

**THE ROLE OF MATERIALS IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM:  
FINDING THE BALANCE FOR B2 LEVEL**

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**Annotation:** This article highlights the delicate balance the materials developer needs to achieve between expanding classroom horizons and dominating the interaction which underlies the learning process.

**Keywords:** classroom, discussion, learners, coursebook, specific group, teacher, skill, textbook, argument, educator.

**Аннотация:** В этой статье подчеркивается тонкий баланс, которого разработчику материалов необходимо достичь между расширением кругозора в классе и доминированием над взаимодействием, которое лежит в основе учебного процесса.

**Ключевые слова:** класс, обсуждение, учащиеся, учебник, конкретная группа, учитель, навык, учебник, аргумент, воспитатель.

"What about meeting learner needs? How can a coursebook meet the needs of a specific group of students?"

These questions, posed by a teacher looking for the first time at *Words Will Travel* (Clements and Crawford 1994), a set of integrated resources colleagues and I had just spent three years developing, set me thinking about the role of preplanned materials and why I have always been interested in resource production. It also recalled my concern, both as a teacher and teacher educator, about the incoherence of many language programs when teachers create their own materials or, as seems more frequently the case, pick and choose from a range of authentic and published materials and worksheets, often originally prepared for other classes.

This discussion is divided into two sections. The first looks at attitudes to teaching materials, including textbooks, and explores two opposing points of view. For some, commercial materials deskill teachers, rob them of their capacity to think professionally and respond to their students. They are also misleading in that the contrived language they contain has little to do with reality. For others, the role of teaching materials is potentially more positive. They can, for example, be a useful form of professional development for teachers, and foster autonomous learning strategies in students. Such arguments and the proliferation of teaching materials suggest the issue is not so much whether teachers should use commercially prepared materials, but rather what form these should take so that the outcomes are positive for teachers and learners rather than restrictive. The second part of the discussion explores eight key

assumptions which the author feels should underpin materials if these are to enhance the learning environment of the classroom.

Preplanned teaching materials – helpful scaffold or debilitating crutch? "What about meeting learner needs? How can a coursebook meet the needs of a specific group of students?" These questions, posed by a teacher looking for the first time at *Words Will Travel* (Clements and Crawford 1994), a set of integrated resources colleagues and I had just spent three years developing, set me thinking about the role of preplanned materials and why I have always been interested in resource production. It also recalled my concern, both as a teacher and teacher educator, about the incoherence of many language programs when teachers create their own materials or, as seems more frequently the case, pick and choose from a range of authentic and published materials and worksheets, often originally prepared for other classes. This discussion is divided into two sections. The first looks at attitudes to teaching materials, including textbooks, and explores two opposing points of view. For some, commercial materials deskill teachers, rob them of their capacity to think professionally and respond to their students. They are also misleading in that the contrived language they contain has little to do with reality. For others, the role of teaching materials is potentially more positive. They can, for example, be a useful form of professional development for teachers, and foster autonomous learning strategies in students. Such arguments and the proliferation of teaching materials suggest the issue is not so much whether teachers should use commercially prepared materials, but rather what form these should take so that the outcomes are positive for teachers and learners rather than restrictive. The second part of the discussion explores eight key assumptions which the author feels should underpin materials if these are to enhance the learning environment of the classroom. Concern whether pre-prepared materials can meet individual learner needs is part of the dilemma teachers face in trying to implement learner-centred language programs in a group setting. This is not a new issue. Over a decade ago, O'Neill (1982) queried the assumption that each group is so unique that its needs cannot be met by materials designed for another group. Such a view not only presupposes it is possible to predict the language needs of students beyond the classroom but also ignores the common linguistic and learning needs of many learners. The process undertaken in establishing the NSW Certificate of Spoken and Written English, for example, tends to confirm this commonality by showing that teachers do not vary radically in the choice of language competencies assigned to learners of a similar proficiency level.

Textbooks nevertheless remain a contentious issue for many teachers and researchers. Littlejohn (in Hutchinson and Torres 1994: 316), for example, claims textbooks "reduce the teacher's role to one of managing or overseeing preplanned events". A similar negative view emerged during a recent discussion of the role of textbooks on the Internet (TESL-L [Teachers of English as a Second Language List],

City University of New York). One participant, for example, claimed that textbooks are for poor teachers, those without imagination. In the same discussion, a Canadian colleague suggested there are cultural differences in attitudes to textbooks and referred specifically to "the Australian prejudice" against them. One reason for this prejudice may well be that so many of the ESL books available are British or American and so culturally removed from learners in Australia. Certainly when asked what they saw as the major strengths of a recent set of materials (Clemens and Crawford 1994), more than one in three of the participants at introductory workshops explicitly mentioned the Australian characters, content and contexts. The discussion on TESL-L, however, confirmed that attitudes to textbooks are complex and represent a mix of pedagogical and pragmatic factors and the different weightings given to these in different contexts. Textbooks, it appears, are acceptable in some sections of the Australian language scene (for example in ELICOS and many school-based LOTE programs) but not in others (such as primary ESL and many tertiary language programs).

It is, of course, relatively easy to criticise published materials. Their very visibility makes them more publicly accountable than those produced by teachers. The grounds for criticism are wide ranging. Not only do published materials make decisions which could be made by the teacher and/or students (Allwright 1981) but they often exhibit other shortcomings. Some materials, for example, fail to present appropriate and realistic language models (Nunan 1989, Porter and Roberts 1981). Others propose subordinate learner roles (Auerbach and Burgess 1985) and fail to contextualise language activities (Walz 1989). They may also foster inadequate cultural understanding (Kramsch 1987). Further weaknesses include failure to address discourse competence (Kaplan and Knutson 1993) or teach idioms (Mola 1993), and lack of equity in gender representation (Graci 1989). The fact that the textbook market flourishes despite such criticisms - Sheldon (1988), for example, reports that, in the US alone, 28 publishers offer over 1,600 ESL textbooks - reflects perhaps teachers' understanding that these same shortcomings also occur in teacher-produced materials; indeed, may do so more frequently because of the time constraints under which these are prepared.

There appears to be very little research, however, on the exact role of textbooks in the language classroom. Allwright (1981) suggests there are two key positions. The first - the deficiency view - sees the role of textbooks or published materials as being to compensate for teachers' deficiencies and ensure the syllabus is covered using well thought-out exercises. Underlying this view is the assumption that 'good' teachers always know what materials to use with a given class and have access to, or can create, these. They thus neither want, nor need, published materials.

The difference view, on the other hand, sees materials as carriers of decisions best made by someone other than the teacher because of differences in expertise. This view

was mentioned by several of the teachers participating in the TESL-L debate who argued for the use of published materials on the grounds that these are better - and cheaper in terms of cost and effort (McDonough and Shaw 1993) - than teachers can produce consistently in the time available to them. For many, however, both the difference and the deficit view challenge teachers' professionalism and reduce them to classroom managers, technicians, or implementers of others' ideas. This attitude is not limited to language teachers. Loewenberg-Ball and Feiman-Nemser (1988), for example, found that preservice primary school teachers in two American universities were taught explicitly that textbooks should be used only as a resource, and that following a textbook is an undesirable way to teach. Such views seem problematic. Obviously teaching materials are not neutral and so will have a role to play in deciding what is learnt (Apple 1992). For this reason, it is essential that materials writers be familiar with the learning and teaching styles and contexts of those likely to use their materials, and be able to exemplify a variety of good practice. In other words, teachers and their experience have a crucial role to play in materials production as well as in their critical classroom use, and the best writers are probably practising teachers.

The difference (or is it a deficiency?) is thus not in terms of expertise, but in access to time and technology. We live in a multimedia age and educational materials need to be of an adequate level of sophistication if the language class and learner are not to be devalued. Desk top publishing facilitates the production of convincing print materials, but many teachers still have neither the time, nor access to adequate technology, to create 'authentic' audiovisual materials (i.e. videos, cassettes and computer programs which reflect the real-world products the learners encounter outside the classroom). Without such authenticity, however, it is difficult to provide culturally rich input, or to develop coping strategies that will enable students to take advantage of the extracurricular input to which they have access.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I have looked at the roles preplanned teaching materials can play, and argued that their contribution need not be debilitating to teachers and learners; they can scaffold the work of both teachers and learners and even serve as agents of change, provided they act as guides and negotiating points, rather than straightjackets. In selecting materials, of course, practitioners need to look carefully at the principles underpinning such materials to ensure they contribute positively to the learning environment. This article outlines eight characteristics which seem appropriate in the light of our current understanding of the learning process, and which suggest we take advantage, not just of print, but also of different audiovisual media to enrich the classroom learning context.

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