BOOK REVIEW

# The Routledge Handbook of Materials Development for Language Teaching

*Edited by Julie Norton and Heather Buchanan*
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*Reviewed by Johanna Stirling*

This is a book many of us in the materials development field have been waiting for. It addresses and updates us on a wide range of key topics related to materials development, some of which have not been dealt with extensively before in the literature, such as versioning, and others which are here explored by practitioners who do not usually get a voice in academic literature. So alongside some names that will be familiar to many readers, such as Brian Tomlinson, Penny Ur, David Nunan, Mike McCarthy , Scott Thornbury and Nicky Hockly, we can hear from a wide selection of researchers, writers, publishers, academics and of course, teachers.

The book promises a historical overview of materials development as well as an exploration of current and predicted future trends. It is also keen to reassure that theory does play a large part in the development of language teaching materials, contrary to some popular claims. In fact, it aims to weave together theory and practice through the range of different points of view, be they writing, teaching, publishing or academia.

And what about the readership? I have no doubt that this book will be an invaluable, up-to-date resource for students of materials development, academics and those involved in English language teacher training, bringing new voices and a very wide range of ideas to their studies. I believe it will also be useful for materials writers, whether new to the game or old hands, if they wish to explore issues in a wide range of material development topics. However, 'Handbook' in the title rather raised my expectations of something a little more practical. There certainly are some excellent practical suggestions in some chapters, but I found these were often rather hidden among wider discussion of issues.

This is a hefty volume with 34 chapters, divided into nine parts. For this review, I decided to focus on one chapter from each part to give as wide-ranging a flavour as I could of the book.

## Part 1 – Changes and Developments in Language Teaching Material

### Chapter 3. Theory and practice in materials development - *by Ivor Timmis*

This very readable chapter aims to describe the current relationship between theory and practice in the field. Timmis examines critical issues in materials for the four skills, vocabulary and grammar, and each of these sections addresses a few principles from theory and the challenges each presents. For example, the principle: 'materials should not be wedded to one model of teaching writing' leads to the challenge: 'how can materials writers integrate insights from product, process and genre approaches in a principled and effective way?' (p. 35).

Timmis pulls together some common themes from theory that form the basis of recommendations for the practising materials writer. These are all persuasively justified and certainly all rang true with me, for example, his call for more opportunities for varied repetition built into materials. He also describes the possible role of technology in achieving many of the recommendations. Finishing on a positive note, he observes that we are seeing small steps in the right direction, such as towards 'conscious learning and explicit teaching' (p. 43) and materials that foster learner autonomy (p. 44) and that is fine with him!

## Part 2 – Controversial Issues in Materials Development

### Chapter 4. Why do we need coursebooks?
*- by Julie Norton and Heather Buchanan*

In this chapter by the editors of the book, they review 'some of the key arguments made for and against global coursebooks with the aim of synthesising, contrasting, and critically discussing these opposing arguments and bringing them together in one place' (p. 49). It includes some fascinating findings from research, such as the fact that some Middle Eastern universities had eschewed the use of global coursebooks in favour of developing their own and then found themselves reverting to the global coursebooks.

Norton and Buchanan point out how polarised views of coursebooks are often spoken about in highly emotive language, but they are keen to present a 'more nuanced and balanced understanding of the value of global coursebooks' (p. 50). They set out a very comprehensive overview of arguments both for and against, but point out that there is a lack of empirical evidence to support most of these views and they may not represent the views of teachers and learners. Reporting on some of their own research, they conclude that materials use (e.g. adaptation, see comments on Chapter 19 below) should be given more attention in teacher training courses and needs more empirical research. They also mention a very important point, that it is useful to check the identities of those for and against - who actually uses coursebooks on a day-to-day basis and who doesn't - is there any other agenda behind their views?

## Part 3 – Research and Materials Development

### Chapter 10. Research in materials development: What, how and why?
*- by Nigel Harwood*

Harwood proposes researching materials development in terms of content - what is actually included on the pages, consumption - how the material is used by teachers and learners, and production - looking at how writers write and how publishers make the decisions that they do. He points out that usually only content is researched, so this can only tell us about 'potential merits and demerits' (p. 141). Looking at consumption, he considers 'teacher fidelity' (how closely teachers follow the coursebook) and to what extent we can measure the learning arising from different approaches and activity types.

One point I found particularly interesting was about the dangers of interference in multiple choice activities (in this case collocations) as the distractors can 'create inappropriate memory traces that are hard to eradicate' (Boers et al. 2014, quoted on p. 142)

In consumption, he explores writers' thought processes while writing and highlights the conflicts that frequently arise between materials writers and publishers. He calls for more work on teachers' ability to adapt, but also points out that writers should facilitate adaptation by making aims clear and explicit. Teachers need to be able to understand the pedagogy behind decisions the writer has made but he does warn that they may not actually buy into it, if local pedagogical approaches and expectations differ significantly from those of the author.

## Part 4 – Materials for Language Learning and Skills Development

### Chapter 16. Materials for developing reading skills
*- by Claudia Saraceni*

Part 4 is particularly meaty and it was difficult to choose a chapter, but I particularly appreciated this one for its structure and practicality which is closely linked with theory. Saraceni starts by acknowledging the vital role that reading plays in language learning but questions the activities that accompany readings in coursebooks, saying that they are 'heavily influenced by assessment needs' (p. 233) and notes that there 'seems to be a mismatch between theoretical, research-driven principles related to the process of reading and their more practical applications in language teaching and learning' (p. 233).

She explores a list of issues in reading, such as interaction between the reader, writer and text, different types of reader response, and an examination of reading skills and strategies.

Then she looks at a few examples of common reading activity-types we find in materials and some of the limitations of these, particularly the superficiality they call for in terms of reading and the lack of space for different interpretations. She points out that text-types can vary enormously but they 'are often approached in similar ways, irrespective of the text type' (p. 239) and concludes that 'developments in language teaching methodology and research in reading and reading skills and strategies do not seem to have had much impact on materials' (p. 240). And she even warns that some common types of comprehension activities that focus on a narrow form of decoding, for example, may have a detrimental effect of the acquisition of reading fluency skills.

Saraceni then provides some interesting practical ideas that encourage learners to offer their own interpretations of a text rather than merely trying to give the one possible correct answer.

## Part 5 – Materials Evaluation and Adaptation

### Chapter 19 - Approaches to materials adaptation
*- by Hitomi Masuhara*

I chose this chapter because previous chapters had confirmed my own feelings that in order to be able to use materials effectively, adaptation is a key skill that teachers need to be trained in. I hoped for detailed ideas on how to support teachers in the adaptation process.

The chapter starts with a definition of materials adaptation: 'Changing materials to ensure a better fit for the learning context' (p. 277) which sounds a worthy goal but then it was interesting to read that 'textbook adaptation can be a potential threat to achieving educational goals' (p. 278). This is elaborated upon later when Masuhara explains teachers often use a ' pick-and-mix' approach and this 'could potentially lead to a lack of principled coherence of objectives, methodology and theoretical validity in terms of language acquisition' (p. 279) It was also interesting, but perhaps not surprising, to read that 'Negative washback from the exam system ... is one of the most influential determiners of how teachers adapt material'(p. 283).

I was pleased to see a section on small-scale adaptation for everyday teaching but was a little disappointed not to see some of the 'minor adaptations which can have a major effect' (p. 286) enumerated here, at least not in enough detail for a teacher to follow, although there were references to sources of these.

## Part 6 –Materials for Specific Contexts

### Chapter 21 - Versioning coursebooks
*- by Heather Buchanan and Julie Norton*

I chose this chapter amongst many other interesting ones in this part because very little has been written about versioning. It proved informative and thought provoking.

Versioning is described as a 'more formal approach to coursebook adaptation for specific contexts' (p. 307) and in this chapter there is a strong focus on addressing issues of cultural appropriacy, particularly in the Middle East region.

The chapter focuses on three areas: the process of versioning global coursebooks, the roles of different stakeholders and the types of changes that take place. The latter includes language, methodology, cultural content and design. The authors identify three types of versioning: market versioning where material is adapted for a particular culture, customer versioning which involves making adaptations based on the requirements of a particular organisation, such as a chain of private schools, and cosmetic versioning which usually only involves changing the cover or title.

The authors highlight 'the tension between materials as educational resources and materials as commercial products' (p. 308) and this is a recurring and fascinating theme. It also leads on to the question of authors' responses to the compromises they are willing to make, especially when it comes to questions of human rights.

By way of exploration of the critical issues inherent in versioning, Buchanan and Norton compare four lessons in an original global coursebook with those in a version produced for the Middle East. This exemplification makes the following discussion much more tangible.

In conclusion, the authors call for more collaboration between stakeholders, training of local versioners and editors, involvement of learners in the process and digital materials which can offer different options.

## Part 7 – Materials Development and Technology

### Chapter 27 – Developing blended learning materials
*- by Sharon Hartle*

After an overview of blended learning, Hartle calls for online and f2f (face-to-face) work to complement each other, neither being better in themselves but each having advantages for specific aims and activities. So later in the chapter she aims to help teachers/writers choose where each can most effectively be used and she provides a useful table (p. 405) of the strengths of both the online and f2f affordances. She warns against using digital just for the sake of novelty.

Hartle points out that the boundaries between online and f2f, as well as between tasks and materials, are often quite indistinct nowadays. The use of interactive tools such as Padlet and blogs, mean that learners can be creating their own material as part of tasks, both in and out of the classroom. She claims 'the development of materials can no longer be considered as creating discrete objects but rather as developing a framework for the flow of the blended learning process itself' (p. 404).

She illustrates the process of designing a blended course including establishing aims, collecting a suitable variety of activities to achieve the aim, deciding which should be f2f and which online, then finding the best ways to exploit the affordances of each mode. She finally concludes that blended learning 'is fundamentally about reflecting the norms of communication that are prevalent in our world to optimise learning' (p. 409).

## Part 8 – Developing Materials for Publication

### Chapter 30 - How do writers write?
*- by Antonia Clare and J.J .Wilson*

This is a highly readable and rich chapter which gives us an insight into the working processes and issues facing very successful materials writers.

The chapter starts with a list of issues and changes in materials writing that Clare and Wilson have noticed in the past 20 years. These include increased focus on authenticity and on lexical chunks for example and, very interestingly, new ways of working as a materials writer in a much more publisher-led environment which relies on large teams of writers.

They then set out six critical issues (homogeneity, topicality, authenticity, measurability, consistency and the relationship between theory and practice) and discuss the implications of these for today's writers who are also trying to create original and cutting-edge materials. One element I found particularly interesting here was the idea of 'voice' of the writers in the materials and how this can get lost in a large team.

In the recommendations for practice section, I found some very practical and insightful ideas, particularly how Clare and Wilson get inspired by the world around them for new topics and texts, or at least new angles on them. They also discuss the actual process of writing with a partner, explaining that they each write different units and then swap them for editing and to suggest changes, so that they are both aware of the content and style of each lesson to maintain coherence.

As many other contributors to this volume have suggested, they feel that materials writing is moving in the direction of more locally-produced, context-specific materials and that digital advances should open up some new exciting ways of working involving teachers and learners more in materials development.

## Part 9 – Professional Development and Materials Writing

### Chapter 32 - Making the materials writing leap: Scaffolding the journey from teacher to teacher-writer
*- by Jane Spiro*

Although this chapter was not exactly what I was expecting - the title implied a more step-by-step process for teachers who wanted to move into materials writing - it did contain some interesting ideas. Spiro points out that 'the published materials writer is required to 'graduate' from her own classroom and write for an audience less known, more generic, and defined as much by the marketing team as by the language teaching team' (p. 475). To address this journey, she first reviews some of the challenges facing materials writers, many of which echo other writers in this volume.

She provides some practical questions for teacher-writers to ask themselves about their work, questions about language of rubrics, level of activities, cultural appropriacy, etc. Some of these ideas are then expanded upon in recommendations for practice where she focuses on defining one's audience, researching existing materials to avoid reinventing the wheel, being up-to-date with current thinking in the specific field, and how teachers can work with others to refine their materials. This section includes some very thought-provoking observations from real-life, including learners who prefer not to have characters from their own culture in materials as they want to be transported to other contexts. The final recommendation is a very practical one - being prepared for not only revision but also compromise, the latter being another recurring theme in this volume. Spiro includes some rather galling examples of compromises writers have had to make, such as the female character in a text whose aim of becoming a doctor was changed to nurse, as the editor felt that would be more 'culturally appropriate' (p. 484).

## Conclusion

Overall, the book is a very rich resource with many recurring themes such as the extent to which materials are informed by theory and how commercial aspects are sometimes an obstacle to this. Many authors call for more empirical research and more training for teachers in the use of materials, particularly adaptation for specific contexts. The rise of digital media has rather pulled the carpet from under traditional materials production and maybe we are moving towards teachers and learners being more involved in materials creation without diminishing the expertise of writers and publishers.

It was wonderful to read from such a great range of contributors in terms of different angles, gender and contexts. At times I would have appreciated more applicable and practical ideas and perhaps a short commentary at the end of each part would have pulled threads together, highlighting agreements and controversies. But all in all, I found this an inspiring and rather hopeful book that made me excited for the future of materials development.

## About the reviewer:

**Johanna Stirling** *is a freelance English Language Teaching Consultant. She has worked as a teacher, teacher trainer, materials writer, editor, academic manager and presenter. Until recently, she was the Academic Manager for NILE (Norwich Institute for Language Education) Online programme. She is still a NILE Affiliate Trainer and as part of this role she tutors and supervises students taking NILE/Chichester University's MA module in Materials Development. She wrote the online version of this course, which is also open to non-MA participants. Johanna is a materials writer herself and has contributed to Cambridge coursebooks such as face2face, English Unlimited and Unlock. She wrote and self-published Teaching Spelling to English Language Learners which was a Finalist for an ELTON Award in 2013 and won a Special Commendation in the British Council Award for ELT Writing in 2012. She has edited digital materials for language teaching and for teacher development. Giving presentations for Cambridge English, NILE and the British Council has taken her to conferences and schools around the world.*