

Materials Development in English as a second language: An Indian Experience

Rama Meganathan, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi

This article presents the process of recent curricular revision and materials development in English at the national level in India in a limited way. Teacher's needs and wants, their participation in the development of materials, the dilemmas of teachers and their implications for classroom transactions are discussed from the experiences of one of the members of the materials development team. I will attempt to answer the following questions: (i) Should India need a textbook at the national level? (ii) Should methodology influence material or vice-versa? (iii) What material for textbooks should be used in countries like India? (iv) Can teachers make good materials? Is it possible to include materials development as part of the professional development of teachers?

Materials development for teaching of English as a second language has been witnessing significant changes during the last three decades in countries like India. The concerns informed by research on language learning and learning theories have impacted the methods that in turn have resulted in change of thinking in materials development. This along with other reasons which are mostly to achieve uniformity or commonality in the system resulted in making the teacher-learner / teaching-learning activities textbook centric. Though teachers are not really heard of in the process of textbook development, their participation is recognized as a positive trend. Teachers, on the one hand expect materials to do all wonders, on the other their needs and wants clash with each other and also with the needs of learners and learning. This creates many dilemmas for teachers and materials developers. The recent curricular revision undertaken in India made an attempt to address these issues and problems by bringing in people from varied contexts to develop materials.

The Process

With the change of the government at the centre (national level), the National Council of Educational Research and Training¹ was directed to take up the revision of the school curriculum. The Education Secretary's letter to the

Director of NCERT annexed with the National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) makes it clear the agenda of the government, as it quotes the National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and its Programme of Action (POA) (1992) calling for a revision of the curriculum every five years. Major opposition to the textbooks developed as a follow up to the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE- 2000) was that the right wing ideas of the Hindutva ideology have been brought into the textbooks, particularly in the textbooks of social sciences. Left wing academics and liberal forces opposed the NCFSE -2000 vehemently and it was lead as a movement.

Revision of national curriculum was initiated with the setting up of (i) The National Steering Committee² (ii.) National Focus Groups³ (21 groups). The Steering committee has around 35 members from many fields as well as NGOs. The issues in language education were deliberated in the two National Focus Groups – Teaching of English and the Teaching of Indian Languages. The major issues in both the groups could be listed as: (i) Medium of learning – teaching /instruction (ii) Language policy in school education – three language formula (iii) Introduction of English as a language (iv) Language teacher education – teachers' professional development (v) Teacher's Language proficiency (vi) Methodologies of teaching (vii) Materials for teaching the language(s) (viii) Multilingualism as a strategy in classroom transactions

The syllabus committee in language(s) translated ideas of the position papers into reality. The syllabus listed themes and suggested varied ways for class transactions in a broader sense. After the syllabus committee, the textbook development committee plunged into action to design textbooks for various classes in a phased manner. In the first phase (2005-06) textbooks for classes I, III, VI, IX and XI and during the second phase (2006-07) textbooks for classes II, IV, VII, X and XII were brought out. The following sections describe the discussions, debates of one textbook development committees for (class X) on various occasions on the important issues and concern to develop materials

1. National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) is a national level apex organization which advises the govt. of India and the state (provinces) govts. on matters of school education. It is also a premier organization which develops textbooks at the national level and undertakes research and extension activities.

2. For details of the proceedings of the meeting of the Steering Committee please visit www.ncert.nic.in

3. To know more about the Focus Groups please visit www.ncert.nic.in

that would make an impact in the classroom to enable children in language learning.

Teachers' point of view (Teachers' Needs and Wants)

Teachers in various systems of schooling have varied needs and wants. The examination driven teaching can be seen everywhere in India, so teachers' worry about examinations even when they look at material or develop materials. The two members of our text book development committee were chosen from the schools in Delhi administration where most schools are run in regional medium, mostly Hindi or in some cases Punjabi or Urdu with a few English medium sections in the regional medium schools and students in these schools hail from lower socio-economics sections. The two teachers we chose from these schools were actually asking for a textbook their students would be able to understand and connect with their real life situations. We were happy that the teachers were in reality wanting to have what NCF- 2005 advocates as its one of the guiding principles, connecting life outside the classroom with the classroom experiences and recognizing the learner as a constructor of knowledge. What was not convincing us was that because their students did not have or possess the required proficiency in English, they want the textbook to be lighter in terms of context and language content. Teachers needs and wants clash here with their understanding of learners and their needs. Hitomi (1996) categorizes needs of teachers into two ways:

Teachers' needs would consist of two general areas: one deriving from personal traits such as their age, sex, cultural and educational background and the other from their professional traits such as areas and levels of expertise, length and types of teaching experience.

Needs, Hitomi further classifies, (i) as self-perceived needs, (ii) needs perceived by others and (iii) objectively measured needs. One could sense the needs of the teachers here are self perceived needs, of course in their context and their understanding of the learner and language learning.

In our scrutiny and analysis of the 'texts' brought in by each member of the group and an analysis of the existing textbooks, the teachers were more apprehensive of relevance and use of almost each text saying, "This our children can not do" "The text is very tough." This made us look at how a typical English language classroom operates in these schools. We are well aware that the situation would not be much different in most of the vernacular medium (government run) schools. There is data to show (Nag-Arulmani 2005) that 40 percent of children in small towns, 80 per cent of children in tribal areas, and 18 percent of children in urban schools can not read in their own language at

the primary stage. From the mouths of the teachers we came to understand, though not so shockingly, how the materials are taught / used in classroom.

"Our children are from very poor background. Lower caste, some are slum dwellers. They do not understand even a single sentence spoken by us. We need to translate most part of the story. More than eighty percent can not even read the lessons you prescribe."

"I explain the whole text line by line and give answers to the question that follow the text and children memorize or some understand and write the answers."

"Leave alone English, they read almost nothing in their mother tongue except the textbook. Some may read newspapers, or short novels, stories, etc."

This tells us a lot; but mostly the belief, "Don't expose them to any materials as they can not read or understand" The irony is that the teachers who believe their students can not read and understand do not want their students to be troubled with anything above their level till they attain the level expected by the syllabus. Secondly, knowledge of the recent developments in language learning and second language acquisition and ELT, though they claim to have, is very limited. Teachers' views from the other two centrally administered school systems, Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS) and Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (NVS) are also the same. Most of the teachers' arguments on having or not having a text, for that matter any text in English textbook could be summarized as,

"Our children do not know English. They can not even read the texts you prescribe."

There is a gap between teachers' needs and wants, results in a gap between them and the learners' needs. This, we sensed not only in our discussions during the development of the materials, but also in our attempt to design model question papers for class X for the CBSE as also in the training sessions, both face-to-face and through teleconferencing mode. Teachers believe that the textbook is a major instrument in terms of content, language input, methods and evaluation. What they fail to recognize is that the 'text' or materials are major inputs for exposing children to natural or authentic language or contexts. This creates tension and anxiety. It is not only learners but also teachers who are anxious and tense when it comes to English language learning in their situations. Krashen points out that -

"effects of various forms of anxiety on acquisition are seen in the learner." But "the less anxious the learner, the better language acquisition proceeds. Similarly, relaxed and comfortable students apparently can learn more in shorter

periods of time.” (Krashen, Dubey, Burt 1982)

This anxiety is triggered as teachers needs and wants don't seem to match the needs of the learner. Teachers are driven by their self perceived needs and though they seem to accept the learners' identity, they underestimate the learner in general as they can not learn, i.e. they cannot learn the language as it happens in an urban English medium school. This agrees with Jim Cummin's remark "poor kids get behaviourism and rich kids get social constructivism." In practice, that means skills for the poor and knowledge for the rich seem befitting to this situation. (Jim Cummins 2005) He was speaking in the context of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in the USA which could be translated in to the Indian situation as stress and burden for the poor and skills and knowledge for the rich.

Materials Question

The selection of texts was done by all members of the textbook development team individually and also during the workshop meetings. The major intensions behind the selections were (i) providing comprehensible inputs through variety of materials based on the themes listed in the syllabus (ii) the materials would facilitate learner to engage themselves with the language in contexts that they are with or familiar with (iii) exposing students to authentic / natural (language) text (iii) the tasks provided should enable learners to work individually, in groups or as a whole class and use the language and produce language in situations (iv) the materials would take the child from known to unknown (themes), from reading to writing and writing to reading, and also speaking and listening as part of the while reading as well as post reading of the text.

In the selected material, we had a good range of genres and themes that would suit our situations. We had translations from different Indian languages, travelogues; stories about animals, speeches, narratives that would enable learners to ponder over philosophy (like Buddha's Sermon at Benaras), and poems from William Blake to Ogden Nash and some other living poets. The dilemmas of teachers as well as by some of the textbook authors include:

- **WE SHOULD HAVE TEXTS**

Classics - from Shakespeare, William Blake; romantic poets like William Wordsworth, Keats, Shelly; poets like Robert Frost are fine, but have longer poems too. Majority prose / fiction by writers belonging to that period.

- **WE NEED TO HAVE**

A good introduction to the author, the poet and about the piece included in the textbook

Vs.

- **WE HAVE TEXTS**

Have a variety of texts that include contemporary (themes) writing so that learners would be able to relate to their knowledge and thinking and with real life situations. We should have a mixed variety of materials from British, American, new literature and Indian literature (both Indian writing in English and translations from Indian languages).

- **WE NEED**

No introduction or very sketchy introductions to the authors / poets. Let learners explore and find out. Moreover the poem or work of art matters more than the poet or the writer.

A Moral Question

The syllabus (NCERT 2006) lists fifteen major themes from where the ideas for the text could be drawn. It is only a guideline, not a restriction. One major question teachers wanted not only as teachers, but as also as parents and citizens is "We need to have texts or stories to teach morals explicitly to our children." This may also be the opinion of many 'adults' who visualize education as 'man making business by imbibing values', 'character building' and 'behaviourial change.' The curriculum in its aims and contents calls for education to act as an instrument in creating a citizen for a democratic society in the Indian context. What is expected by majority of the teachers from a textbook as 'adults' is that materials to act as didactic instrument to teach morals as morals so that our children get to learn them. In this regard the demand from the language textbook is more than other textbooks. Some responses and reflections by students during my visit to a school run by the NVS were:

"Please stop preaching through textbooks. We do not want direct morals like a sermon. Stories should interest us."

"The textbook should have such stories and material of our interests, not simply life and works of people and their teaching."

While the teachers, on the one hand feel that their students would not be able to read and understand textbook, they would expect the texts to be value laden. As students point out they expect texts to interest them so we need to think carefully before choosing a text.

Grammar or No Grammar?

This has taken much deliberation in and out of our workshops. A major change or reform that has taken place in this textbook revision is the integration of grammar activities with the textbook itself. Until this revision we had a textbook or a reader, an extensive reader (supplementary reader) and a work book, which presented grammar, most of them being sentence based exercises, somewhat contextualized. As a mark

of reducing burden- both physical as well as the burden of incomprehensiveness and to let children learn grammar in situations and contexts - the three books have now been made into two. Grammar has now become part of the textbook, the main text book. The dilemmas here are:

Teach formal grammar to some extent

- We need to teach grammar in a functional manner in contexts but also tell them the rules. Sentence based grammar is very useful.
- Each grammar item should be tested in the examination i.e test reported speech as one item. Do not do it like editing, or a cloze exercise, etc.
- Students should know the labels as well as rules so that they would become better users of the language.
- More grammar and correct grammar would make students use the language well.

Vs.

Teach grammar in contexts, situations

- Grammar is unnecessary at the initial years of learning.
- Let the learner discover rules of grammar and have grammar activities in the text and contextualized situations.
- Teach and test grammar in context and in an integrated manner.
- Knowing labels and rules will not make a good learner / user of the language. From the contexts learners will discover the rules and know the labels as they grow.
- Language is learnt when the learner is less anxious (Krasen 1982). Learning (Grammar) mechanically only makes learners stressed. Teaching of more grammar without any understanding of the language will only make the child stressed.

What methods and for whom?

Teachers can be obsessed with some method or another, and quite a large number of them feel that methods are the overarching principles on which a textbook needs to be written. Most teachers believe that the way they were taught would still be the best method. So structuralism and behaviorist models of teaching still holds good for them. The National Curriculum Framework – 2005 and the position paper on Teaching of English (2005) call for a method which in a way is the best of all the methods and approaches to language learning. A combination of the tenets of Choamskian mentalist, Piagetian cognitive and Vygotskian perspective of constructivism would do a lot for teachers to engage learners with situations connecting their life where they use the language. *Input-rich theoretical methodologies (such as the whole Language, the task-based, and the comprehensible*

input and balanced approaches) aim at exposure to the language in meaning-focused situation so as to trigger the formation of a language system by the mind (Position Paper –Teaching of English NCF 2005). The task based methodologies, the position paper believes, would do justice in placing the learner to get engaged with peers, with the community and with the language to make meanings.

Teachers in their response have raised the following apprehensions:

1. Making students read the texts of the text book is a difficult task. We need to read out each line and explain.
2. So it is difficult to have pair / group work in the class. Students would not be able to speak in English.
3. What is wrong, if I teach grammar rules? Here they mean teaching of rules of grammar by giving illustrations in sentences.
4. Let us teach poem contrary to what the textbook says, “Teach poetry for enjoyment and sensitize learners to language use like rhymes, and ideas of the poem to reflect.”
5. We have to keep examinations in mind.

One phenomenon could be noticed as we discuss the demands of teachers and their wants. Teachers expect some concrete ‘content’ to teach. i.e. teaching the material or text or the content of the textbook as an idea rather than using it as an input for learning the language. This may not be true with all teachers, however teachers who want to teach grammar rules and tell about the authors or poets, it seems, want to teach about the content by explaining and describing or supplying additional information about the author or the poet. This needs to be studied in depth before introducing into classroom processes. Activities and strategies to help in promoting peer learning and working with language like pair work, group work and reading with understanding are not of much importance for teachers who believe in and want to teach everything.

The format of a lesson or a unit

The new textbooks present a flexible format. A typical lesson in a English textbook includes: (i) Before You Read (the warming up activity to enter into the text) (ii) the text (Reading with while reading –oral comprehension checks) (iii) Thinking about the text (Comprehension and extrapolative questions to move beyond the texts) (iv) Thinking about language (Grammar & language activities rooted from the text) (v) Writing (vi) Listening, speaking activity. (vii) Some tips for teachers. This is what a typical lesson consists of not a prescription for all lessons or units. This flexible format breaks monotony and also gives scope for the teachers to design their own activities. The last item at the end of each lesson is some tips for

the teachers under the headings: **What we have done** & **What you can do**. This has been introduced based on the feedback from teachers in our interactions during the process of revision and during our training sessions. Teachers wanted to have some ideas how they can deal with the text in the class and also move beyond the book to enrich learning activities. 'What we have done' tells what the authors have provided in the lesson and their intentions for language learning while 'What you can do' gives clues for the teacher to go beyond the text and organize or design activities so as to help learners engage with the language with many more activities in contexts. Teachers have accepted the format and feel this would help them.

Materials Development as Professional Development of Teachers

Developing expertise among teachers and sensitizing them to develop and design materials is one major concern for textbook development organizations like the NCERT and state level textbook development corporations in India. Teacher training courses both pre service and in-service have not much to offer, except a few run by institutions like CIEFL. Most teacher training courses try to develop skills and competencies that would enable the teacher to deliver in the classroom. But they tend to often give them methodologies, approaches and strategies to transact in the classroom. In a teacher training approach teachers or trainee teachers are given procedures and advice to follow. Teacher training help institution and countries to achieve convergence and uniformity, but ultimately it is not very useful for learners, who need teachers who can respond to their divergent needs and wants. (Brian Tomlinson 1998)

Teachers are there as materials consumers and facilitators for students to use the materials and also as the ones who evaluate students' learning as a result of which and otherwise they evaluate the materials. This needs stronger base and understanding of the learner, nature of language learning and acquisition and the contexts in which the learner is placed, his / her identity, etc. Teachers who lack an understanding of all the above would not only find it difficult to develop materials but also they would find it much more difficult to deliver or transact any materials in an effective manner. They need to be central to materials development as Hitomi Masuhara (1998) argues

Teachers can even be said to be the central figures in materials development – for they are the ones who select materials (or, at least, have some influence in the selection process), who actually teach the materials and who sometimes have to rewrite materials. The students come and go and so do materials but large number of teachers tend to stay.

All the arguments by teachers and for or against them reflecting on their needs and wants would not make it to justify that teachers' participation in materials development is ruled out or undermined.

To Conclude

Development of textbook at the national level in countries like India is not questioned as the textbooks developed by institutions like the NCERT are taken as model text-books. NCERT's textbooks claim themselves as model textbooks and cater to the needs of students studying in schools affiliated to national level boards. Any curricular revision percolates from the central level to the states and this is true in the case of textbooks. Teachers' needs or wants do not reflect this aspect. i.e. the idea of having one book in the schools affiliated to national level board in the name of having a common curriculum, (if not a uniform curriculum). We may be for or against having a single textbook for a class even in such systems like the KVS, NVS and schools affiliated to the central boards. Teachers in a particular system and who are on transferable basis from one region to another do not see this (having a single textbook) a problem. Our interactions with the teachers do not reveal that and they feel that they need to accept any textbook given to them. The textbook symbolizes the authority under which the teacher must accept. It also symbolizes the teacher's subservient status in the educational culture (Krishna Kumar (1992).

This, however, does not lead one to conclude that countries like India can not have national (level) textbooks as the present exercise made an attempt to bring in a large number of people from all areas of schooling, from practicing teachers to academics at the university. Brian Tomlinson's (1995) point to develop effective materials is of much relevance in today's context.

We need to find ways of bringing together researchers, teachers, writers and publishers so as to pool resources and to take advantage of different areas of expertise in order to produce materials of greater value to learners of languages.

The gap between teachers' needs and wants is felt during the process of textbook development. Teachers' wants are determined by different concerns and their understanding of language learning and understanding of the child and her context. Even this needs to be questioned as the teachers needs and wants, we can argue, are not determined by their understanding of pedagogical aspects. So they expect the textbook do everything, to have content, language elements, a method which they feel suitable and an evaluation that would enable the learner to enrich their language. Teachers assume that students would not understand English even spoken in simple sentences so do not

provide them anything that they would not understand. In truism, teachers feel, "do not expose them with language input as they can not understand anything at all." One could conclude that the gap between what teachers want and their need impact the classroom transactions. The gap between teachers' needs and wants and students needs determines teacher's use of the textbook in the classroom. So to argue, teachers who believe his/ her students can not read and understand anything in English would not use the textbook as intended by the syllabus or textbook writers.

We need to think much more about methodologies and whether materials need to openly advocate or prescribe a method or some methods to the teacher to follow in his or her classroom teaching. This is not simply to undermine the textbook as a restricting mechanism, but by accepting it as a launching pad for teachers to facilitate language learning where comprehensible inputs are provided to students and tasks are designed to enable learners to engage with the language and with their peers and surroundings to use the language. Moving beyond the textbook to design tasks and activities which children would feel nearer to their lives or from their lives would be one of the purposes of teacher facilitating learning. Julian Edge and Sue Wharton (1995) feel 'in the ELT literature, views about course book seem to polarise'. Richards (1993) also supports the concern that a comprehensive, tightly structured course book encourages dependence on the part of the teachers, and fosters a situation where the teacher relies on the book to do the real work of teaching. Julian Edge and Sue Wharton (1995) while agreeing with Richards feel that many course books attempt themselves to do the work of decision making and pedagogical reasoning, and therefore do not encourage teachers to use them in a creative and personal way. An effective textbook would need to encourage teachers to move beyond it. The new generation books of NCERT (in India) have made an attempt to free the teacher from the shackles of tyranny of textbooks.

Biography

Rama Meganathan is currently a lecturer in language education in the Department of Languages, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi, India. He has worked as a school teacher, teaching English as second language at secondary and senior secondary stage for a decade. He was part of the National Curriculum Group (NCERT) during the recent curricular revision and the development of National Curriculum Framework (NCF) – 2005. He is a member of textbook development team in English for class VI and member coordinator of textbook in English for class X, developed as follow up to NCF-2005. He has authored articles, research papers on ELT, classroom teaching, language policy and school management. He has also published a poetry collection titled, Sounds of Silence. He is currently working on

a research programme on language policy in school education. His interests include material development, classroom processes, language policy in education, teacher training, teaching young learners and poetry writing.

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