Research for Materials Development in Language Learning

Evidence for Best Practice

Edited by
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Preface

It has been noted by many observers (e.g. Chapelle, 2008) that there have been very few publications on research for materials development in language teaching. This has probably been because of the inevitable difficulty of isolating variables when attempting to attribute the effects of learning to the materials used and because, until recently, materials development was not considered a sufficiently 'academic' field for research by universities and research funding councils. However now things are changing and this volume reports the results of 23 research projects conducted in 14 different countries. Most of the research projects reported are case studies of materials development in action and none of them are large, longitudinal, funded projects. This means that, while the research is systematic and rigorous, it is rarely conclusive. It is, however, indicative of a number of informative tendencies in the way that materials are developed, used and evaluated, and it provides valuable indications of the types of materials which are the most effective in facilitating language acquisition and development.

The research reports have been grouped into sections in which the chapters share objectives. At the end of each section we provide our comments on the issues which emerge from the research reported and at the end of the book we summarize what we think are the main conclusions to be drawn from the research results reported in the chapters both for second language acquisition theory and for materials development. We also discuss the applications of the findings and suggest research projects which could further increase our knowledge of the effects of different kinds of language learning materials on language acquisition and development.

Brian Tomlinson and Hitomi Masuhara

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Published Research on Materials Development for Language Learning

1

Brian Tomlinson and Hitomi Masuhara

Introduction

In a plenary paper Chapelle (2008) pointed out how surprisingly little research has been published on materials evaluation. The same point could be made about the development and use of materials. If you look at the main literature on materials development in recent years (e.g. Fenner and Newby, 2000; McDonough and Shaw, 2003; McGrath, 2002; Renandya, 2003; Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 1998a, 2003a, 2008a) you will find scholarship and theory but not very much empirical investigation. If you look at major books on language acquisition and on classroom research (e.g. Allwright and Bailey, 1991; Bailey and Nunan, 1996; Doughty and Long, 2003; Ellis, 1994, 2008; Hinkel, 2005; Lantolf, 2000; Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; van Lier, 1988), you will find a lot of empirical investigation of the factors which facilitate language acquisition but very little reference to the role that materials play in the process. The reasons for this seem fairly obvious. Empirical investigation of the effects of materials on language acquisition requires longitudinal research involving considerable investments of time and money. It also requires a careful control of variables which would be quite easy in controlled experiments investigating such immediate phenomenon as repair but very difficult to achieve in classroom research investigating long-term and durable effects on language acquisition and development (Tomlinson, 2007b). How, for example, can you claim that it was a particular textbook which was responsible for a measured long-term outcome and not the quality of the teaching, the rapport between teacher and class or the exposure to the target language the students gained outside the textbook? Such research is possible but very demanding and could best be achieved by long-term collaboration between publishers and universities. Publishers do, of course, conduct research into the effects of their materials on their users but, for good reasons, such research is confidential and rarely published.

藏书章

Despite what we have said above there is published research on the effects of materials on their users. There is considerable research on the effects of extensive reading materials on learners of English. For example, Day and Bamford (1998), Elley (1991) and Krashen (2004) report research findings which demonstrate the

positive power of free, voluntary reading in facilitating language acquisition. Maley (2008) provides a review of the literature and research on extensive reading and lists websites which report current research projects on extensive reading. Possibly because of the need to justify the extra expenditure, there is also quite a large literature on the effects of CALL materials on their users, for example, Chapelle (1998, 2001), Chapelle and Lui (2007), Hubbard (2006). In addition, a number of books on materials development do include reference to research. For example, Harwood (2010) contains numerous chapters relating research-driven theory to materials development, including a chapter by Tomlinson (2010) on the principles of effective materials development. Mishan (2005), reviews the research literature on second language acquisition (SLA), especially that related to input, affect, instructed SLA, autonomous learning and consciousness raising. She concludes that, for example, authentic texts 'provide the best source of rich and varied input for language learners', 'impact on affective factors essential to learning, such as motivation, empathy and emotional involvement' and stimulate 'whole-brain processing' which can result in more durable learning' (Mishan 2005, pp. 41–2). A series of books edited by Mukundan (2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2009) includes those papers from the influential MICELT materials development conferences and workshops in Malaysia which report research. For example, Chandran and Abdullah (2003) report a study of gender bias in Malaysian English Language textbooks, Mukundan and Hussin (2006) report on the use of Wordsmith 3.0 to evaluate materials, Yahaya, Abdullah and Noor (2006) report on a study of their use of Internet resources as language teaching materials, Tomlinson (2008c) reports on a study contrasting how instructions are given to people helping the speaker in real life and in textbooks, Truong and Phan (2009) report on a study of foreignness in EFL global textbooks and Menon (2009) reports on a corpus analysis of textbooks. McGrath (2002) contains a chapter which reviews the literature on studies of the effects of materials on their users and a short section in the final chapter on the research base for writing and evaluating materials. Renanda (2003) includes research papers on textbook evaluation in Indonesia (Jazadi, 2003), on the use of textbooks in Malaysia (Chandran, 2003) and on localizing ELT materials in Vietnam (Dat, 2003). Tomlinson (1998a, 2003a, 2008a) focuses mainly on ideas for innovation in materials development but he does also include reference to research in his books. For example, Tomlinson (1998b) reports on major research findings in SLA and relates them to materials development and use. Tomlinson (1998c) reports on research into L1 and L2 visualisation and connects this research to materials development and use, Donovan (1998) writes one of the few published accounts of a publisher's trialling of coursebooks, Ellis (1998) reports the literature on research studies which evaluate language learning materials and Masuhara (1998) reports what little literature there is on research into what teachers want from coursebooks. This is a topic of enquiry which is investigated by publishers and reported confidentially. In one such report Tomlinson (unpublished report) found that teachers in 12 countries around the world specified their main want as interesting texts and their main need as not having to spend a lot of time preparing lessons.

In Tomlinson (2003a) there are reports on research into the use of electronic materials (Deriawanka, 2003), hyperfiction (Ferradas Moi, 2003), materials for beginners (Cook, 2003), the realization of primary school coursebook tasks in the classroom (Ghosn, 2003) and the development of textbooks (Lyons, 2003; Popovici and Bolitho, 2003; Singapore Wala, 2003). In Tomlinson (2008a) there is a chapter on language acquisition and language learning materials and in Tomlinson (2008b) there are numerous chapters reporting systematic evaluations of materials in different regions of the world. Also in Tomlinson (2007a), a book on language acquisition and development, there are reports on research relating materials development to the neuro-linguistic processes involved in early reading (Masuhara, 2007), to the inner voice and visual imaging (Tomlinson and Avila, 2007), to influences on learners' written expression (Ghosn, 2007) and to the value of comprehension in the early stages of language acquisition (Barnard, 2007) and Van den Branden's (2006) book on task-based learning contains a number of papers reporting on the effects of task-based language learning materials on their users in Belgium.

So there is already quite an extensive literature on research and materials development but we think it is true to say that regrettably little of it provides empirical evidence of the effects of materials on their users. The revised edition of Tomlinson 1998a (forthcoming 2011) will focus more on linking research findings to materials development.

In her plenary paper referred to above Chapelle (2008) argued that we need to move materials evaluation forward into a more research-oriented framework, which enables us to make claims about the effects of materials on the basis of evidence from research. That is one of the main aims of MATSDA (the international Materials Development Association) which organizes conferences and workshops, publishes a journal Folio and brings together publishers, researchers, writers and teachers to work in collaboration in order to improve the effectiveness of language learning materials (www.matsda.org.uk). It is also the main aim of this volume.

The writing of materials

Until recently there was very little information available about how materials writers actually go about writing their materials. Do they do a needs-analysis first? Do they refer to principles of language learning? Do they refer to principled criteria? Do they map out their materials or do they just start writing and rely on inspiration? Do they picture target students and teachers as they write? Do they rely on repertoire and keep repeating activities which seem to 'work'? We all knew what we did ourselves but we did not know what other authors do. Now thanks largely to Bell and Gower (1998), to Hidalgo et al. (1995), to Johnson (2003), to Lyons (2003), to Maley (2003), to Mares (2003), to Popovici and Bolitho (2003), to Prowse (1998) and to Tomlinson (1995) we have a much better idea of the varied ways in which authors go about writing language learning materials.

The literature also now contains various proposals for principled approaches to writing language learning materials (see, for example, Byrd (1995), Jolly and Bolitho (1998), Tomlinson (2003b, 2003c, 2003d) and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004).

Perhaps the most revealing book on the writing of materials is Hidalgo et al. (1995). This book contains detailed and exemplified accounts of how 19 writers from different backgrounds and cultures go about developing language learning materials. Many of the writers report principled approaches to materials development. For example, Flores (1995, pp. 58–9) lists five assumptions and principles which drove the writing of a textbook in the Philippines, Penaflorida (1995, pp. 172–9) reports her use of six principles of materials design, Rozul (1995, p. 210), Luzares (1995, pp. 26–7) and Fortez (1995, pp. 26–7) describe how they use needs-analysis as a starting point and Rozul (1995, p. 213), Fortez (1995, p. 74), Flores (1995, pp. 102–3) and Richards (1995, pp. 102–3) describe the frameworks that they use to help them to write materials. Maley (1995, p. 221) says that materials development is 'best seen as a form of operationalized tacit knowledge' which involves 'trusting our intuitions and beliefs' and Hall (1995, p. 8) poses the crucial question, 'How do we think people learn languages?' In answering his own question, Hall (1995) discusses the following principles which he thinks should 'underpin everything we do in planning and writing our materials' (ibid.):

- The Need to Communicate
- The Need for Long-Term Goals
- The Need for Authenticity
- The Need for Student-Centredness

A number of other writers outline principled approaches to developing ELT materials in Tomlinson (1998a). For example, Bell and Gower (1998, pp. 122–5) discuss the need for authors to make principled compromises to meet the practical needs of teachers and learners and to match the realities of publishing materials, and they articulate 11 principles which guide their writing. Edge and Wharton (1998, pp. 299–300) stress the need to design coursebooks for flexible use so as to capitalize on 'teachers' capacity for creativity' and Maley (1998, pp. 283–7) provides practical suggestions for 'providing greater flexibility in decisions about content, order, pace and procedures' (280). Jolly and Bolitho (1998, pp. 97–8) advocate the following principled framework which they have used to develop materials:

- Identification of the need for materials
- Exploration of need
- Contextual realization of materials (e.g. the teacher makes a decision to provide practice in communicating hypothetical meaning in contexts familiar to the students)

- Pedagogical realization of materials (e.g. the teacher develops a worksheet focusing on the distinction between fact and hypothesis and the verb forms involved in making this distinction)
- Production of materials (e.g. the teacher types out the worksheet and photocopies it for distribution to the learners)
- Student use of materials
- Evaluation of materials against agreed objectives

Also in Tomlinson (1998a), Prowse (1998) reports on the responses to questions about how they write language learning materials which he asked a number of ELT materials writers from all over the world. Most of the writers stressed that for them materials writing was a creative process which stimulated and required considerable energy and enthusiasm. They reported many different ways of actually writing the materials but seemed to agree that a lot of work on syllabus development precedes the actual writing, that a lot of thinking about the materials takes place 'everywhere – in the bus, on walks, whilst shopping' (Prowse, 1998, p. 136) and then when writing they rely to a large extent on intuitions based on previous experience. Most of them seem to write quickly and at length and to produce many drafts before they are at all satisfied. Johnson (2003) reports similar characteristics of what he calls expert task designers. In an experiment he compared what experts do when faced with a task design brief with what novices do when faced with the same brief. The most distinctive differences were that the experts

- have concrete visualization capacity (i.e. the ability to envisage possibilities)
- have easy abandonment capacity
- practise consequence identification
- show learner/context sensitivity
- spend time exploring
- use repertoire a lot (i.e. make use of tasks which have 'worked' for them before).

For full details of Johnson's findings see Johnson (2003, pp. 128–38).

A review of the literature on advice and principles for materials developers is provided by McGrath (2002, pp. 152–61). This includes Method (1972), who stressed the importance of re-cycling and localization, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) and their focus on the intended effect of the materials, Rossner (1988) and his focus on the quality and authenticity of the experience offered and Tomlinson (1998a) and his focus on learning principles.

Tan (2002a) focuses on the role that corpus-based approaches can play in developing language teaching materials and contains chapters which discuss the contribution that corpora have made to materials development. In Tan (2002b, pp. 5–6) she demonstrates how corpus-based materials can achieve the important criterion of providing 'real contextualized examples of written

and spoken language' and she says that materials should be designed to help learners to

(a) be consciously aware of the unfamiliar usages of language they have heard or read in native speaker contexts;
(b) investigate how these unfamiliar usages are employed in natural authentic communication, and finally;
(c) experiment with these usages in spoken or written communication, so that they become familiar.

Other writers who have drawn attention to the role that corpora can play in developing principled materials by exposing learners to authentic samples of language in use are Carter (1998), Carter and McCarthy (1997, 2006), Fox (1998), Hoey (2000), McCarthy (1998), Tribble and Jones (1997) and Willis (1998).

One publication which gives considerable attention to the principles of effective materials development is Tomlinson (2003a). This contains, for example, chapters on

- materials evaluation (Tomlinson, 2003b) – this proposes a process of developing criteria from an initial articulation of beliefs about language learning
- writing a coursebook (Mares, 2003) – this describes and discusses a principled process for writing a coursebook
- developing principled frameworks for materials development (Tomlinson, 2003c) – this reviews the literature on principled frameworks and then outlines and exemplifies a text-driven flexible framework which has been used successfully on materials development projects in Namibia (Tomlinson, 1995), Norway and Turkey
- creative approaches to writing materials (Maley, 2003) – this offers a framework for generating creative materials
- humanizing the coursebook (Tomlinson, 2003d) – this proposes ways of making coursebooks of more personal relevance and value to the human beings using them
- simulations in materials development (Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2003) – this explores the principles and procedures of using materials development simulations for teacher development.

Other publications which contribute to our awareness of ways of developing principled materials include Byrd (1995), Fenner and Newby (2000), McDonough and Shaw (2003), McDonough et al. (forthcoming 2011), Mishan (2005), Mukundan (2006a), Ribe (2000), Richards (2001), Tomlinson (forthcoming 2011) and Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004). Tomlinson (2007a) is a book about language acquisition and development but many of its contributors propose applications of their research to materials development for language learning. Tomlinson (2008a)

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