

## Teacher Creativity in Materials Writing

In this article, **Daniel Xerri** argues that the creation of language teaching resources does not have to be the prerogative of experienced and published course book writers. Most teachers need to write or adapt materials to meet the individual needs of their students and this creativity has a number of positive effects for teacher and learner alike.



Create your own, tailor-made teaching materials – there is lots of inspiration out there! (image: Pixabay)

Materials writing is most often seen as an activity that involves a high level of creativity. Certain professionals make a living out of it and their services are sought whenever publishers want to issue new course books, photocopiable and online resources, digital media, and other language learning and teaching materials. Their creativity enables them to produce materials for teachers and learners to use in the classroom. However, writing materials is not an activity strictly confined to such professionals. Most language teachers have to regularly write materials or adapt existent ones in order to address the needs of their learners. When they do so, they are still deploying their creativity, despite the fact that some of them might not consider themselves as creative professionals. This article explores the idea that, if teachers were to reconceptualise, creativity they would be able to see what they do with materials (including adaptation) as a creative act. Moreover, the article considers how familiarity with certain language acquisition principles might be helpful for teachers wishing to hone their creativity skills for the purpose of engaging in materials writing.

### Defining Creativity

The way we determine whether someone's efforts at materials writing are creative, or not, very much depends on our personal definition of creativity. If we expect a materials writer to be manifestly original and to produce something patently new, then we might be setting the bar too high. This is because such a narrow definition of creativity is bound to apply to only a few human enterprises.

A more pragmatic approach to creativity in materials writing is based on the notion that we are creative whenever we reconfigure different sources in novel ways and with a specific purpose in mind (Xerri, 2017). Hence, material writers are being creative when they assemble different bits and pieces together into something that can foster learning. For example, a recently published authentic text can be combined with tasks that the writer might already be familiar with in order to produce a piece of material that can be used in the classroom. In addition, we are also being creative whenever we adapt published materials in order to make them appealing to the learners whose needs we aim to cater for. This form of creativity involves reengineering something to serve a somewhat different purpose and audience (Xerri & Vassallo, 2016).

A narrow conception of creativity does not only affect which activities and products we consider creative, or not. It also has a bearing on which kind of people we describe as creative. If we believe that creativity is something that only certain human beings are born with, then we are unlikely to think of all teachers as capable of being material writers because not all of them might be blessed with innate creativity. This myth leads us to believe that materials can only be written by specific individuals who possess a talent that not many teachers have access to. In reality, experience teaches us that most educators are creative when it comes to designing and adapting materials. Not all teachers rely exclusively on published resources, and even when they do make use of these resources, they often adapt them to suit their needs, learners and contexts.

### Why adapt Published Materials?

We have already established that adapting published materials is a form of teacher creativity. Learning how to adapt course book activities, and other resources produced by professional material writers, is an important skill that language teachers need to develop for various reasons (Islam & Mares, 2003; McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013). The risk of not doing so might be that teachers become over-dependent on published resources, simply using them without attending to their learners' needs, even when the suggested approach or methodology may not be suitable for them. In addition, teachers need to bear in mind that published resources may sometimes not be entirely relevant to their learners' needs, the chosen topics may be uninteresting or irrelevant, and the activities monotonous or predictable. One of the reasons for this is that published materials are rarely localized. Hence, exercising creativity in adapting such materials is vital for teachers.

When teachers use their creativity to adapt published materials, they are likely to experience a number of benefits (Islam & Mares, 2003; McDonough, Shaw, & Masuhara, 2013). These involve enhancing a lesson's interactivity by lifting things out of the text and encouraging learners to be more active. Adaptation can make materials more culturally appropriate, personalized to learners' lives and interests, and relevant to specific linguistic needs. Moreover, adapting materials enables teachers to relate them to previous activities and language foci, contextualize language work, and fully meet their teaching aims and their learners' needs. The adaptation of published materials is an important means by which teachers can harness their creativity to improve the quality of teaching and learning.

### Some Helpful Principles

There are various language acquisition principles that might be helpful for teachers wishing to bank on their creativity in order to write materials. Tomlinson (2010) discusses some of these principles in detail. The first is that learners need to be exposed to meaningful and comprehensible input. Thus, materials need to be rich in spoken and written texts that consist of authentic and contextualized language. The second principle specifies that learners' language experience needs to engage them both affectively and cognitively. According to Tomlinson (2010), this implies that materials should enable learners to respond personally and intellectually, and that this kind of engagement should occur before, during and after communication. The next principle highlights the fact that those learners who achieve positive effect are much more likely to attain communicative competence. Hence, materials should be as interesting, relevant and enjoyable as possible, and they should increase learners' self-esteem through the accomplishment of achievable challenges. Another principle identified by Tomlinson (2010) is that learners can benefit from noticing salient features in language input. This suggests that materials should enable learners to use an experiential approach in which they initially learn in an implicit manner and then pay conscious attention to certain features in order to learn explicitly. Materials should encourage learners to make discoveries for themselves rather than providing them

with an explanation of specific features in a text. Lastly, learners require as many opportunities as possible to use language to communicate. In terms of materials writing, this means that a resource needs to provide learners with opportunities to produce language to achieve intended outcomes. Output activities should enable learners to use language rather than merely practice certain features. They should also help them communicate fluently, accurately, appropriately and effectively. Tomlinson (2010) suggests that output activities should be fully contextualized so that learners are responding to an authentic stimulus and have a specific addressee and intended outcome in mind. When an awareness of these principles is merged with teacher creativity, materials writing can facilitate rewarding language learning and teaching experiences.

### Conclusion

If teachers embrace a democratic notion of creativity, they are much more likely to see their efforts at materials writing to be as creative as those of professional writers. All teachers are potential materials writers. If they lack the confidence to produce and adapt materials, training might enable them to tap into their creativity and not only learn the skills to use when writing materials but also develop the confidence to actually give it a go (Xerri, 2018). Developing an understanding of some key language acquisition principles might also prove useful for teachers wishing to exercise their creativity in materials writing.

*Daniel Xerri*

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*Daniel Xerri is a Lecturer in TESOL at the University of Malta. He has published widely on different aspects of ELT, and his latest books are: ELT Research in Action: Bridging the Gap between Research and Classroom Practice (IATEFL, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2Q9ZSgz>), and Teacher Involvement in High-stakes Language Testing (Springer, 2018). [daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt](mailto:daniel.xerri@um.edu.mt)*