


Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching

IAN McGRATH

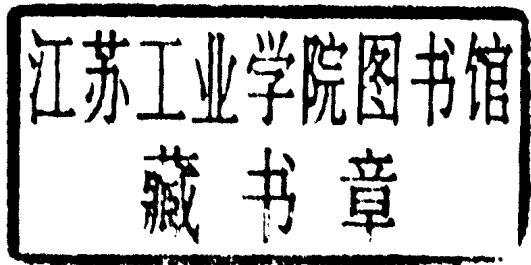


EDINBURGH TEXTBOOKS IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS
SERIES EDITORS: ALAN DAVIES & KEITH MITCHELL

Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics
Series Editors: Alan Davies and Keith Mitchell

Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching

Ian McGrath



Edinburgh University Press

To Natasha,
with my thanks for her unfailing support.

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Titles in the series include:

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by Ian McGrath

Series Editors' Preface

This new series of single-author volumes published by Edinburgh University Press takes a contemporary view of applied linguistics. The intention is to make provision for the wide range of interests in contemporary applied linguistics which are provided for at the Master's level.

The expansion of Master's postgraduate courses in recent years has had two effects:

1. What began almost half a century ago as a wholly cross-disciplinary subject has found a measure of coherence so that now most training courses in Applied Linguistics have similar core content.
2. At the same time the range of specialisms has grown, as in any developing discipline. Training courses (and professional needs) vary in the extent to which these specialisms are included and taught.

Some volumes in the series will address the first development noted above, while the others will explore the second. It is hoped that the series as a whole will provide students beginning postgraduate courses in Applied Linguistics, as well as language teachers and other professionals wishing to become acquainted with the subject, with a sufficient introduction for them to develop their own thinking in applied linguistics and to build further into specialist areas of their own choosing.

The view taken of applied linguistics in the Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics Series is that of a theorising approach to practical experience in the language professions, notably, but not exclusively, those concerned with language learning and teaching. It is concerned with the problems, the processes, the mechanisms and the purposes of language in use.

Like any other applied discipline, applied linguistics draws on theories from related disciplines with which it explores the professional experience of its practitioners and which in turn are themselves illuminated by that experience. This two-way relationship between theory and practice is what we mean by a theorising discipline.

The volumes in the series are all premised on this view of Applied

Linguistics as a theorising discipline which is developing its own coherence. At the same time, in order to present as complete a contemporary view of applied linguistics as possible other approaches will occasionally be expressed.

Each volume presents its author's own view of the state of the art in his or her topic. Volumes will be similar in length and in format, and, as is usual in a textbook series, each will contain exercise material for use in class or in private study.

Alan Davies
W. Keith Mitchell

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This is also an appropriate place to thank the publishers who responded to my request for sample copies of materials by generously supplying the books (and many more) on which I have drawn for examples. Addison Wesley Longman, Macmillan/Heinemann, Oxford – my sincere thanks.

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Introduction

MATERIALS EVALUATION AND DESIGN AS APPLIED LINGUISTIC ACTIVITIES

Those with a responsibility for the development and administration of language-learning programmes in either educational or workplace settings will need little persuading that materials evaluation and design, along with, for example, syllabus design, learner assessment and the study of classroom processes, are centrally important applied-linguistic activities.

The effects of work on materials has also been recognised within the academic community. Johnson (1989a), for instance, writing of three phases in the development of applied linguistics, describes the second phase as one in which work on needs analysis, the syllabus, materials design, the roles of teacher and learner and classroom interaction brought the language curriculum 'more closely into line with our new and broader understanding of communicative competence and the processes of language acquisition and use' (p. xi). Acceptance of the appropriateness of materials as a field of serious study, from the perspective of evaluation, design or research, is reflected in book-length publications (e.g. Madsen and Bowen 1978, Dubin and Olshtain 1986, Dendrinos 1992, McDonough and Shaw 1993, and the collection edited by Sheldon 1987a), some of which explicitly mention students among their target audience. (See also the sections on materials in Jordan 1983 and Johnson 1989b.) Related indicators are the increasing inclusion of materials evaluation and design as a field of study within Master's programmes and the trickle of students pursuing doctoral research (e.g. Littlejohn 1992, Hutchinson 1996).

Writing in 1982 and concerned to make the point that materials writing is not in itself an appropriate goal for pre-service training, Brumfit and Rossner commented parenthetically: 'Materials construction (which does not, of course, require specialized training) . . .' (p. 129). If this was ever true, it is certainly not the case now. Byrd (1995a: 6) notes that 'materials writing and publication has become a professional track within the professional field of teaching ESL'. Byrd's comment comes from her introduction to a collection of papers (Byrd 1995b) written by members of the Materials Writers Special Interest Section

within TESOL, the American-based international association of teachers of English to speakers of other languages; a further collection (Tomlinson 1998a) has been produced by the British-based international Materials Development Association (MATSDA), which also publishes a regular journal.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

To say that materials evaluation and design are applied-linguistic activities is to make two further claims: that on the one hand they are oriented towards practical outcomes (some might say 'the solution of problems') that necessitate relevant experience and specialist knowledge/skill, and on the other that this specialist knowledge/skill is something that is possessed by applied linguists (rather than any other group of experts). So does this mean that to evaluate or design materials language teachers have to be applied linguists (in the sense that they have successfully completed a suitably broad and rigorous programme) and that if they are not we cannot expect them to be capable of carrying out either of these functions?

A functional separation between classroom teachers and others whose work has an impact on language learning may be a helpful way of thinking about the implications for education and training (see Figure I, below); however, there is a danger that if applied too narrowly such differentiation has the effect of disempowering those at the lowest level.

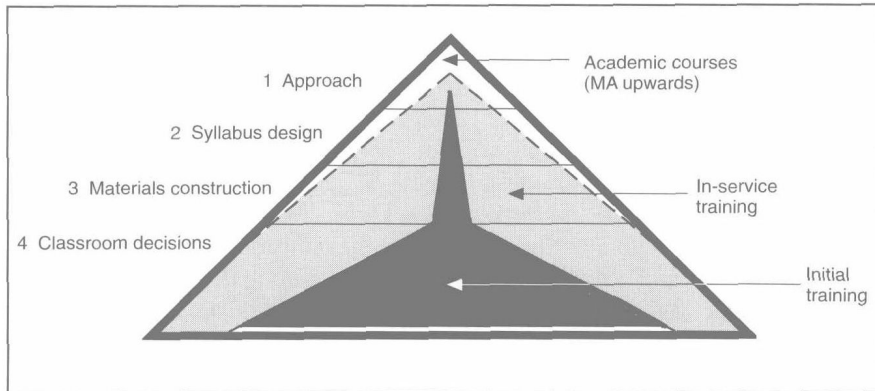


Figure I The decision pyramid (Brumfit and Rossner 1982: 230)

In describing their pyramid model, Brumfit and Rossner (1982) are at pains to point out that the decisions made at higher levels must take account of lower level decision-making and that in taking informed decisions at the classroom level teachers need to mediate between higher level decisions and actual conditions. Seen in this light, the teacher is not simply someone who executes higher level decisions but someone who considers if (and if so, how) these

decisions can be implemented in the light of classroom realities. Thus, to refer to the right-hand side of the diagram, an appropriate objective for an in-service programme (and this need not be at Master's level) would be to enable classroom teachers to construct their own materials if this seemed desirable.

One of the implications of this view is that teacher education programmes must prepare teachers, psychologically as well as theoretically and practically, for this role, a role which involves evaluation as well as creativity. A second consideration, made explicit in the model, is the need to distinguish in a principled way between pre-service and in-service education. These concerns are given a personal dimension in the following quotation from a teacher with several years' experience:

In Chinese, 'study' means 'read the textbooks'. From the first day I went to school, I had to bring my textbooks. Throughout my school years, I learned with textbooks. It was not until I entered the College of Education that I was told not to use textbooks, and I had to design and produce my own teaching materials during teaching practice. Since becoming a teacher I have mixed feelings towards the textbook. Sometimes I hate it and sometimes I love my inevitable teaching partner. This seems unlikely to be a perfect marriage; however, I cannot ask for a divorce. Every day I have to strive to bridge the gap, to 'satisfy the demands of the textbook, but in ways that will be satisfying to those who learn from it' (Stevick 1972). Is this totally due to the quality of textbooks? Is there something I have long neglected? Is there something I can do to help resolve the dilemma?

(Yuen 1997)

The early experiences, the powerful central metaphor of a teacher 'married' to a textbook and the questions raised will no doubt strike a chord with many teachers.

Pre-service teacher education

It is not uncommon on initial training courses such as the one referred to above for trainees to be encouraged to produce their own materials, and there are good reasons for this. Views about teaching and learning change, textbooks change in tune with these, and teachers must be able to respond flexibly to such changes. Thus, there is value in trainees learning to analyse learners' needs and set appropriate objectives and then going on to plan lessons and develop materials to meet those needs *if suitable materials are not available*. However, if this means that there is little opportunity to practise working with existing textbooks that are potentially suitable or that the use of textbooks is actually discouraged, then the emphasis of such courses is misguided. As Yuen points out in the above quotation, for most language teachers working within formal school systems, the textbook is for a variety of reasons an

'inevitable teaching partner', the basis for everyday teaching, and 'the visible heart of any . . . programme' (Sheldon 1988: 237), hence the term *coursebook*. Given institutional and external constraints, there is little prospect that this situation will change. To recognise this is to acknowledge the need for a rather different orientation in teacher education courses from that indicated above. What is important is that teachers should see the coursebook not as *the course* but as an aid to fulfilling the aims and objectives which they have themselves formulated. The implication for initial training courses is obvious: trainees need to develop the capacity to evaluate existing materials in relation to the teaching-learning context and their teaching purposes (Cunningsworth 1979, Brumfit and Rossner 1982, Hutchinson and Waters 1987), and there is further evidence from teacher informants (see e.g. Henrichsen 1983) that this is a *want* as well as a need. Guidance in materials design (principally in the form of adaptation and supplementation) could then be logically related to the perceived inadequacy of existing materials in relation to course objectives and/or learner needs.

In-service teacher education

One of the advantages that experienced teachers have over their inexperienced colleagues is that the former's experience consists in part of being able to predict how learners will cope with and respond to certain types of published material. Thus, when experienced teachers teach using a coursebook that they know well, they will have a sense of what to use and what not to use, what to adapt and where to supplement. In many cases less adaptation and supplementation would be necessary if the textbook had been selected more carefully. It seems logical therefore that one of the most important foci for in-service education should be guidance in the selection of course materials. Even where this lies outside the control of individual teachers, there may be opportunities for them to contribute to selection decisions on an individual or group basis, either by presenting a case for the abandonment of ineffective materials or for the adoption of one set of potentially suitable materials rather than another. If, as is often said, knowledge is power, then wider awareness of materials-evaluation procedures and an understanding of the concepts that typically underpin evaluation criteria might encourage those who have been silent to speak. Teachers themselves are also likely to appreciate guidance in materials design in a broad sense (adaptation, supplementation, the development of stand-alone materials); as indicated above, this would flow naturally from dissatisfaction with existing materials.

The suggestion made here, then, is that the more teachers know, understand and can do, the more capable they will be of carrying out the mediating function referred to earlier, especially in relation to materials. This does not mean that language teachers have to be applied linguists in the sense that they have followed a Master's degree, but it does mean that they need to possess

the confidence and at least basic competences to (1) make informed decisions about the choice and use of materials and (2) develop materials when existing materials are found to be inadequate.

THIS BOOK

The aims of the book

In line with the above thoughts on teachers' needs, I set out to write a 'How to' book. As normally used, this phrase is applied – sometimes disparagingly – to practical guides. My intention was to write a book that would be seen as practical by teachers but would also exemplify *a way of thinking* (about materials, about the teacher's responsibility, about the ways in which learners can contribute) that would give a secondary meaning to the 'How to' label. I can remember saying, as a student towards the end of an MSc in Applied Linguistics (in Edinburgh): 'I've learned a lot from this course, but I think the most important thing I've learned is how to think critically.' In one sense, this book springs from that insight (reflected in the frequent recurrence of the words 'systematically' and 'principles'). However, it derives more directly from the experience over a good many years since then of teaching elective courses in materials evaluation and design as components of Master's courses in Applied Linguistics and English Language Teaching and of running workshops on materials design as part of specialist courses in the UK and overseas. The elective courses and workshops are always well subscribed. This not only points to the value that teachers attach to materials, but also to their wish for guidance in choosing materials, adapting these and preparing their own. The book is an attempt to meet that need in a different form.

The structure of the book

Since this is a volume within a series on applied linguistics, the assumption has been made that the primary readership will be teachers with some experience of teaching. This assumption has influenced both the structure and the content of the book. The linear development of Chapters 2–6, from the selection of a coursebook to materials adaptation and then supplementation, is based on experience of working with practising teachers, but takes little for granted in terms of prior training; subsequent chapters, on topics such as systematising the design process, involving learners in materials design and in-use and post-use evaluation of materials, will obviously be of most relevance to experienced teachers. The final chapter, which brings together a selection of special topics (e.g. materials and culture, materials and syllabus, materials and research), has been included for those with an interest in *studying* materials. The many tasks sprinkled through the book are intended to guide and stimulate reflection, critical thinking and learning through doing.

Using the book

I imagine some using the book as a 'set text', reading prescribed sections in their own time and discussing these and working through tasks in class. The symbol K next to a Task signifies that a Key or Commentary can be found on pp. 288–94. Some I see in libraries, using the book as a resource for assignments or their own research. Others, who are not following a course but are keen to do better the things they do every day, may search the book for guidance and inspiration. Within the latter group there may be little clusters of practising teachers with common needs (such as how to select materials in a more systematic way), who will choose to use specific sections of the book as a basis for discussion or coordinated activity.

What this implies is that there is no one way to use the book. Although it has been planned in such a way that it can be used as a set text, it is not in itself a course. The lecturer who decides to adopt it will – as I will myself – use it like any coursebook, as a resource, selecting, adapting and supplementing according to time constraints, course-participant factors and insight into what is relevant in that context. Lecturers working in pre-service contexts with trainees who are engaged in teaching practice may even wish to stand the book on its head, as it were, working through Chapters 4–6 first and dealing with the content of Chapters 1–3 (a prospective rather than an actual need) only just before trainees graduate.

The hope

My hope is that what I have written will be of value to all teachers with an interest in this topic, irrespective of their experience, level of training and their present circumstances (e.g. studying, teaching or combining the two). My particular hope is that it will embolden readers to take at least one step beyond where they stand at present: that, for instance, those who currently carry out only impressionistic materials evaluation will do this more systematically; that those who evaluate systematically at the point of selection will continue that process by evaluating systematically materials in use; that those who have in the past made only minimal changes to the materials they use will develop the confidence to make more substantial changes when these are called for. These are, of course, progressive steps away from textbook-dependence and towards teacher autonomy. But I also hope that those who have thus far taken on themselves all the responsibility for materials evaluation and development will be encouraged to involve learners and colleagues and that institutions will be prepared to facilitate cooperative initiatives. All stand to benefit from this cooperation.

Ian McGrath
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A systematic approach to materials evaluation

What are materials? – attitudes to coursebooks: metaphors; who needs published materials?; arguments for and against coursebook-based teaching – teachers as materials evaluators – inputs to evaluation – materials evaluation as a cyclical process – the structure of this volume

1 WHAT ARE MATERIALS?

The ‘materials’ in the title of this book are not *any* materials for learning and teaching languages. In a broad sense, materials could include ‘realia’ (real objects such as a pencil, a chair or a bag) and representations (such as a drawing or photograph of a person, house or scene). Materials of these kinds can, of course, be exploited effectively for language learning and advice on their use can be found in books that deal specifically with the use of visual aids. The focus here, however, is primarily on *text* materials. Such materials include those that have been either specifically designed for language learning and teaching (e.g. textbooks, worksheets, computer software); authentic materials (e.g. off-air recordings, newspaper articles) that have been specially selected and exploited for teaching purposes by the classroom teacher; teacher-written materials; and learner-generated materials.

In many situations the expectation is that teaching will be based on a single textbook, although other materials may be used at the teacher’s discretion. The term ‘coursebook’ will be used to refer to a textbook on which a course is based.

2 ATTITUDES TO COURSEBOOKS

2.1 Metaphors

Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) fascinating *Metaphors We Live By* testifies to the power of metaphors in everyday life. Metaphors can also offer a useful insight into the way teachers perceive coursebooks (see the quotation from Yuen (1997) in the Introduction to this book).