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Challenges in Creating a Social Welfare Workbook

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Abstract

When instructors choose to write their own material to use in an EFL class, a lot has got to be taken into consideration. An original set of materials to satisfy learners' learning needs requires assessment, ongoing trials and changes, research of best practices, and above all patience to achieve the best outcome. A set of ESP materials to satisfy the needs of a writing class for university students of Social Welfare requires yet deeper research and greater persistence. This action research paper shows the challenges and issues first-timers faced in attempting to create meaningful materials for a specific group at the university level.

大学3年生の一般英語のライティングの授業で使用する教材を作るため、教材研究と開発を行なうこと3年。使用する学生の学科や専攻に合うように、ニーズ分析を行い、教員や学生からのフィードバックをもとに教科書からワークブックになった。新たな文法を教えるのではなく、すでに知っている文法（現在形、過去形、未来形）を応用し、文章を書くことによって、英作文に対する抵抗を減らし、自信につなぐ。ワークブックが完成するまではまだ多少時間はかかるが、本論文では教材を作る問題や経過報告を紹介している。

There are plenty of writing textbooks available for English language learners in the market. Some are general writing textbooks, while some are specifically for a field of study (English for Specific Purposes, or ESP in short). However, textbooks specifically about, or related to Social Welfare are very scarce, especially in Japan. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to find something that is suitable for true-beginner level university students. There are several ways to tackle this problem: use a general writing textbook that is over the users' level and provide supplementary materials; create photocopied handouts from various writing textbooks; or make worksheets, activities, and exercises from scratch. When considering what the best course of action would be for their students while writing the syllabus for the upcoming year, two instructors thought the first option was out of the question, even though in reality there are plenty of institutions that utilize teaching materials that are not suitable for their stu-

dents' needs. The use of a generic syllabus saves time for instructors, but it does not always mean it is educationally meaningful for learners. The second option, on the other hand, was to create photocopied handouts from various textbooks. This would raise numerous copyright and legal issues. The last option was the most ideal for our learners: creating an original set of materials that would satisfy the learning needs of the learners. However, having to create a completely new set of materials from scratch requires time and effort. What do students want and need? What are their levels? What linguistic proficiency are the students required to achieve by the time they complete the course? What are the students' interests and what kind of activities will they be interested in doing? What do they think about individual, pair, or group activities? These were just the first questions to jump-start the process for creating tailored materials. The purpose of this action research paper is to share and discuss the challenges and

issues that were faced as first-timers in attempting to create meaningful materials for a specific group of students at the university level.

Background

Since 2016, two university instructors for general English classes were assigned third year Social Welfare students to teach writing. The class sizes ranged from 25 to 40 students and their English levels varied from false beginners to intermediate. The students were studying to become welfare workers, psychiatric social workers, school nurses, and/or kindergarten teachers in Japan with a rather limited opportunity of using English in their future workplaces. Notwithstanding students' general indifference toward English, in their Social Welfare Department, general English classes were required all four years. In their first year, students reviewed basic grammar, which they *should have* learned in junior high and senior high schools. In their second year, students continued with grammar with an emphasis on reading. The first two years of university English classes were input-based. However, it was questionable whether these inputs were comprehensible and acquired. In the third and fourth years of university, the general English classes focused mainly on output: writing in the third year and listening and speaking in the fourth year. In addition, in their third and fourth years, students were requested to be taught specific language that would help them in their future workplaces. In other words, their English had to be ESP.

There are copious amounts of textbooks available in the market targeting a specific skill or combination of skills. The topics covered in these books are very general and should not be considered ESP. It was particularly difficult to find a writing (or of any other skill) textbook that would be an appropriate fit for the students in the Social Welfare Department.

Theory

Nation (2009, p. 93-95) introduced four teaching principles (famously known as the four strands) which teachers must keep in mind when designing materials or tasks. The four strands were: meaning-focused input, meaning-focused output, language-focused learning, and fluency de-

velopment. A single task must possess all four strands to improve learners' linguistic proficiency. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005, p. 195), a "good plan for learning" must be "engaging and effective." They stated that the "goal is to affect (learners) on many levels; it must not be dry academic content, but interesting and relevant work, intellectually compelling and meaningful" and through this learners "develop greater skill and understanding, greater intellectual power... as they reach identified goals" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 195). In order to design a more engaging and effective set of materials, they introduced the "WHERE TO elements" that served as a reminder when creating materials: "Where is it going?" ; "hook the students" ; "explore and equip" ; "rethink and revise" ; "exhibit and evaluate" ; "tailor to student needs, interests, and styles" ; and "organize for maximum engagement and effectiveness" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

Wiggins and McTighe's WHERE TO contains numerous questions, which creators and designers should revisit from time to time to prevent them from losing track of their purpose. Nation (2005, p. 95) suggested four types of tasks that would take learners "beyond their present level of proficiency." These were "experience tasks" , "shared tasks" , "guided tasks" , and "independent tasks" . Experience tasks had learners incorporate their past experiences into composition tasks, while shared tasks referred to the collaborative learning experience. Guided tasks provided scaffolding to complete the exercises, and independent tasks left "learners to rely on their own resources" (Nation, 2009, p. 95). These tasks, as Nation (2009, p. 110) argued, aimed to deal with the "gap between the learners' knowledge and the knowledge required to do a task" and showed that there is a variety of ways to approach learning. By introducing different exercises, the learners will be kept engaged, which is an effective way for them to apply their knowledge into practical production.

Processes

Creating a textbook is no easy task. However, basing our work on Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) ideas and suggestions, a simple flowchart was created to help design, plan, and visualize the process. The procedure included

six simple steps.

Step 1: Target

Who would use this textbook and for what purpose? Deciding on the target population and their proficiency was an important first step. Without having a clear target population, a purpose and an objective for creating a textbook, nor an idea of student levels, the final product will be unorganized.

Step 2: Needs Analysis

Conducting a needs analysis was crucial because a textbook should neither be too difficult nor too easy as, in either case, it would not encourage comprehension nor motivation to learn. By running a needs analysis of the target population, it would give a clearer view of the population's characteristics and therefore provide a clearer focus on what kind of exercises should be included and at what level of difficulty.

Step 3: Brainstorming and Outlining

In the next step, writer(s) must brainstorm what to include and in what order, and whether the textbook is going to be content-based or task-based instruction. Also, writers must analyze if each of the chapters, units, or lessons are going to follow the same template throughout or whether it is going to be random in terms of ordering. Going back to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), tasks must be effective.

Step 4: Visuals and Layouts

Because there are many language learners who learn better with visual aid, writer(s) must also pay extra attention to visuals and the layout of each section or page of the textbook. It is important that writer(s) see things from the textbook users' perspective and take into account what they may feel when engaged in completing tasks.

Step 5: Executing, Revising, and Repeating

Testing out the materials and getting feedback from both the instructors and learners is important as this provides an insight to what works and what doesn't work. Revising the textbook based on feedback will make a more

appropriate material for learners. This step is almost a never-ending process.

Step 6: Publishing

Once the textbook feels complete and ready for the next step, writers may approach a publishing company or use an in-house publisher.

Target Population

The student users of this textbook were third year students in the Social Welfare Department in a women's university in Chiba, Japan. The department was split into two courses: the Welfare course and the School Nurse course. In each course, students could obtain licenses, or be eligible to take the licensure exams, to become psychiatric social workers, social workers, school nurses (wellness teachers), or nursery school teachers. Their English proficiency levels were assessed by CASEC (Computerized Assessment System for English Communications) in their first and second years of college. The graph CASEC Score (see Appendix) shows results of first-year students in the school years 2015 - 2016 and 2016 - 2017, who were junior-year students in 2018 when this action research was presented.

These scores compared two sets of first year students who enrolled in 2015 and in 2016. As shown, the gap between the highest and the lowest scores for both years was significantly wide. Although these students were divided into 3 classes, in every class there would be one or two students with a much higher English proficiency level than the others and there would be several who, despite their exposure to years of input, would be like true beginners of English. Furthermore, the CASEC scores showed a drop in both highest and lowest scores after the end of their first academic year, with the exception of the 2016-2017 students' low scores, where there was a slight improvement. These scores did not show any significant improvement in the second year as well (not shown in the graph).

Findings

Three versions of Social Welfare writing materials have been made, tested, and revised since 2016. The first two

versions were textbooks, defined as “a book used as a standard work for a study of a particular subject”, and the third version was a workbook, defined as “a student’s book containing instruction and exercises relating to a particular subject” (New Oxford Dictionary).

First- and Second-Generations: Textbook (2016-2017 and 2017 – 2018)

The first two textbook versions contained progressive and perfect tenses with minimal explanation in English, and no review exercises for the simple tenses. This was too difficult for students because, although they had learned the simple, progressive, and even the perfect tenses on multiple occasions in their prior English language courses, students struggled to form basic sentences by themselves. This was mainly due to their lack of retention, but there may be other reasons, which could be analyzed in a future article. Even though the textbook was designed for a writing course, it contained repetitive grammar exercises in which students showed great disinterest.

In the first semester, students were provided with exercises that required only short answers. In the second semester, students were challenged to write in a paragraph, though this was too demanding. Students were capable of writing short sentence answers, and yet struggled to write multiple sentences about the same topic. Through ongoing observations, the instructors could see that students did not quite know how to elaborate – even in Japanese.

Moreover, the content was too field-specific. The use of fictional characters (both Japanese and non-Japanese) that worked in relevant, Social Welfare-related fields, was expected to have a positive effect on the students. However, the characters’ roles were so distant from students’ reality, that students had a hard time relating, which may have had a negative effect onto students. Overall, the first two generations of textbooks were too difficult, boring, and demanding. The students needed something much simpler and engaging. The instructors, too, had a difficult time checking for comprehension when explaining the grammar points to students.

Third Generation: Workbook (2018 – 2019)

In the third version, the material shifted from being a

textbook to a workbook. Instead of having explanations of grammar points, the workbook contained more exercises and tasks that required students to apply their knowledge. In the first semester, students reviewed the simple (present, past, future) tenses along with numerous pair-work and group-work activities in each lesson. Students were given some autonomy on who they wanted to work with on select tasks. The collaborative learning experience fully allowed learners to help fill each other’s knowledge gaps. Students were expected to produce sentence-level writing and, towards the end of the first semester, they were challenged to a paragraph-level composition.

In the second semester, students were engaged in producing only paragraph-level writing tasks. Each writing task required students to share their thoughts and write longer passages. By the end of the second semester, students were able to write five paragraph essays. In these longer writing exercises, students were engaged and found effective ways of using grammar, words, and phrases they had learned in previous classes. Through numerous collaborative problem-solving and learning experiences, students learned to elaborate on their writing.

In these writing tasks, students were given autonomy on topics they had to write. The second semester coursework required students to write and present three written works. In the first written work, students wrote down their thoughts on certain things around them (i.e. priority seats, English language education, aging population, to name a few). In the second composition, students compared, took sides, and argued their points (topics included living alone or living at home, cats or dogs, cooking at home or eating out, and more). The third and final written task required students to research and talk about a topic related to their majors. Students were encouraged to add any topic of their liking to the list of topics during class, giving them the autonomy to choose. This positively influenced their composition quantity and quality. The sense of achievement students felt at the end of each task should motivate them in their future studies.

After each written task, students were required to submit a typed copy to their instructor prior to their following meeting, which would be copied and distributed to all students in the class. Each student read their paper in

front of their peers, while the other students used a copy of the script to follow, understand, and highlight sentences or ideas that were most appealing to them. This led to another short composition, where each student would write down what they found interesting in every classmate's speech. Although this represents more grading for the teachers, the aim for this task was to encourage students to learn to summarize and get more practice with grammar points taught in previous semesters.

The workbook allowed students to effectively use their linguistic knowledge and engage in writing. However, there were some challenges, for example, when students refused to believe that simple sentences could deliver an adequate, meaningful message. In the beginning, students resorted to using online tools to translate their sentences into English, which we had to stop, explaining that this was a form of cheating. It has been a great challenge to make sure students understand that, as arduous as it may seem, they can write as eloquently in English as they would in Japanese (or their L1). Another challenge faced was the overall lack of creativity in students. Students were seen waiting for their more capable peers or for the teachers to spoon-feed them with ideas or instructions every time a new task would be assigned.

Directions for the Future

Receiving feedback and comments from a non-writer instructor has provided the material preparers an array of points to evaluate and redesign certain tasks for future generations of the workbook. The writers will continue working with others (such as colleagues and students) and seeking feedback to make even more user-friendly, meaningful, engaging, and effective material. The workbook should continue to expose students to written English input and encourage output through written exercises and tasks that are tailored to their levels and to their departmental interests.

Conclusion

There have been various challenges and issues while attempting to create meaningful materials for a specific group of university students. Assuming that students would have reached their third year of university with

enough absorbed input from previous years, and that they would be interested in purely ESP texts, may have been the biggest errors.

However, we have organized the current product based on a clearly defined target population, levels, purposes and objectives.

We have chosen to write our own set of materials to use in an EFL writing class, taking a lot into consideration. We have devised tasks that took into account Nation's (2009) four strands, not only targeting the final outcome. Learners will have acquired greater understanding, skill, and intellectual power as they reach identified goals. The materials also afford these learners with an opportunity to develop their confidence in writing. Our current set of ESP materials aims to satisfy our university Social Welfare students' learning needs through an incorporation of Wiggins & McTighe's (2005) WHERETO elements. This material has effectively been keeping learners engaged by applying their knowledge to practical production.

Also, as onsite trial and error evolved over the years, additional review from the writers and course instructors should provide further multiple perspectives and prove to be significantly useful during the process.

In sum, the suitability of an ESP workbook for a university class in the department of Social Welfare will hinge on its being in tune with learners' academic and, subsequently, professional needs. A workbook with fewer explanations of grammar points and with more exercises and tasks that require collaborative learning has proven to better meet these needs. In addition, having students work on tasks while engaging them in producing paragraph-level composition that will lead up to writing about their majors in Social Welfare has also mitigated students' general indifference toward English.

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Appendix

CASEC Scores

CASEC test scores conducted on two sets of first year students in the Social Welfare Department in April 2015 and 2016, and January 2016 and 2017.



