A Suggested Writing Process for In-House Materials Development

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Abstract
This paper will set out a suggested process for the in-house development of English language course materials. The process is concerned with the how of in-house materials development rather than the what and aims to provide teacher-writers with a working recipe for the efficient production of learning content. The main advantage of the in house-approach is that it is completely responsive to local needs. A brief rationale for the preferential use of such materials over off-the-shelf content will be presented before the process itself is described. Seven discrete steps, ranging from the initial recruitment and planning stage through to trialing in the classroom, will be examined with each step justified. Finally, suggestions for feedback and course maintenance will be outlined.

Introduction
This paper will outline a sequence of practical steps that could be undertaken by any team of teacher-writers in the preparation of a set of English language learning materials. The purpose of the article is to provide teacher-writers with a working recipe for the efficient production of learning materials of significant length, duration or cost. These materials might include, for example, in-house produced textbooks, full-length courses, listening materials, CALL materials or extended series of worksheets. The paper assumes that a needs analysis has already been performed, if appropriate, and that a syllabus document has been designed, if necessary. It will focus on the logistical and technical aspects of materials development rather than on the preparation of specific content. It is, therefore, concerned with the how of in-house materials development rather than the what. Although the process derives significantly from experience gained over several English for Specific Purposes (ESP) writing projects, the sequence could be adapted to suit the needs of any learning institution in any part of the world. In addition, a rationale for the preferential use of materials produced in-house will be presented together with a description of a suggested writing process.
Background and context

The writing process itself arose from empirical observations made during the production of vocationally-oriented ESP materials primarily in the Middle East in the early-2000s. Such materials were designed to address perceived shortcomings in the exit-level English language proficiency of trainee mechanics and technical specialists. Typically, such students were high school graduates with low-level proficiency, and they were required to attend intensive English classes for around one year. Upon completion of their courses, students would then be able to continue their training, having theoretically been equipped with the English language skills to cope with technical lectures and practical classes conducted in English. The main difficulty experienced though was that the existing, long-standing course materials were failing to raise students to the required level of English language mastery in the time allocated. However, given that significant advances had occurred in IT hardware and desktop publishing applications from the late 1990s onwards, it had become increasingly feasible for a team of teacher-writers to design and prepare a course in-house to address the concerns of various stakeholders. The process described below represents, therefore, a distillation of some of the best practices resulting from the identification and subsequent elimination of inefficiencies encountered during materials production (see Steps 1-7).

Ideally, a thorough needs analysis should be conducted before embarking on a writing project. This is especially important if the project is significant in terms of length, cost or duration. A needs analysis questionnaire should be circulated to as many stakeholders as possible to establish any particular or systemic issues connected with the current English language course and wider learning environment. A substantial body of empirical data could then be gathered and analysed to identify possible ways forward. The feedback obtained would help to form the basis of the syllabus document, with its structural and functional content. In addition to specifying content, the document would also act to focus attention on the types of tasks judged as being beneficial to the learners and on those which might be considered redundant. The course structure itself would need to be decided at the outset of the process, and would depend largely on the aims and duration of the course. Consideration could then be given towards the amount of material to be written, and to the precise subdivision of materials in terms of scheduling and gradation.
Rationale for in-house materials development

There are various reasons why a learning institution might consider in-house publication rather than the purchase of a commercial course. Bell and Gower, in Tomlinson (1998), describe the difficulties and compromises professional authors encounter in writing for a mass market. The subject content is often generic and bland and not focused on any particular group of learners or their specific needs. The likely end-result of such a writing project is an anodyne, one-size-fits-all product. Naturally, there is still value and use to be derived from these materials, but, as Jolly and Bolitho (ibid, 1998) highlight, the importance of fine-tuning materials to suit the specific needs of learners is something which, by definition, is lacking in an off-the-shelf course. A further argument to support this assertion would be that the culture, environment, institution, learning style and expectations of the students should be given priority in course design and not imposed from without. The acid test for any course is ultimately whether it is basically felt to ‘work’ by the stakeholders, however this may be defined.

There are several significant advantages to in-house production:

- The materials are designed with a specific set of learners in mind, and they reflect and incorporate the needs of other stakeholders (teachers, the institution and so forth);
- An institution’s staff has a cumulative wealth of context-specific experience that can be utilized;
- Materials can be adjusted subsequently and amended in response to the changing needs of the stakeholders;
- The cost of sourcing teacher-writers from existing staff is likely to be less than that of commissioning external writers or purchasing a full commercial course, which would inevitably have a sell-by date;
- The copyright to the course would automatically belong to the institution.

The main disadvantage is:

- The amount of time required for staff to prepare materials carries an associated opportunity cost since the writing team is no longer in the classroom teaching. An additional workload therefore falls on those not writing, which could cause dissatisfaction.
This disadvantage can, however, be mitigated if an efficient writing process is in place, where a precise sequence of procedural steps has already been identified, enabling a transparent time and cost budget to be established from the outset.

Existing research
Nunan’s work on syllabus design (1989) highlighted many of the issues surrounding the process of planning a course. One point worthy of mention quickly became apparent: in a commercial language setting, there is often a disconnection between the day-to-day work of the English language teacher (or teacher-writer) on the one hand and the academic researcher working at a tertiary institution on the other. The professional interests and responsibilities of these two do not generally meet as a commercial school is usually the first appointment for a newly-trained teacher. The likely result of this is that staff members commissioned to write materials are neither necessarily aware of current research nor in a position to gain access to it readily. This is less of an issue in the online, digital age, although permission from the workplace still has to be granted and funded. Typically, where classroom materials are required urgently, there may be insufficient time to assimilate and apply accumulated research, even in situations where access is possible. It is interesting to note, however, that the system of write, peer-review, pilot, feedback and finalise detailed below corresponds quite closely with the literature (see, for example, Jolly and Bolitho, 1998, and their model of reflective materials development).

The suggested writing process

Step 1 – The recruitment and planning stage
Potential writers should be selected from the staff pool. This selection process could be done following in-house advertisement and the application of some form of screening procedure, such as an interview or perhaps the preparation of a draft exercise addressing a specific item in the syllabus. This could be the design of a specified task. Various factors should be weighed when making an appointment. Arguably, one of the more important attributes is length of service within the school. This sense of familiarity with the existing course, the learners, their learning style(s) and the broader institutional culture is invaluable in materials preparation. As there are likely to be inevitable constraints in resources such as time or areas of potential content, prior writing experience is also highly desirable as it reduces the amount of lead-in time needed to achieve fluency. The notion as to what content is feasible is related
to the writer’s awareness of what is culturally appropriate and his or her knowledge of the students’ familiarity with various topic areas. However, there is also a strong argument for the inclusion of new staff as perspectives beyond the institutional context can help bring a fresh approach to the end product.

A time budget would need to be established and agreed upon. This should specify the number of staff, the amount of time and financial resources available for the project globally and the various intermediate deadlines (relating to the completion of books, volumes and units). Ideally, any budget regarding time or expenditure should be negotiated beforehand. This means that school management and the writing team have to communicate with each other frankly over their mutual requirements. The benefit of a negotiated budget, as opposed to one that is imposed, is that it leads to a sense of commitment and ownership on both sides and avoids potential conflict. Inevitably, as the project gains traction, there will be divergences from the time and cost budget. These deviations, once understood and justified, should be incorporated into a modified budget. In this way, potential overruns can be identified early and acted upon. The budget, therefore, should be flexible and can help form the basis for any further materials development subsequent to the completion of the project.

**Step 2 – Choosing teams of writing pairs**

At this point, instead of allowing individual writers to proceed unilaterally, teams of ‘writing pairs’ should be chosen. The main reason for this is that writing individually, or in relative isolation, can lead to more frequent blind alleys or instances of writer’s block. Initial experience demonstrated the value of this paired approach by virtue of a consistent quality of output and a predictable speed of production. For example, if one partner suggests a situational dialogue to practise a functional area, the other partner might reply that an information-gap activity would work better, and justify that opinion. In pairs, natural checks and balances are introduced and a mutual sounding board is established. The probability of going ‘stir crazy’, with one isolated writer reaching a dead-end, is thereby reduced.

As for the process, each writing pair makes an initial first draft, reflecting all the elements of the syllabus for that unit. The draft is prepared according to the writers’ preferences. Some may prefer to work with pencil and paper, and leave the typesetter to decide on precise organisational details. Others who are relatively proficient with Desktop Publishing (DTP)
packages may prefer to typeset their own work. Some may decide that drafting in MSWord is more convenient because items can be easily moved or amended. The typesetter may then take the basic word document and adapt it accordingly. In terms of precise content, naturally there is freedom to move beyond the suggested topic area if it would accomplish the learning aims more efficiently. The question as to the types of tasks that might be included should be left to the writers as part of the creative process. Practical decisions, such as the number of items per page or the size of graphics, need to be established early on to avoid wasted effort or insufficient copy. Ultimately, the writers need to have a working understanding of how many pages of copy they should reasonably be expected to generate in a given time period.

**Step 3 – Typesetting the first draft**

The initial, rudimentary draft should be typeset using a DTP application if not done already. Preferably, this should be performed by an experienced typesetter. The main advantage of typesetting at this early stage is that it gives rapid feedback to the writers as to the quality of their output. A handwritten exercise or rough draft does not necessarily translate well to the typeset page. It is advantageous to know this at an early stage so as to avoid time-consuming redrafting, which can be a source of considerable delay and lead to inevitable deviations from the budget.

**Step 4 – Critical appraisal and working**

Upon its return to the writing pair, the initial typeset version should be checked against the draft by the writers and any amendments are to be passed back to the typesetters. The typed, amended version is then passed to another writing pair for a critical appraisal and working. This pair will assess for typographical errors, workability, continuity, coherence and appropriateness. Writers and reviewers should come to some agreement over the extent of the additional amendments to be undertaken. This can be a challenging experience but it should be viewed as being for the greater good. There is a further advantage to this stage: the exchange of materials can help in the evolution of what might be called a ‘house style.’ This is where the pattern of exercises, task types and rubrics take on more predictable and sequential characteristics. This can help narrow the focus of the content of the unit and assist in meeting the time/cost budget.
Step 5 – Vetting the second draft
The agreed document is then passed back to the typesetters and a further draft prepared. This procedure may be repeated more than once if necessary before a trial (black and white) version is agreed upon for wider dissemination within the institution. Upon typesetting and checking, these draft versions can be fed out piecemeal so that there is a parallel cycle of writing, amending, trialling (see Step 6 below) and feedback.

Steps 1 to 4 should be repeated for the duration of the writing project, however long that may be. Serious consideration should also be given to switching writing partners after each mini-project. This rotation of staff could be performed quite frequently and could occur at convenient end-points. This keeps the writing process dynamic and prevents partnerships from becoming too stale, one-dimensional or fractious. Changes in writing personnel should be considered periodically, with some staff opting to re-join the main body of teaching staff and others volunteering to contribute to the project. Writers who choose to be released back to the classroom would be in a good position to judge the relative success of the course and may agree to maintain ‘proofing copies’ of the course (see below in Step 6).

Step 6 – Trialling in the classroom
As described above, the pilot version should be trialled in the classroom with students. Feedback forms should be given to teachers and students. Positive as well as negative feedback should be sought, so as to retain a record of what has or has not worked well. All the points raised are to be considered and addressed as far as possible. Feedback should be retained and filed, together with a note as to what action has been taken as a result of the points raised. One or two members of staff can be recruited to maintain ‘proofing’ copies of the draft. These are working copies of the course annotated with real-time feedback as the pilot version is taught. These can be used to supplement broader staff/ student feedback.

Step 7 – Feedback and course maintenance
There are likely to be significant amounts of redrafting and amending when all the feedback is collated and it is important that sufficient time for this stage is incorporated into the budget at the outset. Once completed, the final version may then be sent to the printer. Since colour printing is more expensive than black and white, this stage represents a strong commitment by the school and it is therefore the last in the current cycle.
Once a workable course has been established, maintaining and updating the course can be performed periodically. The task of maintaining the course is relatively routine and capable of being accomplished without further significant investment in time and staff. Additional feedback forms should also be made available from a central resources centre for on-going comments and suggestions from students and staff. These can be incorporated into the next edition.

**Conclusion**

Naturally, this proposed writing process is context dependent and cannot be regarded as anything more than an informed suggestion to other institutions. The steps outlined above can and should be modified according to local needs. The main conclusions to be drawn from the process are the following: First, the use of teams of writing-pairs should be considered, because of the likelihood of fewer instances of sub-standard copy, and the completion of work at a faster rate. The naturally resultant check and balance in the writing process also helps to contribute to a viable end-product. Second, the efficiency of the write, peer-review, pilot, feedback and finalise cycle enables the project to proceed in a predictable and orderly fashion, and within the budgetary constraints. Third, a strong feedback mechanism means that all criticisms can be dealt with systematically and democratically, thereby further enhancing the viability of the course.

**References**


About the Author

Chris Bedwell received his MA from Essex University. He has taught in Japan and the Middle East and is currently a Teaching Fellow at The National University of Singapore. His research interests are centred on materials development and exercise types that can be employed in or outside the English language classroom. He is also interested in learning strategies and the reduction of learner anxiety in educational environments.