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# TSL3111

## Developing and Using Resources for the Primary ESL Classroom

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### Topic 2: Factors in Selection and Evaluation

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Lecturer's Notes

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## Topic 2: Factors in Selection and Evaluation

How do we decide which materials to use in any situation? With time constraints and limited funds, a lot of the time we find ourselves just using whatever is available, but when the opportunity arises to purchase or create materials, we need to know how to recognise something worthwhile.

Here are some factors to consider:

### Level

The age of the students – and their interests – need to be considered as well as their ability. For example, stories and books that are written for the interest of native English speaker teenagers would probably be too difficult for second language speaker teenagers. However stories that are at their ability level are likely to be too ‘babyish’ for them to be interested.

When considering the suitable level of materials we need to think about, for example, how much new vocabulary is included, and what grammar structures predominate, and how adult the topics and content are. *(See the factors discussed in the articles below.)*

### Content – cultural, knowledge

A lot of written material, even ESL material, is designed for learners in countries like the USA and the UK. The topics and content are related to seasons and festivals in those countries and not only use related vocabulary but also make assumptions about students’ understandings of and even interest in these topics. While it is good for our students to learn about other cultures, too much of these materials can be boring for them and even in some cases offensive.

### Clarity

The material needs to be clear to see (visual) or hear (audio). Blurry pictures, videos or texts, and mumbled soundtracks have little value. Also the meaning of the text should be clear, not overwhelmed with idiomatic expressions etc. Font size can be an important factor especially for younger learners who don’t have the concentration span to keep staring at the text and work their way through it. Some students may also have poor eyesight.

### Accessibility

The material needs to be well organised, so that students can find their way around the contents of the book easily. They can see how much progress they are making and can use the material easily with or without the teacher watching.

### Practicality

Consider whether the construction or use of the material is physically possible? Sometimes teachers dream up wonderful ways to teach material, but it really is too difficult to complete. Sometimes the text includes something like a recipe – clearly beautiful but not practically possible, and very discouraging for the students. Activities that are included need to be usable in a classroom situation.

### Versatility

We should consider whether the material could be used in more than one situation. Can it be varied to suit the students or the situation? In the Malaysian school situation where you are teaching several classes – possibly at different levels – can you use and adapt the materials for each situation without too much difficulty?

### Cost Effectiveness

Consider whether you or the school can afford these materials. Sometimes materials are quite expensive initially, but in the long term they are worth the cost. Something that may be cheaper may end up being expensive with many units being needed, or maintenance and repairs being necessary. This applies to equipment as well as books. Photocopiable resources, or books that contain photocopiable pages can be very worthwhile, or sometimes websites charge a small annual fee for access to all of their worksheets and materials.

### Durability Impact

Young learners are particularly rough on materials, testing everything to its limit. Materials need to be strong enough to last the distance. We need to consider whether to make something cheap and consumable, constantly being replaced, or durable by laminating or using sturdy materials. There are advantages for both, for example if the materials are to be consumed, then the children can keep their own copy and decorate it and make it their own.

### Authenticity

Using authentic materials simply means using examples of language produced for some real purpose of their own (for example a newspaper) rather than using language produced and designed solely for the classroom. This is also important for listening materials.

Materials produced by second language speakers often contain grammatical errors – you need to be especially careful when creating your own.

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Ask students to read this chapter about considering the contextual factors in selection and adaptation of materials and then answer the questions below.

## Selection and Adaptation – contextual factors

(McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013, pp. 6-10)

### Contextual factors

In the preceding section, we took a broad view of 'context' and included both learners and setting under this heading. Let us examine each of these in turn in a little more detail.

*Learners* It is possible to identify a number of important learner characteristics or 'variables' which, as we have suggested, influence planning decisions and the specification of goals. The relative importance of these variables, and their effect on programme design, obviously depend to a certain extent on some of the situational factors to be discussed in the next section. For example, a pupil's mother tongue may be more, or less, significant depending on whether more than one native language is represented in the classroom, or perhaps on the educational philosophy of that particular environment.

For the moment we can list here the key characteristics of 'the learner', indicating how they might affect planning and noting that they form part of our common frame of reference as language teachers, wherever we work. Some of these are characteristics of whole groups or subgroups of learners; others are individual and less open to generalization. Again, some can be known in advance

and incorporated at the initial planning stage, in principle at least. Others are more appropriately assessed in the classroom environment itself, and as such are more obviously susceptible to teacher reaction and influence.

We consider the learner's

- *Age*: this will particularly affect topics chosen and types of learning activity, such as the suitability of games or role play.
- *Interests*: as with age, this may help in the specification of topics and learning activities.
- *Level of proficiency in English*: teachers will wish to know this even where their classes are based on a 'mixed proficiency' principle rather than streamed according to level.
- *Aptitude*: this can most usefully be thought of as a specific talent, in this case for language learning, as something that learners might show themselves to be 'good at', perhaps in contrast to other subjects in a school curriculum. (It can be measured by formal aptitude tests, although they are not very frequently used.) The relationship between aptitude and intelligence is not clear, and is certainly not direct.
- *Mother tongue*: this may affect, for instance, the treatment of errors or the selection of syllabus items - areas of grammar or vocabulary and so on.
- *Academic and educational level*: which help to determine intellectual content, breadth of topic choice or depth to which material may be studied.
- *Attitudes to learning*, to teachers, to the institution, to the target language itself and to its speakers. This is directly related to the following point.
- *Motivation*, at least in so far as it can be anticipated. Obviously a whole range of factors will affect this.
- *Reasons for learning*, if it is possible to state them. With school-age pupils this may be less significant than with many adult learners, where it is often possible to carry out quite a detailed analysis of needs.
- *Preferred learning styles*: which will help in the evaluation of the suitability of different methods, for instance, whether problem-solving activities could be used, or whether pupils are more used to 'rote learning', where material is learned by heart.
- *Personality*: which can affect methodological choices such as a willing acceptance of role play and an interactive classroom environment

Many of these factors will affect the learners' need, and this issue will recur in the relevant sections of subsequent chapters.

*Setting* That aspect of the context that we refer to as setting is to be understood here as the whole teaching and learning environment, in a wide sense: it is the factors falling under this heading that will determine whether the aims of a language programme, defined with reference to the learners' needs and characteristics, are actually feasible and realistic. In certain situations, the setting itself may be so significant that it provides the foundation specification of aims. This might be the case, for instance, in a country with a single political or religious ideological base, where the education system is primarily an expression of that ideology. In the majority of systems, however, the setting is more likely to condition the way in which goals are carried out, and indeed the extent to which they can be.

For most EFL/ESL teachers, therefore, the following factors, in some combination and with varying degrees of significance, will influence course planning, syllabus design, the selection of materials and resources, and the appropriateness of methods:

- *The role of English in the country*: whether it is a regular means of communication or primarily a subject taught in the school curriculum, where, in turn, it may or may not be the first foreign language. This relates to the linguistic environment, and to whether English is outside class in the community or alternatively never heard.
- *The role of English in the school*, and its place in the curriculum.
- *The teachers*: their status, both at national and institutional levels, their training, mother tongue, attitudes to their job, experience, expectations (for a discussion of teachers' needs and wants, see Masuhara, 2011). This topic will be taken up in detail in the final chapter of this book.
- *Management and administration*: who is responsible for what level of decision, particularly which are the control points for employment of staff, budgets, resource allocation and so on. Additionally, the position of teachers in the overall system needs to be understood, as does the nature of the hierarchy in any particular institution.
- *Resources available*: books and paper, audio-visual material (hardware and software for cassette and video), laboratories, computers, reprographic facilities and so on. Design and choice of teaching materials will be particularly affected by resource availability as will the capacity to teach effectively across a range of language skills.
- *Support personnel*: administrators, secretaries and technicians, and their specific roles in relation to the teaching staff.
- *The number of pupils* to be taught and the size of classes. Overall numbers may affect the total number of teaching hours available, and the large class problem is a very familiar one in many settings worldwide.
- *Time* available for the programme, both over a working year (longitudinally), and in any one week or term (intensive or extensive). Many teachers would also consider that time of day is a significant factor.
- *Physical environment*: the nature of the building, noise factors, flexibility of tables and chairs, size of room in relation to size of class, heat and cold, and so on.
- *The socio-cultural environment*: this can often determine the suitability of both materials and methods. For example, some textbooks contain topics inappropriate to the setting, and some classroom methods require an unacceptable set of teacher and learner roles.
- *The types of tests used*, and ways in which students are evaluated: assessment procedures may, for example, be formal or informal and subjective. They may also be external, in the form of a public or national examination, or internal to the institution and the course.
- *Procedures (if any) for monitoring and evaluating* the language teaching programme itself. This kind of evaluation may be imposed by 'senior management', or alternatively agreed between teachers as colleagues.

Hedge (2000) covers similar points, classifying them into social, educational, pupil and teacher variables. Nation and Macalister (2010) discuss these factors as environment analysis with three



major elements: learners, teachers and situation. Holliday (1994, 2005) is particularly concerned with the need for methodology to be appropriate to its socio-cultural context, not inappropriately transplanted from a different - and often more privileged - system. We will discuss this in Chapter 11 and, to a certain degree, Chapter 12.

Teachers are affected, directly and indirectly by all these variables. Some they may be able to influence or even control: for example, the deployment of resources and materials, or the pacing of work within an overall timescale. Others, of course, arise from decisions taken far removed from a teacher's day-to-day professional life, perhaps at Ministry level, or at an earlier point in the country's educational history. Whatever their source, it is the teacher who is in the 'front line'- attempting to promote learning and fulfil the stated goals against the background of a complex network of interrelated factors. The grim reality described by Gaies and Bowers (1990: 176), with large classes, low motivation, inadequate coursebooks, poorly trained teachers, lack of resources, heavy workload and the pressure of exams may still be realities in many teaching contexts (e.g. Hu, 2003; Pham, 2007 to name two). The conclusion in Gaies and Bowers (1990) still sounds pertinent that 'by coming to grips not only with new ideas but with the evidence of what happens when they are introduced into the local context, [teachers] equip themselves with the tools for establishing an appropriate methodology that can set realistic national objectives for teacher training and education (181). We will discuss in more detail in Chapter 14 how changes and innovation affect teachers and how teachers may manage their self-development while seeking support.

### Questions about Contextual Factors of Selection and Adaptation:

1. What will be affected by the learner's age and/or interests? *topics chosen, types of learning activity*
2. What does it mean if a learner has an aptitude for language learning? *good at it*
3. What helps in the evaluation of the suitability of different methods? *preferred learning styles*
4. In the majority of circumstances, what does the 'setting' condition? *the way in which goals are carried out, and the extent.*
5. What factors should be considered in the role of English in the country? *whether English is a regular means of communication, whether English is used outside of the classroom*
6. What does resource availability affect? *design and choice of teaching materials*
7. What is a very familiar problem with the number of pupils? *Large class problem*
8. As well as time available for teaching, how can time affect teaching? *time of day has an effect*
9. What physical environment factors can affect teaching? *nature of building, noise factors, flexibility of tables and chairs, size of room, heat and cold*
10. What 'grim realities' are mentioned? *large classes, low motivation, inadequate coursebooks poorly trained teachers, lack of resources, heavy workloads, pressure of exams.*

## Using the Factors for selection and evaluation

Ask students in their groups to consider one particular resource each. (It could be a text book, or a game, or a website, or a storybook, or a song...) They should consider each of the factors below and compare with your group.

Level	<i>[Suitable for the age, maturity, and ability of my students]</i>
Content – cultural, knowledge	<i>[The information contained in the material should not be culturally offensive to the students, and should contain knowledge that may be useful.]</i>
Clarity	<i>[Material should be clear to see or hear. Blurry pictures, videos or texts, and mumbled soundtracks have little value. Also the meaning of the text should be clear, not overwhelmed with idiomatic expressions etc.]</i>
Accessibility	<i>[The material is well organised, and a student can find their way around the contents of the book easily. They can see how much progress they are making and can use the material easily with or without the teacher watching.]</i>
Practicality	<i>[Is the construction or use of the material physically possible? Sometimes teachers dream up wonderful ways to teach material, but it really is too difficult to complete.]</i>
Versatility	<i>[Consider whether the material could be used in more than one situation. Can it be varied to suit the students or the situation?]</i>
Cost effectiveness	<i>[Sometimes materials are quite expensive initially, but in the long term they are worth the cost. Something that may be cheaper may end up being expensive with many units being needed, or maintenance and repairs being necessary.]</i>
Durability	<i>[Young learners are particularly rough on materials, testing everything to its limit. Materials need to be strong enough to last the distance.]</i>
Impact	<i>[The materials need to have an effect on the students' learning. Even if it is only for fun, the resulting motivation may be a worthwhile impact.]</i>
Authenticity	<i>[Using authentic materials simply means using examples of language produced for some real purpose of their own (for example a newspaper) rather than using language produced and designed solely for the classroom. This is also important for listening materials.]</i>



## Works cited in this topic

Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English Language Teaching*. Pearson Longman.

McDonough, J., Shaw, C., & Masuhara, H. (2013). *Materials and Methods in ELT (3rd Ed)*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.