

Encouraging Learners to Create Language-Learning Materials

Student-produced materials are a powerful tool for promoting learner autonomy. They challenge the traditional paradigm of education because the very concept of learner-produced materials is based on trust in the student-centered learning process; when developing materials, learners do not rely on the teacher to make every decision.

Although material-development tasks are typically initiated and guided by the instructor, students are eventually left alone to create and shape their own learning. They brainstorm, plan, and make decisions as well as assess and improve their work. In short, they use their English and critical-thinking skills. The nature of English also changes in such a context: it is not only a language to be learned but also a means of communication to complete a complex task.

In this article, I will highlight the educational value of learner-produced materials and discuss methods to encourage students to create materials. As they do, they review content themselves, provide opportunities for peers to review content and engage in peer learning, and contribute to the collection of stored materials available to other classes and future students. I will also describe a few material-development activities aimed at empowering learners to practice and improve their English.

WHY ENCOURAGE LEARNERS TO CREATE MATERIALS?

Creating materials is an arduous job because it involves a number of challenges. A materials

writer has to be creative, competent, and sensitive to his or her educational context. One might argue that most students are not ready to cope with such a heavy load; however, students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge. Most of them have enough creativity and imagination to deal with tasks that are not within the scope of their classroom routine. At the same time, it would be wrong to challenge students if, in the end, they are not going to develop as language learners. This raises an important question: what are the benefits of learner-generated materials?

One benefit of student-designed materials is that they contribute to peer teaching and learning. For instance, students might facilitate other people's learning by creating and submitting materials to the self-access center (SAC) of their college. According to Malcolm (2004), students in Bahrain were required to submit materials to their SAC as part of their self-directed learning program. The materials designed were mainly worksheets with crosswords, gap fills, multiple-choice exercises, and so on. In addition to submitting materials, the students were requested to evaluate their

peers' contributions to the SAC. Malcolm (2004) states that most student-made activities were useful and appreciated. Yet the evaluation conducted at the end of the academic year revealed that only around a third of the students considered their contributions to the SAC valuable. The author attributes such reaction to the students' deep-rooted belief that they were consumers, not producers, of knowledge, and speculates that some learners might have been annoyed by the extra work imposed on them. Nevertheless, the project offers guidance for teachers interested in involving learners in materials creation.

But teachers should be aware that there are other potential benefits and other types of learner-created materials. For example, developing materials might take students one step further toward better English. Stewart (2010) describes a project carried out with her immigrant students; in an effort to empower her learners to write with *voice*—one's personal and unique way to express thoughts—she asked them to produce a book of stories, essays, and poetry exploring the issue of immigration. Stewart reports that at the end of the project, students felt more motivated to read and write in English as well as use voice in their writing. They also felt they were able to define their identities as immigrants when describing their personal experiences.

Materials creation as a joint endeavor helps learners enjoy one of the key components of collaborative learning: active engagement. According to Maltese (1991), student-created puppet shows and yearbooks featuring the novel *Lord of the Flies* allowed learners not only to read well but also to visualize and experience the reading material.

Student-generated materials also have the potential to encourage students to become

more autonomous. Bhattacharya and Chauhan (2010) report on a study in which students were asked to create an individual blog including two articles; the first was an academic assignment derived from their syllabus, and the second explored a niche topic students considered worth discussing. The students sent emails advertising their blogs, commented on one another's blogs, and shared information. The results of the study revealed that blog-assisted language learning can contribute to learner autonomy, as it helps students develop their language and cognitive skills while empowering them to make more informed choices regarding their decisions.

These studies serve as a starting point for instructors interested in incorporating students' materials into their teaching. Since results are limited to the contexts where the studies have been conducted, it is desirable for instructors to do their own research to investigate the effect of student-created materials on students' learning and determine which types of materials are most beneficial for their students to create.

FACILITATING MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

Producing materials can be a face-threatening experience for students if they are not trained. Here, training means not only modeling a task for learners, but also creating an atmosphere where designing and sharing materials is a natural extension of everyday learning.

Having experimented with student-created materials for almost three years, I have recorded eight principles to guide myself. These principles are, of course, affected by my own teaching experience in the Omani educational context. However, other teachers might find them transferable to their teaching and learning contexts.

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1. *Believe in students' creativity.* If teachers have basic trust in their class, no matter how unmotivated it seems to be, they should have the courage to train students to complete difficult tasks. This does not presuppose blind trust in students' abilities: teachers have to be aware of the difficulties students face. However, treating students as creative individuals is of great help. To show learners that their creativity is appreciated, teachers could, for instance, read student stories, essays, or poems to the class.
 2. *Set a clear goal for each activity.* If teachers decide to review questions in the present simple tense, they can ask students to produce a sentence-scramble exercise including such questions. Establishing a purpose allows students to alert themselves to important information. In addition, it helps teachers use their time in the best possible manner (Fisher and Frey 2011).
 3. *Refer students to something familiar.* According to schema theory, past experiences cause people to create mental networks that will eventually help them figure out new experiences (Liu 2012). That is why it is best to ask learners to develop materials similar to those they have seen in textbooks and class handouts.
 4. *Let students work on simple tasks first.* Learners need to get into the habit of developing materials. It is desirable that they create simple exercises before doing more demanding and time-consuming tasks. For example, they can start with five-item matching exercises and only then, after completing them, work on more complex projects.
 5. *Provide examples.* To visualize their future creations, students should first analyze the content and structure of a similar type of material. For example, they could focus on the words in a sample crossword puzzle and then discuss the direction of cells (across and down) and types of clues (definitions or example sentences).
 6. *Give scaffolded feedback.* Scaffolding comprises much more than giving students the right solution to a problem. Teachers lead learners toward solving a proposed problem by hinting at correct answers or giving them advice or information that will enable them to think about the problem (Finn and Metcalfe 2010). Instructors should steer learners in the right direction rather than give a set of dogmatic instructions.
 7. *Have students share their work.* Knowing that their materials (e.g., wikis) will be evaluated by their instructor and peers motivates students to invest more effort in their work (Weber 2013). Therefore, learners need an opportunity to share their creations in class or submit them to the instructor for further use.
 8. *Store students' materials.* Instructors should create an easily accessible database of the best materials. Having constant access to student-generated materials will help teachers not only supplement their teaching but also model materials production for future students. Such a database will also allow instructors to share students' materials with their colleagues.
- Teachers can refer to these principles before asking their learners to develop materials, while the learners are developing the materials, and after learners have finished. In fact, examining these guidelines after students produce a certain material helps teachers reflect on their own performance and look for ways to overcome the challenges students have encountered.

WHAT KINDS OF MATERIALS CAN LEARNERS DEVELOP?

Students can develop a variety of materials ranging from visuals to crossword puzzles.

Ideally, all materials that learners develop should help them become better users of English. In addition, the materials should supplement and support the course(s) learners are taking. For example, medical students can develop their own pronunciation dictionary of medical terms to help themselves articulate the vocabulary items they are learning. Likewise, law students might stage a mock trial that allows them to use legal English in a meaningful context and in the process develop documents, worksheets on useful phrases and procedures, and mock-trial guidelines for future classes. Teachers simply need to choose activities that are useful and potentially interesting for their students.

I usually ask students to work in pairs because pair work gives them better chances to contribute to the final product. The two students are encouraged to share responsibility and work hard, as there is no other person to help. However, teachers might need to divide their students into groups, depending on class size or the type of activity. Working individually is also an option if teachers feel a student can cope on his or her own.

Following are five activities I have used with my elementary, pre-intermediate, and intermediate learners (18- to 20-year-old university students). They can also be used with students of other ages and levels. For instance, young learners might enjoy creating a word-scramble exercise if they are asked to include the names of colors or animals. I have used these activities during one class period; therefore, they are described in the form of a step-by-step plan to help teachers visualize what they need to do. The activities might last for forty to sixty minutes, depending on students' abilities and level of English.

Activity 1: Student-Produced Text

Instructors can promote learner-centered teaching and learning by asking their students to produce reading material. First of all, student-generated texts might boost learners' motivation. Cloud, Lakin, and Leininger (2011) report that having students create stories about their names and contribute those

to a unit compiled by the teachers turned their students into highly motivated learners. Second, students will feel more in control of their own learning when they create their reading material. Another advantage of student-created texts is that they offer valuable insight into students' needs and interests (Chou et al. 2007).

Teachers can adopt two approaches to student-produced text. They can promote traditional sharing (i.e., students read and comment on their peers' essays, stories, poems, blogs, and so on). Alternatively, a learner-created text can serve as a stimulus for another activity. I am in favor of the latter approach because it is related to peer teaching: students produce materials to give their peers an opportunity to improve their English. One such activity allows students to enhance their writing skills by working on *story starters*—the first three to five lines of an incomplete story—produced by their peers, as in the following steps:

- a.** Conduct a whole-class discussion about what kinds of stories students like to read and write.
- b.** Explain what a story starter is. Be ready to show students an example if necessary.
- c.** Inform learners that each of them needs to write a story starter. Emphasize that the story starters need to grab their peers' attention. If you are using story starters to help students review past simple and past progressive, for example, you could first elicit what they know about the formation and usage of these tenses. You can also assign different topics, or students can be asked to create their own scenarios. They can also come up with their own interpretations of the same topic; for instance, they can all write about a scary night (real or fictional), but any topic that fits students' interests and experiences could work. Walk around the class and provide help as needed.
- d.** After students finish writing, divide them into pairs. Ask them to exchange

their story starters. Tell students to finish their partners' stories. You can make the activity more competitive by telling students that there is a prize for the best story.

- e. If there is time, have students read their stories and, if you want, ask the class to vote on their favorite. The pair who has produced the best story can get a small prize. You could also ask students to hand in their stories and, after you read them, you can announce the winner in the next class.

One option is to ask students to read their stories in groups of four. Each student reads his or her story to the group, and the group chooses the best one. Each group then nominates a speaker to read the story to the class. Each student in the group explains why he or she likes the story. Encourage students to say as much as they can; otherwise, they will be tempted to produce simplistic utterances like "I loved it" or "It is interesting." Instead, they can focus on the content (actions and characters described in the story) and language (grammar, vocabulary, and spelling). It is their chance to use English meaningfully while reflecting on a peer's work.

Story starters can be a source of inspiration for teachers and students; they can also enrich other teachers' repertoire of activities. For instance, the best story starters can be compiled in a book and then published. The book could also include the best stories based on students' story starters. Later, the book can be used by the same school or shared with other schools that may be experiencing a shortage of teaching materials.

Quizzes

Most students take quizzes on a regular basis. Why not ask them to design a quiz of their

own? This exercise might help them feel their contributions are valued by the teacher. At the same time, students get a chance to review what they have already learned. Activities 2 and 3 provide examples for teachers who would like to encourage their learners to design reading and spelling quizzes.

Activity 2: Reading Quizzes

One thing teachers can do is ask students to write comprehension questions about a reading passage. When writing the questions, students have a chance to process the text by focusing on its main idea and details. In addition, they will learn new vocabulary. To facilitate quiz development, teachers can follow these steps:

- a. Mentally, divide your class into pairs before the lesson. Then select two texts (Set A and Set B) from a review unit in the textbook you are using in order to expose students to similar content. If there are no review units, you could select two other texts. If there are 20 students, the first five pairs will get a text from Set A, and the other five will get a text from Set B.
- b. Bring the texts to class. Divide students into pairs and distribute the texts.
- c. Encourage students to read carefully. They need to understand the text thoroughly in order to write proper questions. Allow them to use dictionaries if they want.
- d. After students finish reading, elicit information about two question types: True/False and Wh- questions. Write an example of each on the board. If you are dealing with an advanced class ready to cope with a challenge, include multiple-choice questions as well.

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- e. Inform students they need to write at least five questions (depending on the length of the passage) about the text they have read. Emphasize that they can mix different types of questions. For example, they can write two Wh-questions and three True/False questions.
- f. When the questions are ready, ask students to exchange their text and questions with a pair that worked with a different text. Provide learners with enough time to read and answer their peers' questions.
- g. Students exchange the questions again and check their peers' answers.
- h. Allow students to give feedback to their peers. Have them sit with the pair that has answered their questions. Encourage students to refer their peers to the text while giving feedback. The feedback could relate to the questions that were developed by one pair or to the answers given by the other pair.

The teacher could also photocopy a different text for each pair. Another option is to ask everyone to work on the same text. This option will save the teacher preparation time and allow him or her to give feedback on the quality of students' questions.

Activity 3: Spelling Quizzes

Spelling is a major problem for many English learners. To help them master the intricacies of English spelling, I ask them to develop simple spelling quizzes consisting of a word scramble and an error-correction exercise. I have chosen these two exercise types because my students seem to enjoy unscrambling words and correcting spelling mistakes. Other teachers are free to include the items they find suitable. Nevertheless, they could first examine the steps I have described below.

- a. Provide students with a sample quiz. You can either write it on the board or make photocopies for your students. If there is an overhead projector in your classroom,

you might display the quiz on the screen. You should end up with a quiz like that in Figure 1. You do not have to include the given words in your quiz; however, it is best to provide words your students tend to misspell.

- b. Ask students to take the quiz you have provided. This task should not take too much time because there are only two exercises and four items.
- c. Divide students into pairs. Tell them they need to create a similar quiz for their peers. Ask them to choose words they normally misspell. They need to include five items in each exercise.
- d. Give students enough time to complete their quizzes. Monitor and provide assistance if needed.
- e. Tell learners to exchange the quizzes and check their peers' answers. Then select two or three quizzes and read aloud some of the words students have used. Ask individual learners to spell the words. Write them on the board.

An option, if you want students to take multiple quizzes, is to ask each pair to post its quiz on the wall. Allow students to mingle and take as many quizzes as possible. Tell them to write the answers on their own paper; otherwise, the original will become unusable.

Spelling Quiz

1. Unscramble the two words below.
 - a. dgsein –
 - b. tehri –
2. Correct the spelling errors in the two words below.
 - a. becouse –
 - b. communicat –

Figure 1. Spelling Quiz

If teachers find spelling quizzes boring, they can tell students to make a word search for their peers. Looking for problematic words in the puzzle might help students remember the sequence of letters. Alternatively, learners could list five to ten words and replace problematic vowels or consonant clusters with blanks. In this case, other students will have to provide the missing letters.

Instructors can experiment with a variety of quizzes. What matters here is good scaffolding. Learners should be presented with a clear example and only then be asked to create a quiz. That is why teachers need to make sure the sample quizzes they are showing are clear and easy to imitate. A successful sample saves time and makes quiz creation less threatening for students.

Activity 4: Crossword Puzzles

Creating crossword puzzles has important benefits. First, learners are exposed to the spelling and definitions of words they have already learned. Second, they focus on the words they would like to review instead of relying on their teacher's choice.

I first challenged my learners to create a crossword puzzle three years ago. The experiment proved to be successful, although somewhat time-consuming at first, and since then I have been using the following steps to encourage my learners to create crossword puzzles at least twice a semester.

- a.** Show students a sample crossword puzzle. Discuss its structure. This will activate students' schemata and will later help them create a puzzle of their own.
- b.** Create student pairs or triads. Inform students they will create a crossword puzzle. You will need to explain that they are doing the activity to review the vocabulary they have learned. This might help them feel more positive toward an entirely new task.
- c.** Have each pair or group write down ten words they have learned. The

words should be taken from a textbook learners are using or lessons they have studied. Otherwise, learners might select words that are unfamiliar to their peers, which is both counterproductive and unfair. In any case, students have to understand that one purpose of the puzzle is to help their peers review the vocabulary covered. Walk around to check if students are following your instructions.

- d.** After students write down the words, give them enough time to draw cells for the letters and write the clues. Walk around and help.
- e.** Once the puzzles are ready, allow students to check their work. They need to make sure there are no spelling mistakes or missing cells.
- f.** If possible, photocopy the puzzles so that you can reuse and recycle them, or encourage students to make copies themselves. The photocopies can be used with another class you are teaching and kept for future students.
- g.** Ask students to exchange crosswords with another pair or triad. Give them enough time to complete the puzzles.
- h.** Students exchange the puzzles again and check their peers' answers. To make it more fun, you can ask students to give their classmates a mark out of a possible ten points (ten words, with one point given for each correct answer).
- i.** Students give feedback to those who have completed their puzzle. They sit together and comment on the words selected, the clues, any misunderstandings that occurred, and mistakes their peers may have made.
- j.** Students might have made mistakes in their puzzles. You might want to collect all their puzzles and provide feedback in the next lesson.

Creating a crossword may be followed by extension activities. For instance, teachers could tell students to choose five words from their crossword and use them in a short text, such as a letter or a story. Learners could also do mini-research on some of the lexical items by exploring their word families, synonyms, and antonyms.

Activity 5: Visuals

Creating a visual seems to lie beyond the limits of an English classroom because learners are not really producing language. However, working on a visual has a number of benefits. Students are preparing a powerful stimulus that generates feelings, reactions, and, more importantly, a desire to express thoughts in the target language. Also, some visual aids assist students in understanding what has been taught (see Hoffman 2003).

Visuals can also help students review. Being a loyal fan of English vocabulary, I am never able to resist the temptation to review the words my students have been learning. In this section I describe a vocabulary review activity that is, in a way, similar to the crossword puzzle presented above. The underlying concept is slightly different, though, because students draw pictures and create posters to visualize lexical items recorded in their vocabulary logs. That is why the activity can be named Visualize the Vocabulary Log. Teachers using the activity for the first time are advised to consult the steps below.

- a. Tell students that one way to remember the words in their vocabulary logs is called visualization. To help students understand what you mean, draw a picture of a bone and write the word *bone* inside, or use a drawing and word of your choice.
- b. Divide learners into pairs. Give each pair a piece of paper and some pencils or markers. Tell learners they need to visualize ten words in their vocabulary logs. Then they can draw what they want as long as it helps them remember the words. In any case, students also need to write each word and then provide its English definition, its part of speech,

and an example sentence of their own. Make sure students write new example sentences and do not copy the ones already written in their logs.

- c. Give students enough time to make posters. Monitor and provide support if needed. In fact, watching students work can offer invaluable insights into their creative abilities. For instance, the students I taught last fall were extremely creative. Some drew sophisticated images depicting words like *departure*, *destination*, and *allowance*. Others adopted a more innovative approach. For example, a group of girls drew a bouquet of tulips: the words and parts of speech were written on the stems, while the definitions were written across the petals.
- d. When the posters are ready, ask students to check them for spelling and grammar mistakes. Walk around and help.
- e. Put the posters on the classroom walls to share your students' work with their peers and with other classes.

If teachers have time, they can ask students to reflect on the experience. Students can discuss creating vocabulary posters in pairs or write a reflection paper. If students write, they can focus on the challenges they faced and the decisions they made; this feedback will help you next time you do the activity. Making posters helps students explore their own creativity and review vocabulary, and reflection is a way to extend that process. Students can discuss or write about their reasons for choosing certain vocabulary terms, whether the activity helped them retain and use the vocabulary terms, how different pairs represented the same terms, how they can apply the principles of the activity in their future learning, and so on.

INCORPORATING STUDENT-CREATED MATERIALS INTO A COURSE

Using learner-created materials may cause challenges for the teacher. One of them is

making room for such materials within a course or curriculum. The most practical mode of incorporating student-created materials into routine teaching would be the traditional classroom mode. This suggests that teachers need to use student-developed materials during a regular lesson.

Instructors using learner-developed materials for the first time might want to start with a set of three materials. These can be selected according to the skill or subskill teachers would like to reinforce. For instance, students can develop a set of three vocabulary revision exercises. First, students will develop an error-correction exercise requiring their peers to correct spelling mistakes in five vocabulary items they have learned. I suggest starting with this type of exercise because of its familiar format: most students encounter error-correction exercises in the learning materials they are using. Moreover, an exercise like this is not very difficult to develop.

However, students should be given a chance to transition to more challenging materials later in the course. This transition will boost their material-development skills and help them experiment with different formats. As a result, the second activity I would include in the set requires learners to produce a matching exercise based on five words or phrases and their definitions. It is more challenging than the first exercise and exposes learners not only to the spelling but also to the meaning of the vocabulary items they have chosen. The last exercise of the set is a crossword puzzle including about a dozen vocabulary items students have learned. The advantage of this material is that it helps students use higher-level thinking skills, as they have to produce a well-organized network of cells. At the same time, they deal with each vocabulary item in a number of ways. They pay attention to its

spelling when drawing the cells and focus on its meaning and part of speech when providing context for the clues. The first exercise of the set can be used after the first two weeks of the course, while the second one should be introduced halfway through the course. The crossword puzzle can serve as a review activity near the end of the course.

Teachers can but do not have to focus on the same skill when selecting materials for their set. To provide more variety, they could ask their learners to create different types of materials. For instance, within one semester or course, learners can create a story starter, a reading quiz, and a vocabulary poster. If there is enough time, teachers can introduce a new activity every week or two or use variations of the same activity. For example, they could first ask students to work on peer-created story starters and then, two weeks later, tell them to write stories based on peer-provided endings.

CONCLUSION

The amount and type of materials learners can create is extensive, and the activities described in this article are merely examples. Teachers are free to adjust them to their context. For instance, they can extend or shorten each activity and come up with their own guidelines and requirements. The outcome of such activities might not always be ideal, so it is important to consider learner-generated materials as a learning opportunity. Students will not always create perfect materials, but mistakes are a sign they are processing the target language. Neither should teachers overchallenge learners. It is important to find the right balance between students' language level and the specific material they are being asked to generate. Teachers should also be ready to face and overcome students' resistance. In more traditional educational contexts, students might not be willing to challenge their traditional role and act like "teachers."

Resistance from the institution is another factor to consider, especially in the case of long-term projects. In many contexts, students are left out of materials development

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on the assumption that teachers and textbook authors are the only ones responsible for creating materials. Nevertheless, teachers could use three strategies to get the support of their administration.

First, teachers should share their material-development activities with colleagues they trust. In fact, sharing is vital. By discussing their ideas with other people, teachers basically promote new activities and inspire their colleagues to use them. If several teachers experiment with student-produced materials and find them helpful, the institution might realize that it is a productive use of time. Teachers can present their ideas at a meeting or do a joint presentation on student-created materials whenever there is a professional development event.

Second, conducting research could indicate that student-created materials are beneficial; for example, research on the impact of student-created crossword puzzles on learners' retention of course-specific vocabulary may convince administrators to integrate them into the curriculum. Teachers can choose one type of student-created material and investigate its effect on students' learning. Teachers can also create a questionnaire investigating learners' opinions of activities requiring them to develop materials. If the opinions are positive, the findings may support the claim that student-generated materials motivate learners to improve their English.

Finally, teachers can promote learner-created materials by submitting them to the SAC, if there is one. If the administration sees students benefit from their peers' work, they might encourage more teachers to experiment with learner-developed materials.

The activities presented in this article might seem helpful on paper. However, they will work only if teachers are motivated to try something new in their classroom. The success of any innovation depends on passion. If teachers are passionate about exploring new ways of learning, they will make room for

learner-generated materials in spite of the challenges they face every day.

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