

Writing Language Learning Materials

An Action List of Factors to Consider

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This checklist was originally produced for an online materials writing workshop related to the listserv forum ELTASIA. It now appears on the author's website at <http://www.webofenglish.co.uk>. It is hoped that it will be useful to language and communication teachers both for their work within their own institutions and in developing materials for possible publication. (In view of the latter, a few references to contexts below tertiary level have been retained.)

■ Overall Approaches

Market research

- Have you consulted a sample of your target users (both learners themselves and fellow teachers) before starting to write — talking to them about your general intentions and perhaps your initial outline for example?
- Are you making arrangements to try at least some of the materials out with appropriate users, before you finalize them?

Overall feel

- Overall, are the materials going to be appropriate/motivating for the learners — in terms of age, interests, reasons for studying, etc.?

Topic content

Theoretically, language teaching materials can be about *anything*. An opportunity, but also a challenge!

- Will your topics be motivating for your target learners? A good test might be — will they be the kind of thing they might want to read or hear about in their *first* language?
- Will the topics generate all the types of language you want to teach — descriptive, narrative, interpersonal, etc.?

Layout

- Will your materials be clear and uncluttered? (It's best to avoid too many different colours and fonts, and excessive 'bells and whistles' — especially tempting with multimedia!)
- Will they be well organized for learning? (Is it easy to find your way through each page or screen?)
- Will the overall effect be attractive?
- Do your proposed photos and other illustrations feel culturally 'right'?
- Are the materials economical in terms of space — generating maximum learning activity for each page, or screen?
- For on-screen materials, is the system of navigation within and between individual screens clear? (Above

all, if you're preparing a CD-ROM, be careful not to leave users at a particular screen in a sequence with no way out — or at best only a return to the main menu. It does happen! Online, at least there's a browser Back button!

- Again for on-screen materials, have you formed a clear policy on scrolling? Some people don't like it.

Student progression/sequencing

- Will the learners get regular 'payoffs'?
- Will there be opportunities for them to reflect on their learning?
- Will there be opportunities to revisit learning items encountered earlier — often called 'recycling', or the 'spiral curriculum'? (The nonlinear nature of electronic materials actually makes this easier — but you may still need to build in specific provision for it.)

Learning styles

Not everyone learns in the same way. (For example, some people seem to find 'rules' genuinely helpful; others prefer plenty of practice to help them form an understanding of the regularities for themselves. Beware single-factor gurus, who may really just be talking about how *they* learn!)

- Will different learning styles be accommodated *flexibly* by your materials?

Individualized/independent study

- Do you plan to include opportunities for this?
- If so, in a class context, or self-access/home study only?
- In coursebooks? In workbooks/photocopyable worksheets? In audio/video/electronic materials?

Collaborative work

- Are you planning specific opportunities for this? Pair work? Group work? Projects? Role-play?

Cultural information

- Do you plan to pay specific attention to providing this?
- If so, will it be explicit or implicit?
- Do you plan to focus on one or more specific English-speaking cultures?
- Or is your focus on international communication, often between non-native speakers — in which case you may want to sensitize your target learners to general questions about cultural differences, and the resulting rich potential for misunderstanding.
- Do you need to start with development of a positive and open attitude to foreign cultures in general?

Study skills

- How far do you want to get into these — reading for information, drawing inferences, memorization, note-taking etc.?

Cross-curricular links

- Especially in materials for use at school or college level, can you help teach something else while you are teaching language and communication? (A little synergy is always a good idea — especially in today's crowded curriculum!)

Assessment

- Are opportunities for formative assessment (i.e. feedback on progress) clearly identified in your materials — and linked to any local or national syllabus/curriculum which may be relevant?
- Do they arise naturally out of the teaching context?
- Is there provision for summative assessment at the end of the materials — and perhaps at a limited number of strategic points during it?
- Do the assessment materials allow sufficient differentiation of the learners' individual achievement levels?
- If so, are they going to achieve that by offering separate tasks at different levels of difficulty — or by setting single tasks which allow learners to operate across a wide range of competence?

User support

- Do you plan to provide notes on methodology for teachers? (Particularly useful for less experienced teachers — but even old hands may welcome information on what the author intended, and/or shortcuts in lesson preparation!)
- Will you offer them support for developing schemes of work, and lesson planning?
- If they have to meet specific local or national aims and objectives, can you clearly show, activity by activity, how your materials help to achieve them?
- Will it be helpful to supply answers to exercises?
- Are new/recycled language items (structure, functions, vocabulary) conveniently listed — both for teachers and for individual learners?
- Are user instructions for activities, and any explanations of language points, totally clear and unambiguous? (Especially vital for self-access materials.) Incidentally, it always helps to find someone else to edit what you have written — a second pair of eyes almost invariably picks up something you've missed.
- For online and CD-ROM materials, is there clear, comprehensive and easily accessible onscreen help?

■ Multimedia

Audio and video material

- Will your material be enjoyable?
- Will it have an authentic *feel*?
- Will it be entirely scripted? Or not fully scripted,

but limited by a language and content brief given to the actors? Or genuinely unscripted 'authentic' material?

- How long should each 'chunk' of material be?
- What speaking speed will you use - native-speaker, or something less?
- Will you include any sound effects? If so, how obtrusive will you allow them to be? (More advanced learners may be able to cope with a higher level of 'interference' behind the dialogue.)
- Will the material have good cross-referencing to other materials, and good internal organization, for easy access and use?

CD-ROM and online material

- What is your policy on graphics? (Still pictures? Animation? Video?) They can motivate and contextualize — but they can also waste space. Pictures aren't language — at best they are starters for (or support for) language!
- If your materials are primarily on-screen, do you still want to provide support through other media for some activities (for example, workbooks for extended writing, or a cassette for listening when a computer isn't available)?
- If the on-screen material is a subsidiary component, is it well cross-referenced to the rest?
- What hardware availability are you going to assume? Educational institutions, of course, aren't necessarily at the cutting edge of computer development! (Ironically you can probably expect a higher minimum specification if your target users are going to be working at home.)

Other computer-based activities

- If your target users do have computer access, do you want them to use other software for language activities — writing with a word processor, for example; or designing a magazine with a desktop publishing package; or classifying material with a database program. (More opportunities for cross-curricular work here!)
- If you do have plans of that kind, have you checked your target users will definitely have appropriate software — and can use it?

■ Language-related Questions

Language awareness

- Do you want to get your target learners to think, at a conscious level, about how languages in general — and English in particular — work?
- If so, how are you going to integrate this into your materials?

Use of first language

- Do you plan to use the target language only? This may be inevitable where your target learners have mixed language backgrounds — and it certainly maximizes exposure, which is clearly desirable. But

where it is possible to use the first language, could that be more efficient for such things as quick explanations and background information — and even sometimes for direct translation equivalents? Pragmatism is probably preferable to dogma in this area (as in so many other aspects of language teaching!)

Handling of new language

- The time-honoured sequence of presentation/practice/consolidation/extension (surveys, simulations/role-play etc.) still has much to recommend it. But whatever approach you adopt to introducing new language, it needs to be clear and systematic.

Range of language types

- Do you need to reflect the full range of ways in which language is used: instrumental (using language to get things done)/interpersonal/creative (stories, poems, songs etc.)?
- Or do the particular needs of your target learners require you to zero in on a narrower range?

Approach to structure and functions

- Do you intend to offer explanations, or simply give intensive exposure to particular grammatical aspects in the hope that learners will internalize their own 'rules'? (Or both — see the earlier comments on learning styles.)

Approach to vocabulary

- Will you make expansion of learners' vocabulary knowledge an explicit goal, or leave them to acquire it by 'osmosis' from their exposure to the target language?
- What approach are you adopting to vocabulary control in your materials?
- If you are providing word lists, how will they be organized: a list for each section of the materials? topic-based lists? overall alphabetical lists? (You can offer more than one type, of course!)
- If you want learners to approach the lists systematically, whether for initial learning or revision, have you organized them in 'chunks' of some kind, to make them easy to learn/revise?

Pronunciation

- Will you offer explicit coverage of pronunciation?
- What level of accuracy are you looking for — i.e. how close to whatever native-speaker model you are adopting?
- Will you offer linked listening material?
- How do you plan to represent the sounds of English orthographically? (Are you going to bite the IPA bullet?)

Listening (to cassettes etc.)

(See the comments on audio and video materials in the first section.)

Conversational speaking and listening

- How do you plan to introduce the target learners to the more extensive and open-ended aspects of oral communication — planning what you want to say; responding appropriately to unpredictable contributions to a conversation; gambits for interrupting or politely disagreeing; and so on?

Reading opportunities

- What provision do you plan to make for intensive reading — looking at how text is organized within and beyond the sentence, for example?
- What about extensive reading and the skills which go with it — guessing from context, skipping and skimming; use of headings, contents lists and indexes; and so on? (And don't forget reading for pleasure, and the opportunities it gives for enticing learners to continue their exposure to English outside the classroom!)

Writing opportunities

- Is the controlled/guided/free sequence appropriate?
- Or have your target learners progressed to a point where they can skip the earlier stages?
- On the other hand, if they use another script in their first language, will they first need some introduction to the conventions of writing Roman script?

Mixed skill activities

- Do you plan to include activities which enable learners to move from use of one of the 'four skills' to one or more of the others? (One of the basic features of 'real world' language use!)

■ Last But Not Least...

Have you avoided:

- TENOR ('Teaching English for No Obvious Reason') and
- EFLese (language examples and exchanges which could not possibly occur anywhere outside a language classroom!)