

# From Passive Participant<sup>to</sup> Active Thinker

## A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH<sup>TO</sup> MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT

**S**EVERAL OF MY COLLEAGUES WHO TEACH ENGLISH COMPLAIN THAT THEIR Vietnamese students are shy and do not speak English in class and that they lack the critical thinking skills necessary to express their points of view. Many teachers believe these factors are interrelated and can be explained by a cultural difference to authority that results in passive learning. Although I realize that some students do speak English and are excellent critical thinkers, this passivity is a definite problem in Vietnam's EFL classrooms.

From the beginning, Vietnamese students are taught to view their teachers as the embodiment of knowledge, and the authority and control that teachers exercise can deter students from freely expressing their opinions. In this firmly established teacher-centered system, it is often offensive for students to contradict the teacher's point of view. This unequal classroom relationship is often seen as a

cultural disposition, which I agree with to some extent. However, along with Littlewood (2000, 33), I also believe that if students display passive classroom attitudes, it “is more likely to be a consequence of the educational contexts that have been or are now provided for them, than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves.”

Regardless of how reserved students are, I believe that teachers of English can adopt various strategies to increase classroom participation and critical thinking. One strategy that can benefit language learning is taking a thoughtful approach to materials development. This is especially true for the EFL context, where the classroom is often the only source of English, and materials “play a crucial role in exposing learners to the language” (Dudley-Evans and St. John 1998, 171). This article will discuss why materials development is an important tool for teachers and will illustrate how to make materials relevant and meaningful to students, with the objective of reversing the problem of passive learning.

### Localizing materials

Although English teaching materials come from many places, the dominant sources are countries where English is a native or an official second language. Materials from these English-speaking countries do not reflect the learning styles or cultural values of the EFL students who use them, and, as a result, the students’ motivation suffers and they become reluctant to interact in class and share opinions or ideas. One solution is to *localize materials*, which entails revising them so they relate more specifically to the culture and experience of the EFL students, who would otherwise not respond to materials that have no connection to their lives. Brown (1994) highlights the importance of recognizing the link between culture and language when using materials and activities, and Stevick (1976) explains how materials can contribute to students feeling alienated from their home culture, the target culture, and from themselves.

Localizing materials is based on the idea that relevant contexts naturally encourage students to show interest, which allows the teacher to deliver more effective lessons. When the material is meaningful, students are more participatory and successful at learning a lan-

guage (Brown 1994). Dat (2003) supports using localized English teaching materials because they present students with real-life and culturally familiar language contexts; this matching of language instruction with students’ needs and personal preferences allows them to express their identity and empowers them to make decisions about what they need to learn.

It is my viewpoint that materials do not need to be totally representative of the local culture and that a balance should be maintained between foreign and local cultural concepts and images. This provides a rich opportunity for teachers to explain non-native cultural items, in addition to using localized content. However, it is very important for teachers to be aware of what the materials contain, so they can identify where to best represent local culture and where to explain non-native elements. In many cases it will be obvious where to localize the material to include relevant and recognizable scenarios. For example, an ESL textbook from the UK that is used in an EFL context might contain scenarios that are performed quite differently across cultures, such as a job interview, or a boy asking a girl out on a date. Since these interactions are governed by particular social rules, they may appear inappropriate or offensive to non-natives and would thus be candidates for adaptation to the local cultural norms. An alternative is to explain the cultural differences, but the point is that a balance should be maintained. The role of teachers as skillful material developers is therefore crucial because they can make the best judgment about which foreign cultural elements to localize and which to explain.

Explaining cultural differences is helpful because it gives teachers the opportunity to use English to analyze the differences between cultures. For example, Vietnamese students might find it hard to feel the beauty of this comparison made by Shakespeare in his *18th Sonnet*: “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?” The terribly hot summer in Vietnam makes people feel tired, and they often associate the season with unpleasantness. The beauty would hardly be conveyed if the teacher did not spend time giving students some background about climate differences between the two countries and reflect on the qualities of

seasons that appear in the poetry of each country. Cultural explanations are an excellent way to activate the students' curiosity and invite them to ask questions.

#### *How to localize materials*

Tomlinson (2003) explains that localizing ESL textbooks is a matter of supplementing general activities with packs of texts and illustrations that can be photocopied. The teacher's edition should include suggestions from the textbook publisher on how to accomplish this and also provide instructions for learners on how to modify the material according to their own cultural context. Replacing unfamiliar contexts with familiar ones allows students easier access to the information and gives them something to talk and write about. For example, an ESL lesson that requires students to give directions to the Opera House in Sydney, Australia, could be replaced with one requiring them to use local street names to give directions to the local theater from their homes. Having students actually do the text adaptation is another way to provide opportunities for participation and can lead to further activities; for example, the teacher could have students speculate about how people in different cultures give names to streets. This example of localizing materials can be applied to many other textbook situations and is something teachers can use throughout their careers to keep their students motivated and engaged.

#### *Localized materials or nationally produced materials?*

It is important to distinguish between ESL materials that are localized by students and teachers and EFL materials that are produced nationally. Nationally produced materials represent only the local culture, and many researchers and practitioners in the field advocate their use. Research I conducted at the Regional Language Center (RELC) in Singapore (with Vietnamese subjects) indicated that some teachers feel the urgent need to produce materials for national use. They believe that the main focus in language instruction should be on the local culture because their students will use English in that setting to describe local culture to foreigners. Therefore, they feel it is logical to support nationally produced materials with a focus wholly on the local culture.

Although I agree that the inclusion of the local culture is important, I argue that stu-

dents should also be exposed to materials that focus on the cultures of English-speaking countries. This allows students to compare and contrast their culture with other global cultures, thereby expanding their background knowledge and developing their identity. According to Alptekin (2002, 58), "learning a foreign language becomes a kind of enculturation, where one acquires new cultural frames of reference and a new world view, reflecting those of the target language culture and its speakers." If students rely solely on nationally produced EFL textbooks, they will see only members of their own culture in their own setting who are not unlike themselves (Cortazzi and Jin 1999). To some extent, this would negatively affect their curiosity and motivation to explore new things. Also, if EFL textbooks dedicated to the local cultural context are used exclusively, students will encounter no cultural alternatives and will be less able to relate to foreign visitors because their English will be devoid of the foreign context. Unless the foreign visitors know local culture, mutual misunderstandings might occur. For example, many Vietnamese learners might feel free to ask English-speaking visitors their age or marital status without realizing that this is generally unacceptable, even though it is acceptable in their home culture. Students also might have problems responding to compliments from an English-speaking foreigner about their clothes or hairstyle, and they will just smile or even say nothing, which might seem to be a bit rude to the foreign visitor. A good balance between foreign and local elements in teaching materials is likely to make learners more adept at avoiding such cultural missteps. Localized content is motivating and increases participation, while foreign cultural content increases understanding and awareness of another culture's social conventions.

#### **Humanizing materials**

Humanistic psychology emphasizes the psychological and sociological realities of people; in relation to language teaching, it recognizes learning as a process that includes more than just the language itself. It considers the significance of learners' feelings, emotions, and social experience as integral to the educational process. According to Tomlinson (2003, 13), *humanizing materials* means adding "activities

which help to make the language learning process a more affective experience,” and finding “ways of helping the learners to connect what is in the book to what is in their minds.” When teachers humanize materials, they place learners in the forefront of the development process and consider their needs, preferences, and learning styles. Materials development should be guided by the belief that students are feeling individuals who have a need to express and exchange opinions. Tomlinson (2003) offers four constructs (described below) for developing humanized materials that involve students in the learning process and get them to speak more in English.

### *1. Utilizing multidisciplinary teams*

Teachers are advised to develop materials in multidisciplinary teams. These teams should be composed of both novice and experienced teachers of English and should include teachers from other subject areas. These teams can pool their creative resources to develop a wide variety of topics that satisfy the various professional needs that different students might have. The RELC research I conducted showed that many students at my university want to learn English in order to work in fields such as business, accounting, and tourism, so they are naturally interested in texts that deal with these fields. The subject area teachers who work closely with the language teachers in the process of materials development can assist a great deal in accommodating these students' needs.

### *2. Adopting a text-driven approach*

The text-driven approach requires finding materials from books, magazines, newspapers, and other sources that have a direct link to the students' lives and experience. Specific language skills and activities can then be designed from these materials. The advantage of this approach is that texts can be selected based on the richness and diversity of the language and on their relevance to the English learners, who should find them both meaningful and motivating.

### *3. Incorporating literature*

Teachers are encouraged to incorporate literature in the teaching materials. There is a tendency for teachers to pay more attention to nonfiction materials due to the need to keep up with current events and advancements in technology. As a result, teachers prefer materials that deal with topics such as human cloning, global-

ization, and the effects of global warming. However, adding fiction to the mix gives students the opportunity to experience literary texts of all genres. Literature can be selected for its stimulating plots, action, and suspense, which is captivating to English language learners. Even those works that are linguistically simple can be cognitively and emotionally complex. Exposing students to works of literature lets them experience not only the beautiful language, but also something beyond, such as sympathy with characters and engagement with emotional situations that relate to their actual lives. When studying literature, students react to moving experiences by exploring their feelings and personality, which helps them increase their self-awareness. Adapted or simplified versions of literature are good for intermediate students, while original works can be used for those advanced learners who are better able to handle the content and language.

### *4. Introducing informal discourse features*

Although more formal language typically dominates language classrooms, the inclusion of informal discourse features—such as redundancies, reduced forms, and colloquial language—lets learners experience the type of natural conversation that happens regularly in social situations. This prepares students to be more active participants in conversation. To collect informal discourse, teachers can record English conversations from many sources, including the radio, the Internet, and television. Teachers can also present a film in English where slang and informal language is used. English-speaking visiting lecturers, volunteers, and friends who come to visit or work at the institution are another valuable resource for natural conversation. In addition, EFL teachers who have lived in an English-speaking environment can collect informal language elements and upon their return share them with their colleagues. It is important that such informal samples are collected from both English-speaking countries and countries where English is spoken as a second language because EFL students will likely have contact with people from both places.

### **Employing critical thinking**

The notion of *critical thinking* is not new for teachers and students nurtured under certain educational systems, especially in Western

countries. However, it appears to be a challenging idea for Vietnamese teachers and students. My RELC research demonstrated that Vietnamese students are very reluctant to question ideas or to express their opinions or individual preferences. Therefore, I believe it is important for both teachers and students to change the teacher-centered style of instruction.

For Marshall and Rowland (1998), *critical thinking* occurs when students question their own beliefs or what they are told. Others see critical thinking as the ability to distinguish between facts and opinions, judgments and inferences, and objective and subjective impressions. Critical thinking is a vital feature for the improvement of teaching and learning. It is an essential ability because we are living in times of advanced technology and the widespread expansion of information, when each individual needs to be a critical thinker to uncover bias, prejudice, and misinformation. Learning to think critically can produce enthusiastic language learners, and Marshall and Rowland (1998, 34) describe how critical thinking produces “joy, release, relief, and exhilaration as we break through to new ways of looking at our personal, work, and political worlds.”

#### *Techniques to promote critical thinking*

Materials development can lay the foundation for critical thinking. Paran (2003) believes that incorporating elements of critical thinking into material will encourage learners to question texts and add linguistic value to the textbook and classroom. To encourage such critical thinking, teachers should “not let questions and answers become only one-way activities: questions from teachers and answers from students” (Talebinezahd 2003, 47). One way to do this is by asking *wh-* questions that require students to think deeply and use complex language to respond, as opposed to asking questions that can simply be answered with *yes* or *no*. As Talebinezahd (2003, 46) states, “real language circles around referents or world knowledge in order to create messages and therefore is not form based but meaning based. Thus, questions in the language classrooms should be *referential* or meaning based, and not focus solely on form.” In a language classroom, teachers should elicit meaningful student reactions to texts and also signal that it is permissible to disagree with the text and to ask questions as well.

Richards and Rodgers (2001, 210) write that “language learning is also believed to be motivating when students are focusing on something other than language, such as ideas, issues, and opinions.” To achieve this, one can follow Paran’s (2003) suggestion to construct activities that train students to distinguish (1) fact from opinion, (2) supported opinions from unsupported opinions, (3) texts with factual mistakes in them, (4) corroborating information from disconfirming information, and (5) conflicting information within and between texts. These activities will develop higher thinking skills and make students active participants in the acquisition of knowledge.

Another technique to stimulate critical thinking is for the teacher to provide two texts that present totally different views on the same matter and invite students to discuss and debate the issue. When selecting the texts, the teacher has to pay attention to the content to ensure that it corresponds with topics that students are genuinely interested in. The teacher can also find texts that contain a foreign perspective about the students’ country or culture, so that they can see themselves through the eyes of others. Learning about other cultures and their perspectives is crucial for English language learners because it helps shape their view of themselves and of the world. This is beneficial because it helps students integrate with a large and rapidly changing global community.

However, in selecting materials from foreign countries, teachers should be sensitive to controversial issues, and they must use discretion in deciding whether to use them in the classroom. For example, my students recently listened to a Voice of America broadcast about the lack of religious freedom in Vietnam. I did not support this premise because the Vietnamese people have always enjoyed religious freedom. Nevertheless, this surprising news item provided an interesting cultural topic for discussion, as well as a good lesson on English grammatical structures. After the broadcast I wanted my students to express their views, but one very angry student stood up and told me that the news was untrue and threatened to report the classroom activity to the police. Eventually she calmed down and understood that the intention of the activity was to raise cultural awareness by looking at another country’s perspective, to encourage critical think-



ing, and to develop English language skills. It was unexpected that a student might react in such a way, and the other students seemed to be excited about the broadcast and wanted to share their opinions. Still, it was an unpleasant experience. My intention was to stimulate the students' minds and get them to speak, not to cause distress. However, I mistakenly took for granted that the broadcast would be interesting for all to discuss simply because it was about Vietnam. While teachers should be sensitive to controversy, I still believe that dealing with different or conflicting perspectives is essential to the development of critical thinking and is an important strategy to make students participate in class.

Finally, because so many textbooks come from Western cultures, where critical thinking is often woven into the concepts, images, and topics, learning English is itself a good way to stimulate critical and reflective thinking on the part of students. By using the textbooks, students will learn not only English but also other skills beyond the language. In fact, Bell and Gower (1998) argue that international course materials could actually encourage individualization.

### **Developing learner autonomy**

*Learner autonomy* is defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Autonomous learners understand the purpose and process of learning and are able to choose from available tools and resources to create a productive learning environment.

In an EFL context, where the traditional teacher-centered classroom is still very common, it is helpful to consider promoting learner autonomy for the purpose of transforming dependent and passive learners. To promote learner autonomy, the teacher should encourage students to be more self-motivated and to continue learning outside the classroom so they can be personally responsible for acquiring English. Spratt, Humphreys, and Chan (2002, 255) indicate that "a motivated student would have a greater interest in what was to be learnt and thus be more ready and able to take on responsibilities in the language learning process." They suggest that the teacher promote autonomous behavior by suggesting extracurricular activities, focusing first on

those that students already engage in. For example, the teacher may want to ask students to try such English learning activities as writing letters to pen pals; reading newspapers, magazines, or books; listening to the radio; watching movies; surfing the Internet; talking to foreigners; keeping a journal; practicing conversation with friends; studying in groups; and attending a self-study center.

In addition, teachers can train students to take charge of every stage of their own learning, which includes:

- setting goals
- identifying and developing strategies to achieve such goals
- developing study plans
- reflecting on learning (which includes identifying problem areas and the means of addressing these problems)
- identifying and selecting relevant resources and support
- assessing one's own progress (which includes defining criteria for evaluating performance and learning) (Chan 2001, 506)

There are many factors that have a negative effect on learner autonomy. First of all, according to Edge and Wharton (1998, 298), teaching materials that are controlled by the institution "may limit the amount of investment and involvement that students can have in the learning process." This may place the learners' autonomy and the teachers' creativity at risk. To overcome this problem, teachers need to use a wide variety of resources and encourage students to find and bring to class texts, stories, or any piece of information on topics that are of interest to them. By choosing the materials themselves, students are starting on the road to autonomous learning. The teacher plays an indispensable role by acting as a facilitator and modifying material for the students when necessary. For example, after finding out that students want to master writing business letters in English, the teacher could ask them to find samples of business letters in the style that they prefer. The teacher then uses the samples to work out general rules for writing a business letter and provides students with alternate samples for comparison. In the end, it is the students' choice that matters.

In fact, teachers should not spend too much time and energy preparing or conducting activities that students can accomplish themselves. It is worth considering that “if teachers can share some responsibility with learners, then not only will learners benefit, but teachers will be less burdened” (Edge and Wharton 1998, 298). For example, in order to provide students with examples of conditional sentences, the teacher can ask students to bring in a favorite English song, story, or poem in which the grammatical structure is used. By inviting students to seek materials from different sources, the teacher constructs an environment where students complete tasks by themselves.

### **Incorporating a variety of Englishes**

Another strategy for making students participate in class is to incorporate a variety of Englishes into the teaching materials. Most of the English language use today “is by nonnative speakers, and the number of people speaking it as a foreign or second language has surpassed the number of its native speakers” (Mauranen 2003, 513). Therefore, it is time that we stopped the idealization of British, American, or Australian English. We should recognize the importance of being effective English speakers rather than sounding native-like. This has great implications for English language teaching and materials development; since so much international communication in important fields is conducted by nonnative English speakers, it is essential to include these varieties in teaching materials. If this is not done, according to Matsuda (2003, 720), “the limited exposure to English varieties in the classroom may lead to confusion or resistance when students are confronted with different types of English users or uses outside class. The exposure to different forms and functions of English is crucial for English as an international language (EIL) learners, who may use the language with speakers of an English variety other than American and British English.” The RELC research revealed that many Vietnamese students in the study felt embarrassed about their accent and were hesitant to speak English. The inclusion of more varieties can positively affect motivation, and students may speak English more confidently if they see people who speak English as they do (not as perfectly as native speakers of English do).

### **English as an International Language**

In responding to a survey, all the English teachers at my university but one admitted the need to introduce materials that provide a variety of Englishes to their students because they realize they will interact with nonnative speakers of English. It is therefore important to consider how to include EIL in classroom materials. Since Vietnam has joined the Association of the Southeast Asian Nations, more people from non-English speaking countries have come to Vietnam to do business, and in many cases English is the main tool for communication. Today the tourism industry in Vietnam is an attractive economic sector and is a government priority. It is also an industry in which English is widely used. According to recent statistics on foreign investment in the tourism industry, Singapore is the largest investor, followed by Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, the British Virgin Islands, Japan, Malaysia, France, Thailand, and the Netherlands (Pham and Lan 2003, 21). The development of the tourism industry will continue to demand more use of EIL, which provides a strong rationale for developing and using different varieties of English in the classroom.

How a teacher feels about EIL will influence the choice of teaching materials, so it is important to have a clear understanding of the issue. For example, Tran (2000) and Smith (1991) believe in the neutrality of English and believe that English is culture-free and belongs to all who use it. As Smith (1991, 32) says, “the use of English should not be governed by the phonological, linguistic, or cultural ‘chauvinism’ of native-speakers.” Pham (2001), on the other hand, has a far different view of the matter. He argues that, for the sake of intelligibility in international communication, no varieties of English are acceptable but the Standard English of the BANA (Britain, Australia, North America) countries. He believes that “to attain effective communication in international settings, non-native speakers must use linguistic and cultural norms, which are mostly set by native speakers of English” (Pham 2001, 7).

I share Tran’s (2000) view because it is likely that Vietnamese students will interact in English with other nonnative speakers of English who come to Vietnam to do business, and there is little point in a total concentration on

how native-speakers of English speak if these learners are going to do business with individuals from Hong Kong or Thailand. Effective communication depends on the varieties of English used in these nations. English from BANA countries is important to study for purposes of intelligibility, as there is no doubt that certain norms are shaped by native use of English; however, we should also expose students to English varieties used by nonnative speakers and should use materials that include a variety of Englishes. I believe that doing so will reduce the pressure to speak like a native, and students will speak more in English, and with more confidence.

In short, we should treat English as an international language that “stresses the need for reinforcing all speakers’ (native and non-native alike) sense as communicators at a global level by adding an extra dimension (i.e. cultural awareness) to our communicative competence” (Sifakis and Sougari 2003, 64). Most importantly, teachers should help students to overcome any feeling of inferiority due to being nonnative speakers of English. Nonnative speakers have the right to own English if they are effective and fluent users of English, regardless of their national identity or accent.

### Conclusion

Students do not actively participate in the English language classroom for a variety of reasons, including cultural disposition and a country’s educational context. The EFL teaching environment presents a special problem, and teachers face great challenges to counteract passive learning and make students more thoughtful and engaged. I recommend a learner-centered approach to developing materials as one way to overcome the problem. Materials development offers both students and teachers the opportunity to make learning English more purposeful and productive. However, it requires effort on the part of the teacher, who must carefully scrutinize how texts and activities can be selected and adapted to create a classroom environment that supports interaction and critical thinking. Determining relevant cultural topics, providing authentic texts, and bringing real language into the classroom are some essential tasks for materials development. In addition, teachers must make sure to involve students in the

process. By applying these principles to materials development, we teachers of English can increase the potential for students to be active participants, critical thinkers, and independent learners. English will then not only afford them the opportunity to learn a language, but it will make them more fulfilled human beings as well.

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