From theory to textbook: Constructing language materials for young learners

De la teoría a libro de texto: La construcción de materiales de lenguaje para los aprendices jóvenes

Ken BEATTY
Anaheim University
(Anaheim, CA, USA)

Abstract

Second language materials for young learners are often deceptive in their simplicity. They appear to be easy to create because their content spans a limited range of grammatical forms and vocabulary. However, beyond the challenging process of selecting such content are the underlying theoretical concepts, methodologies, and approaches that inform well-constructed learning materials. This article outlines considerations that go into creating a textbook series for young learners in terms of views of language learning, the communicative approach, a notional functional syllabus, comprehensible input and output, task chains, learner-centeredness, the negotiated curriculum, and autonomy.

Key Words: second language teaching; English; textbooks; communicative approach.

Resumen

Los recursos para la enseñanza de una segunda lengua a niños y a jóvenes son a menudo engañosos por su simplicidad. Parece que son fáciles de crear porque su contenido abarca una gama limitada de formas gramaticales y de vocabulario. Sin embargo, más allá del difícil proceso de selección de contenidos, están los conceptos teóricos básicos, las metodologías y los enfoques que sustentan la adecuada elaboración de estos materiales.

Este artículo describe las consideraciones que intervienen en la creación de una serie de libros para estudiantes jóvenes en términos del aprendizaje de idiomas, el enfoque comunicativo, un programa nocional-funcional, "input" y "output" comprensible, cadenas de tareas, educación centrada en los alumnos, currículo negociado y autonomía.

Palabras Claves: enseñanza de segundas lenguas; Inglés; libros de texto; enfoque comunicativo.

BIRTH OF THE LANGUAGE TEXTBOOK

Formal language learning materials have been in use since at least 1657, when John Comenius created the first commercial illustrated textbooks for learning a second language—in this case, Latin—with other versions appearing in other languages soon after (Bardeen, 1887). Comenius' book emphasized the use of the senses, thinking about what the learner saw, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched. He used pictures and simple translations to bridge the familiar to the unfamiliar. Like countless other textbooks that followed, Comenius' books were informed by current theories of education, some of which are still popular. The following sections outline more recent concepts and theories in language learning before considering how they are applied in a practical way in a recent textbook series for young learners.

THREE VIEWS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

The three main views of language teaching and learning—structural, functional, and interactive—reflect different perspectives on the nature of language. The structural view suggests language is like a machine run by grammar. The functional view suggests language is a tool to accomplish a variety of tasks, such as buying and selling goods and services. The interactive view suggests language is for the creation and maintenance of social relations (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This last perspective focuses on exploring patterns in conversational exchanges.

There have been a number of pedagogical approaches based on these three perspectives beginning with the *grammar-translation method*, used since the 1800s and still popular in some countries (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). The purpose of the grammar-translation method was to instruct learners in the target language through the process of explaining the grammar and then translating classic works of writing (such as Greek and Latin documents) between the original language and the language of the learners. These learners were expected to read and write the target language with little emphasis on the development of speaking or listening skills. The grammar-translation method first became popular when relatively few people traveled for business or pleasure and learning another language was either for the delights of reading foreign literature and scientific treatises or for processing international business documents. Many subsequent methods (sets of procedures)

and approaches (sets of principles) are reflective of the changing needs of language learners.

Although the structural model of language learning that gave rise to the grammar-translation method has been abandoned in most modern textbooks, functional and interactive perspectives still hold sway. In the 1940s, the theoretical support of the behaviorist approach (Skinner, 1938) combined with the functional perspective and innovations in recording technology that led to the creation of the *audio-lingual method* in which learners listened to audio recordings of utterances and dialogs in the target language, repeating them until mastery was achieved. Like the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method had particular foci: to be able to speak in the target language using set phrases and to understand these phrases when others spoke them.

Another functional approach was *situational language learning*, developed in the 1960s. This approach focused on re-creating common situations—such as a store, restaurant, or doctor's office—in which learners might role-play the use of language. Aspects of both the audio-lingual method and the situational language learning method endure; the use of audio recordings of the former and contextualized role-play of the latter are found in almost all contemporary L2 textbooks (Richards, & Rodgers, 2001).

COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT AND COMPREHENSIBLE OUTPUT

Within any syllabus, the selection and delivery of content are often built around acquisition models based on ideas of *comprehensible input* and *comprehensible output*. In explaining the comprehensible input, Krashen (1982) writes:

> The best way, and perhaps the only way, to teach speaking, according to this view, is simply to provide comprehensible input. Early speech will come when the acquirer feels "ready"; this state of readiness arrives at somewhat different times for different people, however. Early speech, moreover, is typically not grammatically accurate. Accuracy develops over time as the acquirer hears and understands more input. Part (4) of the input hypothesis is thus: Production ability emerges. It is not taught directly. (p. 22)

Krashen's hypothesis that comprehensible input (that is, reading and listening) is sufficient for language acquisition has been controversial and was challenged by Swain (1985), who suggested that comprehensible output (speaking and writing) was also necessary. Despite continued questioning of the evidence by Krashen

(1985, 1989, 1994), most now agree that comprehensible input and output are both necessary for second-language learning to take place; learners need not only to listen and read, but must also speak and write to become effective in communicating in the target language.

TASK BANKS AND TASK CHAINS

The question of organizing comprehensible input and output into a logical format is usually done through the creation of tasks, either in a *task bank* or a *task chain* approach (Nunan, 1989, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2001). A task bank is the less often used choice and features a range of random tasks related by theme. The dominant approach is the use of task chains, as described in terms of the task dependency principle (Nunan, 1991). The principle requires tasks to be structured so that learners complete each task as a necessary step before going onto the next task.

Nunan (1991) points out the research supporting task-based learning: "One of the strengths of task-based language teaching is that the conceptual basis is supported by a strong empirical tradition. This distinguishes it from most methods' approaches to pedagogy, which are relatively data-free" (p. 284).

One key advantage of a task chain is that it can be motivating in that it allows learners to see immediate results of their increasing language acquisition and proficiency. On the other hand, a task chain can also be demotivating if a learner is unable to progress after being unsuccessful in one activity in the chain. However, task chains vary in their strictness, as it is sometimes difficult to maintain a lock-step relationship from one task to the next throughout a unit. Task chains are often a part of task-based language learning, in which:

1. the task focuses on pragmatic meaning;
2. the task features a learning gap between what a learner knows and needs/wants to know;
3. the learner choose the linguistic resources necessary to complete the task;
4. the task has a clearly defined outcome (after Ellis, 2007, pp. 156-157).

Ideally, in such tasks, the learner undertakes the task in the world outside the classroom; for example, visiting a dentist to make an appointment. For young learners, this might not be practical, but some real-world tasks can be carried out within the school, or on the school grounds, or as homework in the young learner's home.

LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS

Related to the idea of real-world tasks are the concepts of *learner centeredness* and the learner-centered classroom. Traditional classrooms are teacher-centered, with control residing in the teacher who makes all decisions about what to study, when to study, and how to study. However, language teachers increasingly aim to increase learner-centeredness—moving the locus of control away from the teacher and toward the learner—in activities in which, as Nunan (1984) suggests, learners can be more closely involved in the decision-making process of what is taught and how it is taught.

In practical terms, learner centeredness often begins with a negotiated curriculum, which Nunan (1999) outlines as nine steps for teachers to follow to ensure learners engage more effectively with the curriculum and their own learning processes:

1. Make instruction goals clear to learners.
2. Allow learners to create their own goals.
3. Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom.
4. Raise awareness of the learning process.
5. Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies.
6. Encourage learner choice.
7. Allow learners to generate their own tasks.
8. Encourage learners to become teachers.
9. Encourage learners to become researchers (pp. 17-24).

These steps are not necessarily sequential, nor will all learners be able to undertake all steps, but they point to directions in which learners can take on more responsibility for their own language educations. Typically, in steps 1 and 2, a teacher explains what the learners need to study and asks what the learners would personally find interesting within the topic, implicitly or explicitly identifying personal goals. Then, a related task—as simple as asking learners to collect examples of English from outside the classroom, analyze them, and present them to the class—can help achieve steps 3 through 9.

AUTONOMY

Learner centeredness and the negotiated curriculum both serve to promote learner autonomy, as they allow the learners to explore individual needs to a fuller extent

than the prescribed curriculum. Promoting autonomy is a key goal in L2 teaching, as there is seldom enough time in the classroom for teachers to teach everything that learners need to know or will need to know throughout their academic studies and subsequent careers. In an empirical study of 2,220 learners from grades five to seven in 125 schools, Luftenegger et al. (2012) found that perceptions of increased autonomy significantly improved motivation and helped foster lifelong learning.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

This article now turns to how these theoretical concerns may be expressed in a practical example; in this case, a new textbook series aimed at young learners of English as a second language, *Starship English* (Beatty, 2012a, 2012b). It is a seven-level American English series with learner books, activity books, audio CDs, teacher books, phonics books, interactive whiteboard materials, flashcards, and assessment materials.

The series includes four recurring target-age characters (portrayed through photographs) and the use of an illustrated mascot, Star, a visiting purple-haired space boy accompanied by his alien pet, Stella. Star's purpose is based on the idea that he can ask common questions from a place of intelligence; a space boy may not know some things such as colors and numbers, but he demonstrates that not knowing should not be associated with an inability to learn. Learners who identify with characters in a learning series are likely to have improved motivation in language learning.

Views of language learning

The *Starship English* series recognizes the structural view's concept of language as a grammar-driven machine, but considers that the best way to teach grammar is intuitively, as one learns one's first language, through controlled exposure to properly sequenced and modeled grammatical forms. Consider a partial dialog of the opening page of book 1 in the *Starship English* series (Beatty, 2012a):

Star: Hello. My name's Star. What's your name?

Tessa: My name's Tessa.

Star: How do you spell Tessa?

Tessa: T-e-s-s-a.

Dan: Hi. My name's Dan.

Star. Hi. My name's Star. Her name's Stella. (p. 4)

In the short space of 27 words of this dialog, learners are introduced to capitalization, contractions, formal and informal greetings, pronouns, proper nouns, possessive pronouns, punctuation, question/answer/statement structures, spell-it-out conventions (T-e-s-s-a), and verbs. Learners internalize these grammatical and language points intuitively through reinforcement in this and subsequent units through a variety of activities.

Essentially, as in keeping with the communicative approach, grammar is introduced methodically, but explaining and labeling each of the 14 grammar and other language points in the above dialog would be counter-productive in terms of helping learners acquire the language to communicate effectively and efficiently. Generally, it is best to avoid the additional cognitive weight of inculcating young learners into complex grammatical terminology. However, for diagnostic reasons, the grammar and other language points are explained in the teacher's book.

Starship English embraces a functional and interactive view of language learning. It is functional in the sense that many of the conversations are built around the exchange of goods (for example, shopping) and services (for example, asking for help). But it also focuses on the interactive view that suggests language is for the creation and maintenance of social relations through exchanges such as greetings, and asking others about plans and preferences.

Throughout *Starship English*, there is no use of translation or interpretation or recommendations for teachers to do so for learners. Instead, the goal is to encourage learners to think in the target language. Aspects of the audio-lingual method are included in the form of recordings of dialogs and songs. These provide opportunities for learners to hear target-language modeling of the vocabulary and structures, as well as suprasegmental features such as stress and rhythm. As in the situational language learning method, contextualized role-play is also a feature of the series, giving learners opportunities to practice the dialogs and assume the roles of adults in some of the exchanges. In these and other examples, it becomes clear that it is often practical to use a mixed methods approach, even though the primary focus is on the communicative approach.

The communicative approach

In keeping with the aims of the communicative approach, the aim of *Starship English* is to teach learners to communicate for a variety of purposes and negotiate in a wide range of social interactions. And although there is emphasis on all four language skills of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, the series foregrounds speaking and listening in books 1 to 3, and increases the emphasis on reading and writing in books four to six.

Activities in *Starship English* generally follow the first three of the six defining points of the communicative approach (Thornbury, 2010): *purposefulness* (having a goal in communicating), *reciprocity* (interaction requiring listening as well as speaking), and *negotiation* (clarification strategies for ascertaining meaning). The last three points—*synchronicity*, *unpredictability*, and *heterogeneity*—are particularly emphasized in two typical activities, songs or chants and games. Songs and games are sometimes dismissed by concerned parents as frivolous distractions from the so-called "real tasks" of learning a language.

The first of these three last points, synchronicity, recognizes that learners need to listen and speak in real time, that is, listen and speak with fluency. Audio recordings of dialogs help to set the pace of listening but songs or chants force learners to practice speaking at the pace of native or near-native speakers, reinforcing pronunciation, stress, and rhythm.

Similarly misunderstood is the second of the three last points: the role of unpredictability. Unpredictability is a feature of games that forces a learner to make rapid language choices in reaction to the utterances of the partner learner. Like songs and chants, the games in *Starship English* practice all the target vocabulary and structures of a given unit, but in more fun and active ways. Increasing motivation is a key concern in the communicative approach.

The final point, heterogeneity, is about encouraging learners to avoid the stock questions and answers of the audio-lingual method and to be flexible in the language they use to communicate. The principle of heterogeneity recognizes that there is always more than one way to make a statement, ask a question, or answer a question. *Starship English* provides Talk and Role-play tasks that encourage learners to improvise with the language they have just learned, moving from dependence on set dialogs and standard substitutions to the independence of freer

and more personalized use of the language. For example, in book 6, unit 2, after a presentation of dialog about a cooking class and a visual dictionary section illustrating different ingredients, tools and processes, the Talk task features speech balloons with two characters starting a conversation:

> Tessa: Have you … the …?
> Emma: Yes, and I've …. (Beatty, 2012b, p 11)

The open-ended nature of the partial prompts allows learners to either choose from the vocabulary items and structures they have just learned or substitute other vocabulary and structures they have learned in previous classes or outside of class.

Later in the same unit, after a role-play dialog about a father and daughter making lunch, this follow-up activity is presented: "Swap roles with your partner. Talk about something you have cooked and the ingredients you used" (Beatty, 2012b, p 13). Even more than the Talk activity, this task allows learners to tailor conversations to their personal interests.

Notional functional syllabus

The organization of *Starship English* follows a notional functional syllabus. As it is an international textbook series, it does not try to accommodate any particular local or national curriculum, although tailored editions are produced for some countries, such as one for Egypt to address specific curriculum needs of that country's Ministry of Education.

After a *Starter* book (Beatty, 2012c), used to introduce the alphabet, numbers and basic classroom language, the six higher *Starship English* levels focus on a widening circle of age-appropriate experiences that learners are likely to encounter and in which they are likely to need to use language to communicate. This begins with a focus in book 1 in the home, proceeds through books 2 to 5 with foci on the school, the neighborhood, the city, and the country, and ends with a focus on the world in book 6.

Topics within the geographic foci are intentionally set within the age-appropriate experiences of the target learners. Content and tasks try to answer the question, "What would a child at this age have to listen to and read, as well as say and write?" Many unit themes are reinforced and extended over the course of several books. For example, in books 2, 3, 3, and 5 respectively, the theme of food is carried over five levels with the following notions: kitchen and food, eating in a

cafeteria, shopping for food, and where food comes from. The food theme occurs twice in book 6, with topics on ordering food in a restaurant and attending a cooking class. Other themes, with similar extensions in notions and functions, occur across the series.

Comprehensible input and output

The selection of vocabulary and structures to provide comprehensible input in text, audio and illustrations is an involved process. Nunan (1991) cites a Brown and Yule (1983) study that determined the difficulty of listening texts for L2 learners. Although the study was of secondary school students, it provides an idea of levels of complexity that a materials developer must consider:

> The first factor related to the number of elements in the text and the ease and difficulty of distinguishing between them. The second significant factor was the text type. All other things being equal, descriptions were easier than instructions, which were easier than stories. Arguments or opinion-expressing texts containing abstract concepts and relationships were the most difficult. (p. 285)

At the more discrete level of individual vocabulary items, Gairns and Redman (2002) identify factors in choosing appropriate vocabulary, such as frequency, necessity, the cultural interests of the learners, including their everyday routines, cognitive level and expediency—the appropriateness of the lexical item for the purpose of the teaching context. In the case of *Starship English*, the choice of vocabulary proceeds from the themes, notions, and functions of each unit, but reference is also made to word lists from various national syllabi and the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2010).

Task chains

Starship English follows a task-chain approach, featuring a series of tasks that need to be sequentially completed in order that others can be undertaken. In the opening two-page spread of each unit, the language is modeled on the first page in illustrated dialogs. Teacher-led activities might include learners listening, then listening again as they read along silently, then learners practicing reading aloud, and some learners performing the dialog for the class. Illustrations and photos help to clarify the vocabulary and language structures. On the top of the second page is a unit-specific visual dictionary that presents items that can be substituted into the first page dialogs. As already mentioned, practice in this is followed by a semi-

open-ended activity in which learners use sentence and partial sentence prompts to ask and answer questions, personalizing the language they use to their particular contexts.

Subsequent pages in books 1 to 3 feature a song or chant to promote fluency, followed by related exercises in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, followed by a game to address uncertainty and heterogeneity by promoting random and quick questions and answers. Books 4 to 6, aimed at older learners, dispense with songs and games and instead feature additional reading and writing tasks and role-play activities.

Besides those tasks in the learner and activity books, additional activities are listed in the teacher book, some of which promote a negotiated curriculum and ask learners to act as teachers in the classroom and/or as researchers outside of the classroom, gathering English language materials.

Learner-centeredness and autonomy

Many L2 learner books are neutral in terms of teacher-centeredness or learner-centeredness; rather, the locus of control depends on the openness of the teacher choosing to offer increased autonomy to the learners. Alas, even the most learner-centered materials can be subverted by a teacher who conducts classes in traditional way (Polly & Hannafin, 2011). The *Starship English* teacher books provide many suggestions on how to structure lessons to make them more learner-centered, beginning with instructions on explaining the goals of each lesson to learners and eliciting the learners' background knowledge on the lesson topic.

CONCLUSION

With the rise of English as a global language of business, science and entertainment, there are now more—as well as more varied—second-language learning materials available than ever before, both in print and other media. The Internet, in particular, appears to be a rich source of free resources and pedagogical materials, but many of these materials are constructed with no regard to contemporary language teaching and learning theory. Using such materials often leads to inconsistent and scattershot curricula in which there is no systematic coverage of grammar, structures or vocabulary, and no sequence progression over consecutive years of a learner's education. In contrast, professionally created

materials generally feature a cohesive structure based on extensive expertise, experience, and editing. Not all, but many, are built on in-depth assessments of learner needs and adherence to empirically-supported theory.

It is essential that teachers immerse themselves in current and historical theories of teaching and learning and embrace a critical perspective on any materials they choose to use in the L2 classroom. This is particularly necessary because, as adults, teachers are all influenced by years of instruction in methods and materials that, while they may have allowed them to succeed, may not necessarily the best choice for today's learners. R. Buckminster Fuller captured this idea when he wrote:

> If you are in a shipwreck and all the boats are gone, a piano top buoyant enough to keep you afloat that comes along makes a fortuitous life preserver. But this is not to say that the best way to design a life preserver is in the form of a piano top (p. 9).

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BIODATA

Ken BEATTY is author/co-author of more than 130 textbooks used worldwide from the primary to tertiary levels. Most of his publications focus on various aspects of English as a second language but also include the graduate-level textbook *Teaching and researching computer-assisted language learning*, now in its second edition. His most recent book is *LEAP: Listening and speaking* (Pearson Canada, 2012). He has given 75 conference presentations and more than 200 teacher training presentations throughout Asia, Canada, and the Middle East. He was the recipient of a 2007 Canadian Association of Community Educators Award. Dr. Beatty has worked at colleges and universities in Canada, China, Hong Kong, and the United Arab Emirates, and he is currently TESOL Professor at Anaheim University, CA, USA. He lives on Bowen Island, Canada with his wife and two sons.