

Recognising and Creating 'Good' Materials for Teacher Education

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A dense handout on top-down and bottom-up reading skills and a 'Find Someone Who' questionnaire about classroom behaviour. What do they have in common? Both are examples of teacher education materials. Their difference in topic and approach signal a difficulty with regard to making any generalisations about 'good' teacher training materials, namely the wide variety of circumstances, contexts, purposes and approaches that typify English language teacher education.

Firstly, the motivation for learning and the domain of the learning will affect materials requirements. Teachers may be asked to learn due to developments or innovations in their own institution or organisation but alternatively because they have chosen to learn as individuals. They learn through teacher seminars or workshops held in training rooms but they also learn in the field by creating and reflecting on lesson plans, by teaching and getting feedback on their teaching, and by observing other teachers. Materials for teacher education may be designed for use in the training room or for teachers to use while involved in one of the above-named field activities.

Secondly, approaches to English language teacher education are influenced by different ideas of how teachers learn and what they need to learn. Materials are self-evidently only one component of teacher education courses, but a component that changes according to course objectives and conceptions of teaching and learning. Materials are more likely to lead to productive results if the conceptions of teaching and learning that underlie them are in harmony with the trainer's/trainers' conceptions of teaching and learning and with the stated aims of any particular training course. Teacher learning has been characterised variously as the acquisition of skills or competences (Britten 1997, Blackmore 2000, Cambridge ESOL 2004), the development of thinking processes related to teaching (Woods 1996, Borg 2003), the social construction of personal, practical teaching knowledge (Roberts 1998), reflective practice (Schön 1983, Wallace 1991), and changes in and self-awareness of teachers' attitudes and feelings towards their professional lives (James 2001). It can be viewed through the lens of these different theories but teacher learning can also be regarded as occurring along a spectrum from minimal to maximal self-agency. This spectrum is sometimes simply expressed as the difference between pre-service and in-service training but the route from novice to competent practitioner to expert, involves a number of transitions – from supported teaching capability to conscious decision-making, to an entirely self-regulatory process which may include a strong role for intuition (Glaser 1996, Berliner 2001, Tsui 2003). Writers of training materials for teachers may therefore need to bear in mind a multiplicity of teacher developmental stages, not merely the simple dichotomy of pre-service and in-service.

Finally, more mundane factors at work in the provision of teacher training programmes also lead to the term 'ELT teacher training' having no one clear meaning. Some teacher training for ELT takes place in universities and involves several years of study leading to nationally accepted qualifications. Then there are higher degrees and components of higher degrees in for example, applied linguistics,

which also aim to prepare teachers for English as a foreign language or to provide them with an extra qualification. There are also the privately run courses leading to certificates and diplomas for which the two best-known validating bodies are Cambridge ESOL and Trinity College. These courses vary in length from four weeks to a year. Lastly there is a huge range of taster courses at pre-service level, as well as refresher, development and themed courses offered by providers of all kinds including language schools, adult education institutes, regional ministries and cultural institutes (Beaven 2004). Arising from these quotidian matters of length and frequency of course provision are issues of training course impact and of planning for maximum impact, for example through cyclical syllabuses as opposed to the widely spread 'one-shot' teacher workshop.

Guidelines for teacher training materials

Given this range of variables one can easily understand why Geddis & Wood denominate teacher education practice as a 'profoundly ill-structured domain' (1997:624). The lack of structure and commonality render it extremely difficult to lay down general principles for teacher training materials but the following guidelines might be usefully borne in mind both by those creating materials for teacher education and by those selecting materials for courses:

1. There needs to be an awareness of the paradigm of teacher learning that supports the materials. Materials may have the aim of developing teachers' classroom skills, or of getting teachers to think more deeply about received knowledge, for instance by contrasting two theories on an aspect of teaching. Their purpose could be to surface teacher attitudes and feelings to their practice, or to encourage reflection on practice. Materials may be designed to foster collaboration and social learning or might be directed at individual change. If the materials appear eclectic in their approach to learning, the different elements need to be well integrated.
2. Materials may be experiential (activity based) or may simply deliver information, and it should be clear which, or both, of these goals is intended. Experiential materials can be written for the training room or for use in the field. Materials that aim to extend teacher knowledge may be directed towards knowledge about teaching or knowledge for teaching.
3. Materials for teachers, like materials for learners, need to take account of the target group's previous knowledge and experience.
4. It should be clear whether materials are intended for use with teachers in many contexts or only one context and whether they have been designed for teachers who all work within one institution or prepared for a group of teachers from different institutions. On the whole, materials written with a close understanding of a particular group of teachers are more likely to be effective than materials supposedly created for teachers in any kind of educational system or institution anywhere in the world.
5. Any set of materials should demonstrate variety in task type, layout and presentation, interaction patterns and amount of cognitive demand, since materials used in teacher training will create a model for teachers' classroom materials and the range of activity types they regard as 'normal', whether consciously or unconsciously.
6. Teacher training materials need to be professionally presented but, unless they are published materials, the standard and style of presentation should be attainable by the attending teachers. Teachers, especially new ones, may take the training materials as a model for their own classroom materials.

7. The objectives of the piece of material or set of materials should be either transparent or stated.
8. Ideally, materials will follow the principle of economy, so doing more than one training job at the same time.

Three pieces of teacher training material and their relationship to the guidelines

Bearing in mind Guideline 4 above, readers will want to remember that the sample materials below were prepared for specific groups of teachers and may need adapting to suit other groups of teachers.

A Giving good instructions

This piece of material is based on the concept of teachers needing to acquire practical classroom skills. It delivers information and is experiential. It assumes limited classroom experience or capability. It could be used in many contexts and with teachers from one institution or many. The worksheet is clearly 'home made' but is neat, correct, and laid out so as to differentiate clearly between headings, tasks and informational material. It is illustrated by a visual of the type that any teacher with a computer and Internet access could emulate.

Giving good instructions



Starter

In twos or threes brainstorm ways of giving instructions successfully, especially with low-level learners. Then share your ideas with the other teachers.

Task One

Look at these instructions and decide if they are likely to work well.

We're going to write ideas about how life used to be, oh and how it is now, that is since everybody has had mobile phones. Well, maybe you can remember we mentioned mobile phones last week and I think televisions as well. Can you just look this way a minute, Mandy, you don't need to write now. And Simon. I'm trying to tell you something. Anyway we'll do that comparison of life before and life now. You can get started. No, not by yourselves. In groups I think. How many of you are there? Mm. Let's see, oh just work with some people near you. Jane, aren't you in a group? Oh dear, perhaps.....

Task Two

Look at the instructions below. Are they better? Why? What stages does the teacher go through? Would they suit other activities?

1. Focus everybody's attention, e.g. "OK", "Right", "Now."
2. Make sure you have eye contact with all the learners, and that they are quiet.
3. Remind them of previous experience of the topic you want to introduce, e.g. "We were talking about mobile phones last week."
4. Say what is going to happen now, e.g. "We're going to do a task about mobile phones and other inventions now."
5. Make it clear that you are now saying how they will begin, e.g. "Now this is what you are going to do"
6. Structure the task, e.g. "I want you to think about life before and after there were mobile phones. What differences are there?"
7. Set up interaction patterns e.g. "We'll do this in groups. Listen, I'll give you a number. The people with the same number are in your group."
8. Manage behaviour using gesture and expression when they help, e.g. "Stand up, please. [Raise your lower arms, palms upwards]. Find the people in your group and sit with them. The 1s here, the 2s"
9. Set a time limit, e.g. "You've got five minutes to write down differences in life. What was life like? What did we use to do? Before the mobile phone. And since we have had mobile phones. How are our lives different now? What do we do now?"
10. Check understanding, e.g. "So what are you going to do, Sandra?"
11. Recap if necessary, e.g. "..... So that's what I want you to do. On the big sheets of blue paper [Hold up and show one]."
12. Show learners that they should start the task now, e.g. "Right. Off you go."

Task Three

Work in groups. Your trainer will give you a classroom activity for learners of English , a different activity for each group. Prepare instructions for this activity. Then give your instructions to your fellow teachers with any materials they will need. When you are listening to the other groups' instructions do what you are told, even if it is not what you think is intended to happen in that activity!

Stop after each group has given their instructions and evaluate each other on whether your instructions were clear and helpful.

B Observing your trainer

This worksheet assumes previous teaching knowledge, skills and experience. The material aims to raise teachers' awareness of classroom language and of different teacher roles. It can be located within a constructivist paradigm through its intention to relate teachers' new learning to their previous pedagogical knowledge and to provide the opportunity for tacit knowledge to surface. The material evidences a belief in valuing what teachers know and can do; teachers are regarded as capable of and willing to assess their trainer. The material is also based on the supposition that teacher collaboration and social learning are of benefit to both the teachers concerned and to the trainer, who through this task is anchored firmly within the social structure of the training course as a peer or participant. It is highly experiential, focussing on 'noticing' classroom behaviour and drawing inferences from that behaviour. It implicitly encourages variety in training as the trainer knows that they will be 'under the microscope' in one course session, a circumstance known to concentrate the mind wonderfully! The material also models for teachers the

necessity of referencing sources and acknowledging any external input of ideas or content.

What kind of teacher is your teacher trainer?

Decide together on a day/session when you will observe your trainer. Divide the different categories for observation amongst you. Conduct your observations and then pool your thoughts in an informal class meeting or online. Tell your trainer that you have completed the observation and give the trainer feedback.

Classroom language: Instructions Write down word for word some examples of instructions that occur during the lesson. Do they focus attention, introduce topic clearly, structure the task, set up interaction patterns, manage behaviour, check understanding and make it clear when you should start?

Classroom language: Organisation Write the words the trainer uses to:

- Begin the training session,
- Move from one activity or topic to the next,
- End the session.

Is the language clear? Do the transitions make sense? Does the session begin clearly and end appropriately and definitely or does it fade out in a vague way?

Classroom language: Praise and acceptance Write down a couple of examples of praise or acceptance used by the trainer. Are they appropriate? Helpful? Not condescending?

Classroom language: Questions Write down three questions used by the trainer. What type of questions are they?

- Referential questions (trainer does not know the answer, wants information or seeks opinion) or display questions (trainer knows the answer)?
- Open (what, where, why ...?) or closed (yes/no questions)
- Checking understanding
- Analytical questions
- Evaluative questions

Trainer's role

Put a cross next to the role when you see your trainer acting within that role. Also note what exactly the trainer is doing at that point.

Planner?

Manager?

Information giver?

Diagnostician?

Language resource?

Listener?

Monitor?

Participant?

C Getting learners to reflect

This material arises from a belief that it is useful for teachers to think more deeply about received knowledge, in this case the theory that learners can benefit from reflecting on their learning. The piece of material is suited to teachers who already have some knowledge about the nature of 'reflection' and a fair amount of classroom experience so that they will understand the examples given on the worksheet without too much difficulty. At this stage of their careers teachers may well agree in principle with the idea of learner reflection but not necessarily be sure how to put it into practice. The material aims to increase practical, pedagogical knowledge on the topic of reflection by providing an example and then asking the teachers to suggest further classroom activities for each of the reflection areas. It will suit a variety of contexts, but some of the reflective activities may not be appropriate in all settings. It is economical in that all the statements on the worksheet can be modified to enable teachers to reflect on their own learning within the training course where they worked on this piece of material. For example, 'Learners can reflect on their personal language needs' is turned into 'Teachers can reflect on their personal language needs' while 'Learners can reflect on the lesson they have just had' becomes 'Teachers can reflect on the training session they have just had.' If the teachers then go on to produce examples from their training course they will have fruitfully meditated on their experiences to date during their training course as well as having reinforced their learning on student reflection.

Getting learners to reflect

Look at the list of ways in which learners can reflect, and the examples. Tell a partner if you have used any of the example activities with one of your classes. If so, how did it work? If not, is there one idea you would like to try out? Complete the list with further examples and then share the ideas with the whole group.

- **Learners can reflect on their personal language needs**

Examples

- 1) Completing a questionnaire about their needs in English.
- 2)

- **Learners can reflect on the lesson they have just had**

Examples

- 1) Remembering all the activities they have done in the lesson.
- 2)

- **Learners can reflect on their whole course**

Examples

- 1) A questionnaire asking the learners to reflect on their course and look to future plans.
- 2)

• **Learners can reflect on their own participation in the course**

Examples

1) In group work, one group member is an observer, who counts the number of times the other group members contribute.

2)

• **Learners can reflect on how they can best learn**

Examples

1) Learners meet the idea of a word network, they try one out, they compare with other word learning techniques they have used.

2)

• **Learners can reflect to assess their own communicative skills**

Examples

1) Learners get a list of 'can do' statements. They decide which already apply to them.

2)

• **Learners can reflect on areas they need to work on by themselves**

Examples

1) The teacher suggests three 'homework' activities and elicits the purpose of each. The learners choose which is the most appropriate activity for each of them to do.

2)

Conclusion

In this article I have attempted to define and provide examples of principled teacher training materials. However, teacher training materials cannot be 'good' in isolation. They are only as good as their realisation on a training course. No piece or set of materials will be maximally effective in the training room or in the field unless the trainer understands the concepts underlying the materials and how and when they can be optimally used. Given the close links between materials and their implementation on training courses one might argue that learning to create materials for teacher training is an item that should figure prominently in any train-the-trainer course syllabus. Skills in this area allow teacher trainers to write their own materials, targeted to their context, their educational system, and their teachers' needs. Nevertheless, most teacher trainers, including myself, have at busy periods reached for ready-made training materials. An awareness of how materials are put together should ensure that even when this less than perfect solution is adopted the materials are adapted and supplemented as appropriate for a given target group of teachers. Finally, if teacher trainers become aware of the issues, opportunities and constraints that shape published teacher training materials, they can be more effectively and efficiently consulted and involved when new, published teacher training materials are planned.

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