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Selecting and Developing Teaching/Learning Materials

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Why do We Use Materials/What are Materials for?

Language instruction has five important components--students, a teacher, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation. Why are materials important in language instruction? What do materials do in language instruction? Can we teach English without a textbook?

Allwright (1990) argues that materials should teach students to learn, that they should be resource books for ideas and activities for instruction/learning, and that they should give teachers rationales for what they do. From Allwright's point of view, textbooks are too inflexible to be used directly as instructional material. O'Neill (1990), in contrast, argues that materials may be suitable for students' needs, even if they are not designed specifically for them, that textbooks make it possible for students to review and prepare their lessons, that textbooks are efficient in terms of time and money, and that textbooks can and should allow for adaptation and improvization.

Allwright emphasizes that materials control learning and teaching. O'Neill emphasizes that they help learning and teaching. It is true that in many cases teachers and students rely heavily on textbooks, and textbooks determine the components and methods of learning, that is, they control the content, methods, and procedures of learning. Students learn what is presented in the textbook, and the way the textbook presents material is the way students learn it. The educational philosophy of the textbook will influence the class and the learning process. Therefore, in many cases, materials are the center of instruction and one of the most important influences on what goes on in the classroom.

Theoretically, experienced teachers can teach English without a textbook. However, it is not easy to do it all the time, though they may do it sometimes. Many teachers do not have enough time to make supplementary materials, so they just follow the textbook. Textbooks therefore take on a very important role in language classes, and it is important to select a good textbook.

The Role of Materials in Relation to Other Elements

Since the end of 1970s, there has been a movement to make learners rather than teachers the center of language learning. According to this approach to teaching, learners are more important than teachers, materials, curriculum, methods, or evaluation. As a matter of fact, curriculum, materials, teaching methods, and evaluation should all be designed for learners and their needs. It is the teacher's responsibility to check to see whether all of the elements of the learning process are working well for learners and to adapt them if they are not.

In other words, learners should be the center of instruction and learning. The curriculum is a statement of the goals of learning, the methods of learning, etc. The role of teachers is to help learners to learn. Teachers have to follow the curriculum and provide, make, or choose materials. They may adapt, supplement, and elaborate on those materials and also monitor the progress and needs of the students and finally evaluate students.

Materials include textbooks, video and audio tapes, computer software, and visual aids. They influence the content and the procedures of learning. The choice of deductive vs inductive learning, the role of memorization, the use of creativity and problem solving, production vs. reception, and the order in which materials are presented are all influenced by the materials.

Technology, such as OHP, slides, video and audio tape recorders, video cameras, and computers, supports instruction/learning .

Evaluations (tests, etc.) can be used to assign grades, check learning, give feedback to students, and improve instruction by giving feedback to the teacher.

Though students should be the center of instruction, in many cases, teachers and students rely on materials, and the materials become the center of instruction. Since many teachers are busy and do not have the time or inclination to prepare extra materials, textbooks and other commercially produced materials are very important in language instruction. Therefore, it is important for teachers to know how to choose the best material for instruction, how to make supplementary materials for the class, and how to adapt materials.

What are Characteristics of Materials?

Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989) argue that materials have a hidden curriculum that includes attitudes toward knowledge, attitudes toward teaching and learning, attitudes toward the role and relationship of the teacher and student, and values and attitudes related to gender, society, etc. Materials have an underlying instructional philosophy, approach, method, and content, including both linguistic and cultural information. That is, choices made in writing textbooks are based on beliefs that the writers have about what language is and how it should be taught. Writers may use a certain approach, for example, the aural-oral approach, and they choose certain activities and select the linguistic and cultural information to be included.

Clarke (1989) argues that communicative methodology is important and that communicative methodology is based on authenticity, realism, context, and a focus on the learner. However, he argues that what constitutes these characteristics is not clearly defined, and that there are many aspects to each. He questions the extent to which these are reflected in textbooks that are intended to be communicative.

In a study of English textbooks published in Japan in 1985, the textbooks were reviewed and problems were found with both the language and content of many of the textbooks (Kitao et al., 1995).

Language

English textbooks should have correct, natural, recent, and standard English. Since students' vocabulary is limited, the vocabulary in textbooks should be controlled or the textbooks should provide information to help students understand vocabulary that they may not be familiar with. For lower-level students, grammar should also be controlled. Many textbooks use narratives and essays. It would be useful to have a variety of literary forms (for example, newspaper articles, poetry, or letters), so that students can learn to deal with different forms.

Information on Culture

The cultural information included in English textbooks should be correct and recent. It should not be biased and should reflect background cultures of English. It should include visual aids etc., to help students understand cultural information.

From Learners' Viewpoints

Content English textbooks should be useful, meaningful and interesting for students. While no single subject will be of interest to all students, materials should be chosen based, in part, on what students, in general, are likely to find interesting and motivating.

Difficulty. As a general rule, materials should be slightly higher in their level of difficulty than the students' current level of English proficiency. (Exceptions are usually made for extensive reading and extensive listening materials, which should be easy enough for students to process without much difficulty.) Materials at a slightly higher level of difficulty than the students' current level of English proficiency allow them to learn new grammatical structures and vocabulary.

Instructional issues. English textbooks should have clear instructional procedure and methods, that is, the teacher and students should be able to understand what is expected in each lesson and for each activity.

Textbooks should have support for learning. This can take the form of vocabulary lists, exercises which cover or expand on the content, visual aids, etc. Traditionally, language teaching materials in Japan are made up mostly of text, with few, if any, visual aids. However, with the development of technology, photos, visual materials and audio materials have become very important components of language teaching materials, and they are becoming easier to obtain. Teachers need to learn how to find them, and how to best exploit these characteristics.

Materials are getting more complicated, and instructional philosophy, approach, methods, and techniques are getting more important. Teachers need to be able to evaluate materials involving photos, videos, and computers now.

How Can We Learn About Materials?

There are various ways to get information about textbooks and other teaching materials. Many materials are published by publishers and developed and distributed by commercial companies. Thus, publishers are useful (if not entirely unbiased) sources of information and advice about what materials are available and what materials are appropriate for various purposes. Many publishers provide sample copies on request. Bookstores that carry textbooks are another possible source of information. Clerks at such bookstores may help you find the materials you want. In addition, publishers' displays at conferences are useful. They usually have the most recent materials, exhibitors are willing to help you and answer your questions, and in some cases, you will have opportunities to meet and talk with the authors. Colleagues and friends who are teachers are also good sources of recommendations of textbooks and advice about how to best use them. Finally, there is information from computer mailing lists and web pages on the Internet. Lists on language teaching often have discussions on materials, and you can ask questions and may get good feedback. Many publishers have www pages and e-mail addresses, so you can check with them and also ask questions about the materials.

How do We Get Materials?

In addition to publishers, there are many possible sources of materials. There is a lot of material available on the Internet. You can search for materials when you have free time, and store them for your future classes.

Many teachers go abroad during vacations these days, and they can collect materials in English-speaking countries. TV and radio are good sources. They provide a variety of materials. The information is current and the language is natural, but the content has to be chosen carefully.

Newspapers, magazines, advertisements, and other types of printed material are very useful. Teachers can take photos, make video tapes or record audio tapes. If they make plans before they go overseas, they may be able to make good video or audio programs.

Even in your home country, you can browse the world wide web and search for useful materials for classes. There are lots of sources of materials and photos on www.

Concerns About Materials

The market of language teaching materials are fairly large, and many companies are competing. They produce new materials and promote them with many advertisements and through their salespeople. You need to be careful about what they tell you. You always need to examine their materials carefully from the point of view of what is appropriate for your students and the classes you are teaching.

Another concern about materials is that the copyright issue. Many teachers violate the copyright laws every day. We cannot copy any copyrighted materials. Of course, we cannot copy them and distribute them to our students in the class. We need the permission from the publisher to do so.

Summary and Conclusion

Though there are five elements in language instruction, and learners should be the center of instruction. However, materials often control the instruction, since teachers and learners tend to rely heavily on them. Materials that are appropriate for a particular class need to have an underlying instructional philosophy, approach, method and technique which suit the students and their needs. They should have correct, natural, current and standard English. Teachers need to look for good materials, both commercial and non-commercial, all the time. They also need to be aware of commercialism and copyright issues concerning materials.

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