RESEARCH ARTICLE

SIGNIFICANCE OF TEACHING MATERIALS IN THE ESL CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Materials are important ingredients' in imparting education especially in the case of English as a Second Language Learning.

This paper explores Teachers beliefs and practices related to the role of materials in foreign language (FL) teaching and learning process. Results indicate that the materials are important tools mediating instructional planning and student learning of FL vocabulary and grammar, but it was considered less valuable for students in improving their oral communication skills.

Hence, effective English teaching materials in ESL context need to provide a platform to the students where they can improve their English Language Communication skills.

Key words: Materials, English as a Second Language (ESL), and Foreign Language (FL)

INTRODUCTION

Materials obviously reflect the writers' views of language and learning, and teachers and students will respond according to how well these match their own beliefs and expectations. If materials are to be a helpful scaffold, these underlying principles need to be made explicit and an object of discussion for both students and teachers. Now let us look at the assumptions about language and learning which the author believes should underpin materials used in language classrooms. Individual end-users will, of course, weight these factors differently, and so need to adapt the materials to their own context and learners. In terms of our present understanding of second language learning, however, effective materials are likely to reflect the following statements.

Effective Teaching Materials Foster Learner Autonomy

Given the context-dependent nature of language, no language course can predict all the language needs of learners and must seek, therefore, to prepare them to deal independently with the language they encounter as they move into new situations. The activities and materials proposed must be flexible, designed to develop skills and strategies which can be transferred to other texts in other contexts. The materials writer can also suggest follow-up activities to encourage this process and to provide additional practice for those who need it. This is not only assists teachers in catering to range of learning styles and levels, but also contributes to developing their teaching repertoire. Learners can likewise be asked to explore the strategies they and their fellow students use and where appropriate, try new ones.

One of the advantages of talking about language as proposed here is that such discussion contributes to the development of skills for continued autonomous learning (Borg.1994).and students gain confidence in their ability to analyse the data available in the language to which they have access. Making generic and cultural aspects of the language explicit and available to learners in their textbook gives them more control over their learning environment. Another important aspect of the move to greater self-direction is the ability to evaluate the performance of oneself and others. Materials, therefore, need to build in self-assessment tasks which require learners to reflect on their progress.

In Our Modern, Technologically complex World, Second Language Learners Need to Develop the Ability to Deal with Written as Well as Spoken Genres

Teaching materials will normally need to cover a range of genres, possibly including computer literacy. These things will emerge from the context and be accompanied by activities and exercises which explore both their meaning in that context and, if appropriate, their schematic structure and language features. The extent to which teachers focus explicitly on the latter will depend on the needs and goals of their learners, and whether this kind of analysis fits with learning preferences or not should be carefully adjudicated by the teacher. For many learners, however, these reading materials will provide models which can be used to develop familiarity with the structure of such texts, and provide a scaffold to assist with the learners' subsequent attempts to write similar texts. Materials should be integrated and not require students to write genres which have not already been encountered. This means that when learners do begin their analysis, they have already bad an opportunity to acquire a certain familiarity with the genre. These previous examples can then be used for additional practice in identifying the schematic structure and language features, thus providing learners with an opportunity to elaborate and revise their inter-language (Ellis, 1989).

Writing is a second language is sometimes daunting for L2 learners, especially because, as native speakers know, we tend to be less forgiving of grammatical and other inaccuracies. Learners need to come to terms with this aspect of written language, and develop appropriate strategies for tackling written tasks. Except for informal notes, most writing involves more than one draft. Materials can incorporate learning cycles which allow learners to explore choices and options and choose the most appropriate to their purpose before they begin working on their own. Individual writing will usually occur at the end of a number of activities in which learners have (a) worked with examples of the genre but with the focus on meaning, not form; (b) analysed examples of the genre to determine its social purpose and generic structure; (c) built up

their knowledge of the topic through discussion, reading and so on, so that they have something to write about and have covered the necessary vocabulary; and (d) engaged in a joint construction, either as a whole group or in smaller groups. The discussion such collaborative work provokes engages learners in purposeful interaction and gives them an opportunity to check their understanding of the requirements of the task.

Materials Need To Be Flexible Enough To Cater To Individual And Contextual Differences

Although language is a social practice, learning a language is largely an individual process as learners seek to integrate newly perceived information into their existing language system. It is essential for teachers to recognize the different backgrounds, experiences and learning styles that students bring to the language classroom, and the impact these experiences have on what aspects of the input are likely to become intake. In other words, it is to a large extent the learners not the teachers, who control what is learnt since it is they who selectively organize the sensory input into meaningful wholes.

This diversity of response provides classroom teachers with a rich source of potential communication as learners and teachers share their reactions to the materials and compare cultural differences. This presupposes that the teacher is prepared to adopt an interpretive rather than a transmissive methodology (Wright, 1987) and to adapt the materials to the context in which learning is taking place. Without opportunities to interact with one another, the teacher and the language, students will not be able to confront their hypothesis about how the language system is used to convey meaning, and then check these intuitions against the understanding of their fellow students and the teacher. It is this kind of open interaction which helps make explicit the underlying cultural and linguistic assumptions and values of both teachers and learners. Such assumptions and values become negotiable when they are made overt.

Language Is Functional And Must Be Contextualized

Language is as it is because of the purposes we put it to. For this reason, materials must contextualize the language they present. Without any knowledge of what is going on, who the participants are and their social and psychological distance in time and space from the events referred to, it is impossible to understand the real meaning of an interaction. In other words, language, whether it is input or learner output, should emerge from the context in which it occurs. One possible way to build a shared context for learners and their teachers is to use video drama. Familiarity with the context helps make the language encountered meaningful, and also extends the content of the course beyond that other rich source of contextualized language use, the classroom itself. That is to say, the fictitious world of a video drama can provide a joint focus which is culturally broader than the classroom, and which serves as a springboard into other real world contexts. These will need to be negotiated carefully, however, because they are not shared by all members of the group. Again, it is the teacher who must ensure that a balance is achieved between input and the reapplication of this to the unique context of a given class.

The Language Used Should Be Realistic and Authentic

An outcome of our understanding that language is a social practice has been an increased call for the use of 'authentic' materials, rather than the more contrived and artificial language often found in traditional textbooks (Grant, 1987). The problem with using authentic materials (Nunan's sense of 'any material which has not been specifically produced for the purpose of language teaching' (1989, p.54) is that it is very difficult

to find such materials which scaffold the learning process by remaining within manageable fields. It is also difficult for teachers legally to obtain a sufficient range of audiovisual materials of an appropriate quality and length. The quality of the materials is, nevertheless, important because of its impact on learners and their motivation:

> Hi-tech visual images are a pervasive feature of young people's lives. Text books, worksheets and overheads are a poor match for these other, more, complex, instantaneous and sometimes spectacular forms of experience and learning in this context, the disengagement of many students from their curriculum and their teaching is not hard to understand. Teachers are having to compete more and more with this world and its surrounding culture of the image. (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 75)

Materials, therefore, need to be authentic-like, that is, 'authentic, in the sense that the language is not artificially constrained, and is, at the same time, amenable to exploitation for language teaching purposes' (Mac William, 1990, p.160). Another related aspect of authenticity concerns the classroom interaction to which the materials give rise (Crawford, 1990); Taylor, 1994). The more realistic the language, the more easily it can cater to the range of proficiency levels found in many classes. At the same time, the proposed activities must be varied and adaptable to classroom constraints of time and concentration span. Vernon (1953), for example, found that there was a steep decline in the amount of aural information retained during the course of a half-hour transmission, and that 6 to 7 minutes is probably the optimal maximum even for native-speaking viewers. A video drama which contained 5-minute episodes would not, therefore, be authentic in terms of typical TV programs, but it would be pedagogically practical and efficient in terms of language comprehension.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have looked at the roles 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 straitjackets. In selecting materials, of course, practitioners need to look carefully at the principles underpinning such materials to ensure that they contribute positively to the learning environment. This paper outlined five assumptions about language and learning which seem appropriate in the light of our current understanding of the learning process. Teaching Materials in ESL Context need to help the learners' in developing their Communication Skills.

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