

Some thoughts on DIY materials design

David Block

Materials design is an area of ELT training which is sometimes neglected in methodology texts and teacher-training programmes. In this paper, I shall first discuss reasons often given against teacher-generated materials. From there, I shall move on to consider the opposite view, offering three arguments in favour of DIY ('Do It Yourself') materials design.¹

Introduction The 1980s will probably go down in the history of English language teaching as the decade of world expansion and greater specialization. Attendance at international and national conferences has rocketed, and with this increase in participation has come the formation of SIGs (Special Interest Groups) in everything from video to teacher development. Thus, more teachers than ever are coming together more often with more to say about what most interests them. And, whereas fifteen years ago a teacher might well complain about the unavailability of materials to practise this or that structure or this or that vocabulary field, today, with the plethora of language-teaching materials on the market, the problem often seems to be one of knowing what to choose in a veritable land of plenty.

The literature: a critical review Despite the bounteous harvest of ELT materials which the past decade and a half has provided, published materials do not always provide the types of texts and activities that a teacher is seeking for a given class. While much has been published on second language acquisition, syllabus design, skills development, and a multitude of topics relevant to language teaching, there have been fewer books on materials development. The assumption seems to be that materials selection, adaptation, and development will take care of themselves. General introductory texts on language teaching devote little space to the subject (e.g. Harmer, 1983; Bowen, Madsen, and Hilferty, 1985). In some cases, books on curriculum and syllabus design—be they general (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986) or more specific (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987)—devote at least one unit or chapter to the subject. While such small attention might suggest that materials design is generally considered—at least implicitly—to be something of a *subset* of course design, other books suggest the opposite view: White (1988) and Nunan (1988) devote little if any space to materials, and Johnson (1989) contains merely one chapter (of a total of seventeen) on the subject.

Authors who have dealt with materials (e.g. Williams, 1983; Cunningsworth, 1984; Sheldon, 1987, 1988) have tended to focus on their

selection and evaluation. But while some evaluation check-lists might be used rapidly and efficiently (e.g. Hutchinson, 1987), others are extremely complex (e.g. Breen and Candlin, 1987). And whether they are simple or complex, such check-lists are invariably intended for, or used for, the evaluation of published materials only.

Teacher-made materials

Where materials evaluators have discussed the possibility of teachers developing their own materials, they have done so in a pessimistic manner. Sheldon (1988) states:

The sheer labour-intensiveness of developing classroom materials, the pressures of heavy timetables, and the highly restrictive nature of most teaching situations nevertheless force the teacher (or educational purchaser) to rein in his or her reservations, and to choose a book which only approximates to the needs of the local context.

(Sheldon, 1988: 238)

Sheldon goes on to talk about the 'cruel paradox' that students often prefer slickly produced commercial course books to materials made by teachers themselves. The argument here seems to be that teacher-developed materials will seem ragged and unprofessional next to those produced by *professionals*. Sheldon concludes his somewhat discouraging comments about teacher-developed materials with reference to public exams such as those offered by the University of Cambridge Syndicate or the University of Oxford Delegacy. The premise here is that *professionally* produced materials can better cope with the backwash effect of these exams than home-made materials can.

Sheldon's comments on materials design seem to be in line with what Allwright (1982) has termed the *difference* view, according to which:

... we need teaching materials as carriers of decisions best made by someone other than the classroom teacher, not because the classroom teacher is *deficient*, as a classroom teacher, but because the expertise required of materials writers is importantly *different* from that required of classroom teachers—the people who have the interpersonal skills to make classrooms good places to learn in. (Allwright, 1982: 6)

Carefully worded as it is, Allwright's *difference* view might only be a cover for what in reality is a *deficiency* view:

According to this view, we need teaching materials to save language learners from our deficiencies as teachers, to make sure, as far as possible, that the syllabus is properly covered and that exercises are well thought out ... (Allwright, 1982: 6).

Whether we accept the *difference* view or the *deficiency* view is not terribly important in this case as both lead to a division of labour approach which separates the practising teacher from design of his or her own materials. This situation, in fact, represents little more than abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher or indeed the institution for which he or she works.

**Why teachers
should produce
materials**

I would like to offer three reasons for believing that, for at least part of the time, teachers should replace the commercial course book with a contribution of their own.

*First reason:
contextualization*

Concerning the actual language which textbooks contain, O'Neill (1982) claims that:

Almost always a textbook can be found which will provide the core language which is necessary and useful for a group whose needs may at first sight seem unique. (O'Neill, 1982: 106)

I will not take issue with O'Neill about core language and its relative usefulness. However, I do question the way this core language is contextualized in many commercial materials. Here I shall refer to contexts provided which are not immediately relevant to students and which, in many cases, are frankly boring.

As an example, let us consider the presentation of *used to* to express facts about a person or place which were true in the past but are no longer so at present. In many books, this item is practised with a list of facts about a person—some old and some new (Abbs and Freebairn, 1980: Unit 4)—or two maps of the same town—one old and one new (e.g. Seidl and Swan, 1986: exercise 223). Students are asked to look at the facts and maps and make statements such as:

Patrick used to have short hair.

There used to be a telephone box in West Street.

From these practice activities, students are generally asked to comment on changes in their own lives or their own town.

While this approach to teaching *used to* seems reasonable enough, it could be made more relevant. Instead of having students look at fictitious facts about a fictitious person, they could be given before and after facts about a politician or an entertainer, known to students, who has changed a lot in the past decade. Contextualizing *used to* with real examples which are of interest to students makes the transition to talking about changes in their own lives all the easier. If students do not find changes in their own lives to be significant or even of interest to others, then they may want to continue talking about politicians and entertainers.

The same can be said of the map example; instead of dealing with fictitious information about a fictitious town which students have never heard of and obviously have absolutely no emotional tie to, why not use maps of the students' own towns at different times in their history? In Barcelona, where changes in street names have been frequent during the past fifteen years, I have found it quite easy to set up an activity with map A from 1970 and map B from 1990. The fact that the students are talking about something as real as their home town makes the practice activity that much more relevant, and makes any more open-ended follow-up activity all the more engaging.

Another construction often presented in an unstimulating way is the passive using *be* + *past participle*. In course books, this structure is generally used to describe process. In order to learn it, students have to read texts on such stimulating topics as the production of pencil lead (Swan and Walter, 1987: Unit 17) and a description of bodily functions (Greenall and Garton-Sprenger, 1988: Unit 8).

I have found that a far more interesting context for this structure is the daily news where it occurs in a much more immediate and stimulating way. For example, the following news story about the Lockerbie air bombing from the Super Channel World News of 17 March 1989:

White House spokesman Charles Redmon has said a detailed warning from Britain was received on December the nineteenth, adding to the controversy over secret warnings to airlines about possible bomb threats two days before the Lockerbie disaster. But the letter was not sent on to the airlines until after the crash. The . . . [unclear section] . . . was not received until January the nineteenth. The Pan-Am Boeing 747 was destroyed by a bomb over the Scottish town of Lockerbie on December the twenty-first. Two hundred and seventy people were killed and relatives of the victims are horrified at the latest revelations.

News stories like this offer us realistic contexts for commonly-taught language items (in this case, the passive using *be*). They are also excellent examples of what DiPietro (1987) calls *scenarios* and others (Schank and Abelson, 1977) have called *scripts*: abstract knowledge constructs about common day-to-day experiences, the general framework of which, over time, can usefully be internalized by students.

Second reason: timeliness All too often, one finds reading texts in commercially-based materials which are so dated as to be practically unusable. A case in point is the extract from a 1967 magazine article about British children's views on education which first appeared in the book *On Course* (Greenall and Garton-Sprenger: Unit 6) in 1982, and again in the latest edition published in 1988. Although, the article is an interesting one, my students find it hard to believe that the opinions of school-children in the UK in 1967 are similar to those of school-children anywhere in the world in 1990. Of course, I can always tell them to ignore the content and get on with practising 'If . . . , . . . would . . .' which, presumably, was the reason for using the article in the first place.

Third reason: the personal touch A third and final argument for teacher-generated materials is what we might call *the personal touch*. Earlier, we saw how Sheldon has argued that students often find teacher-generated materials to be tatty or unprofessional. I have found the opposite to be the case. Students appreciate teachers who prepare their classes, and materials give clear and tangible evidence of preparation. When students realize that the teacher has gone outside the course book and prepared something personally, they make remarks such as 'Oh, you work hard', or even 'We don't deserve so much effort'. Moreover, one complaint about some

practising teachers is that they stick to course books too much, only adapting them, but too seldom going outside them to make their own materials.

The types of 'for your eyes only' materials that teachers design vary, but among the most common are remedial exercises based on language work done in class. For example, the teacher might, once a week, put together a 'greatest hits' list of the most frequently made mistakes, using this list as a prompt for a weekly discussion about grammar. Dealing with language problems specific to native speakers of their language (or languages) is particularly fun for local students. Thus, in Barcelona, a teacher might develop materials on *Spanglish* or *Catalanglish*.

The teacher can also impress students with home-made cassette recordings or video recordings of other teachers in the same institution talking on relevant and interesting topics. In preparing a class around the dialogue situation of asking people about their weekends, the simplest way to get a dialogue relevant to the students' context is to ask two or three teachers in the same institution about what they did last weekend. The recording can be made with a walkman, or better with a microphone plugged into an ordinary portable cassette player. The actual activity for students is listening for specific information, and might be set up and expanded on in the following way:

- 1 Preteach and/or elicit the new vocabulary in the recordings;
- 2 Set out this chart on the board (see Figure 1):

Figure 1

Name	Where he/she was	What he/she did
Mike		
Mary		
Laura		

But we haven't got the time!

It is often said, of course, especially by teachers themselves, that they do not have the time to prepare their own materials—a view with which writers such as Sheldon (1988) has expressed some sympathy.

My view, however, is that the time spent is well worth it. The total preparation time for the listening activity above was about 30 minutes. But half an hour spent in that way could yield up to one hour of classroom activity, and could be used several times in one year. The pay-off in terms of stimulating and challenging material, and relevance to both teachers and students, is great.

My suggestion for an efficient use of the teacher's time involves a six-phase process thus:

- 1 The teacher finds an interesting article in a news magazine.
- 2 The teacher spends over an hour putting together a reading exercise, a language activity derived from the text, and a discussion activity.

- 3 The teacher uses the text and activities in class, and then makes a few adjustments in the activities.
- 4 The teacher posts several copies of the text with the activities on a board in the teachers' room.
- 5 Several teachers use the text and activities in their classes.
- 6 At some point, the text and activities are either put in a long-term bank (in which case, they are considered to be relatively 'timeless') or thrown away (in which case they are considered 'dated').

For such a process to be cost-effective, a minimum of six teachers are needed in a department. In secondary schools where perhaps only two, three, or four people work in a department, establishing a co-operative among schools is in order. Initially, such a process might be difficult, but, once in place, teachers would find that one to two hours' work on the part of one teacher cuts preparation time for ten to twenty teachers. I have found, for example, that satellite TV news programmes are a particularly rich source of material from which teachers can design, prepare, and then share useful and timely worksheets. In my institution, worksheets prepared by one teacher have been used by up to thirty colleagues.

Conclusion Behind this discussion of materials looms the larger issue of teacher development and teacher responsibility; materials development is simply one more element within the larger concept of teachers taking responsibility for what happens in their classes. If we are to be reflective practitioners in the field of ELT, we need to consider all aspects of our teaching. I believe that preparing our own materials is one of these aspects.

Received July 1990

Note

1 I would like to thank Seamus Haughy, Jim Herbolich, and especially Diana Lewis, for their invaluable comments on an earlier draft of this article.

References

- Abbs, B. and I. Freebairn. 1980. *Developing Strategies*. London: Longman.
- Allwright, R. 1981. 'What do we want teaching materials for?' *ELT Journal* 36/1: 5-18.
- Bowen, D., H. Madsen, and A. Hilferty. 1985. *TESOL: Techniques and Procedures*. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House.
- Breen, M. and C. Candlin. 1987. 'Which materials?: a consumer's and designer's guide', in Sheldon, L. *ELT Textbooks and Materials: Problems in Evaluation and Development*. *ELT Document* 126. Oxford: MEP/The British Council.
- Clarke, D. F. 1989. 'Communicative theory and its influence on materials production'. *Language Teaching* April: 73-86.
- Cunningsworth, A. 1984. *Evaluating and Selecting EFL Teaching Materials*. London: Heinemann.
- DiPietro, R. 1987. *Strategic Interaction: Learning Languages Through Scenarios*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dubin, F. and E. Olshtain. 1986. *Course Design*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greenall, S. and J. Garton-Sprenger. 1987. *First Certificate Horizons*. London: Heinemann.
- Greenall, S. and J. Garton-Sprenger. 1988. *On Course (second edition)*. London: Heinemann.
- Harmer, J. 1983. *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. London: Longman.
- Hutchinson, T. and A. Waters. 1987. *ESP—A learning-centred approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hutchinson, T. 1987. 'What's underneath?: An

- interactive view of materials evaluation', in Sheldon, L. *ELT Textbooks and Materials: Problems in Evaluation and Development. ELT Document 126*. Oxford: MEP/The British Council.
- Johnson, R. K.** (ed.) 1989. *The Second Language Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D.** 1988. *The Learner-Centred Curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Neill, R.** 1982. 'Why use textbooks?' *ELT Journal* 36/2: 104–111.
- Seidl, J.** and **M. Swan.** 1986. *Basic English Usage Exercises*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Schank, R. C.** and **R. P. Abelson.** 1977. *Scripts, Plans, Goals, and Understanding*. Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Earlbaum Associates Inc.
- Sheldon, L.** 1987. *ELT Textbooks and Materials: Problems in Evaluation and Development. ELT Document 126*. Oxford: MEP/The British Council.
- Sheldon, L.** 1988. 'Evaluating ELT textbooks and materials'. *ELT Journal* 42/4: 237–246.
- Swan, M.** and **C. Walter.** 1987. *The Cambridge English Course 3*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- White, R.** 1988. *The ELT Curriculum*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Williams, D.** 1983. 'Developing criteria for textbook evaluation'. *ELT Journal* 37/3: 251–255.

The author

David Block is an English Instructor at ESADE Idiomes in Barcelona, Spain. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Houston and an RSA Diploma. For the past four years he has been assistant director of the Mediterranean Institute, a month-long programme for language teachers held each July at ESADE. More recently, he has been actively involved in local teacher-training programmes. At present, he is interested in how findings from cognitive science might help us better understand language teaching and learning.