

English language teaching materials :  
choices past and present

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## 1 . Introduction

Perhaps no other teacher-task is as unrewarding as the reviewing of textbooks...Rare is the educator who reads textbooks for the derivation of pleasure or cerebral stimulation. It's work, fatigue-producing work. (Jenks, 1981 : 218)

From an almost overwhelming range of publications, choice of materials is one of the key decisions to be made by anyone involved in education. Teachers, or the authorities that employ them (or, albeit far less frequently, the learners who populate their classrooms), have to make difficult judgements regarding the adoption of a particular text, often for each individual course.

Should a book claiming to be tailor-made for their locality be chosen instead of a more globally-orientated product, with the universal marketing and support that often accompanies it? Alternatively, should the potential restrictions of being tied to a single text be avoided and materials be gathered from multiple sources, or even created by the teachers themselves, with their intimate knowledge of the context in which they will be used and heightened awareness of the needs and wants of all participants concerned?

The following study will first attempt to present a broad overview of materials

design, from past to contemporary theory, with a review of the relevant literature. After brief examination of certain aspects of the ever-increasing range of options available in the current EFL textbook market, features of “good” materials, as defined by expert opinion in the field, will be presented as potential points of reference for the evaluation of works being considered for adoption by teachers.

## **2. Materials : then and now**

The total corpus of ideas accessible to language teachers  
has not changed basically in 2,000 years. (Kelly, 1969 : 363)

The difficulty of gaining a historical perspective on materials design can be seen to stem partly from the lack of authoritative surveys of a general nature, perhaps justifying the critical observation that “language teaching has a short memory” (Stern, 1983 : 76). Chronological distance also necessitates caution in distinguishing pedagogy from practice, as “evidence from... theoretical writings cannot be treated the same as evidence from language teaching manuals” (ibid : 77). However, a number of studies (Bowen et al., 1985 ; Richards & Rodgers, 2001 ; Rivers, 1981 ; Stern, Op. Cit.) provide some overview of the major long-term shifts in approach and methodology containing insights into the accompanying development of materials.

### **2.1 Historical background**

Taking the sequential view (Mackey, 1965 ; Titone, 1968) as a starting point, most surveys see a division of the four centuries leading up to the modern era into four or five reasonably distinct periods. Of particular relevance to the place of

materials within such a chronology is the repeated swing between oral and grammar-based approaches that accompanied the contemporary prevalence of activist or formalist views (Rivers, Op. Cit.).

The period lasting until around 1500, variously labelled ‘ancient’, ‘classical’ or ‘medieval’, when oral Latin was of paramount importance in language education, is the first mentioned by most authors. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the rise of European languages, particularly French, Italian and English, and use of the vernacular, initially for informal social purposes, marks the second period, in which Latin grammar came to be studied for its own sake. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, ‘modern languages’ were still being taught by methods derived from formal training in Greek and Latin, but the latter was no longer the actual medium of instruction although it remained a distinct mental discipline. In this third period, the spoken form of contemporary language began to be considered worthy of study, and translation *into* the target language became a common objective for the first time.

Much of this continued into the fourth and final pre-modern period, though greater opportunities for communication across Europe arising through the socio-political upheavals of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were accompanied by a converse return to formal concerns with the rise of the Grammar-Translation Method. Pioneered by the German linguist Plotz (1819-1881), this made use of memorisation, drilling and translation as its principal learning techniques :

Nineteenth-century textbook compilers were mainly determined to codify the foreign language into frozen rules of morphology and syntax to be explained and eventually memorized. Oral work was reduced to an absolute minimum, while a handful of written exercises, constructed at random, came as a sort of appendix to the rules. (Titone, Op. Cit. : 27)

More positively, this period should also be noted for the increased availability of textbooks expounding the new approach, and a related growth in the overall number of language classes.

Acknowledging that “through studying the history of language teaching we can gain perspective on present-day thought and trends and find directions for future growth”, Stern (Op. Cit. : 76) warns against using historical writings out of context to support modern views. Nevertheless, some interesting parallels can be found, with examples discussed in Kelly’s examination of over a thousand primary sources (Op. Cit.) demonstrating how antecedents of pattern-drilling can be seen in the substitution tables of 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century teaching grammars, and that the currently widespread use of dialogue to present text has been a constant feature of materials over hundreds of years.

## 2.2 The modern era

The whole foundation of contemporary language teaching was developed during the early part of the twentieth century, as applied linguists and others sought to develop principles and procedures for the design of teaching methods and materials, drawing on the developing fields of linguistics and psychology to support a succession of proposals for what were thought to be more effective and theoretically sound teaching methods. (Richards & Rodgers, Op. Cit. : 1)

With the rapid acceleration in the general pace of change from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was inevitable that teaching methodology and materials would undergo similar transformations in quick succession. Richards & Rodgers (ibid) outline four periods within a single century: the first being marked by a continuation and adaptation of late 19<sup>th</sup> century thinking up until World War II; the second, the “Methods Era”, starting in the 1950s, overlapping with a third which

witnessed the coming and going of various alternative teaching concepts in the 1970s, and the establishment of a mainstream communicative approach that would prevail in the fourth period, a “Post-methods Era” (ibid : 244), stretching from the 1980s to the present day. From a slightly earlier perspective, Stern (Op. Cit.) makes a similar division of the century from 1880-1980 into four sequential units.

In terms of materials design, the influence of the Grammar-Translation Method could be seen well into the century which followed its conception :

Certain nineteenth-century textbooks which continued to be used and imitated well into the twentieth century were notable for the meticulous detail of their descriptions of the grammar...preoccupation with written exercises, especially translation, and...lengthy bilingual vocabulary lists. They usually contained long extracts from great writers, chosen for their intellectual content rather than...their intrinsic interest. (Rivers, Op. Cit. : 29)

Rivers also describes the familiar hard-to-break cycle of teachers seemingly unable to use methods other than those by which they were taught and new but old-fashioned textbooks merely passing on “archaic structures and obsolete vocabulary...to successive generations of students” (ibid).

While some pedagogical attitudes remained firmly entrenched, other developments did take place in the first decades of the new century (Bowen et al, Op. Cit.). The Natural Method, formulated in the U. S., required ‘showman’ teachers rather than textbooks for its active promotion of target language use and emphasis on verbal (and non-verbal) contextualised communication. Meanwhile, European tastes for greater intellectual discipline were perhaps behind the rise of the Direct Method, where a concentration upon productive rather than receptive skills (in the U. S. the 1929 Coleman Report recommended reading as the key element)

meant that aural input and oral output were the basis for initial learning and books only required later, if at all. Attracting the interest of both teachers and applied linguists for the first time, the seeds were being sown for a new “methods era” which would commence half-way through the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Richards & Rodgers, *Op. Cit.*).

Rooted in the military need to speak an increasing number of languages worldwide and the concurrent spread of English as the major means of international communication, the Audiolingual Method took structural and behaviourist theory (as exemplified by Fries (1945) and Skinner (1957) respectively) to create a teacher-centred approach involving extensive drilling and, like its immediate predecessors, often no student textbook at first. However, when books were utilised, an interesting contrast with Direct Method practice was evident in the provision of loose, idiomatic native-language versions of the dialogues (Rivers, *Op. Cit.*). Audiovisual materials were also important, particularly in the European adoption of a largely American phenomenon, and the introduction of new technology in the form of language laboratories was suitably timed.

Just as it reached its peak of popularity in the mid-1960s, audiolingualism and contemporary approaches to language learning were again challenged on theoretical grounds, by Chomsky (1957 & 1965). A cognitive element would eventually be restored via modification of the old grammar-translation procedures and a shift from inductive to deductive principles of code-learning and habit formation (Rivers, *Op. Cit.*). Textbook designers were faced with a new dilemma :

Chomsky's theory was designed to explain the competence of an idealized native speaker, not that of a learner of a second language. Consequently, the materials used to teach English

...to those who did not possess native competence continued to be basically audiolingual with cosmetic adaptations to the new terminology. (Lado, 1981 : 230)

Out of this ideological conflict emerged the plethora of methodological proposals in the 1970s and '80s. Limited space restricts any comprehensive listing here, but in relation to their use or rejection of materials there are some relevant observations to be made. Firstly, the notable absence of textbooks from classroom procedures in many of the 'alternative' methods such as The Silent Way (Gattegno, 1972), Community Language Learning (Curran, 1972) and The Natural Approach (Terrell & Krashen, 1983) ; secondly, the preference for real-world materials to commercial texts in Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977) as well as Whole Language (Rigg, 1991) and Task-Based Language Teaching (Prabhu, 1987) approaches ; and finally, the Lexical Approach's requirement for the provision of complete learning packages including text and audio, such as the COBUILD English Course (Willis & Willis, 1989). In a contemporary comment, Bowen et al. (Op. Cit. : 55) note :

While they always play a significant role...materials have a particularly significant place in an era when many inadequately trained instructors are permitted to teach, and when no single, clearly defined method has been agreed upon...

To close this somewhat cursory historical retrospection, the approach eventually adopted on both sides of the Atlantic must be mentioned, as the proven longevity of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), through its wholesale adoption by mainstream language education, has had an enormous impact on materials design for over two decades.

With origins in both British language teaching distancing itself from the



situational approach in the late 1960s and the simultaneous need to respond to Chomsky's criticism of structural linguistic theory, a functional and communicative emphasis advocated by many eminent linguists (including Widdowson, 1978 ; Candlin, 1973 ; Brumfit & Johnson, 1979) was rapidly applied by textbook writers and the results accepted with similar urgency by teachers (Richards & Rodgers, Op. Cit. : 153). Although a text may not be central when a task- or realia-based approach is taken, much of the huge range of contemporary coursebooks presents CLT in its "classic" form to this day (ibid : 169). Similarities to structural syllabuses may be seen in the contents and sequencing, though notion and function are usually given greater prominence than purely grammatical elements.

This long-term continuation of trends and gradual development in materials design, already being predicted at the start of CLT's dominance, was seen as

indicative of the sequential nature of instructional change in this communication-dependent field of study...Many vital findings of linguistic research completed ten years ago have yet to make even a modest impact on major commercial publications. (Jenks, Op. Cit. : 219)

Having examined the multiple paths leading to the present situation, the practical decisions now facing teachers regarding materials and their use will be explored.

### 3. Current options

Teaching and learning materials provide the corpus of the curriculum. They normally exist as physical entities and are open to analysis, evaluation and revision in ways that teaching and learning acts are not ; and they have a direct influence upon what happens in

classrooms, which policy documents, syllabuses and teacher-training courses do not. (Johnson, 1989 : 7)

McGrath's assertion of the "absolute centrality of materials in language education" (2002 : 204) appears to indicate that their importance as a principal resource linking the classroom to the outside world in general, and the target language culture in particular, remains undiminished into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In spite of this, the related debate over the pros and cons of textbook use itself also continues to provoke much discussion.

### 3.1 To use or not to use ?

Posing the question "Are coursebooks a help or a hindrance?" Edge & Wharton (1998 : 298-9) summarise various writers' opinions. Positive factors include the way published materials may represent an organisational framework, saving time and providing support for both teacher and learner (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994) :

participants in social interactions like lessons feel a legitimate need for structure...A coursebook...can provide this...It functions as a management aid...and a secure base from which to depart. (Edge & Wharton, Op. Cit. : 298)

With basic coverage guaranteed and the teaching of defined content suitably reinforced, teachers may become freer to plan more creatively. Furthermore, a book may be the cheapest and most convenient package for learners, also giving them a degree of autonomy in the opportunity to preview or revise material, and monitor their own progress (Ur, 1996 : 184).

The way in which a coursebook's presence could influence the teacher is a pivotal question. It may provide a form of in-service training, particularly for the inexperienced, via a teacher's manual or, where based on some new approach, it might even be viewed as facilitating a form of professional development. However, others interpret this as a deskilling process, reducing teachers to the role of technicians (Richards, 1993) in situations where it is "too easy to follow the coursebook uncritically", and "find themselves functioning merely as mediators of its content" (Ur, Op. Cit.: 185). Richards & Rodgers cite the example of "teacher-proof materials" that may be suitable for poorly-trained instructors lacking in target language ability but would seem restrictive to more specialist users (Op. Cit.: 30). There is fine line to be drawn between design that encourages independent learning and that which effectively renders the teacher redundant.

In contrast to the apparent aim of developmental activities to increase teachers' ability to "debunk" materials design, Edge & Wharton's position is that "a carefully designed coursebook can *in itself* encourage development: it can carry the seeds of its own creative adaptation" (Op. Cit.: 299). This paradox of rather regimented material offering a springboard for imaginative teaching ideas also leads Ur to a positive conclusion, adding a frequently overlooked learner preference:

Classes (taught) on the basis of a selection from different sources have complained of a sense of lack of purpose...their learning is not taken seriously...the possession of a coursebook may carry a certain prestige. (Op. Cit.: 193)

McGrath (Op. Cit.) also concludes that if a suitable coursebook is available then its use would seem sensible, relying upon the teacher's judgement of precisely how and to what extent.

Features of materials likely to be deemed suitable will be discussed in the following section (4), but one general area should perhaps be explored in advance of such details. Having established some consensus within the profession that use of a coursebook per se is not without merit, the next level of choice lies between the basic types of coursebook on offer.

It is not within the scope of the current study to attempt any comprehensive survey of the enormous range of publications readily available today. Instead, examination of one fundamental aspect, the relationship between culture and materials design, may enhance our understanding of the contemporary market.

### **3.2 The cultural question**

...it might be said that the English language class may be less about the spread of English than about the spread of certain forms of culture and knowledge...through the... practices of English language teaching. (Pennycook, 1994 : 178)

From the 1980s, writers began to question the cultural bias to be found in materials, in spite of their increasingly global reach. Different syllabuses were seen as representing particular ideologies (Candlin, 1984), while the ethnocentric nature of teaching publications (Casewit, 1985) and practices (Nayar, 1989) was also noted.

Parallel to developments in methodology described earlier (2.1), Pennycook (Op. Cit. : 158) traces changes in the position of English as an international language from 19<sup>th</sup> century origins in imperialist “British expansionism” to the structuralist view of English as a “neutral medium for communication” accompanying the rise of linguistics as a field of study through the first half of the

following century. The post-war period, with understandably increased links to American power, witnessed the spread of a global discourse where English was presented as beneficial to the development of other countries. A final shift from such interventionism to a more economics-driven approach has given rise to the current position :

The reality of the situation appears to be that English has become a commodity...which has developed into a very large and frequently lucrative international market. (ibid. : 156)

The relevance of such developments to the production of materials becomes apparent considering almost half the total value of the world market in English language training (already \$10 billion according to McCallen's 1989 report) was shared, in a ratio of 2 : 1, between the U. S. (largely based on internal ESL requirements, the TOEFL exam's ubiquity in Asia, and textbook sales related to both) and the U. K., with its many language schools and large-scale export of EFL publications. The monolingual approach seen in both the audiolingualism of the 1950s and '60 s and the communicative methods of the 1970s and '80 s has been maintained up to the present, evident in the observation that "the supremacy of the native speaker keeps the U. K. and the U. S. at the centre of ELT" (Rampton, 1990 : 98). This English-speaking core is subsequently

able to maintain a strong hold over the production of language textbooks and forms of English teaching. Unilingual EFL textbooks can sell universally, and the skills of the native speaker English teacher are applicable anywhere. (Pennycook, Op. Cit. : 176)

The "stubbornly Anglo-centric" bias of global coursebook design (Altan, 1995 : 59) can lead to conflict with local social or cultural norms due to the frequency of activities entirely inappropriate for learners of certain religions (Ellis,

1990) or quite irrelevant to their daily lives (Brown, 1990). The perceived influence of materials on those that use them is also deemed worthy of comment :

Students use a particular course only once, but teachers will use it many times...it is cultural content, more than any other single aspect, that in our opinion influences teachers' attitudes. (Adaskou et al., 1990 : 10)

Most teachers would no doubt be unhappy to see themselves as service industry suppliers of the commodity that the English language appears to have become, let alone designated mere marketing personnel for the ELT product worldwide. Yet the increasing globalisation of the industry provides a valuable area for comparison in evaluation : might local needs be more effectively met by materials specifically designed for the context in which they will be used ?

### **3.3 Teaching materials in Japan**

...in order to cultivate practical English communication abilities, material that gives sufficient consideration to actual language-use situations and functions...should be utilized... topics that relate to the daily lives, manners and customs...geography, history...of Japanese people and the peoples of the world, focusing on countries that use English...(internet 1)

Until the mid-1980s, the main source of material for university English textbooks was British and American literature, reflecting the academic background of many teachers. Communicative situations were rarely presented until a major shift in emphasis signalled the beginning of progress toward the practical attitude expressed in the government recommendations above. While the new approach was generally accepted, albeit grudgingly by some, questions regarding the cultural content continued to be raised.

In the context of earlier discussion, it is interesting to note the strong rejection of Western culture's over-representation in textbooks expressed in a popular examination of Japanese failure in learning English (Suzuki, 1999), claiming that such coverage encourages an inherent inferiority complex. Iwasaki (2000) observed that, in fact, *Japanese* culture is omnipresent in high school English textbooks, with Western characters (invariably from the U.S.) usually appearing as visitors to Japan and receiving explanations of indigenous culture from their hosts. It could be argued that such weighting of content fulfils Berns' stipulation that materials should be "consistent with the reality of English in Japan, where learners have limited contact with native speakers and few opportunities to use English", and is consistent with the recognition of American English as "a viable model" (1990 : 133-4) due to the major foreign influence on the country.

While high schools have some freedom to choose their own textbooks, the strictly regulated situation in earlier schooling has already been mentioned. Frequently contentious though this may be (particularly concerning other subject areas, such as history), one possible advantage for any investigation of Japanese students' needs is the ability to assume considerable uniformity of learning experience within similar age bands, at least for the duration of compulsory education. Government control of textbook choice may restrict some sectors of the market, but the likelihood of increasing introduction of English to elementary schools, however gradual or limited, could add about seven million potential materials users, and there are signs that publishers are already adapting to the eventuality. Conversely, sales to universities are considered "stagnant due largely to population decline" (internet 2), a demographic effect also felt in private adult education, where some popular chain schools use their own original or adapted materials, although the elderly have yet to be specifically targeted by non-Japanese

producers.

Finally, the distinction between global products and those designed specifically for Japan is being delineated with increasing clarity by the major publishing houses. With a marked effect on content and presentation, conscious decisions regarding which approach to take are evidently being made, for both economic and educational reasons. Perusal of recent ELT catalogues may give a fairly accurate indication of current trends.

One has a large range written by native-speaking instructors in Japan for an audience with which they are highly familiar, perhaps explaining the company's strong presence in the university sector with short, accessible texts including numerous references to contemporary Japanese culture. Meanwhile, with a smaller domestic presence, another may be relying on a wider reputation to consolidate the long-term status of certain coursebooks as regional bestsellers, hence the attention paid to the continental level rather than to any single country within Asia. Others could be viewed as taking a more pragmatic approach, with a blend of internationally orientated and Japan-centred products. With some of these being bestsellers locally, the choice of focus is clearly significant.

#### **4 . Good materials**

Teachers dream of finding the ideal materials...that are at once accurate and imaginative, that offer both sequence and flexibility, and that provide variety yet respond to well-defined instructional goals. (Savignon, 1983 : 137)

This article will conclude with a brief survey of theoretical views of what might



constitute the ‘ideal’ of teachers’ dreams. Once identified, these ingredients would be likely to feature strongly as points of reference in any evaluation of a particular product.

Drawing from four texts spanning a recent decade (Nunan, 1988 ; Richards, 1990 ; Ur, 1996 ; Tomlinson, 1998) that give specific lists of desirable elements, much common ground (arguably due to basis in common sense) can be observed. Clearly defined objectives should be “explicitly laid out in an introduction and implemented in the material” (Ur, *Op. Cit.* : 186), with the latter as “appropriate to the learners’ needs and background” (Richards, *Op. Cit.* : 15) as possible. Tomlinson (*Op. Cit.*) also cites the importance of providing content that learners themselves will find of relevance and practical use, while maintaining an awareness of their differences in learning style and attitude.

Nunan (*Op. Cit.*) adds the fostering of independent learning to such criteria as matching learners’ expressed needs, and this encouragement of self-development appears to have been given increasing emphasis in recent years, to the point where growth in self-confidence and the ability to discover suitable learning strategies may be facilitated by the materials, but also demand an amount of “self-investment” on the part of learners themselves (Tomlinson, *Op. Cit.* : 11).

Clarity of objectives should be mirrored by clarity of the instructions for tasks which should vary to meet the aforementioned learner needs in terms of level, style and interest (Ur, *Op. Cit.*). Requesting that learners be involved in “meaningful activities”, Richards (*Op. Cit.* : 15) views as successful materials that provide a sequence from guidance regarding how to perform such tasks, practice in performing them, and finally feedback on the performance. There is some divergence of

opinion on the question of internal organisation of the content itself with, on the one hand, clear grading being of importance to some writers (Ur, Op. Cit.) alongside a balance between avoiding potentially confidence-sapping over-simplification and presenting points that the learners are actually ready to acquire (Tomlinson, Op. Cit., referring to Krashen's theory of 'comprehensible input' (1985)). On the other hand, content that "can be used at multiple levels of difficulty" (Nunan, Op. Cit. : 104) may add a positive element of versatility to items with otherwise restricted use.

Finally, the question of authenticity has gained increasing prominence (Tomlinson, Op. Cit.), often linked to the ongoing need to encourage learner interaction, and thus "to provide opportunities for communicative and authentic language use" (Richards, Op. Cit. : 15) becomes a fundamental requirement.

While other factors are mentioned, the frequency with which the criteria above appear in the relevant literature would seem to confirm their importance to what is currently considered good materials design. Tomlinson makes particular reference (Op. Cit. : 7) to the basis of such a list of positive features in the apparent consensus in Second Language Acquisition research on much of the theoretical background. The continuing dominance of the communicative approach in the "post-methods era" (Richards & Rodgers, Op. Cit.) and the relative absence of any major new trends have perhaps allowed practitioners to formulate more concrete visions of the materials of their dreams.

## 5. Conclusion

In terms of possible transference to other lines of enquiry, the process of close, evaluative examination of materials is seen by some as having greater potential than

the common approach of problem identification as an entrance into the kinds of specific action research and general teacher reflection fast gaining recognition in applied linguistics (Ellis, 1997). Indeed, perhaps evaluating the available choices and those eventually made should be recognised as an activity with greater implications for us as teachers than for the materials themselves. As Savignon (Op. Cit. : 138) concludes :

Textbooks are written for general audiences and thus cannot...meet the needs of a particular...class. The authors...cannot foresee all the needs of individual teachers and learners. The search for materials leads, ultimately, to the realization that *there is no such thing as an ideal textbook*. Materials are but a starting point. Teachers are the ones who make materials work...for their students and for themselves in the context in which they teach.

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