

Teachers as Textbook Writers: Needs, Issues and Procedures

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Abstract:

Drawing on our experiences as teacher trainers and materials developers, we address three core questions in this article: Why must teachers design their own materials? Which issues ought to be addressed while developing language materials, specifically English language textbooks? Finally, what procedures ought to be followed in the process of authoring these textbooks? We argue in favour of tapping the potential of practising school teachers and training them in textbook writing. This, in turn, would strengthen the local materials developing capacity since not only do locally produced materials best serve the needs of the learners but also active engagement of teachers in materials development aids in their continuing professional development.

Keywords: Language materials, textbook, materials, needs, continuing professional development

Introduction

Instructional materials are considered as a significant component in EFL / ESL / ELE contexts. Crawford (2002) examines two contrasting points of view towards teaching-learning materials. According to her, the first set of researchers and practitioners disapprove of commercially produced materials since they “deskill teachers and rob them of their capacity to think professionally”, whereas the other group perceives them favourably as they are “a useful form of professional development for teachers, and foster autonomous learning strategies in students” (p. 80). More than any other published materials, prescribed textbooks/coursebooks remain at the centre of this controversy. Some arguments advanced in

favour of using textbooks/coursebooks are that they provide the basic framework, serve as a guide to organized and economical manner of teaching-learning, offer security, boost confidence and save time (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Mishan & Timmis, 2015; Cunningsworth, 2002). On the contrary, use of textbooks is opposed since they limit the role of the teachers and learners, exercise control, do not cater to the real needs of the learners and impose “uniformity of syllabus and approach” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 67; Thornbury and Meddings, 2001; Prabhu, 2000; Littlejohn, 1992).

Perhaps the main reason behind the criticism that textbooks/coursebooks have been subjected to, as Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018) point out, is that “most textbooks are written as scripts to be followed rather than as resources to be exploited” (p. 29). Moreover, as Hutchinson and Torres (1994) observe, there has been a deluge of English textbooks in the market in the last two decades and despite all odds, the textbook “not only survives, it thrives” (p. 316). As materials developers and teacher trainers we, too, believe that the advantages of a textbook far outweigh its disadvantages and the textbooks can be more beneficial if they are written and transacted as resources (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018); the practice of prescribing a single text is discouraged in favour of selecting and using from a range of available texts in order to allow more curricular freedom to teachers (NCERT, 2006); and most importantly, use of locally produced textbooks is encouraged in place of global textbooks since research shows that local materials serve the needs of the learners better (Bolitho, 2021; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018; Ates, 2012). The question of why there is a need for teachers to develop their own materials is discussed in the next section.

Why Must Teachers Design Their Own Materials?

According to Jolly and Bolitho (1998),

It is not until a teacher has attempted to produce her own materials that she finally begins to develop a set of criteria to evaluate materials produced by others...The process of materials writing raises almost every issue which is important in learning to teach: the selection and grading of language, awareness of language, knowledge of learning theories, socio-cultural appropriacy; the list could be extended (p. 111).

Ates (2012) also highlights the need for locally produced materials since textbooks written in English-speaking countries often do not reflect the cultures or values of the EFL learners because of which they are unable to establish a sense of identity and eventually lose the motivation to learn L2. It is further felt that ELT professionals/experts who may have no or minimal experience of teaching at the grassroots level should not be privileged over school teachers in undertaking this task. Practising teachers have a fair knowledge about the textbooks, local methodological principles and assessment patterns besides a fair understanding of their students' backgrounds, preferred learning styles, etc. The teachers also have a reasonably good idea of the time allocation, the national curriculum and the administrative constraints in the implementation of any teaching-learning programme. It is therefore "both feasible and desirable to involve practising school teachers in textbook writing" (Bolitho, 2021, p. 9) and increase the local authoring capacity. This in no way suggests that a textbook project can do away with experienced ELT professionals. Perhaps, what is sought is a kind of collaboration where they guide the school teachers in materials development and help bridge the gap between theory and practice. As far as teachers are concerned, in case they are interested in developing language materials, specifically English language textbooks, they need to be aware of certain pertinent issues related to textbook production which the next section takes up in detail.

Prerequisites for a Textbook Project

The Organization

It is pertinent to understand who wishes to undertake the project as the project could be initiated by a state/national level educational body, a private publisher or an NGO. Each of them is likely to have different perspectives, aims, resources and operative procedures.

Nature of the Project

Another important issue is to identify the level(s)/class(es) for which the textbooks are being envisaged. Moreover, teachers must ensure that they have a clear understanding of the nature of materials to be designed: only the Main Course Book (MCB), or the MCB along with the Workbook, Literature Reader and the Teachers' Manual. In developing each of these, teachers will be required to make critical decisions such

as appropriately selecting texts/activities/exercises and sequencing them in a graded manner; specifying learning outcomes for different units; integrating skills; offering guidance and supplementary readings to teachers, etc.

Time Factor

Clearly, the nature of the project will determine how much time will be taken to finish it. Generally, private publishers of repute are organized as well as resourceful and therefore take less time to complete a textbook project. It has been seen from experience of working with all kinds of organizations that it usually takes at least 3-5 years to complete an English textbooks series for classes of the Primary and Middle schools.

Selection of Authors

This may actually be considered the first step in materials production training as teachers begin to comprehend the nature of the project better as well as their expected level of commitment in terms of work and time during the selection process. Quite often, best practising teachers are selected for reasons such as their expertise and experience in teaching, course designing and evaluation, professional qualifications, awareness of various trends in language teaching and incisive understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the existing materials. However, there could be problems of selecting suitable authors from the state-run schools. For instance, a large number of teachers would fulfil the basic eligibility criterion for consideration as authors on the basis of their qualifications and length of teaching experience. Therefore, in some states the authors are selected by the SCERTs on the basis of a written test and/or an interview. In rare cases, interested teachers may be asked to share samples of materials designed by them in order to gauge their suitability as a prospective materials designer.

Role of ELT/Language Professionals

ELT/language professionals can help in many ways, not only in providing clarity to knotty theoretical issues but also in suggesting pedagogic solutions to a range of actual classroom problems. Since they are aware of current theories and methods of first/second/foreign language learning and teaching, national language policies and their pedagogical implications, selected authors are often encouraged to interact with them and receive orientation in textbook design and approaches to language teaching, e.g. Structural/Communicative/Constructivist.

While undergoing the orientation programme, teachers get an opportunity to be self-reflective and examine their beliefs and practices. The collaboration between the teachers and the ELT professionals is aimed at helping teachers explore the merits/demerits of different kinds of approaches to language learning and also their suitability for the learning/teaching context. It is naive to believe that only one approach is the panacea for all situations. For instance, what may work with learners from families where English is spoken almost like the first language may turn out to be a disaster with children hailing from backgrounds where English is non-existent both in and outside the home. One also needs to introspect how the prior knowledge and experiences of the learners may be exploited, including their knowledge of the languages used at home and in the community. A critical issue that needs to be addressed during textbooks creation is whether or not languages of children should be used as rich resources, and if yes, how should they be woven so that children use them as a take-off point, gain confidence and feel motivated to learn L2.

The Process of Textbook Writing

Selection of the Project Team

A project team usually comprises a coordinator, editors, practising English teachers, ELT professionals, lay out designers, illustrators, word processors, copy editors and proof readers. If the textbook project is launched by a state/national level body, teachers are selected on the basis of several parameters as mentioned earlier. It is also ensured that the final list of authors is a fair representation from various types of schools and districts. In case the project is initiated by a private publisher, they have their own rationale for selecting the author-team. The project team is guided by a common vision and a sense of team work.

Introduction to the Project

This stage clearly sets out the specific goals of the project, the quantum of work expected and the tentative deadlines for the same. Most importantly, the “instructional framework” (Richards, 2006, p. 12) or the overall principles behind the rationale of choosing texts and activities is laid out. The entire author team is given an orientation on the selection of themes, structure of the book and a unit/lesson in it and how each component of a unit/lesson will be written, labelled, etc. The challenge

is to give this framework a definite form through a syllabus neatly sequenced in lessons/units.

Next, the ELT professionals acquaint the author team with the latest approaches to language teaching and evaluation and how these will influence the nature of materials selection and textbook preparation.

In addition to this, separate sub-committees of authors are formed for each level/class (on the basis of shared interests, compatibility level etc.), and within a sub-committee, a pair of authors is allocated a definite assignment/task to be completed within a stipulated time. The role of the coordinators and editors is explained to the members of the team. The team members are explained at length the dynamics of collaborative writing and how collaborative experience can be enriching for everyone in the team. Teachers are encouraged to be open-minded, appreciate different perspectives and welcome constructive criticism.

Before the author team gets down to creating its own materials, they are advised to examine the existing competing textbooks for each level and evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. They are also asked to prepare an inventory of activity types for each language component/skill that preferably cater to different learning styles.

A detailed discussion on the state/national level English curriculum is held in order to make the participating teachers understand its implications for the nature of materials and pedagogy to be used in the textbooks.

The Writing Stage

Before the author team gets down to writing, they brainstorm in order to shortlist the age/class/level appropriate themes around which texts will be chosen. Next, an approximate length and the nature and density of text for each level are taken into consideration. It is felt from experience that children in the earlier classes enjoy reciting poems and reading narratives and descriptions. In the later classes, other text types are gradually introduced.

One of the major problems that needs to be addressed at this stage is to understand that every text, i.e. a story/play/poem, etc. has a copyright. We cannot use a text without first seeking permission from the copyright holders of the text. However, if the text shortlisted belongs to the realm of authentic materials, is copyright free and is available for use in the

public domain, it may be selected but care must be taken to acknowledge the source.

Once the process of texts selection is final, the texts are distributed to respective class teams to work on the appropriate language items and activities/tasks specific for each level. After receiving the units/lessons from the author teams, the coordinator reviews them in order to check whether they have been prepared as per the specifications. She/he examines whether the comprehension questions, language structures, target vocabulary, grammar in context, etc. have been dealt with in a manner that would enable the learners to use the target language in real life situations.

Subsequently, the materials are passed on to the editors for their intervention. The editors make their suggestions on the draft units/lessons and ask the author team to modify them and resubmit. The editors examine whether the author team has followed the method(s)/approach(es) consistently, and also whether the syllabus for every class has been adequately covered. The editors also have to ensure that the units/lessons are free from all sorts of cultural/linguistic/gender bias. After the editors' final approval, the materials are handed over to the illustrators and lay out designers.

Field Trial/Actual Classroom Feedback

Field trial is a highly variable practice. Most private publishers and state/national level textbook agencies use the first year of the books as the trial period. Based on the actual experience of how the textbooks are received by the teachers and students, these agencies make suitable changes in the books. However, there are some state-level agencies which insist on having a sample field trial of some of the lessons/units for each class, and based on this feedback they ask the editors and authors to make changes not only in the units that have been field trialled but also in other units that have not been field trialled but may have similar problems. The former practice appears to be more authentic and reliable, and if pursued more rigorously, can provide very useful feedback on the strengths and weaknesses in the books produced.

Launch of the Textbooks

Whether the textbooks have been field trialled or not, the state/national level books are normally introduced via seminars/workshops by ELT

professionals on the approach(s) used in producing the textbooks, suggestions regarding how they should be carried out in the class along with demo presentations on one or two select lessons/units. These workshops are normally held much after the books have reached the practising teachers and they have had some experience of teaching a lesson or two from these books. These workshops/seminars are attended by one or two teachers from each school/district/region and these teachers are expected to disseminate the knowledge acquired to their fellow teachers in their respective schools. This is a laudable model of educating the teachers to the new textbooks, their approach(es) and how they should be transacted in the class. However, we wonder if it is carried out beyond a few schools, and that too, in big cities. The state-level agencies must think of better and more pragmatic methods of training the teachers to handle the new textbooks lest any exercise in producing the new textbooks will fail to make any visible change.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the drawbacks of materials production by practising school teachers (cost, time constraint, lack of training, etc.), this article argues that materials development, especially textbook creation contributes towards increasing the local authoring capacity and equally importantly, leads to teachers' growth as "writing materials raises every possible aspect of professional development, ranging from a reconsideration of one's own beliefs, values and practices to a more profound understanding of what teaching and learning mean" (Bolitho, 2021, p. 14).

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