

## 5 A framework for materials writing

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### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we offer the reader a practical idea of the different aspects of the process of materials writing by teachers for the classroom. This is achieved through case studies illustrating the process.

The starting point for this practical overview derives from the thoughts and feelings of those most involved with language materials: the comments below are the authentic voices of students and teachers of English as a foreign language. Each statement appears to have materials-writing implications.

#### 5.1.1 Exercise

As you read through the remarks, you may like to cover the commentary beneath each one and make a brief note about what you feel the materials-writing implications to be, focusing both on the opinions expressed and the language used.

I have noticed that the coursebook I use doesn't seem to deal with 'real' English.

(Italian secondary school teacher)

My demand is becoming a reporter of the English football and I need, so, much familiarity ...

(Danish upper-intermediate student on a full-time intensive course in a British school)

There are many sources of real English within language-learning publications but clearly our Italian teacher is working with materials, perhaps prescribed, that fail to employ authentic language or texts (see Chapter 4 by Ronald Carter, Rebecca Hughes and Michael McCarthy in this volume). She has thus identified a need for materials. Similarly, though in a different context, the second quote identified a need for new materials, particularly a variety of text-types for listening and reading, since there is no widely available book or set of materials known to the authors that caters for the precise needs of this Danish student.

The textbook my institute has written says that you use 'please' and 'would' for simple requests and 'would you mind' for more polite requests. I have heard lots of other things such as 'could you possibly ...'  
(Croatian evening institute teacher)

I get very confused with all these noughts and zeros and nothings in your language ...  
(Argentinian part-time student on a low intensity course in Britain)

The evening institute has identified a need for materials that practise making requests, but clearly the Croatian teacher feels that she does not know enough about the language of requests to teach it as effectively as she would like to do. Textbooks inevitably and necessarily make pedagogical selections of exponents used for specific language functions which do not suit all learners or satisfy all teachers. This teacher will have to engage in some linguistic exploration of the functional area of 'requests' in order to produce more informative materials for her classes. The implication of the word 'confusion' in the second quotation is that here, too, the materials-writing teacher will find it necessary to do some linguistic and semantic exploration before she attempts to respond to the Argentinian's request (see Chapter 3 in this volume by Jane Willis). Even the experienced native speaker would be hard-pressed to locate and contextualise spontaneously all the uses of 'nought', 'nil', 'nothing', 'love', 'zero', 'o', and so on.

It's a very nice book and very lively, but in the section on 'Processes' for example all the exercises are about unusual things for our country. We are a hot country and also have many Muslims. The exercises are about snow, ice, cold mornings, water cisterns; writing and publishing EFL books and making wine. I can tell you I can't do making wine and smoking pot in my country!  
(Experienced school teacher from the Ivory Coast)

Previous materials were not based on life in Brazil which is why I don't think they worked very well ...  
(Brazilian teacher of English in school)

Sir ... what is opera?  
(Iraqi student in mixed nationality class using materials designed to practise reading narrative)

The implications of these three quotations are not linguistic; rather, they address the problem of appropriate contextual realisation for

materials. For the teacher in the Ivory Coast, the materials offered on 'Processes' would be outside the cultural experience of his students (possibly even threatening) and thus effectively useless; conversely, for the Brazilian teacher, the choice of Brazilian settings and familiar mores would have clear advantages over distant foreign contexts as they are essentially more motivating. The quote from the Iraqi student suggests that complete unfamiliarity with the notion of opera is likely to reduce the efficacy of the reading exercises, but in this case the student is curious and likely to regard the material as strange and exotic rather than completely alien (see Alptekin 2002 on the desirability of localised cultural content and Widdowson 1996 on the issue of authenticity and context).

The following example is based on a unit in *Developing Strategies* by Brian Abbs and Ingrid Freebairn which deals with degrees of uncertainty. In it, the students are given an example of a man going shopping in a supermarket who, when he comes to pay, discovers he has lost his wallet. The students are asked to speculate on where he lost it.

**Exercise 1** (Students in British language school classroom doing exercises in pairs as suggested; the focus here is on language *use* rather than on the *content* of the students' utterances)

- PAIR 1      A: His wallet must have fallen down the trolley ...  
                  B: He must have forgotten it there ...
- PAIR 2      C: Perhaps he left it on the shopping trolley...  
                  D: Perhaps he left it on the car...  
                  E: No, perhaps he drop it in the cleaner's ...

In the exercise illustrated above the students are asked to make statements about the relative likelihood of events given the information. However, since no basis for any one hypothesis is stronger than any other basis, students doing the exercise end up making correctly formed but random statements. In terms of recognising a need, exploring the language required to meet the need and finding a reasonable context for practice, this exercise may be said to pass muster; what has clearly failed is the pedagogical realisation of the materials; that is, if these materials were intended to provide meaningful practice whereby students would make statements of greater or less certainty, they clearly fail. Part of the materials writer's task must be to provide clear exercises and activities that somehow meet the need for the language-learning



work that has been initially recognised. Some would say that this is the core of materials writing. Part of effective pedagogical realisation of materials is efficient and effective writing of instructions, including the proper use of metalanguage; poor instructions for use may waste a lot of valuable student time, as this example reveals:

But Paola, I didn't intend you to copy out the whole text word for word – you should just have corrected the summary version ...  
(British teacher to assiduous part-time intermediate Italian student using self-access listening materials)

The layout of this book is just so crowded and it's sometimes difficult to find your way around, especially on double-page spreads; my students also find it confusing ...  
(British teacher on an intensive language course in a British language school referring to a well-known and popular 'global' coursebook)

This picture ... is dog or is ... funny animal ...  
(Spanish student, using a teacher-made worksheet)

The physical appearance and production of materials is important both for motivation and for classroom effectiveness. Teachers engaged in writing materials need to develop the same care and attention to presentation that one would expect of good publishers, though the first quote reveals that even very good publishers also fall down on the job.

I wish I could just write materials and not teach at all ...  
(British teacher at a Technical School in the Middle East)

The implication of this remark is that materials writing, to this teacher, is regarded as an end in itself. However, we take an entirely different view, believing that 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 (see Chapter 1 by Brian Tomlinson in this volume).

Exercise

You may now like to examine the quotations that follow.  
Think about the implications of each one for materials writing; you may feel that some of the quotations carry more than one implication.

If possible, discuss the implications with a colleague; no commentary is appended this time.

- (a) 'The book *Welcome 3* really works well in my experience because there are modern topics, and good tapes that go with the book.'  
(Swiss schoolteacher)
- (b) 'These listening comprehension tapes have too much noise on them, it is difficult to understand the speaker.'  
(Russian secondary schoolteacher)
- (c) 'My students find the speaking (fluency) drills in the lab confusing.'  
(Austrian schoolteacher)
- (d) 'The materials that in my experience don't seem to work very well are coursebooks based on communicative methods only, with a few exercises because students find it difficult to follow the book.'  
(Romanian schoolteacher)
- (e) 'I think, Rafid, there's been a misunderstanding about what you were supposed to have written in this task ... the pictures tell you what to do in order to change a bicycle wheel and I expected you to write a set of instructions to do that ... but you've written about how you changed your bicycle wheel last week ... why?'  
(English teacher in Britain marking the work of an Armenian student of academic English)
- (f) 'Schon wieder so ein dummes Übungsgespräch!' ['Another stupid practice conversation!']  
(Young German learner referring to a tourist/policeman dialogue in an elementary secondary school coursebook)
- (g) 'In our English textbook we only read about film stars and pop stars and famous people. I want to know how the English people live.'  
(Turkish university student who has never visited the UK)

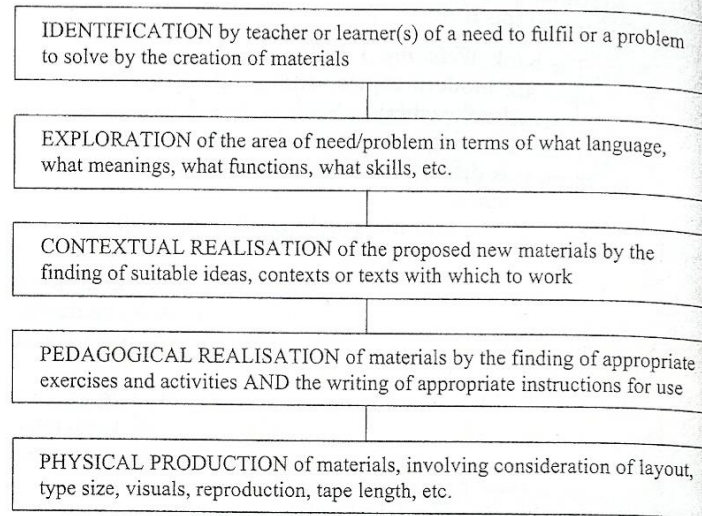
5.2 The process of materials writing

It would be appropriate at this point to attempt to summarise the various steps involved in the process of materials writing in the form of a flow-diagram. Figure 5.1 reveals in a simple although undynamic way how the implications raised in the statements above may be arranged into a simple sequence of activities that a teacher may have to perform in order to produce any piece of new material.

Most materials writers move in this direction, and use some or all of these steps, if not always precisely in this order: a movement from the identification of a need for materials to their eventual use in the classroom. Some such simplified version of the materials-writing process is also clearly how most publishers are constrained to work. The one-directional simplicity of this model, however, may be what makes so many materials, whether published or found in one's own or a



Figure 5.1



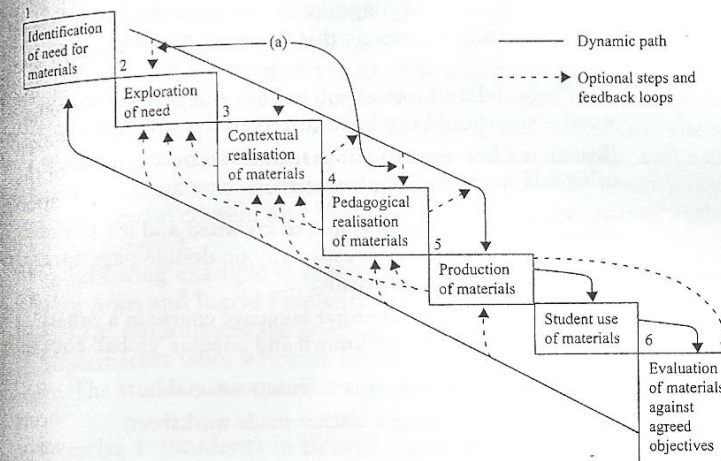
USE in the classroom

colleague's filing cabinet, lack that final touch of excellence that many teachers and students have come to expect. In many ways, excellence in materials lies less in the products themselves than in the appropriate and unique tuning for use that teachers routinely engage in. The simple sequence in Figure 5.1 fails to illustrate the extent to which materials writing can be a dynamic and self-adjusting process.

In the first place, by ending with use in the classroom, it equates materials production and use of materials with effective meeting of identified needs. What is lacking is a stage beyond use in the classroom: evaluation of materials used. The act of evaluation (see Chapter 1 by Brian Tomlinson in this volume), at least in theory, turns the process into a dynamic one since it forces the teacher/writer to examine whether s/he has or has not met objectives: furthermore, a failure to meet objectives may be related to any or all of the intervening steps between initial identification of need and eventual use. (Failure may, of course, be attributed to poor or inadequate use of perfectly adequate materials, but that becomes a matter of classroom management rather than materials evaluation except where poor use is directly related to faulty production.)

Secondly, the human mind does not work in the linear fashion suggested above when attempting to find solutions to problems. For example, a proposal about what form a particular language exercise could

Figure 5.2 A teacher's path through the production of new or adapted materials



Notes

- a) Even in the creation of entirely new materials, it may be the case that some of the steps envisaged have already been done for the writer.
- b) Materials may be produced and evaluated without student use, e.g. by a colleague or professional. Most publishers still work this way. This does not reduce the need for evaluation after use by specific groups of students.

take may very well generate spontaneous second thoughts about the language being exercised; wondering about the physical production of a piece of material may well spark off thoughts about contextualisation and so on (see Johnson 2003). Thus, in addition to evaluation as an essential component of writing materials, we must also imagine a variety of optional pathways and feedback loops which make the whole process both dynamic and self-regulating. These, then, will allow us to deal in a concrete way with the reasons for the failure of language materials and provide us with clues to their improvement, both during the writing and after their use. See Figure 5.2.

5.3 Case studies

The case studies which follow illustrate, from different teaching contexts, how the steps in the path are taken into account in actual samples of material.



5.3.2 Case study 2

IDENTIFICATION OF NEED

Materials to practise the description of development and change over time (need identified by teacher with reference to the writing syllabus).

EXPLORATION OF LANGUAGE

Not carried out.

CONTEXTUAL REALISATION

Simple, universal context of an isolated island seen at four stages in its history.

PEDAGOGICAL REALISATION

Introduction to information. Instructions to student. Four labelled diagrams, showing development in pictorial form and notes (Figure 5.5).

PHYSICAL PRODUCTION

Introduction and instructions at top. Pictures hand-drawn and hand-written, photocopied.

USE OF MATERIALS

With European, Asian and North African students on an academic writing course. Students asked to produce drafts; no time limit.

EVALUATION OF MATERIALS

This revealed that:

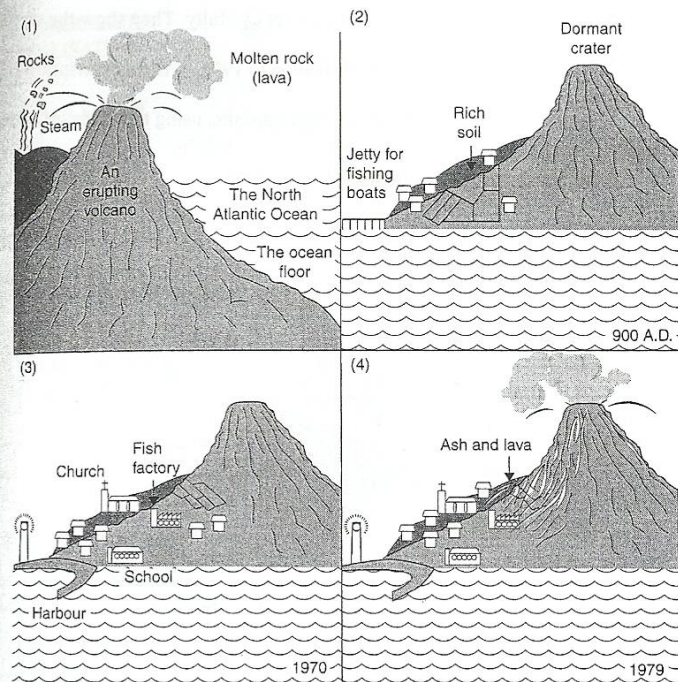
1. The need had been correctly identified.
2. That other needs remained unfulfilled because no adequate language exploration had been done, e.g. language of time duration.
3. The contextual realisation was very good and well understood, but in some ways factually inaccurate.
4. There were flaws in the pedagogical realisation which had led to poor practice by students: (i) writing was distorted through lack of a sense of audience; (ii) the instructions were confusing; (iii) some labelling was confusing.
5. There were flaws in the physical production, particularly in the visual aspects which confused students.

Figure 5.5 Version 1, The Volcano on Heimaey

**Writing** DEVELOPMENTAL NARRATIVE  
THE VOLCANO ON HEIMAEY

**Introduction** Heimaey is an island near Iceland. Volcanoes which have been inactive (dormant) for a long time may erupt violently, blowing out previously solidified material and scattering volcanic ash.

**Writing** Study the following pictures carefully and then write a description of the development of the island of Heimaey during the last 1,000 years.



Rewriting of materials

The evaluative feedback led to a revamping of the materials and the production of Version 2 (Figure 5.6) in which changes were made on the basis of (3), (4) and (5) above.

Figure 5.6 Version 2, The Volcano on Heimaey

DESCRIBING DEVELOPMENT AND CHANGE IN THE PAST

Writing THE ISLAND OF HEIMAËY

Introduction Heimaey is an island near Iceland, in the North Atlantic Ocean. It is a volcanic island, formed in the year 300. Volcanoes which have been inactive for a long time may erupt violently, blowing out volcanic ash and previously solidified material.

Writing Task Study the following pictures carefully. They show the changes on Heimaey from its formation to 1973. Write a description of this development, on the page opposite, using the notes given to you.

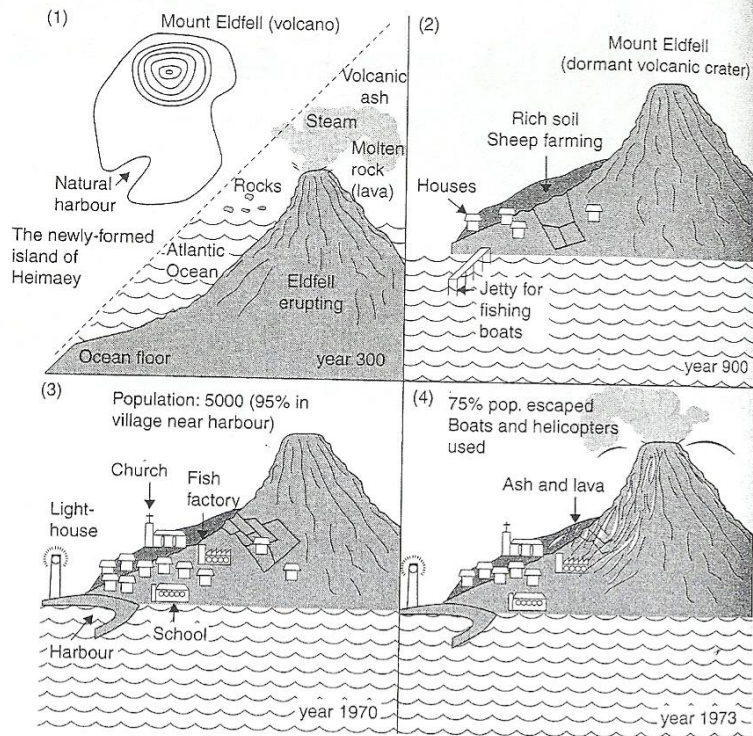


Figure 5.6 (cont.)

Before the year 300 AD, the island of Heimaey did not exist.  
At about that time,

In approximately 900 AD, people came from Iceland and settled on Heimaey.

In the next thousand years,

A few years ago, Heimaey's peaceful development was suddenly disrupted when



5.3.3 Case study 3

With this case study (Figure 5.7) we intend to highlight the fact that the writing of materials is rarely a neat, self-contained, linear process, but an activity which is intimately bound up with all questions that teaching itself raises: learners' needs, syllabus, schemes of work, lesson plans, classroom management, resources, outcomes and assessment, the relation of learning/teaching to real life and so on.


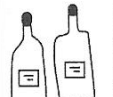


Figure 5.7 Teacher's evening reverie

EVALUATION	<p>... that session on shopping with group 4 today was a bit flat ... in fact, can they shop effectively at all ... I mean, can I really say, hand on heart, that Duda or Kristina could get a small sachet of lemon shampoo from the pharmacy, ... or Miguel his cotton shirts? ... I'll have to give it another go tomorrow, but I can't have them sitting in pairs doing an A-B exercise ... what do I want? ... They must be able to ask for an item, and ask about size, colour, amounts, quantities ... The contents of the book were OK, perhaps a bit too diverse ... Shall I concentrate on food, clothes, newsagents and general personal items you can get from the pharmacy? ... But sitting in pairs was very flat, no urgency, ... they weren't really ... Now what happens when they need to go and shop for something, what is going on? Yes, you've got an idea of what you want, say bananas or apples and you also have other things in your head, like how many you want and you also want to find things out like where the apples come from, whether they are sweet or less sweet ... so ... so ... what I can produce is a set of cards, cue-cards which they can work from ... the cards should be analogous to what would be in their heads as they went into the shop. I can put a picture or draw one on each card to represent the items and on the right-hand side I can put various cue words to indicate what needs to go on in the shop. I'd better go over the cue words in a quick exercise before we start ... what sort of cues ... you need some general clues such as 'sizes' or 'colours' so that they can ask 'What colours do you have?' and so on ... and you also need specific cues, such as 'small' or 'red' so that they have to ask things like, 'Have you got a small one?' ... What I need is some card divided into two by three inch rectangles ... I could colour code it so that blue cards are newsagents items and red ones are for food shopping and so on ... should be easy enough. Perhaps</p>
IDENTIFICATION OF NEED	
LINGUISTIC EXPLORATION	
CONTEXTUAL REALISATION	
LINGUISTIC EXPLORATION	
PEDAGOGICAL REALISATION	
PHYSICAL PRODUCTION	
PEDAGOGICAL REALISATION AND USE	
PHYSICAL PRODUCTION	

Figure 5.7 (cont.)

PEDAGOGICAL REALISATION AND USE	<p>they can do it in groups first ... one group doing the food cards and one doing the clothes and one for the pharmacy and so on ... then I can shuffle the cards and they can practise on me as the shop assistant ... not a bad role if you work it up ... they can take random cards further ... hang on ... they were having problems with containers and things so maybe I'd better do a preliminary exercise on that ... box, packet, sachet, tube tub, car, tin ball, packet, carton, bundle ... any more ... ? I'll go and look in the cupboard downstairs ... yes bottle, mustn't forget that one! ... yes I'll give them a simple list of items and they can give me the right containers ... or do it with each other and then have me check them ... now, I'd better make some notes on all this before I forget it ...</p>
further EXPLORATION after IDENTIFICATION	
PEDAGOGICAL REALISATION	
NOTES MADE	
language exploration	FOOD: Special questions – quantity/amount General questions – types? sizes?
	CLOTHES: Special questions – colours, sizes, materials General questions – colours? materials? (Items: jeans, blouses, shirts, skirts, socks ...)
pedagogical realisation	signs on cards ! = REQUEST ? = QUESTION

Examples of Materials Written

 material? blue? grey? sizes? 2!	 Chianti? £? 1½ litres!	 cotton? colours? sizes? cost? 1!	 Irish? cost? 1½ kilos!
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5.4 Conclusions

In this chapter we have outlined and illustrated a framework for materials writing. Underlying this framework are some beliefs and working principles which we would like to make explicit and comment on here.



**1 Materials writing is at its most effective when it is turned to the needs of a particular group of learners.**

Sooner or later, every teacher of any subject comes up against a need to write materials. How they respond to this need depends on all sorts of variables:

- the prevailing norms in a specific educational context
- the amount of time available
- the availability of reprographic facilities
- the teacher's background and training
- in some contexts, teachers are expected to adhere rigidly to a prescribed coursebook
- most teachers are too busy to contemplate writing their own material from scratch, though there are few who do not adapt their textbooks in some way
- photocopying and other forms of reproduction depend on the availability of technical back-up and supplies of paper
- materials evaluation, adaptation and production are often neglected or underemphasised on initial training courses.

British publishers do great business in many parts of the world with mass-market English language coursebooks. In Eastern and Central Europe, for example, in the years immediately after the collapse of Communism, the welcome given to *Discoveries*, the *Cambridge English Course*, *Headway* and similar courses was, after decades of restriction, understandably warm. Yet, in many countries in the region, the initial enthusiasm was quick to wear off, and a number of them have now produced and are using their own 'home-grown' school textbooks. The logic is inescapable. A 'home-produced' coursebook, if it is well produced, stands a much greater chance of success locally simply because the authors are more aware of the needs of learners in that context, and are able to design the materials in such a way as to fit in with their own learning and teaching traditions, and with the conceptual world of the learners. Put another way, the further away the author is from the learners, the less effective the material is likely to be.

To sum up, the most effective materials are those which are based on a thorough understanding of learners' needs, that is their language difficulties, their learning objectives, their styles of learning, the stage of their conceptual development and so on. This implies a learning-centred approach to materials writing, rather than one which is driven purely by the subject through syllabus specifications, inventories of language items and so on.

**2 Teachers understand their own learners best.**

Teachers understand their learners' needs and their preferred learning styles. The more they become sensitive and responsive to these needs, the more they become involved in researching their own classrooms. Indeed, we believe that the teacher as materials writer belongs firmly in the (recent) tradition of the teacher as researcher (see Burns 1999).

**3 All teachers need a grounding in materials writing.**

It is not until teachers have attempted to produce their own materials that they finally begin to develop a set of criteria to evaluate materials produced by others. Only then does the full range of options, from blind acceptance of other materials, through adaptation and supplementation, to the production of 'purpose-built' materials, become clear. The process of materials writing raises almost every issue which is important in learning to teach: the selection and grading of language, awareness of language, knowledge of learning theories, socio-cultural appropriacy – the list could be extended. And to extend point 2 above, the current emphasis on action research in teacher education programmes needs to be backed up by the establishment of materials writing as a key component of initial training courses and a regular feature of in-service training programmes. Teachers need to be enabled to write their own materials when circumstances demand it, not only in order to reduce their dependency on published materials but also as a means of professional development (see Popovici and Bolitho 2003).

**4 All teachers teach themselves.**

Teachers teach specific groups of learners, as discussed above. They also, inevitably, 'teach themselves' and this has powerful implications when it comes to the materials they are to teach with. All the evidence we have gathered from teachers we have worked with suggests persuasively that 'teaching against the grain' leads to dissatisfaction, loss of confidence and learning failure. Enabling teachers to produce their own effective materials minimises this possibility and helps them to 'teach themselves'.

**5 Trialling and evaluation are vital to the success of any materials.**

Learners are the users of materials, and we have to heed their opinions and listen to their feedback. This is easy enough for teacher-writers, working with their own group of learners. Yet it is a message which many publishers have been slow to take on board. Even when trialling takes place, it is most often teachers' feedback, rather than