

More than just a worksheet: how to write effective classroom materials

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What makes for effective materials?

Does the lesson flow, does it make a whole, or is it just a pile of disconnected lego bricks? Is there a clear path through the lesson? Are the transitions smooth? Does the material carry the learners along so that each stage feels like a natural progression from the last?

Are the materials or topic engaging, relevant, interesting? You want students to be so interested in the topic or activity that they NEED the language to talk about it.

What about the linguistic and cognitive demands. What background or cultural knowledge will they need? What assumptions are you making about what they already know? Is the language useful and appropriate to their level, and, importantly, is there a cognitive challenge as well as a linguistic one? (especially important at lower levels)

Do you have enough variety? Does the lesson have a good balance of heads up/heads down? Are there different activity types and changes in pace?

Meeting the water cooler test

Does the topic or material contain something new that the students might want to tell people about afterwards? You don't necessarily want something completely new to the students- if it's too unusual it's unlikely to contain much vocabulary they'll be able to use again- but ideally you want a 'fresh' angle on a useful topic.

Potential for personalisation and output

Remember that just because a topic is intrinsically interesting, it doesn't necessarily mean that students will have much to say about it. There needs to be an angle that they can relate to their own lives or experiences.

Parsnips

Parsnips is an acronym dreamt up (by Jeremy Harmer?) to describe topics best avoided in coursebooks. (politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcissists, isms and pork). One of the great things about writing material for your own classroom is that you can decide whether to completely ignore this kind of restriction- but it does need to be an informed decision.

Language Focus

As well as content, we (usually) need to think about language. A text, whether written or audio, can be a great context, but should we be using authentic texts or writing graded material? There are

arguments for both. Authentic texts can be very motivating, giving a great sense of achievement, and it's quick and easy to find them on a topical subject.

Once you've found your text, you can start to 'unpack' the language in it (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aeV0Wd0aA1A>). This is great for raising awareness and encouraging learners to notice language as they read.

However, the language in the text might be just too difficult (which is *demotivating*), very culturally bound, or just not that useful.

But aren't specially written texts likely to be dull and unnatural?

Not necessarily. Try using authentic texts as a model. Take note of the style, the organisation, the kind of language that is naturally used and then try to recreate something similar but adapted better to the needs of your learners.

Some useful tools are:

http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/oxford3000/oxford_3000_profiler.html

<https://readability-score.com/>

Output

There's nothing to stop you having output at any stage of a lesson, but we do tend to lead up to a bigger output stage where students have the opportunity to use as much as possible of the language they've been encountering, and develop their ideas about the topic.

Remember that tasks often work better when they're concrete- putting constraints on a task often seems to lead to more interaction and richer language.

Try listing, ranking, sequencing, categorising, matching, finding similarities or differences, or any kind of information gap...and always ask them to give reasons or justify.

Further help

www.elmaterialswriter.com

www.el-resourceful.com

www.elteacher2writer.co.uk

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