

Compromise in Materials Development

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Introduction

In the field of TESOL the term ‘materials’ does not refer to anything used in class (pens, monitor etc.) but is a term exclusively used for text materials. These materials can be those designed for language learning or authentic / real world materials specially selected for language learning (McGrath, 2002). In most instances these come in the form of a textbook (termed a course book should it form the basis of a course).

In the Japanese teaching context, textbooks are popular among Japanese teachers, and big business. However, the forces that impinge upon school and classroom life in Japan, most notably the preparations for the university entrance examination (UEE) and directives from The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), make it difficult to believe that materials exist that accurately represent this complex situation.

Irrespective of the educational context, Japanese or otherwise, a variety of factors impact what is taught and how it is taught. It is, therefore, no surprise that several writers argue TESOL materials represent an inevitable ‘compromise’ (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Bell and Gower, 1998; Harmer,

2001, Islam & Mares; 2003). That compromise is both positive and inevitable, however, is not a view shared by all (Breen, 1984; Saraceni, 2003; Thornbury & Meddings, 2001).

This paper will firstly examine the issue of compromise in TESOL materials and consider whether compromise is inevitable. To illustrate this, I will also provide examples from a context in which I taught and assess the impact these compromises had (and continue to have) on language teaching and learning within that context.

Materials as Compromise

The debate on textbooks has raged for many years with some writers highlighting their value and calling for their continued use (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; Dubin & Olshtain, 1986; Bell & Gower, 1998; Gray, 2000), while others focus on their negative impact (Swan, 1992). Some go even further and call for an end to their use (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001). The pros and cons of these materials are examined in a number of publications (Graves, 2000; Tomlinson, 2001; Richards, 2001; Woodward, 2001; McGrath, 2002) with the final verdict remaining elusive. However, the continued use of these materials by most does seem to indicate that they are of value to teachers.

The debate surrounding materials as a compromise, though by no means unanimous, does seem to be less divisive than that on their inherent value. The compromise that TESOL materials represent, however, would seem to exist in two main ways: creation and use.

Materials Creation

There are many stages and considerations in material development and compromise can exist at the earliest possible stage of creation: conceptualization. Tomlinson (2003a:8) suggests that materials writers “underestimate learners linguistically, intellectually and emotionally” with Cives-Enriquez (2003:78) adding that material developers assume learners “are linguists and have linguistic knowledge”. Despite such views showing the ability of materials writers to ‘get it wrong’ on assumptions about learners, albeit at different ends of the spectrum, they show that at some point an actual assumption *was* made.

Assumptions about learner ability are not the only issues one must consider when planning the creation of materials. Tomlinson (2001), for example suggests writers question whether materials should:

- Be learning or acquisition focused?
- Be contrived or authentic?
- Be driven by theory or practice?
- Aim for language development only or also aim for educational development?

Ultimately, as Singapore-Wala (2003:142) suggests, there are “different influencing factors when designing an appropriate course book-(a) the syllabus, (b) learner roles in the system, (c) teacher roles in the system and (d) instructional materials types and functions”. The answers to the questions posed by Tomlinson and Singapore-Wala will depend in large part upon the context at which the materials are aimed; if they are aimed at a wide/

global audience or at a local context.

Materials Created for a Global Context

Global materials are usually the creation of large publishing houses and profit margins are paramount in their thinking. The writers employed by the publishers to create the materials may wish to address the mismatch between TESOL theory and textbook structure (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994) or create materials based on updated pedagogical principles (Bell & Gower, 1998) but such materials may represent a step too far from the norm for conservative publishers.

Publisher conservatism results largely from the buying habits of consumers whose choice of materials is based on the principle of “better the devil you know than the devil you don’t” (Stranks, 2003:330). Publishers are often reluctant to offer radically different materials to non-native-speaker teachers, untrained teachers or very busy teachers as there is a high risk of rejection (Mares, 2003). Change may challenge the values and beliefs of target customers and result in a ‘conservative impulse’ in which change is resisted (Torres & Hutchinson, 1994). As a result, “publishers generally feel more comfortable with material that is the same but different” (Mares, 2003:135).

However, change within ELT has been described as ‘endemic’ (Hutchinson & Torres, 1994) and new materials need to be seen as offering something new despite buyer conservatism. A compromise between ‘innovation and conservatism’ is required which allows the materials to provide the familiar alongside something new. This results in global materials adopting a largely

eclectic approach (Bell & Gower, 1998).

The production of global materials then appears partly a compromise between writers and publishers. The publisher's view is largely based on the demands of customers. Yet on a global scale, the contexts in which these customers exist would likely differ greatly, as would the customers themselves.

This may be due partly due to the market they wish to cover. When one is creating materials aimed at a global market, one cannot realistically take on board the characteristics of the numerous types of learners, teachers, classrooms, institutions and cultures that are unique to each educational context. To try to capture as many customers about whom writers know neither the curriculum, syllabus or learning objective, it pays to adopt an eclectic approach.

However, pedagogical approach and objective are not the only compromises. The choice of content and its presentation will also require compromise as photos and text theme must be culturally appropriate for the target learners. Such compromises make the production of truly global materials seem impossible and it has been suggested that materials will fail if they try to be relevant to everyone (Bell & Gower, 1998). However, the popularity of global materials demonstrates that an acceptable compromise can be found for materials targeting a wider audience.

Materials Created for a Local Context

Developers of materials for a local audience often have much more information on the context in which the materials will be used, for example, the

culture and level of learners, proficiency of teachers, the education system, and curriculum. However, like global materials writers, writers for the local audience rarely create materials on their own and free of influence. Local materials are often commissioned by a national educational body such as a ministry of education or a board of education, or for a publisher producing materials for a local (often national) customer base. The ideas of the writers and the sponsor will not be identical and so a compromise will be needed.

One of the interesting compromises faced in the creation of local materials is the dilemma of cultural content. Local materials writers will likely know the students' culture very well and one can assume that all materials created will be relevant to the interests of learners. However, local cultural content may be relevant to learners but not represent authentic English use (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986). Local material writers must assess the benefits and drawbacks of local cultural content and that of authentic English use and reach a compromise hopefully informed by their educational principles.

Realities of Materials Creation

Although different compromises are required in creating materials for local and global audiences, there are some issues that are relevant to both. Most importantly, materials are not only a result of compromise between writer and sponsor but also between writers. Typically, the number of writers is often much more than one. Tomlinson (2001), for example, found that writing teams for local materials in Romania, Bulgaria and Namibia consisted of seven, five and thirty people respectively. With more than one writer compromise surely follows. Writing teams also work within certain budget and time constraints which may also demand compromise, for example,

on the amount of preparatory research.

Additionally, materials writers will likely have to answer to an editor and a designer. From these two sources, the writer(s) will alter the materials based on feedback. More editing and alteration will be carried out following the results of a pilot test and can result in the end product differing greatly from the original brief of the sponsor or the idea in the mind of the writer.

Materials in Use

Bell and Gower (1998:118) suggest that “With international materials it is obvious that the needs of individual students and teachers, as well as the expectations of particular schools in particular countries can never be fully met by the materials themselves”. Such a view would suggest a compromise and supports the notion of materials as “proposals for action” (Harmer, 2001:8) and as a “stimulus or instrument for teaching” (Graves, 2000:175) rather than directions of use to be followed exactly. This is the case not only for global materials but also for more specific, local context materials. No textbook is written for just one class, it will have to be adapted.

It is this adaptation of materials that constitutes another compromise. Depending on the circumstances the adaptation maybe minimal or extensive, spontaneous or planned and conscious or unconscious (Islam & Mares, 2003) and may be required for a number of reasons such as:

- Excessive/insufficient guidance
- Questions are too difficult/easy
- Content is not culturally acceptable/inappropriate for age/level

- Authenticity issues
- Too heavily weighted in favour of one or more skills
- Too few practice drills
- Dialogues too casual/formal
- Excessive/insufficient variation in activities
- Inappropriate grading order

Such factors are in addition to more practical considerations such as class size, if students must share materials, and if the classroom contains necessary audio-visual equipment.

Teachers will often try to humanize materials by “adding activities which help to make the language learning process a more affective experience and finding ways of helping learners connect what is in the book to what is in their minds” (Tomlinson, 2003b:163). The resulting compromise is informed by the needs and wants of students. The needs of students the materials are adapted to meet are usually those envisioned by the teacher and, therefore, materials adaptation is a compromise in which the teacher’s input is dominant (Saraceni, 2003).

Ultimately, with so many factors in which the materials and context can mismatch, materials adaptation has been described as “the only realistically feasible option for the practicality and limitations of the classroom reality” (Saraceni, 2003:73). Adaptation of materials represents a compromise between the original notion of use at creation and the actual classroom requirements. Actual classroom use is also itself a compromise between different forces, mostly between teacher and learners but also between forces outside the classroom such as educational institutions and parents.

An Inevitable Compromise?

Some writers suggest discarding materials pre-prepared for the consumption of multiple classes and call for an end to materials driven classes proposing instead the use of real living texts in individual classes (Thornbury & Meddings, 2001). Although such an end seems desirable, if not somewhat idealistic, it does not necessarily mean that compromise can be avoided. Saraceni (2003:73) suggests that “The simple fact of using a piece of teaching/learning material in the classroom inevitably means adapting it to the particular needs or the whole classroom environment by the very process of using it”. Such a view would suggest that materials of any sort, even those created by an individual teacher for his/her own class, will involve compromise and leads many writers to conclude that compromise is inevitable (Islam & Mares, 2003: Hutchinson & Torres, 1994: Saraceni, 2003: Harmer, 2001; Breen, 1984). Ultimately, one cannot accurately predict students response to materials and some compromise will be required (Richards, 2001). Teaching is a dynamic interaction and leads to compromise not only being inevitable but also being “beneficial” (Bell & Gower, 1998:129).

Compromise in a Japanese Context

Perhaps the most noticeable example of a compromise in the Japanese high school context, and one I have personal experience of, is an example of a compromise that is perhaps not inevitable. Education in Japanese high schools occurs in the shadow of “examination hell” (Tsukada, 1991). The university entrance examinations (UEE) wield huge power over high school teaching (Fujimoto, 1999; Horio, 1991) and teachers across Japan fever-

ously prepare students for such tests, which has been termed a “national obsession” (Shimahara, 1991:126). Such descriptions of the UEE are not examples of hyperbole but accurate descriptions of a system which will play a huge role in determining the future lives of Japanese students due to Japanese university and employment recruitment preferences.

The UEE itself places great emphasis on grammatical knowledge and assesses students through reading and writing with a short listening section introduced in 2006. Speaking remains conspicuous through its absence. In response, teachers focus on reading and writing with emphasis upon grammatical knowledge and accuracy rather than fluency (Fujimoto, 1999).

However, MEXT (2002, 2003, 2004) have prioritised communicative language teaching as a means to “cultivate Japanese with English abilities” as “the English-speaking abilities of a large percentage of the population are inadequate, and this imposes restrictions on exchanges with foreigners and creates occasions when the ideas and opinions of Japanese people are not appropriately evaluated” (MEXT, 2002). Upon graduation from high school MEXT expect students to have an “Ability to hold normal conversations (and a similar level of reading and writing) on everyday topics” (MEXT, 2002). Herein lays the dilemma; how do Japanese teachers resolve the demands of a university entrance examination that demands grammatical accuracy and features reading and writing almost exclusively, with the requirements of the Ministry of Education to develop speaking and fluency?

Different ends will require different approaches to teaching. MEXT encourages more Communicative language teaching (CLT) in class in an attempt to meet their communicative ends as opposed to the more traditional

grammar-translation methods favoured by teachers preparing students for the UEE. However, many have suggested caution when introducing CLT into EFL state-sponsored contexts (Holliday, 1994; Liu, 1998; Bax, 2003). Such methods are created with small private multi-lingual classes of highly motivated learners in native-speaker countries. In contrast, Japanese state high school classes are large (usually over 30 students) and poorly equipped. The students themselves are overwhelmingly mono-lingual with their English ability and motivation differing wildly.

The ideal student for CLT classes also differs to that of the stereotypical Japanese student of English. Japanese learners are often described as having difficulty in expressing opinions or debating (Allen, 1996) and like to rely on dictionaries and texts (Dorji, 1997). In addition, research among teachers found that Japanese students expressed difficulty with learner centred activities favoured in CLT (Dorji, 1997). Personal experience and the literature (Fujimoto, 1999; Dorji, 1997) also suggest that teacher-centred classes are favoured by the teachers who, like students, hold a belief that ‘teachers are to teach’ (Azuma, 1998).

The odds seem stacked against CLT yet one cannot simply dismiss the will of MEXT. In addition to a greatly increased inclusion of CLT, MEXT (2003) have indicted a preference for materials with the following three key points given special importance:

- A) Usefulness in enhancing the understanding of various ways of thinking, cultivating a rich sensibility, and enhancing the ability to make impartial judgements.
- B) Usefulness in deepening the understanding of the ways of life

and cultures of Japan and the rest of the world, raising interest in language and culture, and developing respectful attitudes to these elements.

- C) Usefulness in deepening international understanding from a broad perspective, heightening students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community, and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation.

A compromise must be sought and this compromise is visible in the materials produced. This can be seen in an examination of a unit in *Expressway: Oral Communication* (Kairyudo, 2004), a textbook used at a Japanese high school. A PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) methodology is favoured and is representative of the conservatism of materials creators (Bell & Gower, 1998). The presentation stage in this 'speaking' class is a reading exercise, and the practice stage is a written gap fill which is then spoken in pairs. The production stage activity is semi-controlled as students need to describe travel pictures and then discuss the value of each method of transport with a two sentence example of a correct sentence provided. The final activity is a reading and listening exercise.

The materials here do not correspond to a grammar-translation approach but neither do they correspond to a CLT approach. The result is a compromise that would seem to satisfy neither UEE nor MEXT. The communicative aspirations of MEXT would surely be disappointed given that this is a speaking class yet still strongly emphasises accuracy with limited opportunity for oral communication and fluency development. However, the theme (discussion) and subject of exercises (comparing Japanese and global transport) of the unit seem to be more in line with MEXT preferences

for materials. This being the case, the compromise in the production of materials seems to lean more towards the UEE in the linguistic focus but more towards MEXT in choices of theme and topic.

The compromised use of materials is similar to that of their creation. Two thirds of Japanese high school teachers said they needed to prepare their students for the UEE (Sakui, 2004) and high school students, especially those in the third (final) year of high school, want to study more reading and writing in preparation for the UEE (Fujimoto, 1999). Personal experience has shown that the end result is a compromise in materials use which pays only token attention to the communicative demands of MEXT and focuses much more on adapting materials towards preparation for the UEE. Research carried out tends to support this observation suggesting that the Japanese “curriculum privileges fostering communication skills as a primary goal, with linguistic content such as grammar and vocabulary playing a subordinate role” but in actuality:

“In overall actual classroom teaching, grammar instruction was central, and far more foregrounded than CLT. The language of instruction was Japanese. Teachers spent most of their time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading, and vocabulary presentations” (Sakui, 2004:157).

Though compromise in some area and to some degree may be inevitable, this particular conflict, resulting in an unsatisfactory compromise, can be avoided, or at least reduced, by legislation to introduce communicative elements to the UEE.

Conclusion

Compromise within English learning materials can be found during their conceptualization, production and use. Classrooms are dynamic environments and one cannot completely predict how students will respond to materials, making compromise inevitable. Compromise in use will depend on numerous factors in the classroom, mainly the belief and values the teacher brings with them and the needs of their students, but also factors outside the classroom such as the expectations of parents or institutional standards/priorities.

In the Japanese high school context, as elsewhere, institutional demands often contrast sharply with the educational beliefs and preferences of many teachers and their firm commitment to prepare students for the UEE. The gulf between teachers' preference and the demands of MEXT results in a compromise, though one weighted in favour of teachers and preparations for the UEE. The Japanese context shows us, therefore, that compromise may be inevitable but, as the point of contact, the balance is in favour of the teacher.

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