

Identifying a research agenda for language teaching materials

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In recent years, language learning materials, especially for English language learning, have gone from being a neglected area of research and publication to one which has gained serious attention, with a number of new publications (see, for example, Harwood, 2010; McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson 2008, 2013; Tomlinson and Masuhara 2010a , as well as new editions of previous publications (McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara, 2013; Tomlinson, 2011). An important contribution to the field has also come from Tomlinson's (2012) state of the art review of materials development.

Two things are noticeable about the majority of these publications, however. First, the field is generally under-theorised. Many of the books published are 'how to' books, with advice for teachers (see for example McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara, 2013; McGrath 2002; Tomlinson 2003, 2011). These books may draw on research and theory, especially in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), but they are generally not based on research into materials.

The second point to be made is that the majority of previous publications focus primarily on everything but the use of ELT materials. Thus we find books and chapters on materials design and development (Harwood 2010; Jolly and Bolitho 2011; McGrath 2002), materials evaluation and adaptation (Islam and Mares, 2003; Littlejohn 2011; McDonough, Shaw and Masuhara, 2013; McGrath 2002; Nation and Macalister 2010; Richards 2001), the materials writing process (Bell and Gower, 2011; Mares 2003, Maley 2003) and types of materials (Tomlinson 2008). Any view of materials that neglects their actual use by teachers and/or learners can, in our view, only be partial, and yet none of the recent publications listed above focus on this aspect (but see Garton and Graves, in press).

It is precisely this lack of attention to materials in the classroom that is noted by Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013). In their important article, Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) indicate only two classroom-based studies with materials as the primary focus (Canagarajah, 1993 and Yakhontova, 2001). To this we can add the work of Opoku-Amankwa (2010) whose ethnographic study looked at the interaction between

teachers, learners and textbooks in an urban primary school in Ghana. However, this remains an extremely small body of work.

Guerrettaz and Johnston's recent article in this journal (2013) has called for more research on the way materials (e.g. textbooks) actually function in the classroom, taking an important step towards developing a theoretical framework for materials use by adopting a classroom ecology approach. Such an approach enabled them to identify three principle areas in the classroom ecology with which materials interact: curriculum, classroom discourse and language acquisition. In this article we reflect on these three areas and point to future directions for research.

The curriculum

As Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) note, in many contexts materials, usually in the form of a coursebook, act as the *de facto* curriculum, influencing both what is taught and how.

Within a materials-as-artefacts perspective, a number of writers identify principles for the inclusion of topics and language in materials (see, for example, McGrath, 2002; Tomlinson and Masuhara 2010b). The content of materials surely plays a significant role in the affordances for language learning. However, research is lacking on how content choices affect affordances and interactions in the classroom. Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) note that in their data, interaction between learners and materials "seems to occur when connections can be made between the content of the materials and the students' lives" (p. 791). Their study suggests that the content of the material may play an important role in how these connections are made, yet in their data, connections were not generated by the students, but occurred through teacher prompts. This could be because the textbook used in their study focused exclusively on grammar and it may be argued that it is difficult for learners to make connections to content that is exclusively grammar-based. So an important question is what happens when materials are purposefully designed to foster such connections?

Attempts have been made to build such connections into materials through the use, for example, of locally-produced, as opposed to global, coursebooks. Lopez and Debat (2006) make the case that localising materials has the benefit of familiarity and connects them to the learners' world while also matching local practices and

curriculum. However, the ways in which and to what extent learners will actually connect with materials in the classroom is complex and often unpredictable. Lee (1995:325), in her discussion of learner authenticity, identifies five factors which facilitate the interaction between learners and materials: the material, the learner, the teacher, the task and the environment in which learning takes place. According to Lee, it is the interplay between these factors that contributes to 'learner authenticity', which occurs when materials "engage the learner's interest and impress him (sic) as being in some way relevant to his concerns" (Widdowson, 1978, p. 90). These references are not recent, yet there appears to be little or no research into the characteristics of materials that encourage learner connection, or authentication.

The second aspect of the relationship between materials and curriculum lies in curriculum implementation and the role that materials can play in classroom pedagogy. Writers such as Hutchinson and Torres (1994) and Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008), for example, maintain that materials can act as 'agents of change', supporting novice teachers or those who lack confidence. It is also often argued that appropriate coursebooks can facilitate curricular change by providing a visible framework that both teachers and students can follow (Rubdy 2003) and they help teachers to 'fully understand and "routinize" change' (Hutchinson and Torres 1994: 323).

However, this may not always be the case. As Nur (2003) notes, where curricular change leads to new approaches in language teaching, teachers may need training to use the new books, otherwise they continue to employ previous methods. Humphries (in press) outlines a range of factors that affect a teacher's use of materials including their understanding of language and how it is learned and of learners; the teacher's own experience of learning and confidence in English; and contextual factors such as the culture of the school and perceptions of the purposes for learning English. Studies such as that by Humphries (ibid.) show that when teachers are asked or required to use materials that do not match their expertise, experiences and beliefs, they may not use the materials in the ways intended. Further classroom-based studies are needed into the complex interrelationship between materials, teacher cognition and pedagogic practice in order to inform the management of curriculum change processes.

A final aspect of materials-as-curriculum is the role that adaptation and teacher-prepared materials may play in the classroom ecology. Adaptation of materials is generally acknowledged as important for meeting learners' needs (see for example, McGrath, 2002). Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) found evidence in their study that only the textbook constituted the legitimate curriculum of the class. Bosompem (in press) in her work on textbook adaptation with a group of teachers in Ghana also draws attention to the power of the official book in some contexts. The teachers in Bosompem's study, far from seeing adaptation as necessary for learners and the sign of a good teacher, felt guilty about questioning the authority of the book and unprepared to adapt it. Whilst these studies point to attitudes towards adaptation, there is a lack of classroom-based studies into the actual patterns of teacher adaptations and their effect on students, or on teachers' use of supplementary or teacher-prepared materials and learners' engagement with them.

Classroom Discourse

A key finding of Guerrettaz and Johnston (2013) is the role that materials play in the organization of classroom discourse. They show how materials can constrain classroom interaction, but also how they lead to unintended affordances for meaningful and extended discourse.

However, any discussion in the relationship between materials and classroom discourse needs to take into account that the language classroom represents a particular institutional context in which participants come together to achieve the specific goal of teaching and learning. Classroom discourse is therefore a form of institutional talk and as such has certain characteristics, described, for example, by Walsh (2006, p. 5). The classroom must be seen, therefore, as a social context in its own right (Johnson, 1995; Walsh, 2002), with its own goals and rules of communication (Seedhouse, 2004). Walsh (2002, p.4) notes that, in order to understand classroom discourse, the relationship between language use and pedagogic goals needs to be recognised.

Research into classroom interaction has focused on the ways in which teachers and learners co-construct the discourse but we are not aware of any research that adds materials into the equation. As such, the discourse analyzed in the Guerrettaz and

Johnston study provides some revealing glimpses into this type of analysis. For example, as the teacher plays a strong mediating role in all of the interactions, it is difficult to make claims about the affordances (intended or otherwise) of the materials in isolation. Both Walsh (2006, 2011) and Seedhouse (2004) have developed frameworks for analysing classroom interaction which acknowledge a variety of pedagogic purposes in the classroom. These can constitute a useful starting point for research into the different roles that materials may play in classroom discourse according to pedagogic purpose.

Learning

Whilst research into the effects of materials on language acquisition is undoubtedly desirable, Tomlinson and Masuhara (2010b) note that there are practical difficulties in carrying out such studies: they would have to be longitudinal, requiring considerable resources, and it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to control for variables influencing acquisition in a classroom situation. Given the complexities of the classroom environment it may not, therefore, be useful to see specific language learning outcomes as a separate area of investigation into materials use, but to focus on classroom processes and the way in which the various factors we have identified above interact in those processes.

Technology

Our reflections so far have centred on ‘traditional’ materials, particularly textbooks. However, any classroom-based research agenda into materials would need to consider technology. It is no exaggeration to say that developments in digital technology have revolutionised language learning materials and their role in the classroom (see Macaro, Handley and Walter, 2012 for a review of Computer Assisted Language Learning in primary and secondary education).

Particularly significant are the affordances given by technology for changing the roles of classroom participants through the potential for bottom-up classroom processes. The chapters in Thomas (2009) show the range of possibilities afforded for the joint development of materials by teachers and learners through the use of Web 2.0 tools with chapters on Skype, mobile phones, Personal Learning Environments, social networking sites, podcasts, and weblogs, to name just a few. The use of digital audio

and video, the internet, blogs, wikis, Virtual Learning Environments and so on has put ‘the possibilities of the adaptation and creation of a broad range of language-learning materials into the hands of the teacher, but also into the hands of the learners’ (Motteram 2011:304). Therefore, the use of technology shifts the nature of materials from artefact to process and, as such, can place the learner squarely at the centre of materials in a way that traditional materials have not been able to. The implications of this for curriculum, classroom discourse and language learning provide a rich field for future investigations and should be at the centre of any research agenda on materials.

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