

MATERIALS SPOT

Acquiring real-world communicative abilities: Learning to be engaged, influential and emotive humans

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Introduction - Overview of the proposed materials

Second languages are to be used in the real world outside the language classrooms by real human beings with their own aspirations, feelings, mental abilities, interests, and experiences. Moreover, generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) applications are part of our contemporary world; IT-proficient individuals can access these AI applications (like ChatGPT) to improve/correct and create texts within seconds by a few key strokes on IT devices (Bailey, 2023; Barrot, 2023; Cotton, Cotton & Shipway, 2023; Ashford, in-print). Thus, I have conceived, introduced and created language learning materials which facilitate the development of *effective communicative abilities*; *involve students as perceptive, emotional, and complex individuals*; and provide opportunities to learners to analyze texts generated by AI applications as part of their learning experiences.

The target learners of the prepared materials are meant to be 10 to 12 year-old boys and girls studying English as a second language in middle level grades (e.g. grades VI-VII). The prime aim is to use it to prepare the learners to use the English language academically, socially, professionally (in their future), and for personal recreational purposes. The main topic of these materials is horror fiction since my previous research has highlighted that this theme is the most popular theme among Pakistanis belonging to the targeted age groups (Aftab, 2017). It is proposed that the students have read and written fictional materials based on topic(s) different from the horror genre before they engage with the activities presented here.

Theoretical frameworks

The materials are based on the 'Creating Waves'

paradigm (Aftab, 2024) which focuses on *purposeful and impactful communicative acts*. This paradigm treats second language learners as *complex emotional and reflective human beings* who have ideas to share while aiming to share with (that is, write for or speak to), *appeal to* and *influence* an audience (individuals who similarly possess their own interests, feelings and beliefs). Thus, the learning experiences provide students opportunities for communicating significant and relevant subject matter utilizing meaningful, imaginative, eloquent, and provocative language. As a result, learners will acquire abilities to communicate in the real world as proposed by Tomlinson and Masuhara (2018). The 'Creating Waves' approach is partly derived from complexity theory (Larsen-Freeman, 2020) which asserts that language users and consequently language learners can preferably be flexible, variable, adaptable, enthusiastic, in-depth and spontaneous. In addition, motivation levels, emotions, higher order cognitive and perceptive skills (including critical judgment) of the participants, and the responses/feedback are believed to play a key role in communication.

The developed materials have been based partially on theories derived from humanizing language teaching literature. For example, the activities are derived from Tomlinson's (2023) proposals that language learning tasks should exploit the human abilities for multifaceted mental performances; utilize the target students' tastes, opinions, emotions, and passions; and, be related to the learners' lives and importantly their psyches. Additionally, the developed activities are based on the assumption that 'creativity, involvement and enjoyment are the essential elements for lifelong learning' (Prabhavathy & Mahalakshmi, 2016, p. 5), and the techniques reflected in these tasks incorporate elements of discovery and exploration (Bolitho, 2024). Ghanizadeh, Amiri and Jahedizadeh (2020) have suggested through their quasi-experimental study that emotional engagement, as emphasized in humanizing language teaching, can help to improve students'

EFL proficiency. Thus, the proposed materials aim to involve the target learners affectively as well as cognitively (as also recommended by Mehrigan, 2012). In the following sections, I will list the specific objectives on which the activities are based, present specific sample activities and finally discuss the results of piloting the activities.

The proposed materials

The developed materials, based specifically on the theoretical frameworks discussed in the previous section, aim to involve the target learners in;

- Sharing views and feelings
- Responding to images and texts
- Using ideas based on the provided text-type and audience
- Creating/selecting images reflecting suggested ideas
- Using language which is descriptive and effective
- Using words which reflect specific feelings
- Using their imagination
- Reflecting on and using significant aspects related to composing effective fictional material
- Aiming to create an impact by creating specific and appropriate fictional material for the suggested audience.

The sample activities are categorized into three groups (termed sets one to three) and discussed under specifically formulated objectives.

Set one activities

Objective 1:

- *To facilitate sharing of and understanding of emotional content*

This objective is reflected in preparatory activities which introduce the theme of horror. Examples are the following two main activities and one follow-up task.

- Individually think of a situation which you find/found especially terrifying/scary and share with your class.
- In pairs examine the provided pictures (sample pictures in the Appendix). Which of the scene(s) presented in these pictures can be used as a/the setting(s) of a horror novel?

Follow Up:

What have you learnt about your class fellows' fears?

Set two activities

Objectives 2-6:

- *To facilitate interpretation and analysis of different types of fictional content (including authentic material and AI generated texts)*
- *To facilitate identifying content appropriate for the horror genre*
- *To facilitate identifying and understanding of creative, expressive and evocative language*
- *To expand understanding of the use of nouns, articles and adjectives in fictional texts*
- *To expand understanding of effective fictional titles.*

The objectives 2-6 are manifested in activities focusing on reading different types of texts either which the target students can be exposed to outside the classroom or similar to the ones which they can encounter in their lives, such as sample activities (a) and (b) below, and the language discovery and reflection-based tasks that follow.

- Examine the provided titles of fictional books in Sets 1, 2 and 3 and as a class discuss the titles which appeal to you (that is, you will want to read the books with the preferred titles – in case you have not read the books) providing reasons for your preferences.

Title Set 1

- Skeleton Creek*
 - The 13th Warning*
 - The Mystery of the Haunted House*
 - The Halloween Tree*
 - The Graveyard Book*
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Title Set 2

- The Phantom Train*
 - Echoes from the Graveyard*
 - Whispers in the Attic*
 - Nightmare on Maple Street*
 - The Curse of the Midnight Clock*
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Title Set 3

- All Alone*
 - A Deadly Trip*
 - Dark Minds*
 - The Devil's Shadow*
 - Fatal Days*
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- Discuss in pairs:

- Which set has the most unique (unusual) and descriptive titles?
- Which set(s) has/have the most varied titles?
- What ideas and emotions are evoked by the titles provided in Set 3?

The titles of Set 1 are those of real books. The titles of Set 2 have been created by an artificial intelligence (AI) application ChatGPT. The titles of Set 3 have been especially created for this task.

Writers' Language Kit – Reflections about Language

- What is the effect of using the articles “the” and “a” in the titles of Sets 1 and 3?
 - Why are no articles used in three titles of Set 3?
 - Which words in the titles of all three sets do you find especially interesting? Why? Are these words nouns and/or adjectives?
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Writers' Reflections

As a class discuss: What have you learnt about titles of horror fiction books?

Set three activities

Objectives 7-11

- *To facilitate using creative, emotional and content appropriate for the horror genre*
- *To facilitate using expressive, evocative and creative language*
- *To expand understanding of effective opening sentences*
- *To use nouns, articles, tense, and adjectives accurately, appropriately and effectively in fictional texts*
- *To provide effective opportunities for using language and ideas according to text types and audience.*

The objectives 7-11 are reflected in a creative activity requiring students to write for particular audience, and one reflective task.

In groups create opening sentences of imaginary horror fictional books and share them with your class...

How many students were you able to scare?

Writers' Reflections

As a class discuss: What have you learnt about composing sentences of horror fictional books?

Pilot study

The main activity belonging to the third set was piloted in grade VI of five private schools (pseudonyms I to V) located in central Pakistani city of Lahore. This pilot study was conducted in October 2024 and

involved eliciting the opinions of the grade VI learners. Quantitative data was elicited from randomly selected 98 students belonging to these institutions after they had undertaken the activities. 81% of the students of the five schools found the activities interesting to a great extent or to some extent. More than 60% students found the horror theme interesting and the activities useful.

Additionally, interviews were conducted with a smaller number of randomly selected learners in three schools. According to one boy from School I, 'It was different from anything I've done before, and I found it both interesting and engaging in its own way'. He appreciated that the activity made him think differently about the topic, which he found engaging. He mentioned that the interactive nature of the activity helped him connect with the material in a way that traditional teaching methods often do not.

61% of the 18 girls belonging to School II liked the topic based on the horror genre. Many respondents shared that the task was beneficial for their learning, emphasizing that it facilitated discovering new ideas and expressing their creativity, as well as helping them to write related to a genre they do not usually focus upon in academic settings. They also stated that the activity improved their storytelling skills and practised creative writing by facilitating them to express their own thoughts. Some students found the activity particularly enjoyable due to its unique and inventive nature; more than half enthusiastically remarked that they loved creative writing. Finally, the activities were also popular being collaborative as the learners stated that they learned a variety of new ideas from classmates and enjoyed the opportunity to share ideas with each other. This feedback reflects that the students appreciate interactive, imaginative learning environments.

The activities were successful in motivating 15 boys belonging to School III because of their creative nature. The majority of the students appeared visibly excited to engage in a creative task that introduced new concepts and encouraged active participation. This excitement was reflected in the students' positive body language, attentive listening, and willingness to contribute. Many learners seemed intrigued by the opportunity to learn something novel, as the tasks reflected a unique approach aiming to develop their writing skills. The students showed strong interest in undertaking similar activities in the future as well. Importantly, the learners expressed a newfound interest in reading and writing fictional works. They noted that creating opening sentences is crucial in capturing a reader's attention and setting the tone for the story. Most students demonstrated openness to share their thoughts and listen to their peers' ideas. This openness fostered a collaborative learning environment where students felt comfortable expressing their ideas reflecting their positive feelings and interest. Several students highlighted how the activities allowed them

to experiment with unique ideas, with one learner expressing excitement over crafting 'ghostly scenes'.

Conclusion

The sample materials involve learners in affective and cognitive engagement and creative and reflective practices. The main theme of the activities seems compatible with the majority of the target students' tastes as indicated by the small-scale pilot study. The materials provide learners opportunities to use and share their ideas and views flexibly and openly, and adapt language flexibly in order to create an impact on the target audience (as reflected in complexity theory – Larsen-Freeman, 2020). Thus, these tasks can help effectively develop ESL students' communicative skills and are apparently motivating, as implied by the opinions elicited from the pilot research participants.

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The sources of texts¹

The titles incorporated in Title Set 1 for the Set Two Activities have been taken from the following sources:

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The titles incorporated as Title Set 2 for the Category Two Activities were generated by ChatGPT.

OpenAI. (2024). *ChatGPT* (Dec 8 version) [Large Language Model]. Available at: <https://chatgpt.com/> (Accessed 14 October 2024).

1. The remaining texts of Set Two Activities have been created for the article. The pictures provided in the Appendix are personal photographs.

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Appendix



Sample pictures for Set One activity – task (b)

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