



Language Acquisition Theory and Context in Materials Development for Second Language Writing Courses

Kashif Raza

Qatar University, Qatar

Rafael Dean Brown

Qatar University, Qatar

Introduction

Writing instructors, working as first or second language writing (SLW) instructors, use supplementary materials to help students understand the format, genre, organization and structure of target academic writings. Course instructors can either create these supplementary materials or borrow them from textbooks that are adapted for the course or available in the market. As there is no agreed procedure that should be followed to select and utilize these materials, instructors often use intuition (based on experience of working with students), guidelines provided by the program for which they work (e.g., prescriptive syllabus) or suggestions made by SLW researchers.

While there is no scarcity of supplementary materials for writing classes, SLW instructors must decide which materials should be used and how they should be adapted. This process may be easy for some instructors and difficult for others- the intensity varies from classroom to classroom and context to context. However, generally, the intended objectives of a writing course, student population, program goals, and an instructor's preferences define the level of challenges a writing teacher is going to face in selecting level appropriate and relevant materials (Brown & Raza, 2020).

There is plenty of research (Hyland, 2013; Jolly & Bolitho, 2011; Tomlinson, 2010, 2013) available that can help in creating writing materials and gauging their effectiveness as well as understanding the process through which materials are created or modified. The challenges that instructors face during this process and how they can be addressed have not received due consideration. This research gap is more obvious in context specific writing courses and/or programs where teachers have to modify their materials and instruction because of the factors discussed above. To fill this gap, we need studies that explore context specific challenges associated with writing materials development and how they manifest themselves in everyday teaching and learning.

Using an autoethnographic approach, a qualitative research method that involves self-reflection on anecdotal as well as personal experiences to create a connection with socio-cultural as well as political understandings, we report some of the challenges we have faced as writing instructors in selecting and/or developing materials for diverse classrooms and share strategies and models that have assisted in this process. Although many ethnographies use descriptive styles where first-person is used to describe events and stories (e.g., Canagarajah, 2012), researchers have also employed third-person to reach out to a wider



audience while discussing experiences within a cultural paradigm (Ellis et al., 2011). We have used the second approach in this report, as the purpose is to provide a description of the challenges faced in writing materials development in our context as well as keep the discussion fluid enough to relate to other settings. Both authors have taught second language writing in multiple contexts (USA, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Philippines, and Qatar) and have also developed curricula that includes extensive writing components. The lists of challenges and solutions presented here are not inclusive but a selection of recurrent and significant ideas that manifest themselves in everyday teaching and learning.

Language Acquisition Theories

Over the years, several language acquisition theories (LAT) have emerged that attempt to unfold the process of language acquisition, i.e., how people understand each other and speak a language. The four main theories that have informed most of the debates on language learning are behaviorism, innateness, cognitive, and input/interactionist. As the purpose of this report is not to argue for or against a particular theory, we leave this to the readers to decide but, however, provide a brief overview of their contribution to understanding the process of language learning.

Behaviorism was proposed by an American psychologist and philosopher J. F. Skinner who believed that children learn a language by imitating adults. This imitation process involves positive reinforcement (rewarding the learner when a desirable behavior is developed) and negative reinforcement (punishment or no rewards for undesirable behavior formation). Drilling, modeling, and repetition based activities are often based upon this theory. Following a critique of the behaviorist theory in 1957, Noam Chomsky argued that since children develop their language upon the incomplete utterances they receive from adults, they must be born with some linguistic information/ability or what was later called Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This device helps children understand how language functions once they interact with adults who have already mastered a language. Cognitive theory, proposed originally by Jean Piaget, links language acquisition to the mental or cognitive development of a learner. According to this theory, language acquisition happens because of continuous analysis of the surrounding and sense making. Educators who follow this theory create materials that aim to enhance learners' critical thinking and cognitive development skills through project/problem-based activities. Finally, the interactionist or input theory argues that language learning happens as a result of interaction between people where ideas are shared and communicated through language. The idea of scaffolding, which is commonly used in designing materials that break complex language concepts into simpler ideas and introduce simple to difficult language to learners, is an example of the input proposed by the interactionist theory.

Materials Development in Second Language Writing Courses

Researchers have reported a number of approaches to materials development. Prowse (1998) reported two practices that inform materials development for ELT professionals: teacher intuition and syllabus preceding creation of materials. While the former involves the utilization of a teacher's previous education, training, experience, and awareness of student needs, the latter encourages material creation that is aimed to address the student learning outcomes outlined in a given syllabus. Hyland (2013) considered two elements crucial to the selection of materials in ELT classrooms: level of students in L2 and the reason(s) for learning English. He argues that the first point "ensures that we start where the students are now and the second guides the direction we go in by taking the world outside the language classroom into account" (p. 394). He adds that the effectiveness of materials in writing courses depends upon their role in instructional process and the degree to which they connect to the learning needs of students.

Tomlinson (2013) argued for considering the principles of language acquisition when developing materials. While acknowledging the significance of establishing frameworks that inform the processes of materials development in ELT, he contends that a framework should be based upon some principles and have elements of coherence and flexibility. Commenting on the writing processes followed by materials developers, he states, “they say very little about any principles of learning and teaching which guide their writing or about any frameworks which they use to facilitate coherence and consistency” (p. 95). Tomlinson proposes two materials development frameworks, text-driven and task-driven, that he argues include principles, flexibility and coherence. Text-driven framework, mainly helpful for novice materials developers, is claimed to be ideal for course books and additional materials development and comprises eight stages. Task-driven framework uses the stages of text-driven framework with the addition of an activity or a task to promote independent learning and modification of materials to accommodate student needs.

According to Hyland (2003), L2 writing materials assist writing instructors in four different ways: scaffolding, modeling, referencing and stimulation. Scaffolding involves the presentation of complex writing concepts through organized materials in a way that the learners feel supported during the learning process. Modeling is used for students’ *consciousness raising* with the help of materials that assist them in the creation of and reflection on their writings by understanding text organization and its purpose. Hyland adds that the texts used as models should be both relevant and authentic; displaying the type of genre students intend to learn and exposing them to real-life contexts. Referencing, being different from the first two types, is used to “support the learner’s understanding of writing through explanations, examples and advice” (p. 89) and is considered useful for students who do not attend regular classes and rely upon self-study. Lastly, stimulus materials, using reading texts as their primary source, motivate a learner to write about a given topic that they have previously experienced or know about. Their main purpose is to “provide content schemata and stimulate creativity, planning and editing with a sense of audience, purpose, and direction” (p. 90).

Challenges and Issues in Materials Development for Writing Courses

In this report, we focus on challenges we have experienced and observed in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. One of the challenges in developing effective materials for EAP writing courses is to create activities, tasks and practice materials that continuously accommodate diverse student population language needs. Because of increasing migration and globalization, today’s classrooms consist of learners with varied linguistic, educational and social backgrounds, which results in bringing multiculturalism and multilingualism into the classroom, and thus, making it difficult for teachers to create and use materials that are standard and not tailed to individual student learning needs. When there is so much diversity in a classroom, the strategy of one-size-fits-all becomes irrelevant and ineffective (Raza, 2018).

Another associated issue is when a teacher has to balance between addressing program/student learning outcomes instructed by the language program, which may not always recognize the actual learning needs of students, and developing writing skills of their multilingual students. Language programs where teachers are given a fully prescriptive syllabus along with a set of activities and assessments to cover throughout a semester are examples of places where teachers struggle with their autonomy to develop effective materials to accommodate their students’ actual writing needs. Such situations often arise when the experiences and voices of classroom teachers are disregarded and the perceptions of administrators and managers, that may have discontinued connection with everyday teaching, are valued.

A related issue is teacher perceptions about students’ learning processes and language needs. Research on teacher perceptions has shown that they influence their learners’ performance and language development. Positive perceptions bring positive results and vice versa. Harper and de Jong (2004) discussed four misconceptions in ELT that may affect the learning process in the classroom. First, simply

exposing learners to the target language is not enough; active participation is required to achieve higher proficiency levels. Secondly, the learning process for one group of students differs from others. When developing materials in L2 writing courses, teachers need to be aware of their students' distinctive challenges and thus address them through supplementary materials and interactive tasks. Thirdly, the teaching strategies that work best in L1 classrooms may not produce desired results in L2. This means that native-speaker-based content and materials for SLW development may prove counter-productive. Lastly, effective instruction does not mean nonverbal support such as the use of graphic organizers and visuals. "Though such accommodations increase the comprehensibility of texts or tasks, they fail to meet the needs of ELLs when teachers are unable to use them as tools for language development within content classes" (p. 157). In addition to other skills, these misconceptions have serious implications for SLW classrooms where students heavily rely upon teacher created materials. Harper and de Jong (2004) concluded that without addressing these misconceptions, teachers cannot create effective curriculum and assessment practices for language learners.

Materials development, like other fields and skills, requires training and experience to create effective materials for language teaching and learning. Since every language skill (e.g., reading, writing, speaking, listening, vocabulary) cannot be developed through similar teaching techniques and/or materials, people that work on materials development for each of these skills should be aware of the developmental processes they follow, challenges students face in their acquisition, and the intended learning outcomes of the programs they work for and courses they teach.

For example, teaching second language writing involves helping students learn about the characteristics of writing, the process of writing, audience-awareness, and corrective feedback from teacher or peers for possible revisions. Supplementary materials must be developed to address these areas. Jolly and Bolitho (2011) outlined five stages that materials design for writing courses typically go through: identification of a gap in existing materials; understanding of the skills needed to develop; consultation of an appropriate input resource; production of the materials; and usage and evaluation of the materials. To successfully pass through all these stages, a material developer should be aware of the complexities and challenges involved in each step and the way to address them; this is where prior training, experience and collaboration with other colleagues can assist.

With the inclusion of IT in teaching in general and in ELT in particular, language classes have started relying upon digital resources in most contexts. Where language teachers are encouraged to include educational technologies in their lessons, students are also motivated to explore online resources as input. Writing classes have also been influenced by this digitalization of education. Writing teachers can find ideas for tasks, group discussions and homework assignments on different websites and discuss the challenges and strategies that work best in their classrooms with other teachers. Hyland (2013) argued that the online resources "provide a range of materials to model, scaffold and stimulate writing as well as offer advice and examples of language use and opportunities for students to develop new skills" (p. 400). Despite the countless advantages of the online resources, one point of concern is their quality. Although teachers may find interesting materials and exercises that may engage their students, the question that should precede the selection of any resources is whether they are informed by any principle of learning and teaching (Tomlinson, 2013).

The last challenge we wanted to highlight is the relevance of materials in second language writing classrooms. A writing task or activity that works best with one group of students may not always work well with others. Socio-cultural and educational backgrounds often influence student motivation (Raza, 2018) to work on topics that are either controversial or irrelevant and unknown to them. One of the sources of materials for writing instructors are course textbooks. They contain activities, tasks and topics that may not be of interest or significance to everyone. For instance, Hyland (2013) discussed the limitations of textbooks that are designed for wider audience and may not always fit specific student population needs. He argued that "textbooks also need to be treated with caution: teaching writing is primarily a local and complex endeavor which defies being packed into a single textbook" (p. 397). He

adds that the main purpose of the authors of such textbooks is to reach out to a broader market and they have little understanding of our students, their learning challenges and the environment where we teach.

Materials Adaptation Strategies

In this section, we discuss two important qualities of effective materials for writing instruction that can help in addressing the issues discussed in the previous section of this report; writing materials that are informed by a language acquisition theory (LAT) and are developed based upon an enhanced awareness of students' culture, expectations and needs may prove effective and productive. The selection of these strategies is based upon our experiences as materials developers as well as a review of the existing literature on materials development for writing instruction.

One of the elements of effective materials is that they are informed by an LAT. These theories help us understand the processes and stages through which learners acquire and produce language. Materials that are based upon these theories are comparatively more coherent and consistent as they derive their framework from common principles of language acquisition. These theories can not only inform the initial stages of materials planning and development, but also assist in their modification and adaptation during the delivery and/or revision of a writing course. This allows writing materials developers to uninterruptedly serve the diverse student population in their classrooms despite their social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as changing language needs. Basing the materials on LAT likely reduces the chances of instructor preferences and perceptions dominating students' academic needs despite the reliance on instructor intuition and experience.

Tomlinson (2013) has written extensively on materials development and their connectedness with language acquisition theories; he argued that the framework followed for the creation of materials should "be more principled, coherent and flexible" (p. 97). He proposed two frameworks that may assist in this regard: text-driven and task driven. A text-driven framework comprises eight stages: text collection (creating a bank of engaging texts for input provision); text selection (scrutinizing appropriate texts, preferably by following a set criterion to make selection); text experience (re-engaging with the text and reflecting upon your interaction to proceed with activities and tasks creation); readiness activities (devising activities for reading experience); experiential activities (providing mental exercises for personal involvement); intake response activities (developing opinions about a given text); development activities (encouraging language production that is meaningful); and input response activities (reflecting upon the text through interpretation or tasks). He argued that these stages can also be adapted to develop a task-driven framework. Tomlinson did not suggest a rigid sequence for these stages; however, he opined that some stages may precede others, so teachers should use their intuition and the needs of their students to make decisions.

Contextual awareness is another factor that increases the effectiveness and relatability of writing materials. Materials that are developed based upon an understanding of student needs and how they can assist students in linking the classroom knowledge with the outer world produce better results in terms of input retention and quality output production.

There are several ways writing materials and instruction can be tailored to meet students' context specific needs. Harper and de Jong (2004) suggested that teachers should develop awareness about the types of errors their students make (e.g., incorrect verb form, word order in a sentence) while working on a writing task and the factors that influence these errors (e.g., L1 interference). They add that such an understanding allows teachers to perceive student errors as indicators of language development instead of cognitive disabilities and thus assists them in addressing these errors more effectively through modified classroom activities and tasks.

Textbooks, which are one of the main sources for materials selection and development, require scrutiny and careful consideration to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of tasks and activities to accommodate student needs. Hyland (2013) argued that '... teaching writing is primarily a local and complex

endeavor...' and the authors of commercial textbooks '... have no idea of who our students are, their difficulties and target needs, nor the peculiarities of our local teaching context' (p. 396). He suggested that the selection of materials from such textbooks should align with the course objectives and learner needs and may require the creation of additional supporting materials to increase their usefulness and effectiveness. To adapt materials for local needs, Hyland suggested five strategies: adding, deleting, modifying, simplifying, and reordering, and opined that modification of materials is necessary for increasing resources for learners as well as for the professional development of teachers.

The Teaching Adaptation Model (TAM) proposed by Raza (2018) is also useful in increasing information about student population and their language challenges as well as modifying instruction to meet students' academic and non-academic needs. The model comprises five strategies for teaching and materials adaptation: understanding student population, increasing student participation, filtering instruction, considering value clarification, and keeping a teaching journal. Understanding student population involves collecting information about students' language needs as well as linguistic repertoire. This allows teachers to design activities that not only address students' target language but also utilize their previous knowledge, gained mostly in their first language. Increasing student participation means that they will not simply learn the information shared by the teacher but will work as an integral part of the class to provide input on what information will be learnt and how. This means that their feedback in deciding course content, assessments, activities and tasks, and classroom management will be valued. Driving its roots from culturally responsive teaching and differentiated instruction approaches, filtering instruction argues for choosing instructional strategies that align with the learners' context, learning styles and course objectives. This strategy negates one-size-fits-all technique and emphasizes the need to consider learner differences before employing an instructional method. Value clarification asks for including moral education as part of the teaching and learning process to help students clarify their values as they develop the target language. The last strategy, keeping a teaching journal, encourages reflective teaching where teachers can learn from their personal experiences by keeping track of their success and failure stories and use them to design future teaching practices.

Although all five strategies in the TAM have their own significance and share common values of differentiated instruction in a language classroom with multilingual-cultural students, Raza (2018) did not propose a specific sequence for these strategies. He argued that the purpose of the TAM is to provide guiding principles for language teachers and the decision to use the number and/or order of these strategies should be left to teachers.

Conclusion

Materials development for writing courses, just like any other area of teaching and learning, is a challenging and demanding process. Although there is some fluidity in the types of challenges that writing instructors face in developing effective and relevant materials, the contextual nature of these challenges may differ based upon the objectives and intended outcomes of the course, student population and their needs, and the teaching style of the instructor(s). However, what is required of materials developers is to understand these challenges within their contextual paradigms and devise strategies to address them by keeping in mind the needs of their learners and requirements of the program. The two strategies recommended in this paper, adherence to a language acquisition theory and increased contextual awareness for adaptation, allow materials developers to create materials that are authentic, reliable and accurate as well as relevant and appropriate for their learners.

The Authors

Kashif Raza is a lecturer in English and a Faculty Senator at Qatar University. He has previously taught in the USA and Pakistan and has served in various leadership positions. With an academic background in ELT and law, Kashif has been involved in teaching, developing and supervising EAP and ESP law courses, and planning and implementing English education policies at department, college and university levels. His research interests include language policy and planning, educational leadership, expectations and perceptions in education, SLW, and legal English. His forthcoming work is a co-edited book with Christine Coombe and Dudley Reynolds on policy development in TESOL and multilingualism.

Department of English
Foundation Program, Deanship of General Studies
Qatar University
Doha, Qatar, P. O. Box 2713
Email: kraza@qu.edu.qa

Rafael Dean Brown received his Juris Doctor from Case Western Reserve University School of Law and his B.A. English (magna cum laude) from Case Western Reserve University. He has taught legal writing for over 15 years, and is currently with the Legal Skills Department at Qatar University College of Law. He serves on the Qatar University Faculty Senate, and is an Affiliate Member of the Center for Law and Development. Prof. Brown has been a presenter at the Global Legal Skills Conference, the Legal Writing Institute Biennial Conference, and the New England Consortium of Legal Writing Teachers.

Legal Skills Department
College of Law
Qatar University
Doha, Qatar, P. O. Box 2713
Email: rbrown@qu.edu.qa

References

- Brown, R., & Raza, K. (2020). Materials development in EALP legal writing courses. *Language Teaching Research Quarterly*, 15, 33-49. <https://doi.org/10.32038/ltrq.2020.15.03>
- Canagarajah, A. S. (2012). Teacher development in a global profession: An autoethnography. *TESOL Quarterly*, 46(2), 258-279. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesq.18>
- Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: An overview. *Qualitative Social Research*, 12(1).
- Harper, C., & de Jong, E. (2004). Misconceptions about teaching English-language learners. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48(2), 152-182. <https://doi.org/10.1598/JAAL.48.2.6>
- Hyland, K. (2003). *Second language writing*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2013). Materials for developing writing skills. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (2nd ed., pp. 391-406). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Jolly, D., & Bolitho, R. (2011). A framework for materials writing. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (2nd ed., pp. 107-134). Cambridge University Press.
- Prowse, P. (1998). How writers write: Testimony from authors. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (pp. 130-45). Cambridge University Press.
- Raza, K. (2018). Adapting teaching strategies to Arab student needs in an EFL classroom. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 5(1), 16-26. <http://www.ejecs.org/index.php/JECS/article/view/93/pdf>

- Tomlinson, B. (2010). Principles and procedures of materials development. In N. Harwood (Ed.), *Materials in ELT: Theory and practice* (pp. 81-108). Cambridge University Press.
- Tomlinson, B. (2013). Developing principled frameworks for materials development. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (2nd ed., pp. 95-118). Bloomsbury Academic.

(Received March 10, 2021; Revised May 20, 2021; Accepted June 18, 2021)