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1. THE IMPORTANCE OF MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT FOR LANGUAGE LEARNING

INTRODUCTION

In Tomlinson (1998), I mentioned that very few books had been published on materials development. This reflected the feeling at the time that materials development was ‘insufficiently academic’ to be treated as a field in its own right and that it was a “subsection of methodology, in which materials were usually introduced as examples of methods in action rather than as a means to explore the principles and procedures of their development” (Tomlinson, 2001, p. 66). In the early nineties I had had a hard struggle getting a pioneering MA course in materials development accepted at the University of Luton and I had failed to convince IATEFL to start a Special Interest Group in Materials Development. I did however succeed in 1993 in forming MATSDA (the Materials Development Association) “to bring together teachers, researchers, materials writers and publishers in a joint endeavour to stimulate and support principled research, innovation and development” (Tomlinson, 1998, p. vii). Since then MATSDA has played its part through conferences, writing workshops and its journal Folio in establishing materials development as both an important academic field of study and a vitally important practical undertaking. Since my lament in 1998 there has been a steadily increasing outpouring of books on materials development with a noticeable change from the earlier focus on practical concerns (e.g., Byrd, 1995; Cunningsworth, 1984, 1996; Hidalgo et al., 1995; McDonough & Shaw, 1993) to a greater concern with the application of rigorously established theory to effective practice (e.g., Harwood, 2010, 2013; McDonough & McGrath, 2002, 2013; Shaw & Masuhara, 2013; Tomlinson, 2003, 2008, 2011, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2004, 2010). Together with this increase in the recognition of the importance of materials development there has been a dramatic increase in the number of universities delivering MA courses and modules on materials development and in the number of PhD students researching aspects of materials development.

It is now recognised that materials development is one of the most important undertakings in applied research.
WHAT ARE MATERIALS?

Materials are “anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language, including coursebooks, videos, graded readers, flash cards, games, websites and mobile phone interactions” (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 143). They can be “informative (informing the learner about the target language), instructional (guiding the learner in practising the language), experiential (providing the learner with experience of the language in use), eliciting (encouraging the learner to use the language) and exploratory (helping the learner to make discoveries about the language)” (Tomlinson, 2012, p. 143). Ideally materials should be developed for learning rather than for teaching and they should perform all the functions specified above.

WHAT IS MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT?

Materials development is a practical undertaking involving the production, evaluation, adaptation and exploitation of materials intended to facilitate language acquisition and development. It is also a field of academic study investigating the principles and procedures of the design, writing, implementation, evaluation and analysis of learning materials. Ideally materials development practitioners and materials development researchers interact and inform each other through conferences, publications and shared endeavours. In the past materials development practitioners were either teachers with little awareness of applied linguistics or applied linguists with little awareness of teaching and learning. Nowadays there are many materials development experts who have considerable experience and expertise as teachers, as materials development practitioners and as materials development researchers and there have been a number of conferences recently in which materials development principles and procedures have been both discussed in theory and demonstrated in action (e.g., the MATSDA Conference on Applied Linguistics and Materials Development at the University of Limerick in 2012 and the MATSDA Conference on SLA and Materials Development at the University of Liverpool in 2014).

WHY IS MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT IMPORTANT?

There have been a number of movements which have attempted to develop materials free approaches to the teaching of languages (e.g., the Dogme movement of Thornbury and Meddings (2001)) but it is commonly accepted that in most language classrooms throughout the world most lessons are still based on materials. Richards (2001, p. 251), for example, observes that “instructional materials generally serve as the basis of much of the language input that learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom”. It is also commonly accepted that most language teachers use coursebooks and that no coursebook can meet the needs and wants of every (or even any) class (Tomlinson, 2010). This means that “Every teacher is a materials developer” (English Language Centre, 1997) who is constantly