

Key Aspects for Developing Your Instructional Materials

Aspectos cruciales para elaborar materiales instruccionales

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This article describes crucial aspects that EFL teachers must consider for the elaboration of materials to support the instructional design component of their classes. It also emphasizes that language educators should not only maintain a balance between theory and practice when developing their didactic resources, but they also should keep themselves updated in terms of the latest research in the language education field. The article also addresses key questions teachers should formulate before beginning the process of design, and provides useful ideas to develop dynamic, content enriching, and visually attractive materials.

Key words: Course Design, Material Design, Motivational Design, Content Enriching Materials, Attractive Layouts, Teachers' Creativity

Este artículo describe aspectos cruciales que los docentes de inglés como lengua extranjera deben tener en cuenta para la elaboración de materiales de apoyo del componente de instrucción de sus clases. También enfatiza que los

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docentes de lengua extranjera no solamente deben mantener un balance entre la teoría y la práctica al desarrollar sus ayudas didácticas, sino que también deben mantenerse actualizados en términos de los más recientes avances de la investigación en el campo de la educación en lenguas. El artículo discute preguntas claves que los maestros deben formular antes de comenzar el proceso de diseño y brinda ideas útiles para el desarrollo de materiales con contenidos enriquecedores y que resulten dinámicos y atractivos visualmente.

Palabras claves: Diseño de Cursos, Diseño de Materiales, Contenidos Enriquecedores, Esquemas Llamativos, Creatividad Docente

WHY DESIGN YOUR OWN MATERIALS?

There are a good number of commercial books that are used as support for the instructional component of many EFL/ESL classes. These textbooks have been developed considering learning principles and research on what works best for learners. There are many advantages to these commercial texts. Inside those we find colourful pictures, nice layouts, variety of designs, etc. However, do we teachers not feel that sometimes the textbook is not enough? This may be due partly to the fact that through everyday experience, we become aware of our immediate realities. Such consciousness allows us to become sensitive to the needs of our students and to examine if the materials employed are helping them to achieve their particular language objectives. According to Kessler (as cited by Menezes, 2001), "the need for materials developed by teachers in our field is essential because these individuals are the most immediate experts on the needs of ESOL learners, the cognitive abilities of different age groups and the learning process of their specific learners". Indeed, it is teachers in their contact with learners who

perceive their most salient characteristics and needs. Yet, how often do we, teachers engage in the task of adapting and/or creating our own materials? The answer may be that we very seldom do so. This article is intended to encourage teachers to develop their own materials and is an invitation to explore their own capabilities. It focuses on considerations for material design.

Developing materials for the EFL/ESL classroom should not be viewed as a task confined to textbook developers. However, we need to consider some limitations. One has to do with the fact that it is a time-consuming activity that requires dedication, patience and some expertise. According to the CIEL Language Support Network (2000), prospective developers of materials should be skillful in relation to subject knowledge, awareness of language learning pedagogies, technical expertise and editing. In addition, the design of materials could turn into a costly enterprise. Nevertheless, it is a unique experience in which teachers can cater to specific learning objectives and learning styles. Moreover, materials designed by the teachers are more likely to be updated and manageable. That is, they have the possibility of prioritizing the learners and placing them

at the center of the language program while acquainting them with the current world.

Teachers, as innovative professionals, have the potential to explore their creativity by designing materials for their classes. Notwithstanding, there is a word of caution for anyone interested in this field. It should not turn into a meaningless task with the sole purpose of enjoying and keeping the students busy. Certainly, we should develop materials that motivate our learners. Nonetheless, the fact that those activities are enjoyable does not automatically imply that students are learning properly (Dick and Reiser, 1989). As Dewey (1938) once stated, an experience could be enjoyable and yet promote a careless attitude. This implies that the teacher must develop meaningful tasks that emphasize learning which is relevant for students' lives and that helps them understand and challenge their own views of the world.

PREREQUISITES FOR MATERIAL DESIGN

It is also important to highlight that the process of material design is embedded in the sequence of a language course design. Learners should know in advance what their learning process will consist of. Therefore, objectives must be stated in the materials and should be clearly defined so that learners can accurately interpret them. The materials should reflect opportunities for the learners

to achieve the objectives set up. In other words, there must be congruency between the objectives and the materials.

Materials designed by teachers should include prerequisites that are indispensable to promote an adequate atmosphere for learning. A crucial aspect here is the activation of prior knowledge. According to Dick and Reiser (1989), it helps students to feel confident when getting in contact with the information to be learned. This activation can be initiated by means of rich activities before the main topic is confronted. Vocabulary exercises, visual aids, mental mapping strategies, and graphs are useful means by which we can explore prior knowledge. In addition to the activation of prior knowledge, we should also keep in mind the type of interaction that our materials foster. Besides individual practice, there must be opportunities for pair and group work that could maximize their chances for exchange of information. Finally, as with any other element of the curriculum, the materials must be constantly scrutinized for their effectiveness. Hence, we can turn again to our point of departure which consists of the learning objectives and make the corresponding adjustments. The following diagram depicts the process and the types of questions we should ask ourselves regarding the role of our supporting materials.

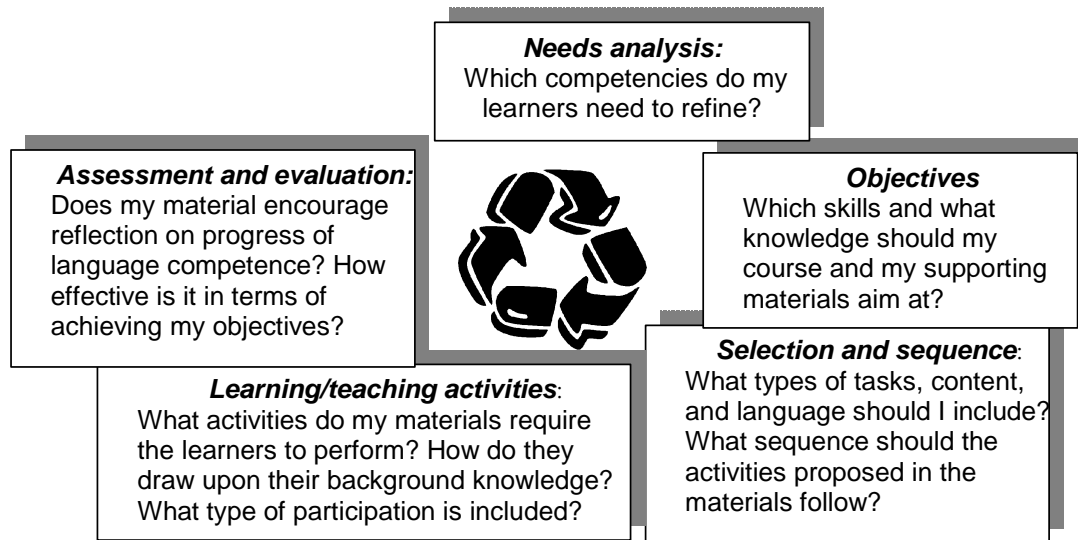


Figure 1. The Process of Course and Material Design

The sequence shown here implicitly emphasizes the idea that teachers' theoretical background must be at the heart of material design. Teachers should possess a grasp of developments in the field of education and particularly in second language acquisition, and the ability to connect theory and research to practice. Teachers must be connoisseurs of their field. They should not only be familiar with theories of foreign language learning and teaching, but also be acquainted with the most recent findings of research. Materials could lack a solid rationale if they are not constructed considering principles in which the teacher believes. It is by combining their theoretical background and their teaching experience in the development of their materials that they create positive conditions for language learning. A combination of experience and theoretical background could guarantee a better developed product.

MATERIAL DESIGN AND MOTIVATION

A central aspect in the design of appropriate materials for our EFL classes is motivation. Ideally, we should call and maintain our students' attention by using meaningful, well-elaborated, updated, challenging, enjoyable and relevant materials. They must be designed so that they tap our learners' feelings and background, and they should enhance learning acquisition by promoting autonomy. In this respect, Small (1997) cites four elements proposed in the ARCS Model of Motivational Design that we consider pertinent aspects when dealing with ways to encourage our learners to learn.

Attention	It deals with the creation of the concept of newness. It explores the way teachers activate curiosity among students and how to match students' interest and needs through the use of different methods.
Relevance	It focuses on goal orientation, motive matching, and familiarity emphasizing objectives. It is fundamental for students to know what the objectives are and their importance. The selection of objectives should be focused on learners' needs. Familiarity takes into account students' experiences and values when designing the contents.
Confidence	It is the link established between the learning process and students' abilities.
Satisfaction	It is the enjoyable experience faced by students when objectives are achieved.

Table 1. The ARCS Model of Motivational Design

It is worth noting that Small capitalizes on the importance of congruency among objectives, tasks and materials. However, the model also implies diversity. More concretely, materials should explore students' personalities, learning styles, language development expectations, likes, dislikes, needs and the contexts they are embedded in. Apparently, this seems an overwhelming task, but it is possible if we observe our learners meticulously and learn to appreciate who they are, how they see the world, and how they interact with each other. Age in this sense is fundamental. Generations change and therefore we must bear in mind that contents and purposes in materials can vary according to learners' ages. A way to bridge the gap between you as a teacher-material designer and your students is to plunge into their age and put yourself in their own shoes so that you understand the way they conceive life.

CONTEXTUALIZATION OF CONTENT

There are two more relevant aspects that teachers should keep in mind when designing materials for their classes. One of them has to do with the contextualization of all activities included in the materials. For instance, vocabulary and grammar exercises should be embedded in the topic that is being studied. Activities should promote exposure to the target language and opportunities to recycle the grammar and vocabulary points to be learned. New words, for example, can be presented in an enjoyable crossword puzzle. Then, students can be asked to use them to complete sentences while working on word transformation. Finally, they can create their own sentences and put them together in a story or use the vocabulary learned in games. There are many options upon which to draw so that new forms can be acquired and put into practice.

They include cartoon stories, matching exercises, memory games, board games such as taboo, stop and simulation of real conversations, games, etc.

VISUAL LAYOUT

Finally, a crucial aspect in the design of materials concerns the visual layout. Although this is the aspect that requires continuous practice and some familiarization with computer programs such as Word and Paint Work, there are basic tips that aid in the elaboration of attractive materials. We will pinpoint the ones that have been of great usefulness for us:

- Include clear and short instructions using everyday, plain language. Also, include a name or heading for each activity you plan in your materials.
- Provide a concise, straightforward example before letting the students work by themselves. In short, model the behaviour.
- Avoid being stuffy. Distribute the information and pictures in a visually-attractive layout so that looking at and reading the material do not become tiresome.
- Use legible fonts that are not too elaborated and can easily be read.
- Recreate your activities with visuals. Those should portray the meaning of the words or situations meant to be learned. Do

not include pictures just for the sake of it with no relationship whatsoever to the content. Design your own pictures or use resources from the Internet, but be aware of copyrighted material.

- Include a varied set of activities. Examples are: tic-tac-toe, memory games, lotteries, bingos, jig-saw puzzles, stop and so forth. You can also create materials that promote interaction and teamwork such as hexagon games, contests, wall-dictation and mutual dictation and simulation games.
- Use eye-catching color in your resources and make sure they are readable.

SAMPLES

At this point we would like to show materials that have been designed to recycle vocabulary. The first exercise reinforces lexis and helps students categorize words under general headings. It is worth noticing that the content of the template can be adapted for different levels and areas. The second example is a board game in which students are expected to ask for permission, give orders, give advice, express ability and invite politely. In short, it has been designed to internalize modal verbs. The exercise is presented as a game and it allows for grammar and vocabulary contextualization. It also stimulates the learners to create their own sentences.

ANSWER KEY THEY ARE ALL (1) ...

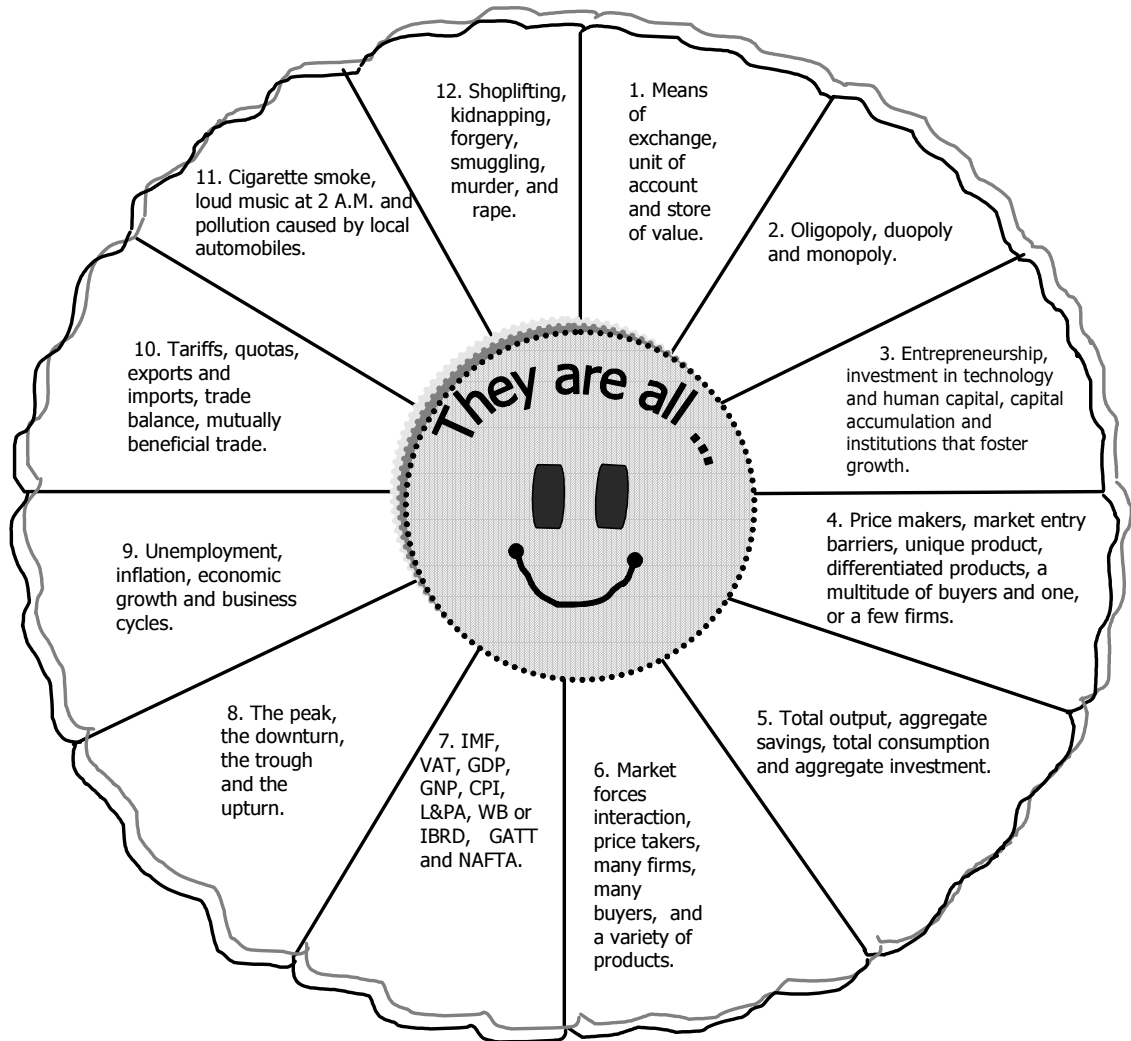
1. They are all functions of money
2. They are all imperfect market structures
3. They are all economic growth sources
4. They are all imperfect market features
5. They are all national income variables
6. They are all perfect market features
7. They are all acronyms
8. They are all business cycle phases
9. They are all macroeconomic problems
10. They are all international trade key words
11. They are all negative consumption externalities
12. They are all crimes

ANSWER KEY THEY ARE ALL (2)...

1. They are all flowers.
2. They are all family members/ relatives.
3. They are all insects.
4. They are all clothes
5. They are all continents.
6. They are all pieces of furniture.
7. They are all colours.
8. They are all sports.
9. They are all verbs.
10. They are all capital cities
11. They are all vegetables.
12. They are all fruits.

They are all (1) ...

Play with a classmate. Take turns deciding how to label the features / aspects that appear in each of the petals. If you don't answer, you miss your turn. The winner is the student who labels the highest number of petals.

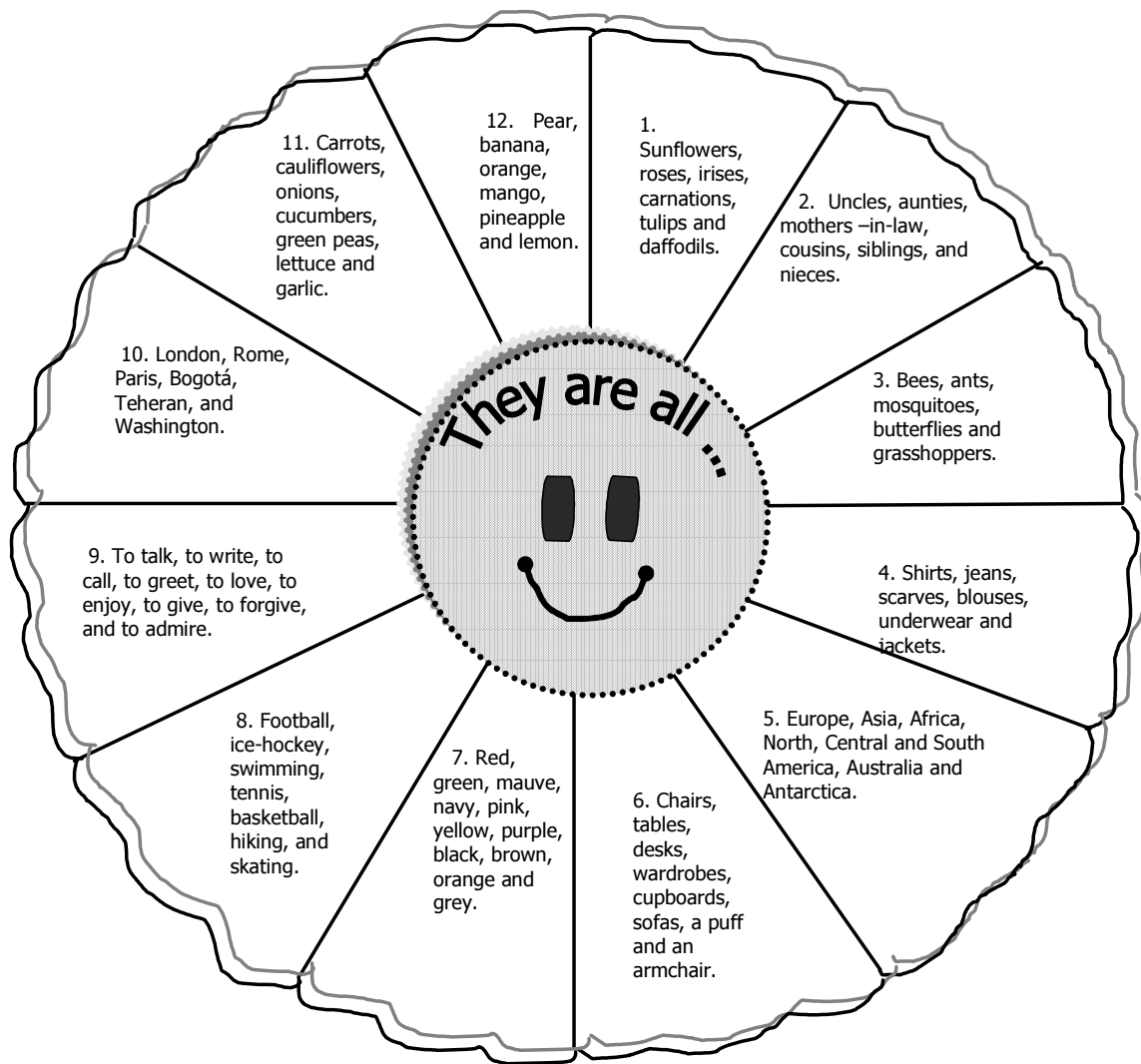


- 1. They are all _____
- 2. They are _____
- 3. They _____
- 4. They are all _____
- 5. They are _____
- 6. They _____

- 7. They are all _____
- 8. They are _____
- 9. They _____
- 10. They are all _____
- 11. They are _____
- 12. They _____

They are all (2) □□□

Play with a classmate. Take turns to decide how to label the things, places, words, names, items, etc. that appear in each of the petals. If you don't answer, you miss your turn. The winner is the student who labels the highest number of petals



- 1. They are all _____
- 2. They are _____
- 3. They _____
- 4. They are all _____
- 5. They are _____
- 6. They _____

- 7. They are all _____
- 8. They are _____
- 9. They _____
- 10. They are all _____
- 11. They are _____
- 12. They _____

What I can do with may, might, can, must, could, should, would, and have to.

Let's play this board game with a die. Throw the die and do what is asked in each box by using modal verbs correctly. If you fail to do the task, you must start again. The winner must get to the box marked finished.

14. Tell your classmates about a possible application for an internship in a multinational firm.	13. Recommend your fellows not to drink and drive because it is dangerous.	12. You are a caring person. Tell your friends to devote more time to their studies.	11. Invite your friends to go for a walk.	10. Ask your teacher politely to repeat the last instruction s/he gave.	9. Invite your girlfriend / boyfriend to have dinner at a quite fancy restaurant.	8. Tell your colleague about the main requirement to go to the United States.	
15. Say you are able to speak five languages fluently.	16. Ask your boss for permission to have a day off.	17. Your grandfather is recovering from surgery. Tell him to stay in bed.	18. Tell your grandmother there is no need to work so much.	19. You have just planted some seeds. Tell your little brother not to step on the soil.	20. Advise your classmates what to do to improve their speaking abilities.	21. Ask the university porter where your classroom is.	
2. Tell your little brother/ sister not to play with fire.	3. Ask your mother for permission to stay out late.	4. Advise your best friend what to do to stop drinking so heavily.	5. Tell your teacher you were not able to do your homework because of a lack of time.	6. Ask someone politely not to smoke in the hall.	7. Tell your classmates about a possible trip to Canada.	22. Tell your best friend there is no need to take/ sit the exam today.	
23. Ask the shop assistant to show you some leather jackets.	24. Ask your teacher politely for your English grades.						
<p>Start here!</p>							

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, we advise teachers to systematize their process. In other words, keep the template used for further reference so that more information can be adapted later. Teacher-designers should compile their materials in a diskette or CD to have easy access and retrieval. They also should label their designs with pertinent information such as the type of activity and the target audience. Besides, it is advisable to maintain a file with printed laminated copies of all materials and categorize them in a folder. Thus, the process will turn into a versatile resource pack that not only assists teachers in their endeavours, but also helps them to visualize their creative side.

It is also important to note that many textbooks and teaching resource packs contain materials that can be adapted according to the needs of the learners. Teachers do not have to reinvent the wheel, and time and energy can be saved that way. However, there are ethical issues that must be considered. We strongly caution teachers about “piracy” and invite them to become aware of copyrights. Any selected material that is adapted, even if it is slightly modified, must explicitly include a reference to the original sources. According to the Purdue University Online Writing Lab (2004), anybody using others’ work needs to document the reference when:

- Referring to somebody else’s words or ideas from a magazine, book, newspaper, song, TV program, movie, Web page, computer program, letter, advertisement, or any other medium.

- Including information gained through interviews.

- Copying the exact words or a “unique phrase”.

- Reprinting diagrams, illustrations, charts, figures or pictures.

- Applying ideas that others have given you in conversations or via e-mail.

It is by giving credit that we acknowledge and value the work of other people and begin fostering an ethical environment in our job. As can be inferred, creating and adapting materials is a challenging enterprise as it demands serious considerations in terms of curriculum and instructional alignment and ethical issues. It is also time-consuming and demanding. However, it provides teachers with opportunities to explore not only their teaching potential, but also their creative side.

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