Principles and Procedures of Materials Development for Language Learning

Brian Tomlinson

This paper takes the position that language learning materials should ideally be driven by learning and teaching principles rather than developed ad hoc or in imitation of best selling coursebooks. It briefly reviews the literature which contributes positively towards the principled development of ELT materials and comments on its implications for materials writing. It then presents six principles of language acquisition which the author thinks should be given a lot more attention in materials development. It outlines and justifies each principle and then derives from it materials development principles and procedures which teachers and materials writers could apply to the actual development of materials.

1 Introduction

In recent years there have been a number of insightful publications which have concerned themselves with how authors typically write ELT materials (for example, Prowse 1998). As Tomlinson (forthcoming 2010) says, this literature reveals that many experienced authors rely on their intuitions about what 'works' and make frequent use of activities from their repertoire which seem to fit with their objectives. Very few authors are actually guided by learning principles or considerations of coherence and many seem to make the assumption that clear presentation and active, relevant practice are sufficient to lead to acquisition.

My position is that materials should not be random recreations from repertoire nor crafty clones of previously successful materials. Instead they should be coherent and principled applications of:

    i)   theories of language acquisition and development
    ii) principles of teaching
    iii) our current knowledge of how the target language is actually used
    iv) the results of systematic observation and evaluation of materials in use.

This is the position which drives this chapter. In it I will focus in particular on applications of theories of language acquisition.

2 Review of the Literature

In this section I will briefly review some of the literature which I think contributes positively towards the principled development of ELT materials.

In Hidalgo et al (1995) there are a number of writers from South-East Asia who articulate principled approaches to materials development reflecting how they think learners learn languages. Some of them propose frameworks and many list the principles which drive their materials. Tomlinson (1998: 5-22) proposes fifteen principles for materials development which derive from second language acquisition

research and experience. Of these I would focus on the following six as those which should drive ELT materials development:

The materials should:

- Expose the learners to language in authentic use
- Help learners to pay attention to features of authentic input
- Provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes
- Provide opportunities for outcome feedback
- Achieve impact in the sense that they arouse and sustain the learners' curiosity and attention
- Stimulate intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement

A number of other writers outline principled approaches to developing ELT materials in Tomlinson (1998) as do many writers in Tomlinson (2003). McGrath (2002: 152-161) reviews the literature on principled approaches, frameworks and procedures for units for materials development, as does Tomlinson (forthcoming 2010), and Tomlinson (2008) proposes ways of applying commonly agreed theories of language acquisition to materials development.

3 Proposals for Principled Approaches to the Development of ELT Materials

One of the things which materials writers need to do is to develop flexible frameworks to help them produce effective materials for target learners in principled and coherent ways. This is something I always do before embarking on a materials development project. My framework develops as I progress and it helps me to write quickly and effectively. But before such frameworks are developed the writers need to decide what principles should drive their procedures.

Here are the main principles of language acquisition which I follow when developing materials, and some of the principles for materials development which I derive from them. As you read them you might like to evaluate their validity and usefulness and to think of other principles of your own.

Principle of Language Acquisition 1

A pre-requisite for language acquisition is that the learners are exposed to a rich, meaningful and comprehensible input of language in use.

In order to acquire the ability to use the language effectively the learners need a lot of experience of the language being used in a variety of different ways for a variety of purposes. They need to be able to understand enough of this input to gain positive access to it and it needs to be meaningful to them (Krashen 1985). They also need to experience particular language items and features many times in meaningful and comprehensible input in order to eventually acquire them. Each encounter helps to elaborate and deepen awareness and to facilitate the development of hypotheses needed for eventual acquisition.

Principles of Materials Development

1 Make sure that the materials contain a lot of spoken and written texts which provide extensive experience of language being used in order to achieve outcomes in a variety of text types and genres in relation to topics, themes, events, locations etc likely to be meaningful to the target learners.

2 Make sure that the language the learners are exposed to is authentic in the sense that it represents how the language is typically used. If the language is inauthentic because it has been written or reduced to exemplify a particular language feature then the learners will not acquire the ability to use the language typically or effectively.

Much has been written on the issue of authenticity and some experts consider that it is useful to focus attention on a feature of a language by removing distracting difficulties and complexities from sample texts. My position is that such contrived focus might be of some value as an additional aid to help the learner to focus on salient features but that prior and subsequent exposure to those features in authentic use is essential.

3 Make sure that the language input is contextualised. Language use is determined and interpreted in relation to its context of use. De-contextualised examples do not contain enough information about the user, the addressee(s), the relationships between the interactants, the setting, the intentions or the outcomes for them to be of value to the language learner. I can, for example, think of at least three different interpretations of, "Give him the keys. Let him drive it." But I do not know what it really means nor why the speaker has used the imperative until I know who is saying it, who they are saying it to, what the relationship between them is, where they are, what has happened before and what the objectives of the conversation are. Only extended samples of language in contextualised use can provide learners with the 'information' they need to develop awareness of how the target language is actually used.

4 Make sure that the learners are exposed to sufficient samples of language in authentic use to provide natural re-cycling of language items and features which might be useful for the learners to acquire.

Examples of Materials

I use what I call task-free activities to help me to apply Principle of Language Acquisition 1. This involves me at the beginning of every lesson reading a poem or story, or telling a joke or anecdote. There are no questions or tasks after the listening, just written copies of the text for those students who were engaged by it to take home, read and file away. The students are encouraged to ask me questions about the texts at any time and to return to read the texts they have collected many times. I also use extensive reading, extensive listening and extensive viewing to help to apply this principle and I use a text-driven approach to developing units of material in which an extensive text drives the skills and language activities of each unit.

Principle of Language Acquisition 2

In order for the learners to maximise their exposure to language in use they need to be engaged both affectively and cognitively in the language experience

If the learners do not think and feel whilst experiencing the language they are unlikely to acquire any elements of it (Arnold 1999). Thinking whilst experiencing language in use helps to achieve the deep processing required for effective and durable learning and it helps learners to transfer high level skills such as predicting, connecting, interpreting and evaluating to second language use. If the learners do not feel any emotion whilst exposed to language in use they are unlikely to acquire anything from their experience. Feeling enjoyment, pleasure and happiness, feeling empathy, being amused, being excited and being stimulated are most likely to influence acquisition positively but feeling annoyance, anger, fear, opposition and sadness is more useful than feeling nothing at all. Ideally though the learner should be experiencing positive affect in the sense of being confident, motivated and willingly engaged even when experiencing 'negative' emotions. There is a substantial literature on the value of affective and cognitive engagement whilst engaged in responding to language in use, with much of it focusing on research into the role of emotion in language learning and use or reporting research on cognitive engagement during language lessons..

Principles of Materials Development

1 Prioritise the potential for engagement by, for example, basing a unit on a text or a task which is likely to achieve affective and cognitive engagement rather than on a teaching point selected from a syllabus.

2 Make use of activities which get the learners to think about what they are reading or listening to and to respond to it personally.

3 Make use of activities which get learners to think and feel before during and after using the target language for communication.

Examples of Materials

I use a text-driven approach in which the starting point for developing each unit is a potentially engaging spoken or written text. I first of all devise readiness activities which help the learners to activate their minds prior to experiencing the text, I give the learners an holistic focus to think about when experiencing the text and I invite them to articulate their personal responses to the text before going on to use it to stimulate their own language production.

Principle of Language Acquisition 3

Language learners who achieve positive affect are much more likely to achieve communicative competence than those who do not

Language learners need to be positive about the target language, about their learning environment, about their teachers, about their fellow learners and about their learning materials (Arnold 1999).. They also need to achieve positive self-esteem and to feel

that they are achieving something worthwhile. Above all they need to be emotionally involved in the learning process and to respond by laughing, getting angry, feeling sympathy, feeling happy, feeling sad etc. Positive emotions seem to be the most useful in relation to language acquisition but it is much better to feel angry than to feel nothing at all.

Principles of Materials Development

1 Make sure the texts and tasks are as interesting, relevant and enjoyable as possible so as to exert a positive influence on the learners' attitudes to the language and to the process of learning it.

2 Set achievable challenges which help to raise the learners' self-esteem when success is accomplished.

3 Stimulate emotive responses through the use of music, song, literature, art etc, through making use of controversial and provocative texts, through personalisation and through inviting learners to articulate their feelings about a text before asking them to analyse it.

Examples of Material

I offer the students choices of texts and of tasks and I consult the students about the topics they would like to read about and discuss. This is what we did on a national materials development project in Namibia and we then respected the students' requests for texts on such provocative topics as drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and marital abuse.

Principle of Language Acquisition 4

L2 language learners can benefit from using those mental resources which they typically utilise when acquiring and using their L1.

In L1 learning and use learners typically make use of mental imaging (e.g. seeing pictures in their mind), of inner speech, of emotional responses, of connections with their own lives, of evaluations, of predictions, of personal interpretations. In L2 learning and use learners typically focus narrowly on linguistic decoding and encoding. Multi-dimensional representation of language experienced and used can enrich the learning process in ways which promote durable acquisition, the transfer from learning activities to real life use, the development of the ability to use the language effectively in a variety of situations for a variety of uses and the self-esteem which derives from performing in the L2 in ways as complex as they typically do in the L1. See Tomlinson and Avila (2007) for example, for principled suggestions as to how making use of multi-dimensional mental representation can help L2 learners.

There is a considerable literature on the vital use of the inner voice in L1 and the infrequency of use of the inner voice in the L2. What the literature demonstrates is that in the L1 we use the inner voice to give our own voice to what we hear and read, to make plans, to make decisions, to solve problems, to evaluate, to understand and 'control' our environment and to prepare outer voice utterances before saying or

writing them. When talking to ourselves we use a restricted code which consists of short elliptical utterances expressed in simple tenses with the focus on the comment rather than the topic, on the predicate rather than the subject. It is cotext and context dependent, implicit, partial, vague, novel and salient to ourselves. However L2 users rarely use an L2 inner voice until they reach an advanced level – though there is evidence that the use of an L2 inner voice at lower levels can enhance L2 performance and can be facilitated by teachers and materials. For further details of the characteristics and roles of the inner voice see de Guerro (2005) and Tomlinson and Avila (2007).

There is also a considerable literature on the role of visual imaging in language use and acquisition. It demonstrates is that visual imaging plays a very important role in L1 learning and use, that it tends not to be used by L2 learners and that L2 learners can be trained to use visual imaging to improve their learning and use of the L2. For details of research on mental imaging and its application to materials development see in particular Tomlinson and Avila (2007).

Principles of Materials Development

1 Make use of activities which get learners to visualise and/or use inner speech before during and after experiencing a written or spoken text.

2 Make use of activities which get learners to visualise and/or use inner speech before during and after using language themselves.

3 Make use of activities which help the learners to reflect on their mental activity during a task and then to try to make more use of mental strategies in a similar task.

Examples of Materials

I build into all my materials activities which encourage and help the students to visualise, to talk to themselves in inner speech and to make connections with their lives. For example, before asking the students to read a poem about a boy's first day at school I asked the students to visualise their own first day at school and then to talk to themselves about how they felt.

Principle of Language Acquisition 5

Language learners can benefit from noticing salient features of the input.

If learners notice for themselves how a particular language item or feature is used, they are more likely to develop their language awareness (Bolitho et al 2003) and they are also more likely to achieve readiness for acquisition. Such noticing is most salient when a learner has been engaged in a text affectively and cognitively and then returns to it to investigate its language use. This is likely to lead to the learner paying more attention to similar uses of that item or feature in subsequent inputs and to increase its potential for eventual acquisition.

Principles of Materials Development

1 Use an experiential approach in which the learners are first of all provided with an experience which engages them holistically. From this experience they learn implicitly without focusing conscious attention on any particular features of the experience. Later they re-visit and reflect on the experience and pay conscious attention to features of it in order to achieve explicit learning. This enables the learners to apprehend before they comprehend and to intuit before they explore. And it means that when they focus narrowly on a specific feature of the text they are able to develop their discoveries in relation to their awareness of the full context of use.

2 Rather than drawing the learners' attention to a particular feature of a text and then providing explicit information about its use it is much more powerful to help the learners (preferably in collaboration) to make discoveries for themselves.

Examples of Materials

I use a lot of language awareness materials in which the students experience a potentially engaging text, respond to it personally and then focus on a particular feature of the text in order to make discoveries about it. For example, the students read about a student whose parents gave him a graduation party. They then discussed the reasons why the parents gave him the party and the reasons he was reluctant to attend it .Next one half of the class analysed the father's use of the interrogative and the other half analysed the son's use of the imperative. They came together in groups to share their discoveries and then they wrote a version of the text in which the mother (rather than the father) tried to persuade the son to attend the party.

Principle of Language Acquisition 6

Learners need opportunities to use language to try to achieve communicative purposes.

When using language in this way they are gaining feedback on the hypotheses they have developed as a result of generalising on the language in their intake and on their ability to make use of them effectively. If they are participating in interaction, they are also being pushed to clarify and elaborate and they are also likely to elicit meaningful and comprehensible input from their interlocutors.

Principles of Materials Development

1 Provide many opportunities for the learners to produce language in order to achieve intended outcomes.

2 Make sure that these output activities are designed so that the learners are using language rather than just practising specified features of it.

3 Design output activities so that they help learners to develop their ability to communicate fluently, accurately, appropriately and effectively.

4 Make sure that the output activities are fully contextualised in that the learners are responding to an authentic stimulus (e.g. a text, a need, a viewpoint, an event), that they have specific addressees and that they have a clear intended outcome in mind.

5 Try to ensure that opportunities for feedback are built into output activities and are provided for the learners afterwards.

Examples of Materials

I develop a lot of material in which the students have to produce a text which is a development from one they have just experienced. For example, in one unit the students had to tell a circle story about part two of a story about strange creatures on a beach which they had acted out from the teacher's narration of the story. In another unit they had to re-locate a story set in Liverpool in their own city. In another unit they had to design an improved version of a vehicle in a newspaper advert and then to write a newspaper advert and perform a tv advert for their vehicle.

Conclusion

When developing classroom materials we should also, of course, consider principles of language teaching. My main teaching principles is that:

The teaching should meet the needs and wants of the learners.

From this my most important materials development principle is that:

Materials need to be written in such a way that the teacher can make use of them as a resource and not have to follow them as a script.

It seems that most classroom materials are written though for teachers and students to follow. It also seems that many of them not driven or even informed by principles of language acquisition and development. Some of them manage to help learners to acquire language because their writers have been effective teachers and are intuitively applying principles of teaching. Most of them would be a lot more effective if they were driven by the principles of acquisition I have outlined above.

(This paper is an adaptation of part of Tomlinson, B. (forthcoming 2010) Principles and procedures of materials development. In N. Harwood (ed.) *Materials in ELT: Theory and Practice.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.)

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