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## Chapter 10,

# Materials and

This chapter is rather different from those that have preceded it. It is concerned with the relationship between materials and ...

- learning
- ideology
- culture
- syllabus
- method
- research.

The intention is to provide an opportunity for consideration of a number of special topics that could not easily be incorporated within the framework adopted for the previous chapters, but also, and this is much more important, to illustrate the absolute centrality of materials in language education. In formal (e.g. state-school) systems, materials, mediated by teachers, are a key link in the externally-determined design chain which potentially runs from curriculum to syllabus and leads to public examinations. In any language-learning setting, materials – published, teacher-produced or learner-produced – provide much of the content of the teaching-learning encounter. They are an in-class resource for learners and teachers – what learners learn with, and an out-of-class resource for learners – what they learn from. Published textbooks also link teachers and learners to the outside world. They are a means to access not only the target language and possibly its culture(s) but also the accumulated knowledge and experience – of language, learning, learners, teaching and teachers – of those involved in making the books, all of whom have striven to produce materials that are perceived as relevant, interesting and useful. It is this centrality which argues strongly for the inclusion of a 'materials' component in pre-service and in-service teacher education programmes. The same centrality makes the study of language learning-teaching materials, and their development, classroom use and evaluation, not only a legitimate but also a hugely important focus of research for teachers and teacher educators.

## 1 MATERIALS AND LEARNING

Learners can learn more than language from the materials used in language-learning classes. What is learnt – or there to be learnt – is most obviously embodied in the materials as content, but certain other types of learning may also result. Some of these outcomes will be intended and positive; others may be negative. A particularly useful introductory reading on this topic is Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989).

### 1.1 Learning from content

In the global 'structural' (audiolingual) textbooks of the late 1960s and early 1970s, lessons typically began with specially written dialogues and stories about fictional people. While these texts were sometimes interesting and occasionally amusing, for the most part they were content-less. They were no more than *language-teaching* texts. In some countries, however, there were, and still are, locally produced textbooks containing texts – such as literary extracts and historic speeches, familiar tales, and stories about local heroes – which have clearly been selected for their content. The specific reasons for the inclusion of particular texts or text-types may be as varied as the texts themselves: for instance, 'great literature' and speeches may be justified on cultural or inspirational grounds while local content can offer some security in a sea of unfamiliar language and reinforce a sense of cultural identity. Nowadays, of course, when there is so much emphasis on the use of authentic texts, one of the key criteria for the choice of one text rather than another is its intrinsic interest, and one of the features that makes a text potentially interesting is its content, that is, the fact that it is informative.

Cook (1983; cited in Littlejohn and Windeatt 1989: 157) lists six forms of 'real content' in materials: (1) content from another academic (school) subject; (2) student-contributed content (see Chapter 8), which would presumably include students talking about themselves; (3) the language itself, i.e. as an object of analysis; (4) literature; (5) culture; (6) 'interesting facts'. Littlejohn and Windeatt suggest two further forms of 'carrier content': (7) learning to learn (see below) and (8) specialist (i.e. ESP) material in a student's own discipline.

### 1.2 Learning from process

Learners learn not only from what they read (or hear), they also learn from interaction with others and from the process of carrying out tasks. This learning goes beyond the merely linguistic (e.g. negotiating meaning; arguing a point of view). One of the arguments for group tasks is that they encourage socialisation and teamwork; they also make possible learning-by-observation of others. Moreover, specific types of task can provide practice in such

'transferrable skills' as, for example, collecting and classifying information, reasoning, critical thinking, creativity and problem-solving.

Littlejohn and Windeatt's (1989) incisive discussion of the 'hidden curriculum' in language-learning materials draws attention to a number of other less benign possible results of the classroom procedures embedded in materials. One of these has to do with power relations in the classroom, as reflected in a choral substitution drill:

[P]upils will hear the 'model sentence' and each substitution somewhere between 15 to 20 times, depending on the way the class is grouped. ... For the pupils, the experience of simply repeating sentences after the teacher's prompts would appear to demonstrate clearly that their role in the classroom is largely a powerless one in which they mechanically follow instructions. The fact that this is done in chorus adds the sense of anonymity and being 'one of the mass' upon which much social control - inside and outside the classroom - seems to rest.

(Littlejohn and Windeatt 1989:167)

Now while this could be dismissed as a rather jaundiced view of a single procedure which has certain (limited) linguistic and psychological justifications, other examples are more convincing. For instance, their analysis of one set of materials leads to the following conclusions:

At its simplest level, the picture that may be presented by the above sequence of sections is that learning English involves reading texts in detail, attending to items of vocabulary, rules of grammar and punctuation, and writing isolated sentences. At a deeper level, however, it can be seen that each time the learners are required to do something, the activity involves closely following a model or referring back to a text. One can say, therefore, that an underlying message being transmitted to the learners is that to learn English one must complete a series of short, controlled exercises that require reproduction of already presented linguistic facts with little in the way of personal creativity, expression or interpretation.

(p. 163)

Commenting on a functionally-oriented set of materials, they suggest that the absence of any explicit reference to grammar, vocabulary and punctuation may give learners the impression that 'learning English essentially involves learning fixed phrases into which one can slot different items. ... The material may distinguish itself from the first course book by its emphasis on pairwork throughout, but underlying the series of exercises we have a similar view of language learning' (ibid.).

They conclude: 'Depending on the prior experience of the individual learner, the view of language learning projected by material can be of central

importance since it may shape learners' perceptions of their own abilities and of the steps they need to take to progress further' (p. 164).

### 1.3 Learning to learn

Many coursebooks these days include specific sections designed to raise learners' awareness of what they can do to become more effective learners. Such sections may take the form of suggestions on how to organise one's learning; they may encourage self-assessment (e.g. of progress, learning difficulties or learning preferences) or reflection on attitudes (see Appendix 9). Alternatively, this 'teaching' may be much less explicit and be woven into tasks. One assumption behind skimming and scanning activities, for instance, is that learners who are accustomed to reading word by word and sentence by sentence will eventually learn to adjust their reading strategy to their reading purpose.

### 1.4 Attitudes and values

Littlejohn and Windeatt's examples of how attitudes and values can be represented in materials include the following:

1. A coursebook contains hundreds of photographs of people in different roles. Only two of these photographs are of black people. One is a muscular athlete and the other a manual worker.
2. In the first 25 pages of another coursebook there are more than 30 references to smoking and drinking.

What we have here are not a couple of isolated instances but undeniable *patterns*, reinforcing a stereotype in the first example and apparently endorsing certain behaviours in the second. As evidence that this might have an effect, Littlejohn and Windeatt refer to a survey of studies on sexism in materials by Porreca (1984: 172):

In one study, Jenkins (cited in Nilsen 1977) found a direct correlation between the length of time spent using Alpha One Reading Program (which apparently portrayed girls as 'stupid, dependent, whining and tearful' and boys as 'active and aggressive') and the degree to which pupils' attitudes matched those in the materials.

To judge only from the few details provided of the study, learners' age might have been one factor in their susceptibility.

Drawing on the educational literature on outcomes, Littlejohn and Windeatt make a distinction between referential learning (i.e. learning from

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content) and experiential learning (learning through doing), suggesting that of the two experiential learning may exert a more powerful influence. If this is the case, concerns about content in materials may be a little exaggerated. Littlejohn and Windeatt's own conclusion is as follows:

In order to begin to argue that such features of materials may bring about particular kinds of learning outcomes... one needs to show that specific values or attitudes are *pervasive* throughout the text (Gordon, 1984)... Without this evidence, one may simply object to the inclusion of certain items on the grounds that they offend our moral sensibilities.  
(p. 173; original emphasis)

### Task 10.1

1. Do you think it is important that materials should offer opportunities for learning more than language? Can you think of any other forms of positive non-linguistic learning that might result from working with published materials? Select a lesson in the coursebook you are using or any other coursebook that is available. Is there any evidence that the author intended to provide for the learning of more than just language? If not, and if you are in favour of material serving more than one learning purpose, how could you adapt the lesson so that it can fulfil more purposes?
2. Do you agree with the view that experiential learning is likely to have a more powerful effect than referential learning, and that referential learning would only have any effect if it pervaded the materials? Do you have any evidence to support your view?

## 2 MATERIALS AND IDEOLOGY

Ideology, like culture, can be built into materials by design, as when a country wishes to promote a particular set of national values. It may also be less conscious, but no less manifest, in the nature of the reality depicted visually and verbally in materials, in the relationships and roles envisaged for teacher and learner, and perhaps most subtly in the language selected for inclusion.

The following quotations indicate some of the concerns that have been expressed. Dendrinos's (1992) book on *The EFL Textbook and Ideology* draws attention to the extent that ideological positions, conscious or unconscious, underlie every aspect of textbook writing and design:

[T]he EFL textbook... will contain material whose purpose will be the linguistic acculturation of learners and therefore their subjugation to social conventions. (p. 152)

Themes, topics and titles of units, and how these are articulated, are in

themselves revealing in relation to the social reality to be constructed for textbook users. (p. 175)

[P]ictures, illustrations, photographs, etc. are social constructs and they ideologically position their addressees towards realities. (p. 165)

[T]he selection of language functions to be transmitted and acquired is arbitrarily and ideologically loaded. (p. 165)

[... and this selection will] contribute to the development of different conceptions of social reality and determine how the pupil as a social and institutional subject will interact with that reality. (p. 170)

Littlejohn and Windeatt's discussion of values and attitudes has been referred to in the section on 'Materials and learning'. In a later paper, Littlejohn (1997) turns his attention to 'ideological encodings' in self-access tasks. Taking as a reference point Lum and Brown's (1994) list of twenty exercise/activity-types, he analyses these with respect to the role that they imply for the learner, using three questions for this purpose:

1. What role in the discourse is proposed for the learner: initiate, respond or none?
2. What mental operation is to be engaged?
3. Where does the content for the task come from? From within the task itself, from the teacher or from the students?

(Littlejohn 1997: 186)

His conclusions are: (1) with one or two exceptions, the exercises offer very little scope for learners to initiate, that is, to use their own words; (2) only a fairly narrow range of mainly low-level mental processes is involved; (3) in most cases, there is no opportunity for learners to be creative, that is, to express their own ideas. This leads him to the paradox that 'in ideological terms, there is, thus, a clear tension apparent here in the ostensible aim in the provision of self-access facilities and its realization in practice' (Littlejohn 1997: 188).

So how might a teacher respond to the concerns expressed above? In relation to the problem of self-access tasks, Littlejohn suggests a number of changes in the way self-access is organised that would give the learner more freedom. These include a shift in activity-types towards activities which encourage learner initiation and creativity; the use of 'example' answers rather than keys; the possibility of peer feedback; and involving learners in the preparation of exercises (as suggested in Chapter 7). (For further suggestions and examples of alternative exercise-types, see Tomlinson 1998f.)

As for the values and attitudes represented in materials, Littlejohn and Windeatt (1989) offer the interesting idea that materials might themselves be made an object of 'critical focus' (p. 175). Learners might, for instance, be encouraged to comment on the attitudes or values that seem to lie behind the selection of texts, topics or visuals or, more broadly, on the way in which the materials influence what they do in the classroom.

For Dendrinos, the questions are linguistic and the answers lie in linguistic research:

Questions ... which could serve as a point of departure for the investigation of one or more textbooks are questions such as: what categories of verbs (mental, action, feeling, process verbs) are selected to define and delimit the behaviours, attitudes, feelings, relationships of the people presented in the textbook? What nouns and adjectives are selected to describe people as institutional subjects (as men and women, parents and children, employers and employees, teachers and pupils, etc?). What type of comparative/contrastive statements are made in relation to what, and which are the entities being compared and ultimately favoured? In what kind of communicative encounters are strongly or weakly directive statements made and who uses what type of modalized statements? For what communicative purposes are transitives used instead of intransitives and vice-versa, and in what circumstances are agent-focusing mechanisms used or avoided?

(Dendrinos 1992: 181-2)

Questions such as these, she hopes, will 'serve as stimuli for those responsible for the evaluation of textbooks to assess them not only as teaching aids but also as media for pupil pedagogization' (p. 182).

#### Task 10.2

1. Do you feel that Dendrinos' concerns are justified? Choose a textbook, one that you use normally or whatever is available. Examine it for evidence to support or counter her comments.
2. What do you think of the suggestion that materials might be made an object of critical focus? Look through a textbook for one or more features on which you would like learners to reflect critically. Discuss these with your colleagues.

### 3 MATERIALS AND CULTURE

It has been suggested that knowing a language is inseparable from understanding the culture in which the language is spoken – that is, that without cultural knowledge of fairly specific kinds, one cannot fully understand what is said or written (Brown 1990b). This view raises a number of issues in relation to the selection and development of materials:



- what one means by 'culture' and 'cultural knowledge';
- the extent to which it is possible to generalise about the culture of, say, a number of countries in which the target language is spoken;
- what cultural knowledge is likely to be needed by a particular category of students in a particular context.

Faced with the challenge of designing an English course for Moroccan secondary schools, where English is a second foreign language and studied only in the final three years, Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (1990: 3-4) were obliged to confront all these issues. They distinguish between four senses of culture:

1. The aesthetic: 'Culture with a capital C: the media, the cinema, music (whether serious or popular) and, above all, literature'.
2. The sociological: 'Culture with a small c: the organisation and nature of family, of home life, of interpersonal relations, material conditions, work and leisure, customs and institutions'.
3. The semantic: 'The conceptual system embodied in the language... Many semantic areas (e.g. food, clothes, institutions) are culturally distinctive because they relate to a particular way of life.'
4. The pragmatic (or sociolinguistic): 'The background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills that, in addition to mastery of the language code, make possible successful communication.'

Adaskou et al. could see the need for a cultural component in senses 3 and 4, but were dubious about the relevance of 1 and 2, given the likely needs of the learners and the lack of any explicit reference in the official syllabus to this kind of cultural knowledge. However, they saw it as important to consult teachers, teacher trainers and inspectors. From the resulting discussions with groups of teachers, and questionnaires to and structured interviews with all three groups, a clear consensus emerged. Most English teachers felt that the use in coursebooks of foreign milieux would invite cultural comparisons and lead to discontent with students' own material culture; and that the patterns of behaviour normal in an English-speaking social context would not be desirable models for young Moroccans. The informants also felt that the learners would be no less motivated to learn English if the language were not presented in the context of an English-speaking country. Field trials and subsequent feedback not only confirmed this view but indicated that learners were more motivated to learn English when the language was presented in contexts with which they could identify. The writers' conclusion suggests, however, that teacher attitudes may be even more important than learner attitudes: 'Students use a particular course only once, but teachers will use it many times. And it is cultural content, more than any other single aspect, that in our opinion influences teachers' attitudes' (p. 10).

In other situations, where learners are more likely to travel to Britain or

another English-speaking country, it is conceivable that a different view might prevail. After all, words conjure up concepts or images. 'Breakfast' represents a meal that may vary in both its content and the time at which it is taken. 'Home', 'school', 'polite', 'big', may all be translatable, but still be understood in distinctively different ways by speaker and hearer. Anyone who knows another language well will be able to supply examples of words for which there is no exact translation equivalent. We can therefore say that in this sense materials embody cultural content, and that knowledge of this content is essential if one is to understand the language. Language-learning materials, as has been suggested in a previous section, can also be made to carry cultural content. This may be about some culturally neutral aspect of real life (insofar as anything can be culturally neutral), some exotic culture, or about specific cultural features present in the world of the learner or that of the speech communities in which the target language is the mother tongue.

How such speech communities are represented is, of course, a matter of concern.

EFL books whose aim is to present reality in today's Britain over-represent the white middle-class population with their concerns about holidays abroad and leisure time, home decoration and dining out, their preoccupation with success, achievement and material wealth. Absent, or nearly absent, are the great variety of minorities; people of African, Indian, Pakistani descent who make up a considerable part of the population; and the problems of the homeless and the unemployed; of the socially underprivileged, of the illiterate masses are rarely or never mentioned. . . . Generally, an idealized version of the dominant English culture is drawn, frequently leading populations of other societies to arrive at distorted conclusions based on the comparison between a false reality and their own lived experience in their culture.

(Dendrinos 1992: 153)

One argument against a bicultural approach is that, taken to an extreme, it may be seen as a form of cultural imperialism (Alptekin and Alptekin 1984), as a result of which one culture is overwhelmed by the flow of potentially misleading information from the other. Alternatively, when learners see no possibility of travelling to an English-speaking country or even interacting directly with native speakers of English, it may be perceived as an irrelevance (Altan 1995). In a world in which English has assumed a global importance, it has been argued, a multicultural approach would be more appropriate (Prodromou 1992a); Altan's (1995) suggestion is that what might be thought of as international culture (human rights, interactive media, Japanese business practice, the *ecu* being his examples) or general knowledge should be used as the content for practice in the receptive skills of listening and speaking but that practice in the productive skills should relate to the learner's own

socio-cultural context. Underlying this distinction between 'input' culture and 'output' culture is the belief that language learning is complexified by the introduction of a cultural component and that in any form other than the kind of general knowledge an educated person might be expected to have about the world he or she lives in, this is unnecessary.

The need to relate these arguments to specific contexts is underlined by Prodromou's (1992a) survey of the interests of 300 Greek students of English, mostly young adults. This revealed that alongside a very strong linguistic orientation (84 per cent said they wanted lessons to be 'about the English language'), there was an interest in 'facts about science and society' and, among intermediate- and advanced-level students, social problems. British life and institutions was preferred to the American equivalent (60 per cent and 26 per cent respectively), a finding explicable, Prodromou suggests, by the high standing of the Cambridge examinations and the 'bad press' accorded to America in the post-war period. What is also of interest is the generally low value given to 'local' topics. Prodromou speculates that this can be explained by 'the highly charged nature of Greek political life ... Discussions of political or semi-political topics (such as Greek newspapers) can be unexpectedly divisive' (p. 46).

Nunan (1991: 211) comments: 'Learners have an infinite capacity to surprise, and there is a danger that the claim of cultural inappropriacy may be used as an excuse for refraining from action. It may also block classroom initiatives which the learners themselves might welcome.' Rather than making assumptions about learners' views, further context-specific research of the kinds reported in this section is obviously needed.

### Task 10.3

1. "'Globally" designed coursebooks have continued to be stubbornly Anglo-centric' (Altan 1995: 59). Is this true of the materials you use? If so, do you see it as a problem?
2. Altan goes on:

There is no such thing as culturally-neutral language teaching. ELT coursebooks convey cultural biases and implicitly communicate attitudes concerning the culture of the target language and indirectly the learners' native culture. Passages and units with foreign cultural themes and topics not only cause difficulties in comprehension, but actually seem to increase misunderstanding and confusion about the non-native culture, leading to a lack of production and of success. When both the materials we use and the way we use them are culturally adverse, then inevitably learners switch off and retreat into their inner world to defend their own integrity. (ibid.)

Do you think that Altan's comments on the effects on learners of materials containing foreign cultural themes and topics have relevance for the learners you teach?

#### 4 MATERIALS AND SYLLABUS

There are two basic ways of representing the relationship between materials and syllabus. In the first and still more common, the syllabus determines if not the selection of materials at least the way in which they will be exploited for teaching purposes. This was referred to as a syllabus-driven approach in Chapter 5. In the second, materials are selected first, for their intrinsic interest and general linguistic appropriateness, and a specific linguistic syllabus is then derived from them. We called this a concept-driven approach in Chapter 5, but in a more restricted sense it has also been termed a text-driven approach (see, e.g., Tomlinson 1998d: 147). In creating materials for the occasional lesson the individual teacher may start from either of these positions, but for the teacher who is devising a whole course and for the professional materials writer this is an issue that requires serious thought. The first part of this section assumes a syllabus-driven approach. In the second part, we consider some of the pros and cons of a concept-driven approach.

##### 4.1 Syllabuses and teachers

Teachers and materials writers require an organisational framework for their work. A syllabus fulfils this function. At its narrowest, it is no more than an inventory of items to be taught; in broader conceptions, these items will be logically derived from a statement of aims and objectives, related to a time-frame; and sequenced. In the broadest (most prescriptive?) form of syllabus specification, teaching procedures and perhaps aids will also be indicated. (For an early discussion of syllabus content, see the various contributions to Brumfit (1984); for further discussion of syllabus-types, see, for example, Nunan (1988c) and White (1988).)

This syllabus-first view is economically described by Nunan (1991: 208):

[M]aterials, whether commercially developed or teacher-produced, are an important element within the curriculum, and are often the most tangible and visible aspect of it. While the syllabus defines the goals and objectives, the linguistic and experiential content, instructional materials can put flesh on the bones of these specifications.

When there exists an official syllabus which teachers are expected to follow, this will be an important factor in materials selection. In some contexts, teachers are only permitted to use 'authorised' textbooks (i.e. those which have passed official scrutiny); in other cases, it falls to the teacher to check the coverage of a textbook against the syllabus. If no official syllabus exists to prescribe or to guide, textbooks are sometimes allowed to take over this function: the textbook syllabus becomes the course syllabus by default, as it were.

The reason why this should not be allowed to happen is that decisions

concerning syllabus need to be taken before a textbook is selected. As Cunningsworth (1984: 1) has remarked, 'coursebooks are good servants but poor masters'. In other words, coursebooks should not dictate what is done but be selected for what they can do to help. Logically, therefore, the selection of a textbook would take place only after some preliminary assessment of needs in the broad sense. As noted previously, while there may be a rough match between a coursebook syllabus and the needs of a particular group of learners, the match will not be a perfect one (this applies to any kind of external syllabus). It follows that even when there is an official teaching syllabus (or an end-of-course public examination which may serve a similar purpose), a teacher still has a responsibility to establish aims and objectives for the course which also take other contextual factors and known learner needs into account. Where no syllabus exists, teachers need to give thought (again, before selecting a textbook) to what kind of syllabus(es) would be appropriate and how the syllabus(es) might be specified.

It is one thing to specify what is to be taught; it is quite another to design an instructional plan. The following quotation from Rossner (1988: 141) indicates some of the problems:

For the modern language teacher, the task seems endlessly complex. How does one reconcile the need to get the elements of the new language sorted out with the need to get used to hearing and understanding, speaking, reading, and writing it? And on top of that, how does one gradually plan for learners to become adept at matching form to function? And having done that, how does one plan for learners to accommodate the language in use to situational constraints imposed by channels of communication, location, surrounding events, and the participants?

This is one reason why teachers tend to base their teaching on textbooks, of course.

The argument advanced thus far in this section is that materials have been selected because they embody a syllabus that has been determined at least in part by the teacher. Richards and Rodgers (1986) appear to take a rather different view. They make three points about the potential relationship between syllabus and materials, suggesting that:

The instructional materials ... specify subject matter content, even where no syllabus exists, and define or suggest the intensity of coverage for syllabus items, allocating the amount of time, attention and detail particular syllabus items or tasks require. Instructional materials also define or imply the day-to-day learning objectives that collectively constitute the syllabus.

(Richards and Rodgers 1986: 25)

While the first point may seem little more than a restatement of Nunan's view

of syllabus and materials quoted at the beginning of this section, the inclusion of the phrase beginning 'even' in the first sentence introduces a very different perspective. Although partially mitigated by words such as 'suggest', and later 'imply', this view seems to assign to materials the role of teacher's partner rather than servant. In certain circumstances, as when teachers are inexperienced or a new approach is being introduced, support is of course needed and is probably most valued in the form of appropriate materials. In other situations, a less equal partnership would be desirable, as argued above.

#### 4.2 Materials writers and syllabuses

Tomlinson (1998d: 147) makes the argument for a text-driven approach:

[O]ne of the things we know about language acquisition is that most learners only learn what they need or want to learn. Providing opportunities to learn the language needed to participate in an interesting activity is much more likely to be profitable than teaching something because it is the next teaching point in the syllabus. And deriving learning points from an engaging text or activity is much easier and more valuable than finding or constructing a text which illustrates a pre-determined teaching point... If the written and spoken texts are selected for their richness and diversity of language as well as for their potential to achieve engagement then a wide syllabus will evolve which will achieve natural and sufficient coverage.

One of several assertions in the above quotation is that a text-driven approach 'will achieve natural and sufficient coverage'. However, one of the potential limitations of a text-driven approach is precisely that it does not yield a syllabus with sufficient coverage. As if recognising this, Tomlinson cites Prowse's (1998) suggestion that this problem can be overcome if a checklist is used to monitor coverage.

The point should perhaps be made that while the reference to a checklist is a tacit admission that some form of external syllabus or self-generated list of learning items can be helpful, it is not an abandonment of the principle of a text-driven approach. Whether or not a checklist is used, there is value in materials designers preparing a grid which shows when specific items are introduced and recycled and the attention paid at different points to skill development. Since a grid of this kind should reveal gaps and imbalances, it can function as a monitoring device even without reference to any external categories.

#### Task 10.4

1. 'Materials design exists at the interface of syllabus design and methodology' (Nunan 1991: 214). What does this mean? Is it true?

2. Most teachers are familiar with language form syllabuses, whether they relate to grammatical structures, functions or phonological features, and can make judgements about the adequacy and appropriateness of these for their own teaching context. However, most modern textbooks will also include skill syllabuses and these can only be evaluated if the teacher has a clear understanding of what constitutes skilled behaviour and how this can be developed. This task consists of two steps.

- (a) Think of a specific group of learners and a single skill (e.g. speaking) that is important for all the members of the group. Now try to write down in as much detail as possible the various things they need to be able to do in that skill area. You may also be able to identify enabling knowledge and skills that feed into the main skills that you have noted.
- (b) Analyse your coursebook (or any other relevant book that is available) to see how this skill is dealt with in the book. Is there evidence that the writer has adopted a systematic approach to skill development (i.e. that the materials have been based on what can reasonably be called a skill syllabus)?

## 5 MATERIALS AND METHOD

In a carefully designed approach to language teaching (see, e.g., Stern 1983, Richards and Rodgers 1986) we might expect a high degree of consistency between aims, objectives, syllabus, materials and method. Thus, materials will embody syllabus content and the method that is used to facilitate the learning of that content will be congruent with overall aims and objectives and with the beliefs about language and language learning that lie behind these.

Method, normally understood as a coherent set of procedures, can be said to exist at three levels: (1) the theoretical level, or what is supposed to happen; (2) the level of materials, insofar as these prescribe what teachers/learners are to do; and (3) the classroom level. Levels (2) and (3) represent successive stages in interpretation or approximation.

This section focuses on the relationship between levels (1) and (2) and (2) and (3). It first raises a number of questions concerning the realism (and, indeed, the desirability) of the interlocking framework described above. It then turns to the relationship between materials and teacher and the teacher's role in realising the intentions of the materials designer.

### 5.1 Materials as the realisation of principles

Materials represent the first stage in which principles are turned into practice. Here we consider the extent to which materials really do (and, in the case of communicative materials, can) reflect the beliefs that supposedly lie behind them.

Rossner's (1988: 161) random survey of materials published between 1981 and 1987 found that:

[F]ew authors have yet found ways to make available to teachers and learners resources which can provide a basis for tasks and activities in the EFL classroom that truly reflect the ideals of communicative approaches as articulated by applied linguists... Probably truly 'communicative' tasks and activities can only be evolved by teachers who know their learners' needs and wants well, and who are used to working within the constraints surrounding particular teaching and learning situations... it goes without saying that successful classroom language development depends on the ability of teachers to put together coherent sequences of activities which may be based on published or other materials, but which have been adapted, reformulated and supplemented to respond to the particular needs of those students in that situation.

Clarke (1989a), writing just one year later and with a similar purpose, comments on the 'considerable dichotomy between what is theoretically recommended as desirable and what in fact gets published and used on a wide scale' (p. 73). His helpfully detailed survey of the literature on communicative principles, and in particular authenticity, can be summarised as follows:

1. There are two schools of thought on text authenticity, with one group insisting on the 'real' and another arguing that the primary criterion for decisions concerning the selection of materials should be appropriateness for the learners. One argument put forward by the latter group is that real materials which are inappropriate in terms of level or perceived relevance to learners can be just as alienating as meaningless form-focused activities.
2. There is agreement that authentic texts should be processed in relation to the writer's communicative purpose (i.e. that tasks should be focused on the writer's meaning and a response to that meaning).
3. There is concern about context both in relation to the wider context from which an authentic text has been taken and the sequence of activities within a lesson.
4. There is an acceptance of information-gap activities and role play and simulation as communication tasks.

In a survey of materials published between the mid-1970s and the late 1980s, he finds that:

1. The principle of authenticity in relation to texts has been widely adopted (he dubs this 'the "realia" explosion' (p. 79)), but photographs and even texts appear in some cases to have been included for largely cosmetic



- reasons. 'Simulated realia' or 'pseudo authenticity' takes the form of simulated newspaper headlines and graphic devices such as notepads and handwriting. Listening texts are frequently at least semi-scripted. Original materials are adapted, sometimes without this being made explicit.
2. Despite widespread acceptance of the principle of authentic response, there is a continuing reliance on comprehension questions, which in some cases focus on points of detail. Authentic materials are sometimes used only to make a linguistic point. Form (whether in the sense of grammatical structure or function) thus still maintains ascendancy over meaning, a situation which is only partly concealed by the creation of an aura of authenticity' (p. 82).
  3. A concern for context is evident in materials with a thematic or topic-based structure; in other materials text selection seems 'random' or the contexts linked only by the linguistic feature that binds them together.
  4. Although there is little evidence of the use of the information-gap principle in coursebooks, there are attempts to create a purpose for communication by inviting the learner to make a personal response to, e.g., a questionnaire, a topic, a poem. Roleplay is also used. Whether these materials, and indeed many of the texts included, will seem relevant to learners is questionable.

In short, 'modern materials tend not to exemplify the communicative principles they purport to embody' (p. 84).

## 5.2 Method in books and classrooms

The potential gap between principles and materials is even wider when it comes to the classroom use of materials, since teachers may or may not use the materials in ways that correspond to the intentions of the materials designer.

In an attempt to ensure this consistency, materials designers have sometimes produced materials in which procedures are laid down in great detail. The intention is to ensure that the materials are 'teacher proof', that is, that the materials are used as intended. There are certain situations, as when a new approach is being introduced or when the teachers who will use the materials have little teaching experience, when explicit and detailed instructions on what to do will be appreciated as support. But there comes a time when the unfamiliar becomes familiar and the inexperienced more experienced. If the instructions are written into student materials in such a way that the teacher has virtually no freedom to deviate from them, it is at this point that frustration may start to set in.

After all, most teachers like variety as much as learners. This is why they prefer materials that can be exploited in different ways (Nunan 1988a), and