



Fifty

tips

for

ELT

Materials

Writers

Fifty tips for ELT Materials Writers

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Multiple authors

Editor's note

In June 2016 I delivered a one-month online course with iTDi called *Creating ELT Materials*. Participants came from all corners of the globe. They were working in many different contexts, from teaching Early Years learners in private language schools to giving Academic English classes at universities. Some were already published ELT authors, others were keen to improve the materials they were making for their own classes. What they all had in common was a keen interest in materials design and a wealth of ideas, creativity and passion.

During the course I posted this discussion question:

Which ONE piece of advice would you give to a teacher who wanted to create their own classroom materials?

The result was a lively thread of tips for materials writers. Sometimes the advice is appropriate for somebody who wants to write professionally. Other advice is focused on teachers who want to create materials for their own students. There are inevitable contradictions but that's the nature of advice when it comes from different quarters. We hope that you'll find some of them useful and wish you well in your ELT materials creation.

Katherine Bilborough

ELT writer, Trainer and Teacher

Tips 1 – 10

1. Add space in materials for reflection.
 2. Ask yourself *Why am I doing this?* Reinventing the wheel is a waste of time.
 3. Only create materials that fill a gap or are an improvement on existing materials.
 4. Ask yourself *Why do I feel the need to I create something new?* Materials should result from a practical need and have a solid theoretical basis.
 5. Be a student! Take a class or try out your own ideas using another language. You will be able to critique your own stuff more objectively.
 6. Be consistent with formatting!
 7. Be open to learning from others and in particular, let yourself be inspired by other people's creativity.
 8. Be well informed about teaching and learning theories.
 9. Be yourself.
 10. Besides making materials relevant and engaging, try to make the content spark curiosity for further learning.
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Tips 11 - 20

11. Build an audience that supports your work and build a network that can help you achieve greater success.
12. Check what other people are creating. Then don't just try to reinvent the wheel - be unique and creative.
13. Conduct a *needs analysis* to identify the major interests, desires and needs of your students.
14. Consider the learners' level, learning aims and styles of learning.
15. Consider the visual appearance - spacing, layout, design. Ask yourself questions like: *What do you focus on first? Does the piece appear crowded? What will the students notice first?*
16. Create a *manifesto* that details your principles, both philosophically and artistically, when you create a work.
17. Create your materials. Then take a break before you check them over.
18. Decide on your main activity and then brainstorm other activities that you could develop around it. Finally, see how you can fit these together to make a cohesive lesson.
19. Don't set your ideas in stone. They should evolve to meet the current context which will invariably be different from the previous context.
20. Don't worry about boundaries and limitations. They can foster creativity.

Tips 21 - 30

21. Find a co-author! Collaborating with somebody who has a different set of skills to you will lead to more opportunities and a wider reach.
22. First plan the aims you want to achieve with the materials. Then use them to guide everything you create!
23. Follow a logical sequence: an introduction to the language point, practice activities and something in context to help consolidate the learning.
24. (a) Conduct a needs analysis, (b) make materials, (c) teach with the materials (d) feedback on materials (e) make changes as necessary.
25. Follow your own vision and beliefs.
26. Get a friend or colleague to proof read or pilot materials for you if possible.
27. If the materials are digital, test them beforehand, to make sure the text and the pictures have enough contrast and are easy to see. Sometimes things look great on your own screen but are hard to read or understand when projected or printed out.
28. If you're not sure if it will work, try it out! If you are sure it will work, try it out anyway!
29. Keep it simple.
30. Know your content market . Figure out what kind of content you love to produce and then produce lots of it.

Tips 31 – 40

31. Leave plenty of white space for users to write notes and annotations.
 32. Maintain a clear aim in your head throughout the creation exercise.
 33. Make materials and then adapt them according to each class and level.
Remember that *one size does not fit all*.
 34. Make sure you use spell check or ask a colleague to proofread it.
 35. Make sure you write clear teaching notes and keys so others can use the materials too.
 36. Personalise materials for different contexts.
 37. Pilot materials as early as possible!
 38. Prepare your materials and write your instructions well in advance. Then proofread them again a week or so later. Some things may not *read* as obvious as when you first wrote them and sometimes you need to struggle a bit to understand what you actually meant in the first place!
 39. Print out materials to check the spelling, layout and colours.
 40. Remember that creating materials requires a different a skill set to teaching.
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Tips 41 - 50

41. Set aside a number of hours per week when you'll be doing nothing else apart from creating materials.
42. Take the time to make your materials interesting and relevant to your students' lives.
43. The simpler you want your materials to be, the more you are going to work, and the more time you are going to spend on them.
44. Think as a learner, more than a teacher. Because materials target the learners and should address their needs, interests, level and context.
45. Think of the users (teachers and learners) when you create materials and make them as simple, easy and flexible to use as possible.
46. Treat materials writing like any other job. Work out your rate based on time and value.
47. Try not to repeat activity types or formats too frequently.
48. Use content that is topical, or suitable to your audience - something they can identify and engage with.
49. Write your materials. Then *sleep on them* and if at all possible, get a colleague to test them for you.
50. Writing materials should be enjoyable. If it isn't, something is wrong!

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