ESL Material Writer and Classroom Reality

Creating teaching materials that support learning
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Introduction

• Zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 1978)

• Challenging tasks + high support from teachers = learning achievement + confidence independent learning (Mariani 1997)
Background

Research questions:

1. How can teachers support a disparate group of ESL adult learners?

2. How do commercially produced teaching materials support teaching in the classroom?
More research questions

3. Do activities around reading such as vocabulary work, silent reading, syllabification practice, language games and dictation support the development of reading skills?

4. Do instructional materials play an explicit role in supporting teaching?
Evening class: Profile

- Bands A, B, C
- Ages: 35-65
- Gender: 8 females & 6 males
- L1: Korean, Chinese, Spanish, Farsi
- ISLPR: 0 to 0+
- Disparate levels
- 2 evenings X 3 hours per week
Reading material

Our island home
Pornsawan Brawn

Many people call Australia home. In this book you can read about some of these people and their lives. You will meet Poipoi who lives on Thursday Island, Sita who does not like the rain, Jung Hee who is learning English, Leslie who is a farmer, and many more.
Workbook

• *Our island home – Workbook* (Porpsawan Brawn)

This workbook accompanies the elementary reader *Our island home*. It contains a range of learning activities which aim to help learners:

• consolidate their reading skills
• develop vocabulary
• understand the grammatical features of the stories
Rude awakening

• My learners lacked the basic skills to tackle the reading text.

• Negative initial outcome
Note from home!

Dear teacher

Would I give you some advice for this course? Would you mind slowing down the speed on the class, and teaching us step by step? Because our English are poor. We cannot understand some you teached.

Thank you
Strategy changes

• First change - back to very basics to cater for the slowest ones who complained - not practical (losing better students)

• Second change: good class preparation at medium pace of delivery
Help at hand

• Peer support (limited/controlled interpreting by peer)
• Encouragement - learning how to learn
• Cooling off period before attempting the reader again
• Explicit process of support
Some Considerations for Designing Activism-Related Materials

• “When we create materials our aims should be to broaden our learners’ horizons and to improve their language abilities…… “(Sohii Hronopoulos MWIS Newsletter July 2005:Volume 18, Issue 2)
Materials and independent critical thinking

Quotes: S.Hronopoulos

• Present materials that contain the facts and leave it up to the students to make their own interpretations.
• You should always encourage them to question everything, even the materials you presented to them.
• Fostering healthy, inquisitive, and independent critical thinking will serve our learners well beyond their educational life.
Choice of materials

Quotes: S. Hronopoulos

• The lessons you design must serve some pedagogical purpose. Design your lessons so that they optimize learning opportunities for the four macro-skills.
Using an ESL reader

Learners' perspectives and learning experience

• Workbook activities for teaching sequence
• Word contour for learners with literacy problems
• Storyline - common/shared experience and empathy (eg refugees/family/ learning difficulty /same cultural background)
Activities around the ESL reader

- Silent engagement
- Illustrations – help prepare learners and contextualise vocabulary (OHT)
- Recorded texts
- Workbook – second look at the text – language structures, reading strategies, cultural aspects
Materials & Learners Support

Quotes: S.Hronopoulous

- Learners appreciate “Useful Language” boxes that appear on their handouts because this assists them in accomplishing a task.
- A good dose of graphics also make the teachers’ task easier as it can be the hook that catches the learners’ attention.
Recorded text : To use or not to use?

“Very weak readers may be struggling to spell out each word, letter by letter and are only able to interpret a few common spelling patterns, and a few “sight words” that they have memorised. These readers are using so much cognitive effort at this level that they will get very little comprehension out of a complex text.” (Rose 2003:4)
Recorded text: To use or not to use? - My view

• Dramatic reading
• Pronunciation - helping
• Word recognition
• Later - fluent reading
Observation

- Explicit support and revised pacing seemed to work for learners
- Encouragement and praise - go a long way!
Research question revisited

1. How can teachers support a disparate group of ESL adult learners?
   - No easy solution but explicit support and a focus on pacing seemed to have worked
   - Patience, patience and patience
Research questions

2. How do commercially produced teaching materials support teaching in the classroom?
   - Teacher assessment, strategies and preparation in combination with the teaching materials
   - Be all and end all materials? (Fat chance!)
Tips (Gibbons 2003)

• What is the starting point of the teaching sequence in terms of students’ prior knowledge and experience, current understandings and current language abilities?

• How can I explicitly link to students’ prior experience?

• What should be the sequencing of the tasks?

• Will I need to use mediational texts, as well as chosen materials?
More tips (Gibbons)

• How can I use materials to create abundant language sources (ie those that supply the learner with expanded rather than reduced input to support learning?)

• What will be the metacognitive focus and the metalinguistic focus of the sequence?
Findings

**Grammatical structures**
- need to be consistently reinforced in the materials and consolidated throughout the text
- need to be used in context that allows students to link them with real-life contexts
- If a new concept is introduced, - needs to be a clear link to preceding sentences or phrased used in the text
More findings

• Lexical items
  - Words should keep reappearing in the text and contribute to the continuity of the text (providing reassurance – learners recognising recurring items)
  - Good to have synonyms and antonyms in the same text
Back to research questions

3. Do activities around reading such as vocabulary work, silent reading, syllabification practice, language games and dictation support the development of reading skills?

- Yes (group work and individual work at their own pace) Range of activities
Final question

4. Do instructional materials play an explicit role in supporting teaching?

• classroom teachers – provide support and related materials to class

• Material writers – help teachers shape their lessons
Food for thought for writers

• Try to put yourself in the situation where you have to teach the classes you are writing for
• Project and anticipate the grammatical structures and linking materials that will be needed outside the texts
• Consider that more repetition is needed for lower level learners
Conclusion

• Good materials should provide units that minimise the need for teachers to provide support at the macro level of teaching sequences.
• At the spontaneous micro level of the classroom, due to its unpredictable nature, it is not possible for materials to be all things to all students.
• It is the teachers’ role to respond to the emerging support needs of the classroom.
About to get muddy: Crowds watch the 'Mud Pit Belly Flop' at the 10th annual 'Redneck Games' at Buckeye Park in East Dublin, Georgia. (AFP/Jeff Haynes)

Have a go: Take a plunge!