

## Training Teachers to be Materials Writers

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### **Abstract**

This paper is concerned with the content and processes involved in the training of materials writers, and specifically of writers of English language textbooks. It draws on the author's experience as a consultant to a number of national textbook projects and it makes the case for training local authors to write for their own context rather than relying on books written for wide international use. This case is premised on the beliefs that each country needs to build authoring capacity, and that teachers and learners are best served by materials that take into account local culture, school realities and mother tongue interference problems.

**Keywords:** materials; textbook; local; global; project; training; content; process

The three-way relationship between teachers, learners and teaching materials is complex, often characterized by affective as well as cognitive perspectives. I have previously described it as 'the eternal triangle' (Bolitho, 1990). While language teachers generally rely on published textbooks as tools of their trade, most find at some point in their work that their textbook falls short of their learners' needs or of their own expectations. This leads inevitably to dissatisfaction and complaints, but in many cases also to a decision to supplement or adapt the textbook, or even to replace it with material targeted directly at the learners the teacher works with on a regular basis. This is how I started out as a materials writer, and I suspect that the same is true of many in our profession. Of course, these early attempts at writing are usually experimental in nature, and the materials produced this way may be amateurish and not always successful. But a bridge has been crossed,

and for some teachers, there is no going back. They may never write for publication, but they have understood that tailor-making materials for their learners is a way of ensuring that their needs are met and that language classes become more focused and relevant. Learners, too, are experienced consumers of textbooks, and their views and preferences need to be taken into account.

The decision to write one's own material depends to a large extent on the initiative of an individual teacher, but in this paper, I would like to concentrate on a larger scale aspect of materials development, namely government-initiated textbook procurement or development. When it comes to English language textbooks for use in state education systems, there is a clear divide between those countries that have adopted global textbooks, usually authored by native speakers and marketed by big international publishing houses on the one hand, and countries that use locally authored textbooks printed and published by local companies or state publishing houses. The debate about which is the better option has been extensively covered in print (e.g. Copley, 2018; Ates, 2012), but the main issues are worth summarizing here:

<b>'Global' Textbooks</b>	<b>Locally Authored Textbooks</b>
Usually written by 'expert' native speakers	Usually written by non-native speakers
Language input more likely to be accurate and authentic, increasing face validity	Language input may be less reliable, decreasing face validity
Many authors no longer teach	Authors are often practising teachers
Authors have an international reputation based on expertise and popularity	Authors may need to be selected and trained
Authors have little/no contextual knowledge	Authors are familiar with the context
No contribution to local authoring capacity	Builds local authoring expertise and capacity
No direct alignment with national curriculum	Normally based on national curriculum
Cultural content often broad and non-specific	Local culture can be addressed and valued

No coverage of translation or L1 interference	Specific aspects of L1 interference can be covered; translation can be included
Teachers have to 'bridge-build' from textbook to learners	Teachers have less 'bridge-building' to do
Usually based on widely accepted methodological principles	May take account of locally accepted methodological principles and traditions
No government agenda in content	Government agenda often compulsorily included (Mukundan, 2008)
Cost likely to be higher	Cost likely to be lower

As with most binary distinctions, there is an element of simplification in these juxtaposed issues, but they give a flavour of the dilemma which education ministries face in deciding how to 'deliver' language teaching and learning materials to their schools. One thing that is clear is that local authoring builds and maintains capacity and ensures that textbooks are written specifically for the context which the ministry presides over.

I have been directly involved as a consultant in a number of 'local' textbook projects, in Romania, India, Russia, and Belarus, and the training of writers has in each case been built into the project timetable. At the time of writing this article, I am also training a group of Tunisian inspectors (all former teachers) at a distance, as part of a plan, supported by the British Council, to boost local textbook authoring capacity. These experiences have served to strengthen my belief that a well-planned period of training is the essential foundation of a successful textbook project. It not only ensures that the new authors are given a thorough professional grounding, but also provides an opportunity to establish shared working principles, a common vision and a team ethos, as well as a chance to observe the team at work and to establish compatible sub-teams to work on specified tasks within the project. It is also the first step in the long-term process of capacity-building. It has become clear to me that it is both feasible and desirable to involve practising school teachers in textbook writing. They have the potential to bring to the task their direct classroom experience and a practical orientation which helps to ensure that textbooks have perceived relevance to learners' needs and conform to the curriculum. However, not every good teacher is capable of making the transition to materials writing. The skills required are

related but different and making these skills available to teachers is the main priority for writer-training programmes.

My role as a consultant in these projects has been multifaceted. I have led the training courses that preceded the writing period in each of the projects. I have provided language advice to teams consisting of non-native speakers and also advice on methodology and on the design of materials. I have been able to work on behalf of the teams at the interface with the publishers. But I have not allowed my own ideas and preferences to take precedence over those of the writers; I have simply functioned as a critical friend, asking them to explain and justify their ideas and decisions, but never overriding them.

So, where do we start? In the projects mentioned above, the first step has always been the selection of writers. In all cases, interested teachers were asked to apply and to submit samples of materials they had produced themselves. This was a chance for them to show genuine interest and motivation. This was followed by individual interviews and, in some instances, by a shared seminar in which applicants had to produce short pieces of materials in randomly constituted teams. Selection criteria were also extended in India, Romania and Russia, all large countries, to include representation from different regions, in order to avoid capital city bias in the team. This process of selection is actually also the first experience of training for the applicants, as they begin to understand the requirements of the project and what a commitment to participating will mean for them. Typically, some people drop out at this point.

The content of the training from this point onwards will always depend to some extent on participants' prior experience and on factors in the local context, but it is likely to include some or all of the following topics (here with a brief gloss on each):

**From Curriculum to Textbooks:** Interpreting curriculum documents and building curriculum objectives into a working language syllabus and thence into materials.

**Syllabus Design:** Selection and grading of language materials and aspects of skills to arrive at a pedagogically realisable sequence.

**Objectives and Learning Outcomes:** Distinguishing between these two terms, and what they mean for materials. In materials, objectives give direction to learning, whereas learning outcomes specify the result of learning and should be assessable.

**Needs Analysis:** Ways of establishing what will appeal to target learner groups and their needs relative to L1 and their learning background. A thorough needs analysis will also take stock of teachers' needs and wants in terms of materials.

**Aspects of Methodology:** Textbooks as powerful drivers of methodological change and innovation, for example, in the kinds and sequencing of activities within a lesson. The shift from 'language as knowledge' to 'language as communication' has been a major issue in all the courses I have worked on.

**Sourcing and Exploiting Texts:** Criteria for selecting texts, e.g. authenticity, potential for affective engagement, understanding readability levels. How to work with texts in ways that enhance learners' ability to respond as well as simply to comprehend. Permissions and copyright issues.

**Task Design:** Ways of designing tasks to promote thinking, interaction and follow-up. Principles of task-based learning and project work.

**The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR):** Its importance to materials writers and to teachers and learners. Drawing on CEFR descriptors to describe levels of attainment.

**Developing and Balancing the Four Language Skills:** This topic is doubly important in contexts where language knowledge has traditionally taken precedence over language as a means of communication. It also draws on insights from the CEFR and from theory.

**Language Systems:** Establishing a place for grammar, vocabulary work and phonology as means of enabling communication, rather than as ends in themselves. On some courses, detailed attention to language awareness and discourse analysis are needed in order to support the shift in thinking that is needed.

**Life Skills/Transferable Skills:** Also commonly referred to as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. Training in this area looks at ways of integrating skills such as time management, self-awareness, critical thinking, teamwork and presentation skills into the language syllabus and thence into activities.

**The Cultural Dimension in Textbooks:** Ways of integrating intercultural awareness, cultural knowledge and local culture into language work in textbooks. This is a sensitive area which may need to be dealt with

in different ways depending on the local context. (cf Shin, Eslami and Chen, 2011; Byram, 2013)

**Catering for Different Thinking and Learning Styles:** Ensuring that textbooks offer strong visual and audio stimuli, and that there is scope in tasks and activities for both holistic and analytical thinkers to be engaged and to express themselves.

**Assessing Progress:** Most modern textbooks include progress checks and some also offer self-assessment opportunities. Writers invariably need training in how to frame these components in ways which refer to learning outcomes.

**Writing Instructions for Teachers and Learners:** Nearly all novice writers have difficulty with this. Training focuses on making instructions both short and unambiguous. This feeds into the teachers' guide as well as the textbook.

**Writing a Teachers' Guide:** With a focus on the end users of the materials, decisions need to be made about the degree of methodological guidance to be offered, what extra material to include, the best way of addressing teachers, etc. A Teachers' Guide is a potential tool for in-service teacher training once the textbooks are published.

**Information Technology in the Writing Process and in the Classroom:** Accessing corpus data, frequency counts and text analysis software. Evaluating and choosing source materials from the Internet. Appropriate use of ICT in the classroom, and how best to take account of this in textbooks.

It is interesting to look back and to see how the content of writer training has developed over the last thirty years to take account of changes in school curricula and innovations in technology. Of course, these content areas, taken separately or together, are not in themselves a guarantee that a training course will produce excellent writers. Tomlinson (2003) expresses it very clearly, "It is a cliché, but a very important one, that you cannot be *instructed* to become a good materials developer. You can only be given the experience and helped to gain from it". (p. 520).

Helping trainee writers towards these gains is achieved through the processes involved in training courses, which bring to life all the content-based learning and ensure that there are ample opportunities for professional learning to take place. Just as teaching is a 'doing'

profession in which teachers learn and develop by teaching, writers learn best through all the hands-on processes involved in writing. Let us now look more closely at these processes.

I have already mentioned that a well-designed selection procedure has benefits not only in terms of identifying potential authors, but also through exposing them to team-based tasks and clarifying the kind of work load they can expect if they join a writing project. Once the team is constituted, the process of needs analysis can begin. Almost all the writers I have worked with have brought their own pet ideas to the table at the outset, some of them useful and valuable, others less so. Needs analysis puts all that in perspective as it gives direction from learners and teachers to the planning of new materials, to supplement the guidelines and requirements that may exist in curriculum documents. It is in essence a research exercise and is best conducted through the triangulation of data gathered by different methods, here probably by questionnaires to teachers and learners, observation in classrooms and consultation with other stakeholders, possibly including ministry officials, employers or parents.

Then, over the duration of the training programme, writers learn to work in teams, gradually discover their own strengths and weaknesses, understand the value of listening to each other and taking heed of feedback. Teamwork also enhances the end product. If team members have different learning styles and thinking styles, the materials they produce will reflect this diversity and will provide for analogous differences in learners. As they start to produce even small amounts of experimental materials, writers will develop a stronger grasp of key issues like sequencing, grading, framing objectives, balancing skills and activities and realistic time management. They also find out, through sometimes bitter experience, that the process of writing entails working through several drafts and dumping early attempts in the dustbin before they reach a version that is close to what is needed. Lessons learned this way are reinforced when draft material is sent into schools for piloting with real classes. Pilot materials are accompanied by questionnaires to teachers and learners, and in some cases, writers are able to observe classes in which the materials are trialled. This is a very powerful stage in the development of new textbooks. Not only does it bring the writers out of their secure 'bubbles' and into the realities of everyday classrooms, but it also involves practising teachers in the process of refining the

materials, thereby securing a degree of buy-in, shared understanding and ownership.

The processes of discussing the findings from piloting and making further revisions lead right up to the publication stage, and interaction with publishers reveals a fresh set of issues for the writers. They learn basic things like fitting materials to pages, standardizing the length of lessons and units as well as becoming aware of issues relating to copyright, plagiarism, artwork, house style for spelling and punctuation and much more. Once the books are published, the processes often go on, as writers are asked to speak about their books at conferences, to train teachers in the use of the new materials and even to write articles for teachers' journals and magazines.

All this can be seen as part of the professionalisation of the writers but also as deep professional learning for each individual who is involved. 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, as well as a greatly enhanced level of language awareness and capacity for language analysis (for more on this, see Popovici and Bolitho, 2003). For me as a consultant and trainer, helping to facilitate this developmental outcome makes the job worth doing. Watching how team members have grown and developed through writing is always immensely satisfying. The whole process throws up, on a regular basis, dilemmas and conundrums that have to be addressed and resolved in order to ensure that textbooks are written on a sound and principled foundation. In the end, only the authors can provide that.

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