

Tailoring Materials to Learners' Academic and Occupational Needs

FAITH P. ONGPOY-MIGUEL

Abstract

Communicative competence plays a crucial role in man's survival in whatever field of endeavor he belongs. Today, many Filipinos want to work abroad but most of them lack competence in English. Considering this reality, language programs must be tailored in the contexts and needs of students who are aspiring to learn English for career goals and for present-day overseas contract workers (OCWs). Alongside this, teaching materials must provide authentic applications to communicative settings i.e., real life props or texts (e.g. road signs, making calculations, comparisons, etc.); must employ technological innovations like using cameras, teaching online and providing internet access to students hence bringing the outside world into the classroom. In addition, themes and topics must be content-related to particular disciplines focusing on the language of these activities in relation to grammar, vocabulary, discourse and its analysis and the four macro skills.

Key words: tailoring materials, virtuous circle, communicative competence and experiential language learning.

Introduction

The current global demand for a more functional language learning has posed increasing challenges to the language teaching stakeholders. Language mentors are called on to enhance the language teaching sphere with wider perspective and goals responsive to the needs

FAITH P. ONGPOY-MIGUEL, a Full Professor in the Department of English, College of Arts and Social Sciences, MSU-IIT, finished both her Ph.D. in Language Teaching (1996) and M.Ed. Teaching English as a Second Language (1988) from the University of the Philippines, Diliman. This paper, was read during the 3rd PALT International Conference on Language Education and 4th National Convention held on December 4-6, 2007, Manila Hotel, Philippines.

of their clients to prepare them to cope with the rapid changes a global society. While this learning environment is more demanding, it can be extremely rewarding since learning is of the real-life and has immediate application. A remarkable response to this call is a recommendation in the Bullock's Report as cited by Marland (1979). It strongly endorses a coordinated effort at which language teaching becomes the most functional means so that learning of the other disciplines can be facilitated. He stresses the importance of a "virtuous circle" which devotes thought and time to assisting language development so that learning in all areas will be helped.

It becomes obvious that developing communicative competence of the learners is a very significant consideration in today's world of dynamism where trends and innovations greatly affect the needs of the learners and the people as a whole. As a tool for communication, language will always be an inseparable exponent of progress and development as well as in the unified goals and aspiration of a group of people. Since English will continue to become the language of science and technology, business communication, transactions, negotiations in the international realm, then the **experiential language** learning offers the functional training to develop in the students the target communicative competence demanded by the job market. It stresses giving attention to the specific communication needs of the learners as basis for the selection and sequencing of materials. Regardless of how distant or unspecific the communicative needs of the learners may be, "every program with a goal of communicative competence should give attention to opportunities for meaningful English use, opportunities to focus on meaning rather than on form." Savignon (2001).

Since English classrooms use English as the medium of instruction, then learners must be given special attention such that they shall have more opportunities for English language experience. They must be helped to develop their skills to communicate and express themselves in response to their mentors' speaking to them in English or to English-speaking individuals they might encounter in their future workplace. Savignon (2001) adds that "when this happens, teachers need to take special care to help learners realize they are not expected to understand every word, any more than they are expected to express themselves in native like English." If language experiences are vital consideration in language teaching and learning, so what then should these classroom experiences be like that must be reflected in the design

of teaching/learning materials addressed to learners' academic and occupational needs?

I. Materials Design to Address Learners' Needs

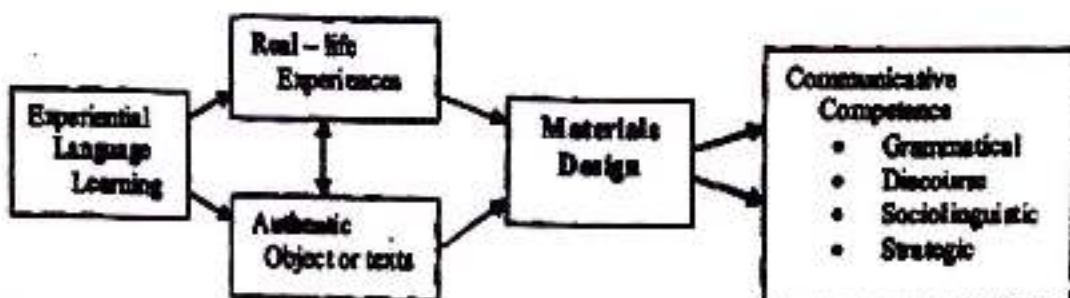
In communicative language teaching, much consideration is placed on the "need for real-life objects or texts (e.g. maps, railroad timetables, application forms, etc.) to lend authenticity to the communicative situation" (Brinton, 2001). In addition, students are given the "feel" of the whole activity by letting them do the whole task of presenting, e.g. a sample proposal in a technical writing class with multimedia presentation and video documentation.

The use of authentic objects or texts and the active participation of the learners in the experiential approach can be good bases for materials design with themes and topics of the teaching/learning material content-related to particular discipline. This takes into account the syntactical and semantic aspects of these activities, in particular grammar, vocabulary, discourse and its analysis and the four macroskills development (i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening). It follows then that a more holistic material design will somehow meet the eventual language needs of these learners both in their academic pursuits while yet in school as well as in the language occupational needs later in their workplaces.

Nunan (1995) concludes that "today, the aspect of experiential language learning which acknowledges the socioaffective component of the learning process and the importance of the learner in the instruction (learner-centeredness) is well-established." Thus, this kind of learning suggests that mentors create a kind of humanistic classroom atmosphere treating students as individuals who are part and parcel in the success of the learning process. Learners need teachers' compassion and patience to encourage them to self-expression, and listening ears that make learning meaningful to them in the here and now.

The experiential approach embraces a more holistic concern not only on the linguistic competence but also sociolinguistic, strategic and discourse competence (Canale, 1983) which are provided in a promising language setting for the development of "communicative competence." It is a learning environment where negotiation of information is done within or outside the classroom premises motivating learners in the

communicative transaction of transmitting and receiving meaningful information.



Schematic Diagram of the Experiential Approach to Language Learning

II. Alternative Materials Teachers Can Use

Approaches may vary but almost all language mentors are one in recognizing that media can do a lot to facilitate language teaching and learning. Nowadays, it is evident that language classrooms have capitalized the use of the various kinds of media from **nonmechanical** aids such as household objects, flashcards and magazine pictures all the way up to sophisticated **mechanical** aids such as video cameras and computers assisting teachers in their jobs, bringing the outside world into the classroom...making the task of language learning a more meaningful and exciting one (Briton 2001).

To some mentors, preparation of the media materials maybe laborious but the "pay off" is greater than the traditional methods employed in the classrooms. It is a fact that 'media appeal to students' senses and help them process information "(Harnett, 1985), thus, they help in reinforcing the teaching point and saving the teacher unnecessary explanation.

In using either non-mechanical or mechanical media, it is important to ensure that activities in the language classrooms are derived from the student's need to develop more controlled and mechanical to less-controlled communicative behaviors. By considering this continuum, teachers can select from a classification of activity types and sequence them within a lesson. Valcárcel et. al. (1985) as cited by Crookes and Chaudron (2001) have developed a tentative list of activity types. The list has been grouped according to four phases of instructional sequencing

in lessons as follows: **Information and Motivation** (in which learners' interest, experience and relevant language knowledge are aroused such as warm-up, setting, brainstorming, story telling); **Input/Control** (in which learners are involved in deepening their understanding by close attention to details such as organizational, content explanation, role play demonstration, recognition, language modeling, dialogue/narrative presentation, question-answer display, review); **Focus/Working** (in which individual linguistic and thematic difficulties can be isolated and examined in depth such as translation, dictation, copying, reading aloud, drill, dialogue/narrative recitation, cued narrative/dialogue, meaningful drill, preparation, identification, game, referential question-answer, checking, wrap-up); **Transfer/Application** (in which new knowledge and the learners' refined communication abilities can be put to actual use such as information transfer, information exchange, role play, report, narration, discussion, composition, problem-solving, drama simulation).

Media materials maybe classified as non-technical which refers to inexpensive materials that are always readily available and user-friendly. Briton (2001) enumerates a number as follows:

blackboards/whiteboards	wall charts, posters, maps, scrolls
magnetboards/pegboards	board games
flash cards/index cards	mounted pictures/photos
cartoons/line drawings	equipment operation manuals
objects/realia	puppets
pamphlets/brochures/flyers/menus	newspapers/magazines

III. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Materials or Modalities for Language learning

Nowadays, learners are exposed to almost an infinite variety and roles of media materials which find their way into their language classroom. Whereas, the nonmechanical media are low cost, and accessible; mechanical media are less user-friendly but they can bring the outside world in all its complexities into the classroom. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) materials which comprise these technical media include the following as enumerated by Briton (2001):

record player	opaque projector
audio tape/recorder	slide projector
cd player/recorder	computer
radio	language lab
television	computer lab
video player/recorder	multimedia lab
telephone/teletrainer	self-access center (e.g. MSU-IIT's e-
overhead projector	Learning Environment (MOLE), MSU-
filmstrip/film projector	IIT on-line)

With the advent of computer technology, language teaching and learning become more interesting. It can offer a better way to learn a language more effectively. Sokolik (2001) emphasizes the fact that computers "equal, or surpass, human performance." She added that "as computers can store and process enormous amount of information, they excel in areas where human memory maybe deficient, or where human patience may be easily exhausted." She enumerates these areas as follows:

1. Drills
2. Adaptive testing
3. Corpora and Concordancing
4. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)
 - a. E-mail
 - b. Chat
5. Multimedia Production
 - a. Digital Video
 - b. Hypertext/Web-Based Stories

Brinton (2001) suggests the following factors to be considered when incorporating instructional media into the language teaching goals:

- Type of skill/concept to be presented
- Student preference: the age, interests, experiences, and learning styles
- Teacher preference: facility with equipment, familiarity/skill in the given medium, teaching style
- Availability of software and hardware
- Physical circumstances of the classroom/laboratory

Brinton concludes that "ultimately, availability and teacher creativity/adaptability will play major roles in determining to what extent media will be used and which media will be selected."

Bibliography

- Brinton, D.M. *The use of media in language teaching*. Teaching English as a second or Foreign Language. 3rd ed. USA: Heinle & Heinle
- Canale, M. 1983. From communicative competence to communicative language Pedagogy. *In Language and Communication*, edited by J. Richards and R. Schmidt. London: Longman
- Marland, Micheal CBE. 1977. *Language Across the Curriculum*. Great Britain: Cox & Wyman Ltd., London, etc.
- Sauvignon, Sandra J. 2001. *Communicative Language Teaching for the Twenty-first century*. Teaching English as a Second Language or Foreign Language. 3rd ed. USA: Heinle & Henlie.
- Sokilik, Maggie. 2001. Computers in language teaching. Teaching as a Secondor Foreign Language. 3rd ed. USA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Valcárcel, M., C. Chaudron, M. Verdú and J. Roca. 1985. Adaptation to COLT and a developing system in activity type. In *COLT: Coding Conventions and Applications*, edited by N. Spada and M. Frolich. Sydney: Australia: National Center for English Language Teaching and Research.

Sample Lesson. Calculating Drug Dosages

Audience: English 1 Nursing Students or Nursing Aide Students

Teaching Objectives: To develop an awareness of the importance of accurately calculating drug dosages; understand common abbreviations of dosage timing as indicated in most doctors' prescriptions; write a report about drug information based on the **Nursing Drug Handbook and Internet** resources; develop individual and shared group work.

Media: **Nursing Drug Handbook**
Information Grid

Skills: Reading, Vocabulary, Speaking, Writing, Grammar (Definite and Indefinite Articles, Present Tense)

Time: 1 Class Period (1 ½ hours)

Procedures:

1. Teacher discusses the importance of accurate calculations of drug dosages for patients of different age brackets based on the **Drug Handbook** information.
2. Elicit from students common problems they and their loved ones experienced due to wrong dosages taken.
3. Using the Internet or a library, have students research on the topic "Different Classifications and Uses of Drugs."
4. Teacher introduces the information grid and demonstrates the procedure students are to follow using the given example. They are also taught to interpret common timing abbreviations (e.g., **q.i.d.**, meaning "four times a day").
5. Students are divided into small groups of four or five and each is assigned specific names of drug of which they shall refer to the **Nursing Drug Handbook** for the recommended

dosages, possible adverse effects, indications, abbreviations of drug timing, contraindications.

6. Students then work to transfer information into the grid and present their output to the class relating some information from the Internet or a library. The grid format is provided below with a sample given.
7. Teacher discusses paragraph unity and coherence, use of present tense and articles.
8. As a follow-up activity, each student will be assigned to interview a friend or a relative who is simultaneously maintaining 2 or more medications for a certain illness. Each will write a report about their prescribed medications including the information provided by the Drug Handbook and their effects on the patient concerned.

GRID

Drug	How Supplied	Indications	Dosage*	Adverse Reactions	Contraindications
Femicon	60 mg, 195 mg, 260 mg, 300 mg, 325 mg tablets	Iron deficiency	Adults: 180 mg, P.O.I.I.A. or q.i.d. Children: 5 mg/kg P.O.I.I.A. increased to 6 mg/kg P.O.I.I.A. as needed and tolerated	Epileptic pals, constipation, diarrhea, black stools	Patient receiving sponged blood transfusions

- *Legend:
- mg - milligram
 - p.o. - by mouth
 - p.r.n. - as needed
 - q - every
 - q.d. - everyday
 - q.i.d. - four times daily
 - q.o.d. - every other day
 - t.i.d. - three times a day