

One size does not fit all: reflections on designing English teaching materials

O tamanho único não serve a todos: reflexões sobre a elaboração de materiais didáticos de Inglês

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ABSTRACT: This paper focus on the scope of foreign language teaching-learning, more specifically the English language, within the context of teaching undergraduate courses. In addition to that fact, we consider our experiences as teachers at an English Language undergraduate course at a university in Bahia, that some considerations have been woven about the importance of discussing and problematizing the place and role of teaching materials designing in teaching. Especially when it comes to the teachers-to-be, who sometimes feel unconfident and unprepared to choose and elaborate the most suitable material for the training classes, for example. Theoretically, the discussions were based in the perspectives by Scheyerl (2012), Siqueira (2012), Mendes (2012) that suggest an intercultural and globalized proposal, questioning ideological issues, Leffa (2007), (2009) that in a more prescriptive way, points to more technical prepositions and, also, in the Tomlinson (2004) and Macalister (2016) writings. This paper, coming from teachers' concerns, points to the need to promote a more engaged theoretical discussion, which precedes the elaboration of the teaching material so that future teachers can be able to develop consciously teaching materials that demonstrate a theoretical-practical coherence.

Keywords: teaching materials; teaching; English language

RESUMO: No universo do ensino-aprendizagem de língua estrangeira, mais especificamente língua inglesa, no âmbito dos cursos de formação para professores, a elaboração de material didático é uma área que nem sempre recebe a atenção devida nos cursos de licenciatura. E é a partir de uma experiência como docentes de um curso de letras com inglês de uma universidade baiana, que algumas considerações foram tecidas sobre a importância de discutir e problematizar o lugar e o papel do material didático no fazer docente, especialmente, no dos licenciandos, professores em formação que, por vezes, sentem-se inseguros e despreparados para escolher e elaborar o material mais adequado para as aulas de estágio, por exemplo. Teoricamente, as discussões foram amparadas nas perspectivas de Scheyerl (2012), Siqueira (2012), Mendes (2012) que apontam para uma proposta de material intercultural e globalizada, problematizando questões ideológicas, de Leffa (2007), (2009) que de forma mais prescritiva, sugere preposições de ordem mais técnicas e também, nos escritos de Tomlinson (2004) e Macalister (2016). Este trabalho, oriundo de inquietações enquanto docentes, assinala a necessidade do fomento de uma discussão teórica mais engajada, que anteceda à elaboração do material didático, para que os futuros professores consigam com propriedade e consciência, desenvolver materiais didáticos que demonstrem uma coerência teórico-prática.

Palavras-chave: material didático; ensino; língua inglesa.

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First words

Every teacher is a material developer
(English language center, 1997)

The concern that triggers this reflection lies in experiences with the English Language at different levels. Memoirs as English undergraduate students, struggles as English teachers - when in charge to produce our own materials and, as professors of the subject Supervised Internship of a Public State University in Bahia. That latter experience highlighted how important it is to encourage students to think critically upon the need of being aware of the theoretical backgrounds, which must lead the production of English materials.

Students enroll in Supervised Internship subject in their last semester of the course, technically. Most of them have already been into practice, which means, they have already been planning classes, giving classes, and producing teaching materials by their own. Practicing before having the opportunity to study formally these topics pushes the students to learn it by doing it, lacking the appropriate discussion on the fundamentals of materials development. Although we are aware that is a vast discussion, which can be placed in a curriculum agenda, it is not our current focus. For now, we are engaged to think over our particular experiences.

Supervised Internship is an important academic subject, in which students have the opportunity to get to know important teaching-learning theories and learn about lesson plans, teaching methods, approaches, and techniques, focusing on the English language teaching. It is also the time to consider the hybrid status of our students. It is the switchover when "being a student" merges into "being a teacher" and they need to be very precise in defining their roles. They need to deal with the demands to phase out the course, which include handing in the term paper, taking at once pending subjects, and the need to adapt to the teaching demands.

In parallel, they see themselves switching roles, overwhelmed by work, tasks, and academic activities, between this and that, the internship professor needs to be sensitive enough to their hybrid status. The professors must favor relevant reflections and support pertinent activities, in order to help future professionals to become aware of the guiding

principles of teaching practice. It ought to be a matter of developing critical thinking and reflexive practices.

Thus, this paper aims is to discuss the English materials design from the perspective in which theory and practice get along well together and that this theory-practice dialogue grants the teachers-to-be more confidence when producing their own materials.

1. English Materials: A definition

Before defining materials, we consider it mandatory to understand what is behind the concept of English materials development. Teachers and professors are in charge to plan their courses and classes, to develop teaching materials, and to evaluate their students. For the effectiveness of these steps, they need to bear in mind some considerable concepts, such the second language acquisition theory and the teaching theory they advocate. In this study, we name them as *principles*.

Macalister (2016) defines *principles* as “the research and theory about best practices in language teaching and learning” (p. 44), in brief, it is all the theoretical and practical background knowledge which is triggered when the teacher/professor starts to think about a course/class plan or any activity related to the teaching-learning process. So, why is it important to consider the *principles*? The answer is simple; no classroom decision-making can be random. As a rule, the language acquisition theory must guide the teacher’s choice of the teaching approach and method, for instance. Meantime, the substantial challenge, when it comes to merging theory into practice is not the understanding of the proposal’s importance or effectiveness. It lies in the difficulty to conceive how it is forsooth done.

Let us start placing the development of English teaching materials in the context of language teaching and learning. This placement directly connects us to the concept of teaching, language, approach, and method, among others. The teachers' understanding of these concepts is decisive in relation to the kind of class and material they will prepare. Initially, defining Language is capital. Here, our language concept is not built considering it only as a system of structures and grammar rules, but a myriad of aspects that Mendes

(2012) clearly defines as “*the action between people who are social, historical and culturally placed on*”³ (p. 671).

Aligned with that perspective, Agar (1994) affirms that

Language, in all its varieties, in all the ways it appears in everyday life, builds a world of meanings. When you run into different meanings, when you become aware of your own and work to build a bridge to the others, “culture” is what you’re up to. Language fills the spaces between us with sound; culture forges the human connection through them. Culture is in language, and language is loaded with culture (AGAR, 1994, p. 28).

We start, therefore, from this understanding of language and culture being intrinsically connected, comprehending language as that place where identities are constructed and reconstructed from social interactions. Language is constituted by the communicative need of its speakers; this is our premise for teaching the English language.

Teaching Language along these lines requires a teaching theory that fits accordingly. Historically, the act of teaching has been understood from several perspectives, a notable example is the banking concept of education, criticized by Paulo Freire, in which the teacher would transfer the knowledge he had to the students as if the students had no previous knowledge at all.

In this paper, we understand teaching as the opportunity to facilitate the students’ learning process. Considering the learning conceptions, we can cite *behaviorism*, which works with a *stimulus* and a *response*. In case of a positive response, the *reinforcement*. Brought to language learning, this theory inspires teachers to see the teaching process, as an opportunity to mold and train students at will.

On the other hand, constructivists’ theories point out a language teaching theory more concerned with the individual’s language usage and their interaction within the social environment. That way we can assume that the sociocultural aspects of language are being privileged and the approach used in our classrooms must keep up with that proposition.

³ ação entre sujeitos situados social, histórica e culturalmente.

At this point, we understand teaching from this perspective. Considering the conceptions of language and teaching, when it comes to principles and materials development, McGrath (2002) says that the materials are the representation in the first stage in which principles turn out into practice.

Here, we comprehend materials “as anything which is *used* by teachers and learners to facilitate the learning of a language” (TOMLINSON, 2011, p. 02), although, it is worth mentioning that resources and materials are different. We can use anything as a resource. On the other hand, anything that we assign a pedagogical purpose becomes a teaching material. Another point that is deserving of consideration is that, in some contexts, when teaching materials are brought into the discussion, they are related only to textbooks.

An endless range of possibilities can be turned into language-learning materials. It is risky to understand materials only by textbook bias. Especially because, most of the time, textbooks generalize issues that needed to be approached at a local classroom level. So, either using a textbook or producing their own material, teachers must ask themselves about the principles which will determine their choices.

We strongly agree with Mishan (2015) when she states that

sets of principles should not, of course, be misread as rules and need to be combined with the variables relevant to each particular learning context, such as sociocultural issues, curricular constraints and materials developers’ own beliefs, preferred teaching styles and so on. (MISHAN, 2015, p.09)

Thus, teaching materials are conceived in this paper as any kind of input with a pedagogical purpose, guided by principles that help teachers to make suitable choices to their specific classroom context. Our aim is not to prescribe the dos and don’ts in designing materials - there is no such unique recipe - we intend to favor the teachers’ autonomy in designing and using them though.

What follows is an account of trying to come up with a conception of English materials that may be a beacon for teachers and teachers-to-be.

2. The pursuit of a conception on English Materials

Discussing the principles of the English teaching materials designing is important to help future teachers to develop their own conception and materials, regarding it, Gill (2000) believes that

all the tools we use, from the humblest piece of chalk to the mightiest multimedia center, have the potential to be valuable *if used in a principled way*, and that my duty to trainees is to introduce them to as wide a range of tools as possible and to guide them in developing their own principles for the assessment and use (or otherwise) of these tools. (GILL, 2000, p. 19 *apud* MISHAN, TIMMIS, 2015)

As already mentioned, here, we are neither offering a recipe, nor a magic trick, which would be applied in any context and would succeed. Our intention is to help future teachers understand that in order to elaborate their teaching materials, they need to be aware of their place of speech, the theoretical approaches they advocate, and their linguistic, cultural, ideological, and political beliefs.

The first step taken, there are a number of considerations we can make concerning our conception of materials. We can start placing it in the intercultural agenda, which definitely helps us to think about the development of culturally sensitive materials. But, what are culturally sensitive materials? In order to answer this question, we need to broaden our understanding of the term *intercultural*. The word *intercultural* suggests a connection between people from different backgrounds with diverse cultural experiences, beyond that, there are dozens of other possible implications (NEWTON, 2016) as Mendes believes that

the intercultural term is an effort, an integrative action, capable of evoking behaviors and attitudes committed to principles oriented to respect for the other, to the differences, to the cultural diversity that characterizes the whole teaching-learning process, be it languages or any other school content. (MENDES, 2012, p. 360)⁴

⁴ o termo intercultural é o de um esforço, uma ação integradora, capaz de suscitar comportamentos e atitudes comprometidos com princípios orientados para o respeito ao outro, às diferenças, à diversidade cultural que caracteriza todo processo de ensino-aprendizagem, seja ele de línguas ou de qualquer outro conteúdo escolar. (MENDES, 2012, p. 360)

In addition, Liddicoat (2003) fits the term in the learning process frame when he affirms that

Intercultural language learning involves the fusing of language, culture and learning into a single educative approach. (...) intercultural language learning involves developing with learners an understanding of their own language(s) and culture (s) in relation to an additional language and culture. It is a dialogue that allows for reaching a common ground for negotiation to take place, and where variable points of view are recognized, mediated and accepted (LIDDICOAT, 2003, p. 43 *apud* NEWTON, 2016, p. 162-163)

As far as English materials development is concerned, preparing culturally sensitive materials requires putting all these principles together to come up with a proposal that enables a context adjustment, that promotes cultural diversity, and encourage mutual changes among the individuals who are involved in the teaching-learning process.

Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) state that teachers

should critically evaluate the theories behind any methods and make optimal use of classroom implementation techniques and tools in order to suit the learners and their contexts in developing culturally sensitive materials (TOMLINSON, MASUHARA, 2004, p. 35).

Due to the great variety found in our English language classrooms, to achieve the purpose of producing inclusive materials the teacher should focus on the local and relevant concerns of their students, therefore, teachers cannot allow textbooks to dictate the rules (THORNBURY, 2000, *apud* MISHAN, TIMMIS, 2015). Regarding the importance of considering the students' needs and specificities, Newton writes that "teaching a language interculturally entails first and foremost recognizing and embracing diversity in the classroom, especially as it relates to learners' cultural and linguistic backgrounds" (NEWTON, 2016, p. 165).

Another way of understanding culturally sensitive teaching materials is by showing what they are not. Here, we can say from our own experience that most textbooks available on the market do not pay careful attention to this matter. When remembering some of the English books we used at school, it is not difficult to recall the cultural notes

ending up lessons showing some commemorative date in the United States most of the time. As Newton confirms that “in traditional forms of communicative language teaching culture is often either invisible or explicitly represented by the cultural norms of North America or the United Kingdom” (NEWTON, 2016, p. 163).

We do find *Culture* in the textbook, but as in the example cited, it is in a standardized, hegemonic, and imperialist way. Mendes (2012) states that for a material to be intercultural it does not need specific and explicit cultural adornments from a specific place, it needs to be a *space* that promotes interaction, acceptance, dialogue, and respect. This proposal is reasonable to achieve when the teachers have the autonomy to apply their principles when using these prefabricated materials.

It is certainly true that regarding textbooks “teachers have a limited range of options when facing issues” (MACALISTER, 2016, p.43), so, in an intercultural approach, there is no room for a tied up lesson plan in which the teacher has to follow systematically what a textbook dictates. Being culturally aware is a way to overcome any kind of pedagogical limitation imposed on the teacher and bring up discussions about the lack of teacher’s autonomy is also a road we can take to uphold the interculturally sensitive approach.

Loosely, teachers can choose texts, videos, audios, and activities in general, focusing on the individuals’ interaction, being effective in a way that students can use the language to get to know them and their mates better. The interculturally sensitive proposals offer linguistic-culture input, as Newton (2016) wisely states that

Language instruction needs to be informed by an intercultural agenda, which seeks not to impose a foreign, hegemonic set of sociopragmatic norms but to develop in learners sensitivity to different ways of being in and seeing the world, awareness of self and other in communication, and an understanding of how culture is constructed *in, around and through*. (NEWTON, 2016, p. 163)

Newton’s statement helps us to conceive our conception of designing English materials. It is a matter of guaranteeing our students’ cultural awareness. Cultural awareness “is defined as ‘perceptions of our own and other peoples’ cultures” (TOMLINSON, MASUHARA, 2004, p. 06), considering this definition, it makes total sense what Newton suggested above: *in, around and through*, that is what individuals’ perception is about, the ability to assimilate, absorb, and interact with everything in their surroundings.

The more we have cultural knowledge, the more we develop empathy and sensitivity to what the others present to us, and this openness to other individuals and to us, it puts forward the language learning process. Having cultural awareness helps us to develop a sense of equality of cultures and genuine interest, in a tolerant and respectful way (TOMLINSON, MASUHARA, 2004). It is the main social role of language teaching, preparing students to be global citizens, capable of communicating beyond borders, connecting with the world, respecting, and being respected in the motto of equality.

Therefore, the material design concept that we try to build here is one that promotes learning by intercultural experiences, by helping students to become aware of their values and beliefs, by offering access to language use in a range of different cultural contexts, by letting the students take ownership of the language they are learning and speaking.

We agree with Ellis when she affirms that “every time teachers make pedagogic decisions about content or methodology they are in fact making assumptions about how learners learn” (ELLIS, 2003, p. 4), may our assumptions be the ones that guide our teaching-learning approach to freedom.

3. One size does not fit all: what can we do?

At this point, we assume that teachers understand the nature of teaching, that they are aware of the implicit learning and teaching theories in teachers’ choices, and that they are also aware they will “face complexity and diversity” (NEWTON, 2016, p. 162) in their classrooms. Thus, the teaching process, as Freire (2018) teaches us, requires research, respect to what students know, criticism, critical reflection on practices, recognition, and assumption of cultural identity.

Freire’s suggestions are in line with the intercultural proposal we have been advocating. As was mentioned in the previous sections, to develop culturally sensitive materials, teachers should be principled oriented and should consider the local needs and wants. We corroborate with Maley’s statement that notes “designing appropriate materials is not a Science: it is a strange mixture of imagination, insight and analytical reasoning” (MALEY, 1998b, p. 220-221 *apud* TOMLINSON, 2001, p. 69), so, there are teachers’

fingerprints all over the materials and that is the reason why it is so important to care about how well prepared the teachers are.

Concluding the academic subject *Supervised Internship* should guarantee the future teachers to be confident enough to stand up for their beliefs, giving up on the global syllabus to favor the local, when necessary, negotiating the contents they will teach so that they fit accordingly, serving the development of students' reliance and critical thinking (TOMLINSON, 2001).

Many teachers find themselves in the impasse of choosing between using the textbook or making their material. In any teaching context, it is possible to suggest the production of teaching material, although some private schools require the use of the book already adopted. Some teachers, even when facing this obligation, manage to be agents of interculturality (MENDES, 2012) by using the book in a way they believe, often re-signifying what is not appropriate for their reality, aware that one size does not fit all, as we entitled our paper.

When developing our materials, it is important to flag that it requires organization and a lot of planning. Teachers need to get the idea of the whole course plan so that they can coherently organize their material. To illustrate a way of preparing them, Leffa (2003) helps us, affirming that teaching materials are learning tools and their production involves analysis, development, implementation, and evaluation.

As Leffa (2003) remarks, the first step, the *analysis*, consists in focusing on the students' needs, their personal preferences, the materials adequacy, and teachers need to prepare a material, which is able to access the students' background. According to the author, the second phase is *development*. We consider this moment to be the one in which we need to focus more attention.

He guides us saying that

it is possible to outline the objectives of the material to be produced, not only in the cognitive domain (involving knowledge) but also in the affective domain (involving attitudes) and even in the psychomotor domain (involving skills). The definition of these objectives takes into account not only the needs analysis but also the time available, being sometimes very difficult to adapt the objectives to the time available. (LEFFA, 2003, p. 19)

Here, we must consider *knowledge*, *attitudes*, and *skills* as being the focus of the teachers' thoughts and attention. It is the moment to ask themselves through the intercultural lenses: 'after my class, what should my students know? What attitude should they develop? What skills should they be able to perform?'

In this stage, according to Leffa (2003), it is of concern to determine which approach is going to be applied, considering the learning philosophy the teacher/professor believes. It is also time to define the content, the activities - according to him; it is always preferred authentic materials - and the resources (LEFFA, 2003). The following phase is *implementation*, as the name suggests, it is the moment the material is being used itself. Finally the last phase, the *evaluation*, during this stage, is when the teacher reviews the material after being applied to the students, in order to promote any adaptation or update if it is needed.

Thus far, we get back to our initial point, when we warned teachers-to-be about the imperative need of knowing the principles that base and guide the teaching practice and everything related to it. If we pay attention to them, our attitude toward the understanding of language, culture, and material designing will improve considerably. Tomlinson (2001) confirms that when he says that

An important fact in changing attitudes to materials development has been the realization that an effective way of helping teachers to understand and apply theories of language learning – and to achieve personal and professional development – is to provide monitored experience of the process of developing materials. (TOMLINSON, 2001, p. 66)

Therefore, we believe that the academic subject Supervised Internship should be the place of personal and professional training and empowerment, where the student-teacher can teach and learn in a meaningful way.

Final Words

Retaking some important ideas we have brought up, we can affirm that merging theory into practice is mandatory to develop materials culturally sensitive. Teachers who are engaged with culture must consider principled ways to develop their English teaching materials. Being critical and reflective is a way to increase cultural awareness. The only

way teachers can avoid repeating mistakes and outdated practices is reflecting on their practices. What about my teaching practice? What is my language concept? How do I understand the teaching process? What is the place the teaching materials occupy in my practice? What am I going to teach? What does my student need? In what way am I going to teach? Asking questions may bring us some answers.

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