Since the first edition of this book was published in 2002 there have been many changes in language teaching, not least those associated with technological developments. Despite such changes, the same basic needs remain as far as teacher education is concerned. Teachers still need advice on how to: evaluate coursebooks and other core materials systematically, source, evaluate and adapt materials and design their own materials. This book provides this – offering a structured approach to the selection and subsequent evaluation of textbooks and practical advice on their adaptation and supplementation. For teachers who prefer to prepare their own materials there are suggestions on systematising the process of materials development and on the use of learner-generated materials.

The second edition of this bestselling textbook:
• Features newly selected extracts from a representative range of teaching materials
• Includes new content on worksheet design, differentiation, digital resources and learner involvement in materials production and evaluation
• Provides interleaved tasks which promote the sharing of experience and learning, reflection and application
• Focusses on developments such as coursebook packages and the wider range of ancillary materials
• Discusses the increased availability of lesson-ready material online
• Responds to the growing expectation that teachers will produce their own material.

Ian McGrath has over 30 years’ experience as a materials writer and a teacher and educator in the UK and overseas, most recently as a Visiting Associate Professor at the National Institute of Education in Singapore. He is now an educational consultant based in the UK.
Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching
Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics

Titles in the series include:

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To Natasha,
with my thanks for her unfailing support.
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Series Editors’ Preface

This series of single-author volumes published by Edinburgh University Press takes a contemporary view of applied linguistics. The intention is to make provision for the wide range of interests in contemporary applied linguistics which are provided for at the Master’s level.

The expansion of Master’s postgraduate courses in recent years has had two effects:

1. What began almost half a century ago as a wholly cross-disciplinary subject has found a measure of coherence so that now most training courses in Applied Linguistics have similar core content.
2. At the same time the range of specialisms has grown, as in any developing discipline. Training courses (and professional needs) vary in the extent to which these specialisms are included and taught.

Some volumes in the series will address the first development noted above, while the others will explore the second. It is hoped that the series as a whole will provide students beginning postgraduate courses in Applied Linguistics, as well as language teachers and other professionals wishing to become acquainted with the subject, with a sufficient introduction for them to develop their own thinking in applied linguistics and to build further into specialist areas of their own choosing.

The view taken of applied linguistics in the Edinburgh Textbooks in Applied Linguistics Series is that of a theorising approach to practical experience in the language professions, notably, but not exclusively, those concerned with language learning and teaching. It is concerned with the problems, the processes, the mechanisms and the purposes of language in use.

Like any other applied discipline, applied linguistics draws on theories from related disciplines with which it explores the professional experience of its practitioners and which in turn are themselves illuminated by that experience. This two-way relationship between theory and practice is what we mean by a theorising discipline.

The volumes in the series are all premised on this view of Applied Linguistics as a theorising discipline which is developing its own coherence. At the same time, in order to present as complete a contemporary view of applied linguistics as possible other approaches will occasionally be expressed.
Each volume presents its author’s own view of the state of the art in his or her topic. Volumes will be similar in length and in format, and, as is usual in a textbook series, each will contain exercise material for use in class or in private study.

Alan Davies
W. Keith Mitchell
Acknowledgements

Over the years, I have been lucky in my teachers, in my professional colleagues, in my co-authors, in my editors, and in my students (among them language teachers following BEd and MA programmes in Edinburgh, Nottingham, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore). Some are named in the text. Others know who they are, and, with a small number of exceptions, it would be invidious to single out individuals. This is, however, a suitable opportunity to thank Philip Prowse for inviting me to become a co-writer on a coursebook series, for what I learned from that and subsequent collaborations and for his friendship over the last thirty years; and Tessa Woodward and Penny Ur for the wonderfully stimulating times when we worked together on international trainer training courses.

This is also an appropriate place to thank the publishers who responded to my requests for samples of materials by generously supplying the books (and many more) on which I have drawn for my examples: Cambridge University Press, Express Publishing, Garnet Publishing, HarperCollins, Heinle/Cengage, Helbling Languages, Macmillan and Oxford University Press.

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Introduction

1 MATERIALS EVALUATION AND DESIGN AS APPLIED LINGUISTIC ACTIVITIES

Those with a responsibility for the development and administration of language learning programmes in either educational or workplace settings will need little persuading that materials evaluation and design, along with, say, syllabus design, learner assessment and the study of classroom processes, as aspects of curriculum planning and development, are centrally important applied linguistic activities.

The value of work on materials has also been recognised for some time within the academic community. Johnson (1989a), for instance, writing of three phases in the development of applied linguistics, describes the second phase as one in which work on needs analysis, the syllabus, materials design, the roles of teacher and learner and classroom interaction brought the language curriculum ‘more closely into line with our new and broader understanding of communicative competence and the processes of language acquisition and use’ (1989a: xi). Byrd (1995a: 6) notes that ‘materials writing and publication has become a professional track within the professional field of teaching ESL’. Byrd’s comment comes from her introduction to a collection of papers (Byrd 1995b) written by members of the Materials Writers Special Interest Section within TESOL, the American-based international association of teachers of English to speakers of other languages; a further collection (Tomlinson 1998) was produced by the British-based international Materials Development Association (MATSDA), which also publishes a regular journal; and a Materials Writing Special Interest Group has been formed within the British-based International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL).

Acceptance of the appropriateness of materials as a field of serious study, from the perspective of evaluation, design or research, has also been reflected in the increasing inclusion of materials evaluation and design as a field of study within BEd and Master’s programmes, and the (still small, but growing) number of students pursuing doctoral research, together with the not unrelated increase in publications, one of which is tellingly entitled Applied Linguistics and Materials Development (Tomlinson 2013a).

And materials writers and teachers blog merrily.

2 THE IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

To state that materials evaluation and design (seen as separable) are applied linguistic activities is to make two further claims: that on the one hand they are oriented towards practical outcomes (some might say ‘the solution of problems’) that necessitate relevant experience and specialist knowledge/skill, and on the other that this specialist knowledge/skill is something that is possessed by applied linguists (rather than any other group of experts). So does this mean that to evaluate or design materials language teachers have to be applied linguists (in the sense that they have successfully completed a suitably broad and rigorous programme) and that if they are not we cannot expect them to be capable of carrying out either of these functions?

A functional separation between classroom teachers and others whose work has an impact on language learning may be a helpful way of thinking about the implications for education and training (see Figure 1); however, there is a danger that if applied too narrowly such differentiation has the effect of disempowering those at the lowest level.

In describing their pyramid model, Brumfit and Rossner (1982) are at pains to point out that the decisions made at higher levels must take account of lower-level decision-making and that in taking informed decisions at the classroom level teachers need to mediate between higher-level decisions and actual conditions. Seen in this light, the teacher is not simply someone who executes higher-level decisions but someone
who considers if (and if so, how) these decisions can be implemented in the light of classroom realities. Thus, to refer to the right-hand side of the diagram, an appropriate objective for an in-service programme (and this need not be at Master’s level) would be to enable classroom teachers to construct their own materials if this seemed desirable.

One of the implications of this view is that teacher education programmes must prepare teachers, psychologically as well as theoretically and practically, for this role, a role which involves evaluation as well as creativity. A second consideration, made explicit in the model, is the need to distinguish in a principled way between pre-service and in-service education.

2.1 Pre-service teacher education

It is not uncommon on initial training courses for trainees to be encouraged to produce their own materials, and there are good reasons for this. Views about teaching and learning change, textbooks change in tune with these, and teachers must be able to respond flexibly to such changes. Thus, there is value in trainees learning to analyse learners’ needs and set appropriate objectives and then going on to plan lessons and develop materials to meet those needs if suitable materials are not available. However, if this means that there is little opportunity to practise working with existing textbooks that are potentially suitable or that the use of textbooks is actually discouraged, then the emphasis of such courses is misguided. For most language teachers working within formal school systems, the textbook is for a variety of reasons ‘the visible heart of any . . . programme’ (Sheldon 1988: 237), hence the term coursebook. Given institutional and external constraints, there is little prospect that this situation will change. To recognise this is to acknowledge the need for a rather different orientation in teacher education courses from that indicated above. What is important is that teachers should see the coursebook not as the course but as an aid to fulfilling the aims and objectives which they have themselves formulated. The implication for initial training courses is obvious: trainees need to develop the
capacity to evaluate existing materials in relation to the teaching–learning context and their teaching purposes. Guidance in materials design (principally in the form of adaptation and supplementation) could then be logically related to the perceived inadequacy of existing materials in relation to course objectives and/or learner needs.

2.2 In-service teacher education

One of the advantages that experienced teachers have over their inexperienced colleagues is that the former’s experience consists in part of being able to predict how learners will cope with and respond to certain types of published material. Thus, when experienced teachers teach using a coursebook that they know well, they will have a sense of what to use and what not to use, what to adapt and where to supplement. In many cases less adaptation and supplementation would be necessary if the textbook had been selected more carefully. It seems logical therefore that one of the most important foci for in-service education should be guidance in the selection of course materials, both textbooks and other materials. A recent survey of English teachers in Sweden (Allen 2015) confirmed that whereas the inexperienced prefer to rely on coursebooks to provide a structure for their lessons and as a source of extended reading practice material, experienced teachers are increasingly using online materials and see coursebooks simply as a ‘fall-back’ resource. Even where materials selection lies outside the control of individual teachers, there may be opportunities for them to contribute to selection decisions on an individual or group basis, either by presenting a case for the abandonment of ineffective materials or for the adoption of one set of potentially suitable materials rather than another. If, as is often said, knowledge is power, then wider awareness of materials evaluation procedures and an understanding of the concepts that typically underpin evaluation criteria might encourage those who have been silent to speak. Teachers themselves are also likely to appreciate guidance in materials design in a broad sense (adaptation, supplementation, the development of stand-alone materials); as indicated above, this would flow naturally from dissatisfaction with existing materials.

The suggestion made here, then, is that the more teachers know, understand and can do, the more capable they will be of carrying out the mediating function referred to earlier, especially in relation to materials. This does not mean that language teachers have to be applied linguists in the sense that they have followed a Master’s degree, but it does mean that they need to possess the confidence and at least basic competences to (1) make informed decisions about the choice and use of materials and (2) source, adapt and develop materials when existing materials are found to be inadequate.

3 THIS BOOK

3.1 The aims of the book

In the years since the first edition of this book was published there have been some changes in the landscape, not least those associated with technological developments.
Despite such changes, the same basic needs remain as far as teacher education is concerned. Teachers still need advice on how to:

- evaluate coursebooks and other core materials systematically
- source and evaluate other materials
- adapt materials
- design their own materials.

When I set out to write the first edition I had in mind a ‘How to’ book. As normally used, this phrase is applied – sometimes disparagingly – to practical guides. My intention was to write a book that would be seen as practical by teachers but would also exemplify a way of thinking (about materials, about the teacher’s responsibility, about the ways in which learners can contribute) that would give a secondary meaning to the ‘How to’ label. I can remember saying, as a student – many years ago – towards the end of an MSc in Applied Linguistics (in Edinburgh): ‘I’ve learned a lot from this course, but I think the most important thing I’ve learned is how to think critically.’ In one sense, this book springs from that insight (reflected in the frequent recurrence of the words ‘systematically’ and ‘principles’). However, it derives more directly from the experience over the last thirty plus years of teaching courses, often elective, in materials evaluation and design as components of Master’s courses in the UK and overseas, and of running workshops on materials design as part of specialist courses or at conferences. The elective courses and workshops are always well subscribed. This not only points to the value that teachers attach to materials, but also points to their wish for guidance in choosing materials, adapting these and preparing their own. This book is an attempt to meet that need in a different form.

3.2 The structure of the book

Since this is a volume within a series on applied linguistics, the assumption has been made that the primary readership will be teachers with some experience of teaching. This assumption has influenced both the structure and the content of the book. The linear development of Chapters 2–6, from the selection of materials to materials adaptation and then supplementation, is based on experience of working with practising teachers, but takes little for granted in terms of prior training; subsequent chapters, on topics such as systematising the design process, involving learners in materials design and in-use and post-use evaluation of materials, will obviously be of most relevance to experienced teachers. The final chapter, which brings together a selection of special topics (for example, materials and culture, materials and syllabus, materials and research, and finally a short section on materials and teacher education), has been included for those with an interest in studying materials or teaching about materials.

3.3 The new edition

For the purposes of this new edition, all chapters have been revised and updated, and new content has been added on, for example, differentiation, digital resources,
and learner involvement in materials production and materials evaluation. In the previous edition, suggestions for further reading were included at various points in each chapter. These are now collected in a single section at the end of each chapter. The extracts from teaching materials included in appendices have also been selected to reflect the range of materials currently available from mainstream publishers. My own experience of using the book on assessed teacher education courses over the last twelve years and feedback from course participants has also led to some changes in tasks, and particularly the decision to include the Reflection, Discussion, Action activities at the end of each chapter. Many of these are intended to prompt the reader to reflect critically on the relevance of what they have read to their own teaching context and professional practices, and to consider the implications for change. On my own courses, they have encouraged the sharing of experience, insights, intentions and reports of action (through face-to-face discussion or contributions to an online forum); they have also been the basis for written assignments, including a reflective journal.

3.4 Using the book

I imagine some using the book as a ‘set text’, reading prescribed sections in their own time and discussing these and working through tasks in class. The letter K next to a Task (e.g. 2.4K) signifies that a Key or Commentary can be found on pp. 301–19. Some I see in libraries, using the book as a resource for assignments or their own research. Others, who are not following a course but are keen to do better the things they do every day, may search the book for guidance and inspiration. Within the latter group there may be little clusters of practising teachers with common needs (such as how to select materials in a more systematic way), who will choose to use specific sections of the book as a basis for discussion or coordinated activity.

What this implies is that there is no one way to use the book. Although it has been planned in such a way that it can be used as a set text, it is not in itself a course. The lecturer who decides to adopt it will, I am sure, use it as I have myself used the first edition – like any coursebook, as a resource, selecting, adapting and supplementing according to time constraints, course participant factors (including participants’ own priorities) and an understanding of what is appropriate in that context. Lecturers working in pre-service contexts with trainees who are engaged in teaching practice may even wish to stand the book on its head, as it were, starting at Chapter 4 (materials selection and adaptation for lesson planning) and dealing with the content of Chapters 2–3 (selecting coursebooks or other core materials), a prospective rather than an actual need, only just before trainees graduate.

I have previously argued (McGrath 2000) that by developing skills in materials evaluation and design, teachers also develop the capacity for greater professional autonomy. Having recently had the good fortune to work with in-service teachers in Singapore, and seen what changes are possible within one-semester part-time courses lasting only thirty-six hours when teachers have access to their
own classrooms for experimentation, I am more than ever convinced that this is the case.

3.5 The hope

My hope is that what I have written will be of value to all teachers with an interest in this topic, irrespective of their experience, level of training and their present circumstances (studying, teaching or combining the two). My particular hope is that it will embolden readers to take at least one step beyond where they stand at present: that, for instance, those who currently carry out only impressionistic materials evaluation will do this more systematically; that those who evaluate systematically at the point of selection will continue that process by evaluating systematically materials in use; that those who have in the past made only minimal changes to the materials they use will develop the confidence to make more substantial changes when these are called for, and be able to justify these by reference to their own principles. These are, of course, progressive steps away from textbook-dependence and towards teacher autonomy. But I also hope that those who have thus far taken on themselves all the responsibility for materials evaluation and development will be persuaded to involve learners and colleagues and that institutions will be prepared to facilitate cooperative initiatives. All stand to benefit.

Ian McGrath
Nottingham, July 2015