Perspectives on Language Learning Materials Development

Edited by Freda Mishan and Angela Chambers
Perspectives on Language Learning Materials Development

Edited by Freda Mishan and Angela Chambers
Introduction

Materials development is not an ‘optional extra’ in language teaching. Every language teacher is a materials developer (Tomlinson 2003, p. 1), whether this is at the level of mediating the course book, adapting or supplementing it, or designing materials, course books or curricula as the teaching context demands. Given the central role materials development plays in language teaching, it is surprising that, against the background of the boom in the language teaching industry in the second half of the twentieth century, it has taken so long for it to emerge as a field in its own right. This is in part because it is an area that, in a manner of speaking, treads on the toes of its commercial big brother, the ELT (English Language Teaching) publishing industry. In the tension between the business and pedagogical principles inherent in this relationship, the provision of published materials which appropriately match language learning needs can too often be compromised. The field of materials development is concerned with strengthening the language learning basis of language teaching materials of all types, from published course books to materials designed by practitioners ‘on the ground’ for specific teaching situations. Indeed, it is at this ‘local’ level, where published materials are very often unsuitable, inadequate or lacking, that materials development support is most needed. This latest addition to the field covers the full range of contexts, from published course book to context-specific materials for use at national, local and institutional level. With contributors to the volume coming from a variety of international teaching, research and materials development backgrounds, what emerges strongly is the degree to which materials development as a field embraces contemporary influences on language learning theory. These include the use of naturally occurring discourse in language teaching, the influence of technology on language learning, the concept of intercultural competence, and new insights into the specific learning needs of individual learner groups.
Introduction

The book is divided into three sections, *Materials development and naturally occurring discourse*, *Technology and materials development*, and *Tailoring materials for learner groups*. The first section, *Materials development and naturally occurring discourse*, begins with a chapter showing how insights from corpora have now begun to inform mainstream language teaching publications. In this chapter, entitled *Bridging the gap between corpus and course book: The case of conversation strategies*, two of the authors of the corpus-informed, four-level adult English course, *Touchstone*, published by Cambridge University Press (McCarthy, McCarten, and Sandiford 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b) describe the exploitation of a spoken corpus, part of the Cambridge International Corpus of North American English, for the development of materials for teaching conversation strategies. McCarthy and McCarten point out that the books in the series teach not only the traditional four skills but have, in addition, a sharp focus on conversation strategies. They examine how a spoken corpus was exploited to identify four major conversational macro-functions: managing one’s own talk, taking account of the listener(s), showing good listenership, and managing the conversation as a whole. The authors show how these four macro-functions then become the basis of a conversation syllabus which is markedly different from a conventional speaking or listening skills approach. The *Touchstone* series exemplifies the design of published teaching materials which foreground information from the corpus in a user-friendly way for both teachers and learners.

Farr, Chambers and O’Riordan’s chapter, *Corpora for materials development in language teacher education: Underlying principles and useful data*, also focuses on the role of corpora in language teaching, but from a different perspective, examining how corpora can be used in the context of language teacher education (LTE). Their aim is to show how teacher educators can prepare student teachers to use corpus data to prepare materials which are relevant and based on real contexts. They begin by outlining five key principles for the development of LTE materials. Materials should achieve impact; they should help learners to feel at ease and to develop confidence; they should require and facilitate critical cognitive and emotional development; they should allow for attention to be drawn to specific features; and they should permit a silent period and take into account that the positive
effects of instruction are usually delayed. This is followed by a considera-
tion of three ways in which corpus data may be used in LTE programmes, 
namely corpora as language resources, corpora of classroom discourse, 
and corpora for reflective practice and professional development. While 
examples are taken from English and French, the authors’ arguments are 
also applicable to other languages.

In Chapter 3, *Teachers telling tales: Exploring materials for teaching 
spoken language*, Timmis continues the theme of developing corpus- 
informed teaching materials, but this time turning from large publishers’ 
corpora such as the Cambridge International Corpus, on which *Touchstone* 
was based, to the possibilities for individual teachers to generate their own 
spoken corpora and base materials on these. The author describes the pro-
duction of just such a corpus and of learning materials based upon it. He 
first contextualises this within the socio-cultural arguments around the 
teaching of native speaker (NS) norms as opposed to those of near-natives, 
speakers of other Englishes or of English as a Lingua Franca. He discusses 
the criteria for selection of spoken language features for teaching from 
the teacher-generated NS corpora and presents samples of these, includ-
ing conversation and listenership strategies. Describing his approach to 
learning materials based on the corpus, Timmis proposes the design of 
dual purpose, ‘light touch’ listening/noticing tasks which offer ‘learning 
opportunities’ in preference to traditional pedagogy.

In *Helping learners to fill the gaps in their learning*, Tomlinson argues 
that corpora cannot meet all the needs of teachers and learners, and pro-
poses an additional resource, namely teachers using the naturally occurring 
discourse which they encounter in their everyday lives, in particular through 
the possibility of recording television programmes. After giving an overview 
of the limitations of using corpus data, Tomlinson analyses recordings of 
television programmes to show how they can reveal the various ways in 
which English speakers ask people to do things. TV Chef James Martin, 
he discovers, only uses the imperative when he has established a friendly 
relationship with his guests, preferring conditional phrases such as ‘If you 
can cut that guys’ in the initial stages of the programme. This is followed 
by an examination of how a number of course books and grammars present 
this aspect of English, where, unsurprisingly, the imperative figures much
more prominently than the conditional. Tomlinson then outlines a seven-step procedure he has used to show how the teacher can provide many opportunities for re-visiting the same authentic text, encouraging learners to notice the reality of language use in ways which facilitate acquisition.

The two chapters in the next section, *Technology and materials development*, illustrate different roles that technology can play in providing language learning materials. In the first, *Catching words: Exploiting film discourse in the foreign language classroom*, by Alexander Gilmore, technology is not the learning medium itself but the means of extracting texts for use as teaching material. As in the chapters on corpora in Section I, what is stressed in this chapter is the importance of spoken discourse for language learning as opposed to written language models. For this, the author looks to film dialogue, which, in contrast to the inauthentic nature of many course book dialogues, emulates naturally occurring discourse, provides rich input, and is appealing and motivating for learners. Like Tomlinson in Chapter 4, Gilmore looks to television and popular culture for his material, an episode of the ever-popular sitcom *Fawlty Towers*. He describes the technical process of extracting transcripts, either from the subtitled dialogue or the audio track, using readily available software for use on Macs or PCs. A useful section on ‘copyright headaches’ assists with the copyright minefield trodden when wishing to use authentic material. The author then illustrates just what can be done with extracted film transcripts, presenting a sample section of the transcript of an episode of *Fawlty Towers*, along with the teaching materials based on it.

Turning from technology as a tool for extracting texts for teaching materials to technology as media for learning, in the next chapter, *Task and task authenticity: Paradigms for language learning in the digital era*, Mishan holds up a fundamental language teaching construct, the task, as a paradigm for technology-based learning. Building on the notion of task authenticity, that tasks should involve genuine, meaningful activity that engages and motivates the learner, Mishan points out that Information and Communications Technology (ICT) offers an ever-increasing array of technologies that lend themselves to such tasks. This is illustrated with a selection of sample tasks using familiar Web 1.0 and 2.0 tools, with the emphasis on balance in creating tasks that provide both structure
and direction, while also challenging students’ cognitive, linguistic and technical skills. The facility with which today’s language learners handle technology provides the starting point for the second part of the chapter, in which Mishan questions the appropriateness for these learners of some conventions of language learning materials development and classroom procedures. Simplifying input and pre-teaching lexis, for example, are held up as practically redundant for the learner possessed of a complex set of e-literacy skills. Mishan, furthermore, suggests that such conventions might be flawed from the outset, arguing that they have little justification in language acquisition principles. She concludes by pointing out the crossover of this skills set into the conventional classroom and the importance of factoring this into our teaching.

In Section III, Tailoring materials for learner groups, the first of the learner groups that materials are tailored to, is young learners (YLs) of English. In Why should we make activities for young language learners meaningful and purposeful? Hughes stresses the interrelation of child language and cognitive development, and based on this, the importance for language learning activities to be meaningful, purposeful and contextualised. She begins by laying down a set of basic pedagogical principles relating to young learners, what she terms the ‘building blocks for TEYL’ (Teaching English to Young Learners), which layer young learners’ general cognitive development, their language learning facility and the implications of these for the materials we develop for them. The author then provides an overview of child language and cognitive development, as well as factors involved in language learning in general, with reference to seminal works in these areas ranging from Piaget (1967) to Donaldson (1978), Chomsky (1959) and Gardner (1993). Hughes stresses that young learners need their learning to be centred in the concrete ‘here and now’ and that the key to designing learning materials for children is to provide cognitive and developmental challenges appropriate to their age. She provides valuable checklists of materials design principles, which include the need for variety, contextualisation, kinaesthetic involvement, challenge and enjoyment, supporting these with some vivid examples of materials for use in the YL classroom. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the sensitive area of assessment and evaluation of young learners.
In *Using ethnography to develop intercultural competence*, Mason addresses the needs of his learners in Sousse, Tunisia, for contact with native speakers as a means of developing intercultural competence. Identifying British tourists holidaying in the region as a response to his learners’ needs, he conceptualised the meeting between his students and the tourists as an ethnographic interview project, with the North–South divide in England as the subject matter of the interviews. Situating his project in the context of research on intercultural competence, he encapsulates the essence of the various terms and concepts he defines in terms of three specific characteristics: inquisitiveness, open-mindedness and diplomatic skills. After describing the specific context of the learners, he describes and evaluates the project, focusing on the preparation of the students, the materials used in the project and the rationale behind them, the ethnographic interviews themselves and the learners’ evaluation. The objective of the chapter is to stimulate ideas which other teachers will be able to put into practice in their own contexts.

As Hann, Timmis and Masuhara point out at the beginning of their chapter, *ESOL materials: Practice and principles*, the constituency of learners they are concerned with, learners of English for Speakers of Other Languages, ESOL, remains poorly served by language teaching materials in many countries. Using the ESOL context in the United Kingdom as a case study, the authors portray the rather piecemeal provision of ESOL support and materials there, in a scenario recognisable in other countries. The chapter describes how in Britain, a measure intended to improve basic literacy among migrants, the Adult ESOL Core Curriculum and materials launched between 2001 and 2003, proved inadequate to serve the ‘super-diversity’ of the ESOL population, in terms of their differing educational and cultural backgrounds and needs. Furthermore, the complex system of administration and inspection involved with using a central core curriculum provided by more than one public body (responsibility for ESOL provision having shifted between government departments over the years), coupled with uneven teaching facilities, meant that these ESOL materials were felt to be unsatisfactory and inadequate. While the battery of available ESOL materials is slowly growing, the authors suggest that materials development in this context needs to work from the bottom up, i.e. materials
should be based on the learners’ real and immediate needs, address their diverse cultural backgrounds and levels of literacy, promote core learning skills, and, most basically, be available and accessible to both learners and teachers. While emerging from the British ESOL context, the fundamental principles for developing ESOL materials stated in this chapter provide an essential frame of reference for other contexts as well.

Venezuela is the context in which the final chapter is set. In Designing materials for a twelve-week remedial course for pre-university students: A case study, St. Louis, Trias and Pereira, like several of the authors in this volume, take as their starting point an awareness that a course book cannot meet all the needs of the learners. In addressing an international audience, they tend to avoid controversial topics. As Tomlinson also pointed out, they often fail to reflect authentic language use. In addition, their pedagogical approach might not be appropriate for the pedagogical cultures of specific teachers and learners. Based on their experience of the process of materials development in a Venezuelan university, the authors develop an eight-step process for materials development, starting with reflection on their view of language, learning and the learner. This is followed by an account of the needs analysis, the formulation of objectives, the selection of materials, the analysis of the texts, the creation of activities, and the learners’ evaluation. While the final step, the implementation of change based on the feedback of the learners, falls outside the time-frame of the chapter, the strong focus on the process of materials development in this case study will be of interest to many teachers.

Drawn from across the globe and across disciplines, this collection of chapters is at the same time eclectic yet projecting a common preoccupation with the need for language learning materials to be based on empirically and theoretically based principles of language acquisition. Indeed, the principles set out by one of most prominent figures in establishing materials development as a field in its own right, Brian Tomlinson (for example, 1998), principles centred on the needs, wants and capabilities of the developing language learner, are very much in evidence in the chapters in this volume. Significantly too, this book touches on some of the salient issues in materials development today: the tension between the coursebook and materials; the failure of many course books to provide authentic, natural
models of spoken English; pedagogical approaches taken in designing materials; exploring resources and exploiting technology; localisation and humanisation. In so doing, this volume contributes to the body of research in this dynamic new field and demonstrates the importance of the intersection of research, theory and practice in the development of successful language learning materials.

References