

Materials Design Rationale for Body Image – Victoria L. Clark

This paper presents a set of materials to be used with teenagers of differing nationalities attending summer camps in England. It consists of a student's book, teacher's book and CD. The materials have been designed around the topic of 'body image'. Considering principles of second language acquisition (SLA), educational context and pedagogic goals, I will present the underpinning principles of the approach I have used to design these materials and include a detailed commentary of the individual tasks.

Principles of Materials Design based on SLA theories

According to the literature on SLA, there appears to be no consensus between researchers on either an over-arching theory of how people learn second languages, or the most effective way of designing materials to achieve mastery of the target language (Cook 1996; Tarone & Yule 1989). However, I suggest there are several principles to bear in mind when designing materials. First, an understanding that learners are individuals with differing aptitudes, attitudes, skills, schematic knowledge, motivations and learning styles is crucial (see Skehan 1998) and second, differentiation through the inclusion of a variety of learning tasks.

Approaches of Materials Design

There are numerous approaches available for consideration when designing materials. For teenaged learners of differing nationalities, a multi-dimensional approach that incorporates elements of structural, communicative and task-based syllabi should be followed (see Hedge 2000). A hybrid approach such as this does not focus on one particular area at the expense of another and caters to a wider range of differing needs and preferred learning styles, which can result in increased learning. The organising principle is topic-based which create the various dimensions of the unit. The main advantage of a topic-based syllabus is that units can be treated as modular and therefore provide greater flexibility as chapters can be selected according to students' needs and interests.

Educational Context

According to Tomlinson (1998), materials should target a specified range of learners. Questions that need to be answered include those of age, nationality, level and geographical location. These learners aged 13-19, come from all over the world and are sent by their parents to spend two weeks in the UK at summer camps to improve their English through a programme of lessons and extra-curricular activities. Having conducted initial tests, these learners are upper-intermediate level and have studied English for approximately 5-6 years. For this reason, I have focused on the grammatical area of infinitives and gerunds, which is a syntactic feature that students will have previously met, but not necessarily have mastered. As these students come from a variety of cultures and countries, topic focus should lend itself to cross-cultural comparisons. Topics that learners can relate to should lead to increased motivation. Furthermore, Hedge (2000:351) suggests successful topics are "provocative but not offensive, intellectually stimulating but not too arcane...popular but not bland". Consequently, the topic of *Body Image* has been selected as it fits the context and fulfils the criterion of successful topics for teenaged learners.

Additionally, materials should be designed to increase motivation. These learners are not always highly-motivated and are sometimes resentful of having additional lessons during their summer

break. Not all of them see the value of learning English. However, motivation can be increased by the impact materials have on learners. Following Tomlinson's (1985:7) principles, "materials can achieve impact through novelty, variety, attractive presentation, and appealing content". These criteria are exemplified through my topic choice, activity types, use of visuals and a variety of texts and classroom management choices as illustrated in the teacher's book.

Finally, the design of materials is dictated by what learners need and want to study to achieve their personal goals. For these learners, English is a compulsory subject and will be tested on both grammatical and skills-based areas to enter into higher education. Important factors which must be considered are the needs and expectations of both parents and students. Therefore, there is a precarious balance between providing what the parents tend to want (grammar; writing; exam skills), what the students generally want (games; music; films; relaxation!) and what students usually need (study skills; intensive listening; oral fluency practice). To cater for these needs, tasks have been designed to reach these aims.

Pedagogic goals

As English is a global language, it is a vehicle or tool for gaining other skills and accessing new information especially at upper-intermediate level. Consequently, materials should have a dual-purpose – it is insufficient to merely focus on learning grammatical structures – the aims of material should be to teach life-skills such as racial-tolerance, cultural sensitivity and empathy as well as pragmatic life-skills such as giving opinions, negotiation, apologising and disagreeing tactfully. English should not be taught for English's sake, but should be used to teach life-skills, morality, and being a 'good' citizen of the world. Materials should subsequently challenge students' perceptions and inform them about new ideas and viewpoints.

1. Learner training

It is commonly acknowledged that an underpinning principle of learner training is a belief that learning strategies of successful students can be classified and taught to unsuccessful learners to improve their language ability (Rubin 1987; Wenden 1987 cited in Rees-Miller 1993). Furthermore, an awareness of personal learning styles benefits learners' ability to adapt to different situations (Cohen 1990; Ellis & Sinclair 1989; Rubin 1987). Learners need to be trained to become more efficient at manipulating language by learning the most effective ways of retaining new lexis and by acquiring the necessary skills, which will enable them to read and listen more successfully.

2. Personalisation

The material places a strong emphasis on personalisation activities ensuring that the language tasks are meaningful to students. According to Scarborough (1981:84), "the more we can make it possible for learners to react in a deep personal manner to learning materials the better the language learning that will take place". First, personalisation activities engage students directly, which leads to better retention of the target language (Rinvolucri & Morgan 2004). Second, it promotes the importance of students' own voices, which can lead to increased confidence. Third, relating one's own experience and ideas is inherently more interesting and motivating than an imaginary person in a textbook. Fourth, it acknowledges that students should be actively engaged in the learning process

and not passive recipients of lessons. Fifth, personalisation tasks require learners to produce lexical and grammatical structures, through spoken or written discourse.

Commentary of activity selection

In line with Tomlinson (1998:9), tasks are “pedagogic and authentic...push learners slightly above their level” and are “stimulating...problematic...but achievable”.

Vocabulary tasks

New lexis is introduced in a way that focuses on form, meaning, use, lexical chunks (Lewis 1993) and most importantly, contextualisation, either through gap-fill sentences (6), or personalisation tasks (3, 15a). Despite accusations of ‘linguistic imperialism’ (see Phillipson 1992), idioms are included. These students study in the UK and they will have contact with native-speakers. Idioms provide interest and comparison to L1s, which leads to increased retention. The idiom ‘pigs might fly’ was considered, but rejected due to cultural-sensitivity towards Muslim and Jewish learners, but ‘when hell freezes over’ is deemed acceptable as the concept of heaven and hell is not a forbidden topic in faiths without these beliefs. Task 2 requires learners to focus on meaning through categorisation, and phonological form through intonation patterns. Task 3 recycles idioms by asking students to produce them orally in a semi-restricted personalisation activity. A task on word-building (16) is included to raise students’ awareness of word-trees and to encourage dictionary skills.

Reading

The text (p. 3), an authentic article from the New York Times has been modified through the deletion of a reference to genital mutilation which detracts from the focus of body image. The text acts to introduce a different perception of beauty, as a springboard for discussion (9.q.5) and a grammar focus (10). The reading tasks emphasise skills successful readers use to comprehend texts quickly. Preceding the text, a gap-fill task (6) serves to pre-teach difficult/unknown vocabulary to help students concentrate on the content, rather than lexical stumbling-blocks. Two pre-reading tasks follow to assist learners to improve exam techniques: A predictive task (7) follows to improve students’ ability to draw on existing schematic knowledge, and a skim reading task (8) to improve students’ reading speed. The while-reading task (9) encourages students to read carefully and extract meaning from the text.

Grammar focus

It is commonly understood that meaningful communication is generated by learners solving grammar problems interactively (Fotas & Ellis 1991). Asking learners’ to deduce and discover the rules for themselves through a true/false + example sentence in pairs (10a) encourages meaningful communication and allows learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Task (10c) is an awareness-raising of infinitives & gerunds that increases saliency (Chapelle 1998) and enables students ‘to notice the gap’ between known and unknown grammatical knowledge (Schmidt and Frota 1986).

Speaking

In response to students' need to focus on fluency, rather than accuracy, and to maximise communication, many discussion tasks are included. A strong emphasis is placed on personalisation activities, where students are asked to respond and discuss their own opinions with partners (1, 3, 4, 12, 15a, 17), which serves to promote students' confidence by giving them chance to express their opinions and to increase student-talking-time. Discussion tasks also help to prepare learners' for listening (4, 15a) tasks by activating their schematic knowledge and allow students' to respond to what they have read or heard (9.q.5, 17). There are also integrated pronunciation tasks to improve learners' spoken ability (2, 16).

Listening

The listening activities include an interview and a pop song to increase students' motivation and interest. Both listening texts are authentic, which students at this level should be able to cope with. The aims are to improve learners' ability to predict (4, 15a), and listen for specific information in a question-answer task (5) and in a gap-fill activity (15b), which mirrors listening components of examinations. The tasks also help to scaffold learners as teachers can play the recording twice if necessary.

Writing

The focus of the writing task is to use language creatively within the context of story-writing (13). The free-writing task encourages students to develop their own voice and, make vocabulary more memorable through a personalised and contextualised activity. There is also a writing extension task that can be found in the teachers' book. The answers in the discussion tasks can be used as writing activities, depending whether students need to be "stirred" or "settled" (MacLellen 1987).

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