

BOOK REVIEW

Perspectives on Language Learning Materials Development

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Introduction

Half of the papers in this book are based on presentations given at the 2008 MATSDA (Materials Development Association) event on 'Developing materials to meet needs and wants'. The scope of this volume, however, has a keener focus; all papers attempt to promote localized, teacher-generated solutions over traditional, mass-produced teaching packages in language teaching.

Content overview

The book is divided in three parts, comprising four, two and four papers respectively. Section one (pp. 9-108) focuses on 'Naturally occurring discourse' and consists in an appraisal of the potential (McCarten and McCarthy; Farr, Chambers and O'Riordan; Timmis) but also the limitations (Tomlinson) of Corpus Linguistics for materials development. Section two (pp. 109-72) envisages technology as a tool rather than a medium in materials development. More specifically, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) is advocated either as a selection and parsing tool for naturally occurring language in the media (Gilmore) or as a means to create genuine, meaningful activities for effective Task-Based Language Learning / Teaching (Mishan). Section three (pp. 173-270) centres on needs

analysis in materials development. Two papers offer a more theoretical take on this topic (Hughes on young learners and Hann, Timmis and Masuhara. on adult ones) while the remaining two adopt a more practical, case study format (Mason on '[u]sing ethnography to promote intercultural competence' and St Louis et al. on '[d]esigning materials for a twelve-week remedial course for pre-university students in Venezuela').

Detailed summary

Part one: Materials development and naturally-occurring discourse

In chapter one, McCarten & McCarthy discuss the caveats of developing *Touchstone*, a conversation-based, corpus-informed ESL textbook for adults. Careful analysis of a North American spoken corpus allows them to identify and teach high frequency language beyond word level, especially the distinction between 'transactional' language (which carries content information) and 'functional' language (which is concerned with conversation management) (O'Keefe et al. 2007).

In chapter two, Farr et al. advocate the use of corpora in initial and continuing Language Teacher Education (LTE). They start by outlining the 'underlying principles for the development of LTE material'. Their list, which draws on Tomlinson's discussion of fundamentals in language learning materials (1998), pinpoints factors such as cognitive development, input selection and processing, and affective factors. They go on to suggest ways of '[preparing] teachers for the use of corpora in more active and inductive ways than simply by consulting published corpus-based materials' (38). Teachers are encouraged to use freely accessible, mostly online resources to enhance their everyday practice (for instance by providing a list of attested examples) as much as promote pedagogic awareness (for instance by illustrating typical teacher and learner discourse).

In chapter three, Timmis takes up the challenge of implementing spoken language research in the classroom. He starts by discussing the sociocultural dimension of teaching spoken language features, especially in terms of relevance—those features are

potentially of great value for learners (66), and appropriacy—they can be taught in ‘sociolinguistically appropriate ways’ (66). Timmis then addresses the two-fold methodological challenge posed by selection and task design. Selection ought to ensure that texts are both relevant and accessible in terms of form and content with motivation being a prerequisite. Teacher-generated materials, he contends, offer just that. Designing appropriate tasks then involves combining listening and noticing activities with a clear focus-on-form feel that correlate form and function in a descriptive rather than prescriptive way.

In chapter four, Tomlinson outlines some limitations of using corpus data for educational purposes. He argues that corpora, and even more the teaching materials they have inspired, offer a partial and static representation that typically lacks the contextual, pragmatic and dynamic dimensions of actual language use. Tomlinson suggests we revisit everyday life media to go beyond these limitations. Using footage from Saturday Kitchen, a culinary TV programme, Tomlinson details how such materials can be used to promote noticing and language acquisition.

Part two: Technology and materials development

In chapter five, Gilmore outlines a method for using audio-visual materials in the classroom. Such materials, he contends, ‘[provide] learners with the opportunity to make new linguistic, paralinguistic and pragmatic meanings in the L2’ (112). Gilmore mentions the pros—especially ‘accessibility’ (115-7), ‘authenticity’ (117-9) and motivation (119-20), as well as the possible cons—especially selection (121-2) and copyright issues (123-5). In the rest of the paper (125-44), Gilmore provides a detailed, at times technical procedure for turning rough audio-visual materials into readily usable language learning materials.

In chapter six, Mishan revisits the notion of task in relation to Information and Communications Technology (ICT), especially learners’ growing electronic literacy. Borrowing from SLA theory, she starts by identifying affective engagement as ‘arguably the most fundamental area of the SLA rationale for task’ (150), points to the oxymoronic nature of ‘task authenticity’ (151) and considers ICT a validation of the task paradigm. She then underscores the importance of designing meaningful tasks at the classroom level that both exploit and harness learners’ de facto computer skills.

Part three: Tailoring materials for learner groups

In chapter seven, Hughes sets out to embed young learners’ language learning within more general

developmental processes. Her discussion starts by outlining a theoretical framework, which combines Piaget’s theory about developmental readiness with Vygotskian insights about the values of interaction for cognitive development. Hughes further endorses innatist views of language acquisition and underscores the existence of multiple intelligences. Consonant with her theoretical orientation, Hughes then reports on teaching activities that place experience, interaction and authenticity at the center of the teaching equation. Evaluation of learning outcomes, she contends, should be formative rather than summative and should also rely on tasks that mirror the learning approach used in the first place.

In chapter eight, Mason discusses the benefits of using ethnography in language learning. The paper starts by defining ethnography (the science of describing a culture) and intercultural competence (the ability to function across cultures) and then reports on an ethnographic interview project in Tunisia that stimulated fruitful intercultural exchange for both interviewers and interviewees as well as language practice. Mason further explains how to replicate such projects even in seemingly unfavorable contexts (limited access to native speakers for instance).

In chapter nine, Hann et al. reflect on the challenges involved in teaching English to adult immigrants in Britain, –English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) learners – with a view to formulating a series of recommendations for educators working within ESOL. This category of learners is characterized by its extreme diversity, which means that careful learner profiling and needs analysis ought to come first. Hann et al. further advocate a skills-based, participative approach that ‘[caters] for learners’ real and immediate needs’ (240) and also ‘[respects] and [exploits] the diversity of ESOL learners’ backgrounds’ (241). Following up on Tomlinson (2003), they view ‘[g]reater personalization and localisation of materials’ as essential.

In chapter ten, St Louis, Trias and Periera report on the development of materials for a pre-college remedial course in Venezuela. This step-by-step process sees the authors reflect on their own beliefs (254-6), carry out a needs analysis (256-7) that helps them formulate realistic objectives (257) and finally create relevant activities (263-4). The central idea here is that locally-produced materials are better suited than internationally published resources.

Evaluation

‘Think global, act local’. This catch phrase, borrowed from environmentalist discourse, captures the essence of this volume. The editors indeed further a view of foreign language pedagogy that aims at inclusion and intercultural exchange by promoting teacher-driven and learner-centered practices. Central to their project

is a belief in the pedagogical potential of naturally occurring spoken language corpora, especially teacher-generated ones. The main strength of their discussions is thus that actual usage, teachers' input and learners' needs finally come to occupy centre-stage, which has seldom been the case in ELT pedagogy, let alone materials development (see for instance Tomlinson's uncompromising content analysis of published ELT materials (92-95).

It comes as no surprise, then, that large portions of the volume should centre on the do's and don'ts of using corpora for pedagogical purposes. Although contributors do not say as much, they mostly advocate a corpus-driven approach in the sense that text selection precedes the identification of potentially useful language structures (a corpus-based approach would make a priori claims and look to validate those claims using a corpus). Teachers are not only encouraged to create corpus materials; they also get practical advice on how to do so. For instance, Gilmore's step-by-step guide for producing a corpus of audio-visual materials is bound to benefit even the least technologically inclined.

One reservation I have is that, for all the justified discussion of relevance, appropriacy and affective engagement, some contributors (Tomlinson, Gilmore) should settle for material that is inadequate for most types of English language teaching. I am a huge fan of John Cleese, but I daresay that choosing *Fawlty Towers* is unfortunate on at least two counts. The series dates back to the mid-seventies and is heavily rooted in that decade both in terms of language and life style. Add to this the highly idiosyncratic language use of the cast and you would be hard pressed to say that *Fawlty Towers* is representative of actual usage. The language used by Saturday Kitchen's chef is also very idiosyncratic. I am not suggesting that broadcasts, which are more often than not scripted or at least edited, can never qualify as a proxy for naturally occurring spoken language. Nor am I advocating the kind of artificial language that characterized teaching materials until recently. Perhaps opting for media content that is both more current and less linguistically marked would be a pedagogically acceptable compromise, especially considering the affective incentives of such a choice.

Another programmatic statement is to be found at the beginning of the volume: '[t]he field of materials development is concerned with strengthening the language learning basis of language teaching materials of all types [...]' (1). This is a major paradigm shift in a field that is infamous for its over-reliance on intuition. Contributors refer extensively and opportunely to theory and, with the notable exception of research on usage-based models of language acquisition (Barlow and Kemmer, 2002), major advances in SLA research are reported on. Special attention is paid to the role of salience, language awareness and scaffolding (see especially Hughes). Overall, the emphasis lies more on applications of theory than on theory itself. Theoretical considerations are systematically embedded in discussions of actual problems, which the authors supplement with readily applicable solutions requiring limited technical skills / effort.

Resources in language learning materials development are scarce and this volume is indeed, as the blurb claims, a 'much-needed' addition to the emerging scholarship on this topic.

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