

Reflections on the Journey from Materials Creation to Evaluation and Beyond

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In this paper we reflect on three phases of our teacher development journey that were taken before, during, and after the writing of a textbook. We look at how working in a team, and together in collaborative research, helped us develop in significant ways. After that, we reflect on our experience and investigate the benefits we found. We conclude by explaining how collaborative inquiry strengthened us as researchers and teachers.

Introduction

We are all interested in developing skills. Teachers are not alone in this but the field known as “teacher development” is particularly large. Teacher development starts with the teacher questioning the reasoning behind the choices they made (Mann, 2005). It is done to promote the possibility of success in a particular context and is a process that continues throughout a career. This process is driven by reflection, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation (Roberts, 1998). It can be sustained through collaboration, where a shared stimulus, such as books or articles, can enhance an inquiry (Freeman & Hawkins, 2004). In this paper, we report on how a collaboratively-written textbook writing project stimulated research goals and teacher development. The before, during, and after phases in this paper are: materials development, materials evaluation, student performance.

Phase 1: Materials Development

This phase started at the end of December 2014 when five teachers, all of whom taught the course “Speaking for Academic Purposes” at the same institution, met to decide on a core textbook and to collaborate on writing a syllabus for the upcoming semester. In the first meeting, they discussed the current textbook and proposed alternatives for a new one. The discussion was based on teacher intuition and experience. It was decided that, while the current textbook helped develop the students Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1979), the textbook was not suited to developing discussion skills. After sharing views on possible alternatives, it was suggested (by one member with textbook writing experience) that we collaboratively write a textbook. Spurred on by the desire to collaborate, all members agreed.

The subsequent writing process helped us collaborate and share knowledge on teaching. In meetings, we shared ideas about methodologies and considered activities that would be used in the book. 18 meetings in total were held as well as communication via Skype and by email. The meetings and the online communication amounted to a continuous and spontaneous set of peer evaluations of each other’s work. As each teacher had a different background and teaching style this evaluation was insightful for all. Honesty was encouraged, and this sometimes led to

evaluations that could be deemed too harsh – and too personal, but this was inevitable bearing in mind the personalities who were involved. As the project progressed, divisions occurred between participants. Fortunately, though, these divisions were worked through amicably and we were able to discuss topics, tasks to be included, and ways of sequencing them.

The first decision we made was that each unit should be about a global issue. Soon after we decided that each unit would comprise vocabulary exercises, a reading, and discussion exercises. As we developed these activities, we were mindful of our potential students' level and took due care to monitor vocabulary used. We used Thomas Cobb's vocabulary profiling software to ensure that the text contained words from the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2011). For each reading we developed exercises to pre-teach the vocabulary used and increase students' awareness of learning strategies. We decided that each unit should focus on a specific discourse function. Through developing the discussion tasks that promoted the use of these functions, we increased our understanding of the communication strategies used in discussion, and our awareness of how to develop speaking tasks that promoted them.

Through working on the project, we were also able to develop team-working skills. Due to the high level of collaboration involved, we were forced to manage our time effectively, so that we could attend the scheduled meetings and complete our assignments by the deadline. Inevitably the pressures of work and family life resulted in some people (including both writers) falling behind. This led to tension and at one point in the project at least two people were on the verge of quitting (see Walker, 2016). We thus had to find a balance between being strict, so that the project could be completed on time, whilst being sympathetic and encouraging to those who fell behind. Luckily, we all persevered, and the textbook was published in March 2016, which brought us to the next phase of our journey.

Phase 2: Materials Evaluation

Jolly and Bolitho (2010) note that evaluation in the material writing process allows writers to discover whether or not the materials have met their objectives. They can then be adapted if necessary. Although the original writers helped to evaluate the text from a teacherly perspective, only the two authors of this paper were able to conduct research that focused on student perspectives. To do this, we designed a questionnaire to evaluate how successful or unsuccessful the text was. We took learner needs, objectives, and levels of conceptual development into consideration. By creating the questionnaire and reflecting on the results, we increased our experience of developing survey items and interpreting data.

Our evaluation questionnaire collected qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative section comprised of sentence stems that had to be completed. To make this easier for students we scaffolded student responses with example phrases and, in some cases, with Japanese translations. The quantitative part consisted of twenty statements that examined student preparation, classwork, and discussion performance. Students responded by choosing responses to a Likert rating scale that ranged from one to five and measured the extent to which they thought the statement reflected their behavior.

In total, we were able to survey four classes of students who we taught at two private universities: one in Tokyo and one in Chiba. 75 students responded and answered it on the final class of the semester. Prior to answering questions, students were invited to reflect on their overall experience of the course. This gave them time to clarify any misunderstandings they had about the questions. The students took between 10 and 25 minutes to complete it.

As we analyzed the data, we realized that the four groups could be divided into two. Group one consisted of high-level students from the university in Tokyo and the highest level one in the university in Chiba; group two consisted of the two lower-level groups from the university in Chiba. Through analyzing the data, we found that the textbook was more suited to the middle range ability level of the students who responded. Advanced-level students commented that the uniform structure of the units was somewhat repetitive, and that the vocabulary items were not challenging enough. In contrast, lower level students reported difficulties connected to a weaker understanding of English vocabulary. To remedy this, some lower level students suggested a more refined and incremental development of reading complexity over the course of the textbook. Although some of the advanced students felt stifled by the controlled practice of the discussion functions, students of all levels reported that these exercises had a practical use that was relevant to their futures: either studying abroad or a future career using English. With the aim of improving the students' discussion skills further, we progressed onto the next phase of our journey: analyzing student performance.

Phase 3: Student Performance

By observing our students in the classroom, we knew that they were able to use most of the discursive functions that we taught. We also knew that the lower levels found some functions easier to use than others. While students could easily lead a discussion and express their opinion, a large number of low-level students found rephrasing difficult. Even though lower-level students were able to rephrase written responses after suitable pre-teaching, they experienced difficulty in rephrasing spoken responses in real-time. Students also found controlling the floor difficult. To examine this further we decided to video record a selection of student discussions in order to analyze both verbal and nonverbal communication (such as gesture or gaze). After viewing our recordings, we realized that many things were happening prior to and during the exchange of a turn. It led to a focus on turn-taking.

According to Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974), turn-taking is fundamental to all conversations regardless of the number of participants. Successful turn-taking occurs when there are minimal gaps and little overlap between speakers. For this to happen the other participants have to listen for an opportunity to take part in the conversation and act on it (Sidnell, 2010). These opportunities occur at places known as Transition Relevant Places (TRP). They occur when a speaker completes a communicative act (with what is termed a Turn Construction Unit (TCU)). At a TRP, either the current speaker (CS) selects the next speaker or the next speaker selects his or herself. If neither does this, the current speaker continues to speak.

Although we had studied the basics of Conversation Analysis (CA) during our MA studies, neither had applied in the classroom. We decided to use CA because we realized that the turn-taking system broke down when students were slow to enter the floor. We also knew that according to Young (2018), first language turn-taking norms interfere with second language turn-taking norms and we wanted to investigate this further.

While analyzing the recordings we became aware of instances when low-level learners used expressive body language to help recall vocabulary and maintain control of the floor. In the excerpt below, three speakers are discussing the topic of work and priorities. Speaker A is unable to recall a word and uses mime to fill a gap in her lexical knowledge and also maintain control.

Excerpt 1

A. I think (.) eeeehhh (0.5) {sniff} (.) ehh.(1)=
= goodt (1)
good place (.) soooo (.) <goodplace> (.) and
ah (.) I think (0.2s)

A. ihmp (.) ah! (.)

B. =tsh(h) hhhh.(h)

C. = tsaheeheejee

A = the besst pointo (0.5)=

=<workplace>. (0.5)

Sooo I thinkuh (.)

it (.) uh itis good (0.5)

= (moves hands in circular motion)

= (moves hands away again)

for mee touu (6)

= (separates both hands again)

= (extends right hand away from left hand eight times;

= (then moves left hand in rolling motion in direction of C)

not far

(B nods three times quickly for agreement while looking at A, who nods)

(A nods several times to receive her answer)

Do you know what I mean?

Key:

(.) indicates micropauses; (1) indicates one second

= indicates no gap between utterances

<__> indicates the talk is quicker than surrounding talk

Through viewing the recording of this discussion we also noticed the use of explicit signaling by the current speaker to the next speaker. This should not have surprised us because lower-level participants use both verbal and nonverbal

communication to signal they can take the floor (Heath & Luff, 2012). We also noted that turn-taking sequences for lower-level discussion groups were cyclical in that a first speaker asked a question to the student who sat next to them. This student, in turn, answered the first speaker's question before asking the same question to the speaker sitting next to them. This was repeated in a clockwise manner. After repeated viewings, we surmised that cyclical discussions occurred because of the emphasis on discussion questions that the teacher provided. These questions were presented in a numerical order, and, perhaps as a result, the students answered them sequentially. It led us to encourage each student to prepare questions related to the topic before class. To introduce a degree of authenticity we instructed students to ask their questions at any point in the discussion. We also encouraged them to self-select at TRPs (and not wait to speak in a cyclical order) by using discourse functions that express agreement or disagreement.

Conclusions

Through collaborating on the various stages of a textbook writing project and further researching student performance we were able to develop as teachers in a number of ways. Through the materials writing project we were able gain skills relating to materials creation and teamwork. After using the materials, we also learned how to evaluate student use. In recording our students after using the textbook we were also able to develop as teacher-researchers, which enabled us to become more informed practitioners. These phases in our journey would not have been possible without the initial collaborative inquiry that spurred us on. We plan to continue our research on classroom performance so that we can become more effective teachers and materials developers.

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