

## **EFL MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT FOR ADULT EDUCATION STUDENTS IN THE PROEJA PROGRAM**

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Theory, both pedagogical and linguistic, can definitely assist the English language teacher. As a firm believer in the idea that theory and practice are inseparable, I conducted my MA studies and wrote my MA dissertation in Applied Linguistics<sup>1</sup>. I focused my research work on studying my own process of materials development for two groups of adult education students who were halfway through finishing their studies in a program that coupled regular Secondary Education with a technical-vocational program called PROEJA. This program is offered on a regular basis at the public Secondary education school where I have been working for the past 24 months. I also used parts of this research to realign my teaching practices in my morning classes where I teach Secondary students aged 15-18.

My research aim was to develop teaching materials that could trigger and stimulate the development of foreign language learning competencies in my learners and help them to develop their communicative competence. This research was theoretically underpinned by a combination of principles from the communicative approach to language teaching, task-based language teaching, and ESP. Results pointed to a need for reorienting the course syllabus, course plans, and the lessons themselves towards communicative principles which are supported by the PCNs, i.e., the Brazilian national standards. Collected data also showed the need for developing learners' learning competencies supported by classroom reflection and practices with a focus on language learning styles and language learning strategies.

Methodologically speaking, this research work was qualitative in nature and can be described as a case study. Data collection was carried out through participant observation and video recording of my own classes. I gathered information and opinions from my students through three different data gathering instruments, namely two questionnaires which called for students' self-reflection on their own learning, and a group interview with open-ended questions. I also analyzed the course plan that I restructured while conducting my research.

The materials development process can be briefly described as “a sequence of activities which aim at creating a learning instrument” (LEFFA, 2003, p. 15). If we reduce this process to its minimum, it will be consisted of four stages: 1) Learners’ needs analysis; 2) materials development; 3) materials implementation, or use; and 4) materials evaluation (LEFFA, 2003, pp. 16-38).

The first stage, learners’ needs analysis, has obvious similarities with its counterpart in ESP. That calls for a need to add observations made by Hutchinson & Waters (2002), who suggest that the most important learning component is the development of learners’ communicative competence, with special attention being paid to it in the initial stages of language learning. Teachers who develop materials should assess their learners’ level of communicative competence in order to know what they actually need to learn. As they work on that competence, learners can gradually improve their communicative performance. That is the reason why needs analysis cannot be reduced to its linguistic aspects only. By assessing learners’ previous knowledge, needs analysis should encompass observation and analysis of learners’ personal traits, styles, learning strategies, and learning expectations.

Stage two, i.e., materials development, should be built on collected data from stage one, as learners’ needs should determine learning aims, goals, and objectives. Setting clear goals is beneficial both to learners and to the teacher who develops teaching materials. Learners benefit from knowing beforehand what learning outcomes are expected of them. Teachers who develop materials benefit from defining landmarks and criteria from which they can assess the efficiency of their own materials, which in turn helps them in stage four, i.e., materials evaluation.

Materials which are developed under communicative language teaching principles should place an emphasis on learning tasks that promote shared negotiation of meaning. Such principles and actions can contribute to close the gap between what is learned inside the classroom and how it can be put to use in daily situations outside the school environment.

Materials which are produced under these principles are expected to positively impact learners regarding their motivation. It seems obvious that teaching materials should be interesting and stimulation. We know, however, from our own experiences as language learners, that not all materials we were exposed to motivated us to learn. In

such situations, some of our teachers made the difference through their own initiative of restructuring existing materials to some extent, and sparing their learners and themselves of having to deal with materials that provided little or no stimulation at all.

One research work that tries to explain how motivation can be incorporated into the process of materials develop is being carried out by researcher John Keller and it is called the ARCS model, an acronym for Attention, Relevance, Confidence, and Satisfaction (LEFFA, 2003, p. 33). Briefly speaking, the ARCS model states that learners should: 1) believe that the task they are going to undertake is important and/or relevant; and 2) believe they are capable of carrying out the task. Motivated is here assessed in terms of the effort learners put into carrying out and solving the task at hand.

In the third stage of materials development, implementation, learners begin to interact with the materials developed by their teacher. This is the stage in which teacher-producer-researcher will try to verify whether or not the materials do or do not offer the input learners need in terms of: 1) adequate vocabulary; 2) activation of previous knowledge; 3) tasks which motivate learning; 4) instructions that guide the learning process; 5) a focus on communicative tasks which are based on real world information and situations.

Feedback from learners can be used at this stage to help teachers implement change and improve the quality of both their materials development process, and the materials (or products) themselves.

Implementation can occur in three completely different situations. In the first situation, materials will be used by the teacher who developed them; in the second situation, they will be used by another teacher who did not develop them; in the third situation, they will be used by learners on their own, with no support from a teacher, as is the case with self-learning materials.

The latter is the most challenging situation for both the teacher who develops the materials and for the learners who use them, as there is no direct contact or face-to-face communication between materials developer and materials user. The teacher-developer tries to anticipate what previous knowledge and questions learners may have, and what their learning styles and strategies are, so that he/she (the teacher) can build an appropriate path for learning to take place. The learners or users, on their hand, have to work in an environment that will probably offer little to no room at all for innovation

and creative thinking: the more original they try to be while using the materials, the more distant they will be from the structured set of activities which were prepared for them, and the less feedback they will probably have.

The new digital information and communication technologies offer possibilities and resources that can be used to improve this situation. As an example, the Internet and real-time software and applications which are currently available may provide tools with which learners can share their learning paths and personal learning choices with one another. These technological resources may also bring materials developers and users closer to one another. Distance-learning technologies provide audiovisual resources that promote virtual interaction among learners, instructors, teachers, and – why not? – materials developers.

In the fourth and last stage, materials evaluation, it is important for the teacher-developer to pay close attention to how learners carry out the proposed tasks according to the information and guidance provided in the materials themselves. It is also necessary to verify what learners can actually do. Learner performance should be assessed at the very moment they are interacting with the materials.

This process demands teacher-developers to undertake ongoing learner observation. Questionnaires and surveys are useful and can provide clues about what the materials mean for the learners and how helpful the materials can be. They cannot, however, offer the insights that observation can provide about the interactions between learners and materials.

In many cases, learners tend to answer questionnaires according to what they think their teachers would like to hear, thus failing to provide insights about they actually think (LEFFA, 2003, p. 39). Another limitation of questionnaires and surveys lies in the fact that data is usually collected only after participants have completed the activities proposed in the materials. That reinforces the need for teacher-developers to observe learners in action, while they carry out learning tasks, so that they can verify the efficiency of the materials in terms of learner performance at the very time and moment the learning process is taking place.

Gottheim (2007), Tomlinson (2007), and Hutchinson & Waters (2002) offer examples of alternative ways of organizing the materials development process. Their findings show, however, that to this date no single way of developing materials can be

considered a model to be followed. Differences in target audiences, learning needs, and available resources (material, human, and financial) provide the elements that will always make room for new proposals and possibilities. I personally see this as something positive, as it makes room for the appreciation of learners' singularities and teacher-developer professional competence. As such, the existing processes and development proposals are dependent on their production context. Taken as a whole, all they point to the existence of general criteria that can be analyzed, used, adapted, or discarded according to specific situations, as to other authors suggest in their reflections:

[...] materials writing as a process is pointless without constant reference to the classroom. In short, a need arises, materials are written, materials are **used** in the classroom to attempt to meet the need and subsequently they are **evaluated**. The evaluation will show whether the materials have to be rewritten, thrown away, or may be used again as they stand with a similar group. Writing the materials is only a part of the activity of teaching. (JOLLY & BOLITHO, 2007, p. 95).

Despite the simplified way in which they present the process of materials development, these authors later clarify that this is a dynamic, self-regulated, and non-linear activity, with a variety of possible paths, turns, reviews, and progress activated by constant feedback in each of its stages (JOLLY & BOLITHO, 2007, p. 97). As proof of this non-linear feature, and of the importance of feedback, they present a case study (JOLLY & BOLITHO, p. 109) in which the materials development process stemmed from a negative evaluation a teacher made of results from a previous activity, one in which he/she was able to identify the learning needs that had not been met by one group of learners.

Gottheim (2007, p. 14) dedicated her research work to developing a course book for the teaching of Portuguese as a Foreign Language, or PFL. Her research work is markedly different from mine, in the sense that my aim was not to develop a course book, but single, independent materials that originated from the teaching and learning process my students and I were involved with, and from my daily observations of my students' learning needs.

One of the many contributions Gottheim provided my own research with was the clarification her analysis brings regarding the axis upon which her materials

development process was based, especially the way she revealed the formal and informal knowledge base which triggered her decision-making process for developing her PFL course book.

Another important contribution was her work of gathering interview statements from other materials developers in an attempt to make materials development processes explicit and possibly systematize it. These contributions inspired me to create two comparison charts between Gotheim's work and my own. These charts revealed aspects of my own work to me, as well my own concepts of materials development. Gotheim's discussions can be added to Nunan's (2009, pp. 6-11) in the sense that each activity which is conducted in the classroom reflects, implicitly or explicitly, a teacher's beliefs about the nature of language, and also about language learning and teaching practices.

In Gottheim's opinion (2007, p. 16), materials are the coding of the teaching and learning experience that materials developers wish to happen. She states that teaching materials are key in the teaching-learning process because they guide both the teacher and the students towards building a communicative environment. I would add that teachers who develop materials for their own classrooms and their own learners become self-guided and achieve autonomy both as teachers and authors.

Under this perspective, materials are like a letter of intent that teachers hand to their learners. Through the materials, teachers make their views explicit about how they think the work conducted inside a language classroom should develop. It must be kept clear, however, that "the way we teachers think" about the teaching process within a social-interactionist view which is implicit in communicative language teaching implies a great deal of negotiation between teacher and learners.

Materials are a key element in the teaching process, but they are not enough in themselves. In fact, we believe it is not possible for one single element to be the key to all the exchange and interactions that may involve teachers, their learners, and the real world they are all inserted in.

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## NOTAS

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<sup>i</sup> My dissertation can be viewed at [http://www.pgla.unb.br/images/Dissertacoes/2010/liberato\\_silva\\_dos\\_santos.pdf](http://www.pgla.unb.br/images/Dissertacoes/2010/liberato_silva_dos_santos.pdf)