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How Does One Go About Developing Content-Based Materials for the Commercial ESL/EFL Market?

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Today's teachers of ESL and EFL seem to be searching for materials that challenge their students—materials that require interaction and creativity, that are exciting, and that focus on meaningful content. Many want materials that more fully engage the minds of readers and are less tightly controlled than those of the “drill-and-kill” variety.

My own attempt to reach such a market is reflected in *Reading in the Content Areas* (1990) and *Exploring Themes* (in press), which I will use as examples throughout this discussion. Because the major thrust of my own content-based materials has been anthologies of selected readings, naturally I feel more comfortable talking about such texts than I do about other kinds of materials. It should be kept in mind, however, that many of the suggestions offered here can be applied to other kinds of texts.

While preparing content-based materials, it might be wise for authors and editors to contemplate the following questions:

For whom are the materials intended? Are they intended for children, adolescents, or adults? Are they for beginning, intermediate, or advanced students? Are these students in ESL or EFL programs? What are their goals? Needs? Interests? Learning styles? Under what time and other constraints will they most likely be working? In sum, the materials must be appropriate for the learner and for the situation.

What do you expect the students to be able to do as a result of reading your materials? If you expect that in the content areas students will use language mainly as a vehicle to learning content, then the focus must be on the content itself. Through this focus the student can be expected to reach progressively higher levels of proficiency in areas such as the following: comprehending intended meaning, internalizing knowledge, applying knowledge, synthesizing experience, and

so forth. Much of what is expected will depend upon the cognitive levels, needs, and goals of the students.

What kinds of readings will you include? In *Reading in the Content Areas*, which is intended for international students planning to attend English-speaking colleges and universities, I wanted to include authentic readings from currently used textbooks representing a variety of subject areas. In order to find appropriate, up-to-date readings, I used the university bookstore as my main source. Fortunately, the manager was willing to let me borrow books for short periods of time. If you are doing an edited book such as the one above, other sources of selected readings may be the community or public school libraries. In *Exploring Themes*, which is intended for the same audience, I wanted to include stories, poems, songs, and cartoons that were both relevant and exciting and that related directly to the themes I had chosen. To find just the right inclusions, I poured over numerous journals and volumes in libraries and bookstores; I asked friends and relatives what favorites they might recommend. Even my own dog-eared collections served as sources.

Regardless of the subject area in which the materials are to be prepared, the selections included should be chosen because of not only their content but their general appeal to students. They should be well written, but not too technical (unless, of course, students are ready to deal with technical materials). In addition, they should contain careful explanations of major concepts in the case of expository pieces and visual support of many kinds: clearly constructed graphs and tables, pictures, photos, and so forth. They should avoid an overuse of idiomatic language, which is apt to cause difficulty for second language students. Moreover, the selections need to be long enough to engage the reader to the point at which full understanding becomes likely. Many readings selected for textbooks are too short and too dull to even begin to involve the reader in any meaningful way.

What sorts of activities might be included? As I stated in the notes to the teacher in *Reading in the Content Areas*, "In order that it have the best possible chance for becoming internalized, content must be explored in sufficient depth so that the reader can experience its presence, reflect upon its substance, and expand upon its meaning" (p. x). The activities should aid in this process. Prereading with use of anticipation guides, prediction, and discussion questions relating to prior knowledge and experience is important in providing the schema necessary to understanding the selection. For example, in *Exploring Themes*, a questioning strategy is used to prepare students for a story entitled "Blue Winds Dancing," which is about a person from a nondominant culture returning home.

Sometimes people find themselves far away from home and from those they love. Many dream of returning one day. Think about your own situation. Are you now far away from home? If so, what do you think might happen if you returned? What would be the joys? Might there also be some fear? If so, explain.

Students are to discuss these questions with a partner.

One word of caution here. Prereading activities should not be too lengthy. Sometimes authors, in their attempt to cover all bases through extensive preparation, will put the student into a state of lethargy even before the reading begins. I have found that while students appreciate having their curiosity piqued and a cognitive scaffold established to make comprehension easier, they do not appreciate putting on hold whatever motivation they may already have to read the selection.

Questions following each selection might begin at the knowledge level (What mixed feelings does the main character have about returning home?) and progress toward more cognitively challenging questions (Do you know of other persons who have had experiences similar to that of the main character? How did these persons react? How do human beings usually react in such situations?) Other activities might include role play, interviewing, small group discussions, writing of various types, and so forth, all related directly to the reading selections. Through the activities students should begin to increase their confidence in their abilities to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they read.

How should the selections be organized? They may be organized thematically. For example, in *Exploring Themes*, which is literature-based, the readings fall into themes that I thought would be of high interest: "All That Glitters..." (about money and its relationship to happiness), "Between Cultures," "The Search for Love," and others. Or selections may be organized according to subject area. For example, *Reading in the Content Areas* is organized around such subjects as sociology, psychology, art, and so forth. Regardless of the basic organizational scheme, the selections should be arranged to maximize the students' feelings of success in gaining mastery over the language. Essential considerations include: (a) the natural reinforcement of concepts, structures, and skills within the selections themselves; and (b) the difficulty levels, both semantic and syntactic, of the selections. It should be remembered that judgments in these matters are complicated and highly subjective. It must be kept in mind too that the difficulty of any given selection will ultimately depend on the student and on the student's prior knowledge and experience.

How should new vocabulary be handled? In many ESL textbooks on the market today, vocabulary is dealt with in exercises found before

as well as after the selection. I personally prefer to use carefully prepared glossaries and individualized practice with vocabulary items selected by the student under the guidance of the teacher. Glossaries containing clues and definitions placed at the bottoms of the pages on which the words or phrases are found give students assistance when it is most needed, while they are reading.

Content-based instruction presents many challenges for the selection and adaptation of authentic materials. Although an attempt has been made here to cover a few considerations important to content-based materials development for publication, this discussion is by no means comprehensive. There is still a great deal to be learned about developing materials which integrate language and content instruction. ■

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