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# Materials adaptation begins with materials evaluation

by Touria Jouilla (Swan English Language Training)

As English language teachers, we are accustomed to adapting learning materials for specific learners and purposes. In doing so, we may simply edit a reading passage or exercise for a particular lesson, making it more suited to a level or adding a specific language focus. Either way, teachers often feel the need to tweak course book materials to make them relevant to their own teaching context. When looking at materials I could potentially adapt for learners, I often find the thought of materials adaptation daunting. Where does one begin?

## My learning context and objectives.

I currently teach two B1 level classes, each consisting of 14-15 students. Students in these classes enjoy course books that involve the use of imagination and meaningful discussions surrounding the subjects within them. One of the major points expressed by my learners is the need for interesting topics and materials; like many ESL students, these two groups were the first to tell me that most topics covered in course books can be unappealing, repetitive, and often detached from their own realities. They were also vocal in their requirement for input that reflects language used in daily discourse, since most of them are working and living in Ireland. To this end, my role, I feel, is to use this as a starting point in evaluating the course books available at my

institution. Students should have access to language which is not contrived. Tasks should, therefore, include meaningful language used naturally rather than artificially.

**“This serves the purpose of helping students to communicate and use the language in all the core skills without too much focus on form or structures.”**

## What else do my students think of ELT course books?

My professional evaluation of most course books leads me to the conclusion that given the choice, my students would benefit from using many of these as core learning materials. Many offer opportunities to discuss a range of topics, though some can be over-crammed with exercises of a grammatical nature, which overshadows the focus on meaning and engagement with tasks for my classes. When asked about which books they preferred, my students favoured those less cluttered and found images and readiness questions (in most current course books) useful for lead-in activities. By asking my students for their opinion, I wanted to ensure that my decision to adapt materials was based on the learners’ needs and personal opinions as well as my own professional assessment of the materials available at my institution. Jacobs and Farrell (2001) recognise this approach of shifting the attention to the learners’ needs as a stepping stone toward a more learner-centred focus.

## Does having criteria for materials adaptation help?

I have carried out my own research into the vast subject of materials design and adaptation and came to the conclusion that what I needed was something relevant to my context. Setting a clear checklist would reflect my students’ needs and their course objectives. Lessons in my current B1 classes are, in many ways, determined by a more top-down approach, requiring the use of set materials and course books for a large chunk of the course. The idea behind this is to fully, and ultimately, prepare learners for their final TIE and IELTS examinations but with some room for supplementary materials that employ a range of communicative language teaching



A huge range of tools are available for the creative classroom

Pic by speedofcreativity

principles.

My criteria are based on a task-based framework to some extent, making tasks a central part for adapted versions of course-book units, guiding students toward specific outcomes. This serves the purpose of helping students to communicate and use language in all the core skills without too much focus on form or structures. Prabhu (1987) defines a task as an activity directing students toward an outcome as well a means of actively engaging students in the learning process. Willis & Willis (2001) express a similar view, in that task-based learning involves a communicative aim with a clear outcome.

My criteria for adapting materials are, thus, as follows:

1. Incorporate topics and language relevant to students' daily lives and course objectives; this mirrors the course examination objectives as well as the students' personal aims (for my current classes, the shared aim is to use every-day English as well as focus on exam preparation).

2. Materials should be sequenced in a way that allows students to (1) prepare for tasks, (2) complete exercises using meaningful communicative language and (3) post-task output with some focus on form.

3. Include preparation speaking tasks that allow students to use their linguistic resources as well as process ideas. It should also include conversation tasks.

4. Pronunciation exercises should be incorporated in speaking and vocabulary tasks to reinforce pre-taught language. Students in my classes often have issues recognising fragments of statements in connected speech, which poses difficulties in understanding others and being understood. It is also an important component of the TIE and IELTS exam criteria.

5. A focus on form should be an integral part of production exercises, and should draw students' attention to features of language, since students are assessed on accuracy in the use of grammar and lexis. In addition, since our syllabi (at Swan ELT) are topic-based, grammatical content should reflect relevant topics and provide opportunities for communicative output.

6. Reading tasks should include preparatory content, allowing students to be mentally and cognitively ready for graded reading skills. While these can involve personalised tasks of a communicative nature, they should also focus on text comprehension and reading skills.

Therefore, tasks for each reading passage should gradually expand to include exam components as well as generate personalised interaction in the classroom.

#### **Why are preparatory tasks important?**

I find that my students often require more preparatory tasks to become cognitively engaged, and to create their readiness for subsequent tasks in all the core skills. It is also my own observation that many course-book units make sudden leaps from simpler language tasks (such as using comparative adjectives in a set context) to more complex ones: 'ask your partner about their life in x and home country. How different are they? Use comparative adjectives'. Such tasks can leave novice teachers wondering why students are reluctant to engage in communicative exercises despite having thoroughly covered a language point in a given lesson. The underlying issue here can be attributed to the fact that many course-book tasks assume a level of readiness is already in place when it comes to certain production tasks. Nation (2001) views language acquisition as a process requiring repetition and recycling, since newly learned language is likely to be forgotten unless revisited in class tasks. One way to address this can be to add pronunciation and vocabulary tasks addressing issues students appear to struggle with at the start of a lesson before embarking on a more demanding productive task. Though this can be time-consuming, adding such vital preparatory tasks to existing materials can develop a teacher's ability to progress from evaluating materials to designing them, with clear, tangible outcomes.

**“Every English language teacher will have, at some point, adapted worksheets and materials for a particular class or learner(s).”**

**“The selection of materials can depend on many principles, depending on context.”**

#### **Are there any alternative approaches to materials adaptation?**

Tomlinson (2011) defines materials as anything writers, teachers and learners use to make the learning and meaningful production of language possible. The selection of materials can depend on many principles, depending on the context. The latter can be driven by several objectives, some of which are course objectives, the learners' needs and the course syllabus. Richards (1990) believes that effective materials should reflect relevant learning and teaching theories, increase interest in the subject being taught, be meaningful, reflect learners' needs, and set conditions for the practice of language in use. In many ways, Tomlinson's text-driven approach echoes this view. Tomlinson makes a direct link with SLA (second language acquisition), which can be reached through meaningful interaction with texts and the tasks surrounding them. Tomlinson goes on to explain that texts should have meaningful content that stimulates and engages interest as well reflects learning needs. In addition, texts should extend beyond engagement with language features and allow students to connect with the subject. To determine my own criteria for my classes, I found the number of checklists, approaches and available literature overwhelmingly vast. In the case of the classes I currently teach, the first step toward evaluating materials is to

narrow my focus to the learning context and the syllabus objectives, as well as adopting some of the principles in Tomlinson's text-based approach.

Every English language teacher will have, at some point, adapted worksheets and materials for a particular class or learner(s). With time, teachers become better at spotting sections that are not suited to a group of learners. Tomlinson (2013) highlights two separate areas for materials evaluation criteria. The first one is general; it applies to teaching and learning as a whole. The second criteria is shaped by the teacher's own context and the specific needs of his/ her learners. Having a predetermined criterion ensures the systematic sequencing of tasks in a way that combines language accuracy, course objectives and students' learning needs. The usefulness of criterion-based evaluations in materials adaptation is something I have come to appreciate, as it marks a stepping stone toward my own professional development as an English language teacher.

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