

The Role of ESL Materials Development at Victoria University, Footscray Nicholson Street Campus, Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract

The article reviews English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, materials, and the roles of ESL materials development at Victoria University of Technology, Footscray, Nicholson Street Campus (VU FN) in Melbourne, Australia. The main focus is on two ESL courses: Certificate 1 Access ESL and VCE Year 12 ESL group D. The advantages of materials development for the teaching and learning are also discussed.

Background

Victoria University of Technology, Footscray Nicholson Street Campus (VU FN) offers Technical and Further Education (TAFE) courses for interested learners who would like to further their vocational and technical education in various fields. The courses being taught here equip learners with vocational and technical knowledge. They can be divided into two types: (1) regular courses which take between one term to 12 months to complete, and (2) short intensive courses that may range from one day of teaching to the ones that take nine weeks to complete. There are various vocational and technical courses to choose from; for example, accounting, adult education, administration, advertising, banking &

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finance, tourism, sport and recreation, women's education, library services and so on. These courses aim at training learners to master the necessary skills and improve their knowledge in vocational and technical subject matter to enter the job market or improve their career potential.

In addition, various English as a Second Language (ESL) courses are taught here. These courses can be further categorized into (a) English for Occupational/Vocational Purposes (EOP) and (b) English for Academic Purposes (EAP). For more details, see Figure 1. These ESL courses offer both Certificate and Diploma levels, the duration of which may range from 6 months to 1 year of studying.

At VU FN, learners who take English courses come from various and diverse backgrounds, i.e. some of them are immigrants, some are refugees, many others are overseas students wanting to improve their English skills. It is essential for them to be exposed to carefully chosen ESL materials, which can teach both Australian ways of living as well as language use. However, there are no ready-made English textbooks for the teachers to rely on and, because learners come from various backgrounds, teachers, following the given syllabus, will have to prepare the teaching materials on their own. They need to be very eclectic in the preparation of the teaching materials; therefore, materials development is an essential part of the routine teaching and learning here.

This survey review attempts to highlight the roles of ESL materials development at VU FN. The two ESL courses under the focus of this review are Certificate 1 Access ESL and VCE year 12 ESL group D taught by Peter Newnham, an ESL teacher at VU FN. The benefits of materials development towards the teaching and learning will also be discussed.

Overview of ELT

Hutchinson and Waters (1989) present the analogy of a tree of ELT to help us get a bit closer to an understanding of ELT development. Figure 1 represents some of the common divisions that are made in ELT.

According to the ELT tree, we can see that ESL can be classified in a similar manner as EFL. English for Occupational/Vocational Purposes (EOP) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) are sub-branches of

ESP: approach not product

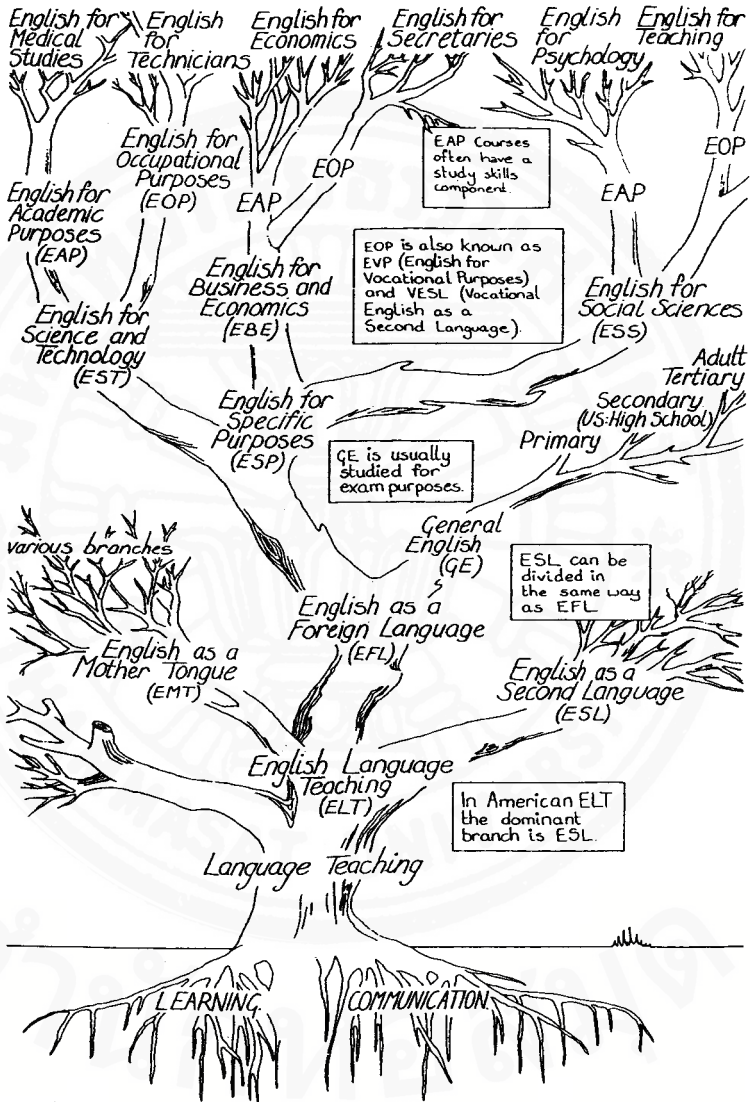


Figure 1. The tree of ELT

English for Specific Purposes (ESP). And ESP is a branch of EFL and ESL.

This ELT tree should help us to have a clearer idea of the situation and position of ELT in general. It can be used as a guideline for ESL teachers to select suitable ESL materials for particular teaching purposes. However, one must not overlook non-academic factors that may influence the content of ESL teaching materials. As Yalden (1987) pointed out, the age, educational background, and the expectations of learners will also constrain the choice of syllabus type. Not all learners will accept new types of classroom activities, but others can quickly adapt to communicatively oriented ones, even if they have been used to structure-based drills only (Yalden, 1987, pp. 79-80).

ESL Courses Under This Survey Review

The two ESL courses for this survey review are: Certificate 1 Access ESL and VCE Year 12 ESL group D. These courses provide students from non-English-speaking backgrounds with an opportunity to improve their English language skills in reading, writing, speaking and listening; develop their knowledge of Australian society, and develop strategies for successful transition into the workforce or further study.

An Example of a Summary of Assessment Tasks for Certificate 1 Access ESL

1. Hold a short conversation in which you exchange greetings and instruct someone on how to use local public transport to travel between the Footscray Nicholson and Sunshine campuses of Victoria University, or instruct someone how to use public transport to get from the Footscray campus of VU to a recreational site of interest.

This conversation should be no less than 1 minute long. It should be recorded with a class member or teacher.

Completed by week 4 (Approximate date for completion of task)

This assessment task is assessment for the following Learning Outcomes:

VBN 462 LOs 1,2,3 (Listening)
VBN 463 LOs 1,2,3,4 (Listening)
VBN 501 LOs 1,2 (Local Orientation)

2. Write a note or message telling about a recreational activity you intend to undertake in the local area. Give some simple instructions as to how another person can join in this activity. You should write at least 50 words.

This assessment task is assessment for the following Learning Outcomes:

VBN 464 LOs 1,3 (Reading)
VBN 465 LOs 1,2 (Writing)
VBN 501 LOs 3,4 (Local Orientation)

Completed by week 6 (Approximate date for completion of task)

3. Listen to a story and answer some simple questions about who the story is about and what happens to the people in the story.

This assessment task is assessment for the following Learning Outcomes:

VBN 462 LOs 4,5 (Listening)
VBN 463 LOs 5 (Speaking)

Completed by week 18 (Approximate date for completion of task)

4. Complete enrollment forms and timetable sheets. Keep a diary in which you have recorded at least 2 short pieces of writing. One piece should reflect on what is an effective way for you to learn English. Another piece should give your opinion about a story you have heard in class.

This assessment task is assessment for the following Learning Outcomes:

VBN 464 LOs 1,2,3 (Reading)
VBN 465 LOs 1,2,4,5 (Writing)

5. Read 2 short simple texts taken from a newspaper or short story. Answer 5 simple comprehension questions about the texts.

This assessment task is assessment for the following Learning Outcomes:

VBN 464 LOs 4,5 (Reading)

Completed by week 34 (Approximate date for completion of task)

6. Read a short creative composition. Give a brief oral response (semester 1 to be done 3 times). Give a brief written response (semester 2 to be done 3 times).

This assessment task is assessment for the following Learning Outcomes:

VBN 464 LOs 4,5 (Reading)

Completed by week 34 (Approximate date for completion of task)

As there are no commercial textbooks for this course, the teacher who teaches this course must prepare his own teaching materials throughout the period of 12 months. However, the summary of assessment tasks above serves as a solid framework, which provides the teacher with concrete contents guidelines on which the teaching materials should be based.

Prerequisites: a level of English necessary to complete the course.

Duration: Certificate 1: 600 hours full time or part time

Career: various or further study

Learning Outcomes, Assessment Criteria and Evidence Guide

Teachers who teach most ESL courses at VU FN must develop their teaching materials in strict compliance with the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of each course. Below are examples of learning outcomes, assessment criteria and evidence guide for Certificate 1 Access ESL.

Speaking (Access 1)

Learning Outcome 1

Exchange greetings and make introductions

Assessment Criteria

- 1.1 Use greetings and make introductions
- 1.2 Respond to inquiries about personal information and interests
- 1.3 Inquire about personal information and interests
- 1.4 Give simple explanations
- 1.5 Respond to and make requests for repetition or clarification or explanation

Actually, there are 5 learning outcomes for this course.

Evidence Guide (For LO 1)

Range of variables

The following variables may include but are not limited to the following:

Greetings and introductions

- Good morning/afternoon/evening/night.
- Hi, how are you? Fine thanks, and you?
- See you later/tomorrow/next Monday.
- Have a good weekend.
- How do you do?
- Pleased to meet you.
- Hi, I'm Tom. I'm a new student.
- This is Heng and this is Ali. They are joining our class.
- My name is Mrs Lopez. I'm Ana's mother.

Inquiries about personal information and interests

- When did you come to Australia?
- Where did you come from?
- Where do you live now?
- Tell me about your work and study.
- Have you got any children?
- How do you get to/travel to class/college/the centre?
- Tell me what you like to do in your free time.
- Do you have any hobbies?
- How do you like our weather?

Simple explanations

- I came to Australia because there is a war in my country.
- I live in St Albans because my sister is there.
- I didn't finish school because I got a job.
- I don't like the weather because I always feel sick.

Requests for repetition or clarification

- Are you coming to class next week?
- Which day/what time will you be coming?
- I don't understand, could you explain it again please?
- Can you repeat that?
- How do you spell that?
- Can you spell your name, please?

As shown above, the learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and evidence guide serve as a practical framework for teachers to comply with when they prepare the topics and class materials. Not only can teachers set their teaching goals clearly but they can also plan their course contents as well as possible teaching materials. Moreover, there are no midterm or final examinations for ESL courses at VU FN. Students' performance will be assessed through course assignments given by the teacher. For every course being taught here at VU FN, teachers will follow the learning outcomes, assessment criteria, and evidence guides strictly, so the chance of digressing from the framework of the syllabus will be minimal.

The Roles of Materials Development at VU FN

Why does materials development have significant roles at VU FN?

This is because VU FN offers many ESL courses for various groups of learners, and most importantly, no custom-made teaching materials are available. The teachers, following the Learning Outcomes, Assessment Criteria and Evidence Guide, have freedom in choosing the proper materials for their classes. This allows them to apply their creativity and competence in managing the lessons and classroom activities.

This part will focus on the roles of materials development as a means to maximize learning as well as teachers' teaching efficiency. Therefore, discussion of this part will be categorized under the following headings:

- ◆ sources of teaching materials at VU FN and how the teacher chooses ESL materials
- ◆ commercial materials and ESL classrooms
- ◆ benefits of materials development for the teacher
- ◆ benefits of materials development for the learners

Sources of Teaching Materials at VU FN and How the Teacher Chooses ESL Materials

There are many sources available for teachers to choose their ESP materials, i.e. commercial textbooks from different publishers, periodical publications, media, and on-line web sites. However, they must do it within the framework of the given syllabus.

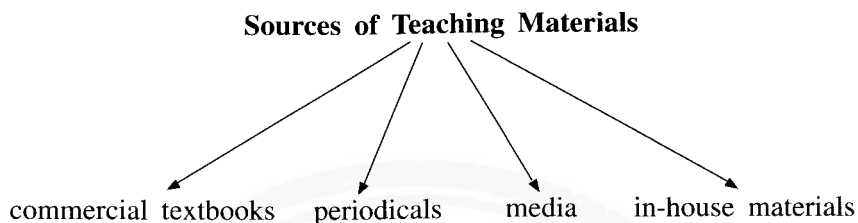


Figure 2. Sources of teaching materials

In practice, teachers at VU FN may find that choosing the right teaching materials from the right sources is not a hard job. However, the process of converting these raw materials into appropriate and well-planned lessons should be far more stimulating and challenging. They need to make sure that the selected materials will bring maximum benefits for their students. In this article, commercial textbooks refer to ESL textbooks by famous publishers which are available in the market. Periodicals refer to printed publications like journals or magazines that can be found in the library or the Self-Access Center (SAC). The word “media” refers to all kinds of published media both in print and those found on most web-sites e.g. newspapers, television programs, radio programs, advertisements, movies and so on. In-house materials refer to particular lessons or exercises produced by the teachers themselves to serve a specific teaching objective.

Like other teachers at VU FN, Peter Newnham finds the most convenient way to get ESL teaching materials is not to rely too heavily on any single source to get his teaching materials. Rather, he creates a variety of ESL teaching materials by carefully selecting materials from different sources to serve different teaching points. Sometimes he takes them from on-line sources, which is a quick way of retrieving relevant pieces of information to bring into the classroom. Other excellent sources of his teaching materials can be easily accessed from commercial textbooks, television, radio broadcasts, newspapers, movies, etc. Periodicals are another good choice. They include magazines, journals, printed materials that can be found both in the library and on web sites. They are practical and handy sources of ESL/EFL materials for most teachers. Quite often when time allows, Peter will produce his own teaching materials in the

form of a revision exercise, e.g. vocabulary review and comprehension check exercise for external reading assignment (the title of the novel is “When Things Fall Apart”).

Are Commercial Materials the Best Choice for ESL Classrooms?

In ideal situations, most ESL teachers long for perfect textbooks that will fit all students and serve all syllabuses. As a result, there has been a boom in the publishing industry of materials for a wide range of ESL teaching settings. These commercial materials are designed to match particular groups of learners with the aim to incorporate the four skill areas of speaking, listening, reading and writing into logical and well-sequenced units of lessons.

Most commercial textbooks seem to be carefully graded, with gradual progression of teaching points and topics and carefully designed review exercises. Most include a student’s book, a teacher’s manual, and supplementary workbooks and/or audiocassettes, and are marketed as complete language programs. Famous publishers are Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, and Heinemann.

However, there are also commercial materials that devote separate textbooks to each of the language skills, some of which cover grammar, writing, reading, speaking and listening or pronunciation of a particular proficiency level (beginner, intermediate, upper-intermediate, advanced) for particular groups of ESL learners (high school, vocational college, university, adult). As the potential markets of commercial materials in ESL contexts continue to grow, so too does the concern about the ways in which commercial materials may shape what and how teachers teach. One must be aware of the fact that commercial materials are not broad-spectrum drugs that can be used to treat all types of patient. The danger is when teachers rely too heavily on them and let them control the course content. According to Richards (1995), teachers’ over-reliance on commercial materials has been found to cause a lack of flexibility and creativity in their instructional practices. Moreover, given increased class size, the need to maintain student records, and external pressures for schools to quantify teaching achievement, teachers are neither expected nor encouraged to alter or adapt commercial materials to suit the specific needs of their students. Instead, teachers’ over-reliance on commercial

materials has been found to lead to instructional practices that lack relevant goals.

In other words, it seems to be a challenging task for teachers to choose their teaching materials from various sources and adapt them to match the needs of specific learners.

Benefits of Materials Development to the Teachers

The following part highlights benefits of materials development that help teachers to achieve their teaching objectives. In fact, teachers who devote themselves to preparing well-designed materials will find themselves able to cope with different situations as follows:

Teachers will be able to direct their course content in compliance with the given syllabus. Taking into account the given syllabus, the learning outcomes, assessment criteria and evidence guide, they can control the topic, content and what counts as relevant to the topic, no matter what sources the teachers may take their teaching materials from. Using the materials design model from Hutchinson and Waters (1989) also helps ESL teachers in the preparation of their materials. This materials design model (as seen in Figure 3) provides a coherent framework for the integration of the various aspects of learning, while at the same time allowing enough room for creativity and variety to flourish. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1989), the model consists of four elements: *input, content focus, language focus, and task*.

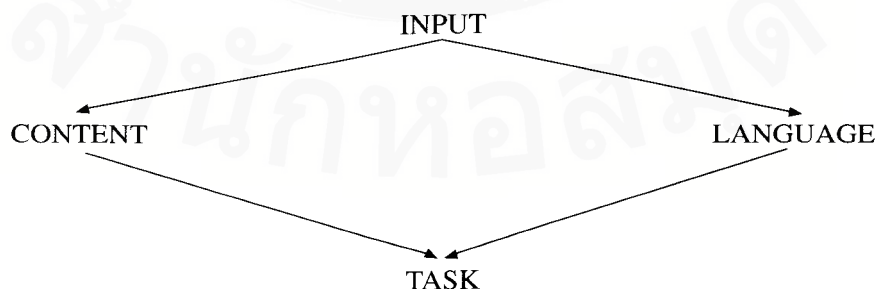


Figure 3. A materials design model

- a) **INPUT:** This may be a text, dialogue, video-recording, diagram or any piece of communication data, depending on the needs of teachers in providing variety to the lessons.
- b) **CONTENT FOCUS:** Language is not an end in itself, but a means of conveying information and feelings about something. Non-linguistic content should be exploited to generate meaningful communication in the classroom.
- c) **LANGUAGE FOCUS:** Here learners have a chance to take the language to pieces.
- d) **TASK:** The ultimate purpose of language learning is language use. Materials content and language knowledge built up through the unit are used in the task.

Teachers will be able to handle classroom management more efficiently. Once teachers have made the right choice of materials and well-designed exercises, they will find it easy to adjust the length and pace of the lesson. Thus, teachers can create flexible dynamics with classroom practices. As observed by the writer, students not only enjoyed their lesson but also had enough opportunities to learn and use English with their peers. Observations also indicated that teaching materials of appropriate length and level of difficulty allow adequate time for the teacher to use pair and/or group work as a means to encourage the use of the four skills. Examples of the pair work activity are shown below:

Subject: VCE (Vocation Certificate of Education)

Aim: To practice word spelling and 4 skills

Duration: 20 minutes

Seating: Pair work

Student A and Student B are given one letter each. Student A reads the letter out loud while Student B listens and copies down what he/she hears. If any difficult word comes up, student A has to spell it out. They take turns reading and copying the letter until they finish writing both letters.

Student A

Think of the child

I am not against gays and lesbians. If that is who you want to be then it's up to you—but consider the child's wellbeing.

Maybe gay couples can look after a child perfectly well physically, but how about mentally? How many children would feel comfortable if their parents were gay? Think of all the teasing and laughing that will take place at school. How will it affect a child psychologically?

Sure, some will argue against me—but are we willing to take risks with a child's psychology?

Cecilia Nitsche, Springvale

Student B

Perton is way out of line on bullying

I am appalled by state Opposition education spokesman Victor Perton's sad admission (The Age, 10/3) that "Teasing is a part of Australian society, part of our good humour, and there is a big difference between teasing and bullying."

One in five of our students are affected by bullying every week. Many of these end up depressed, traumatized and isolated. Teasing is the most common form of bullying.

I can think of no other single fact that undermines the performance of our young people than the fear of being bullied in schools. Any action taken to effectively reduce bullying in our schools is to be applauded.

Andrew Fuller,

Departments of psychiatry and learning and educational development, University of Melbourne

From this pair-work activity, students not only practise reading out loud and correct spelling, they also read for detail to find any positive or negative words from the letters. In doing so, the teacher will ask questions and students will give answers; therefore, they are encouraged to practise the four skills.

Teacher will be able to provide lesson topics, which are in the immediate interests of the learners. Take the pair-work activity for VCE (Vocation Certificate of Education) above as an example. It was developed by Peter Newnham, the teacher at VU FN, and is used with Year 12 students who have to write essays giving their opinions or points of view on public issues. Such issues as gun laws, smoking in public, genetic engineering, drunk driving laws, and logging of forests are the ones which are of public interest. The topics about being gay or bullying in schools will motivate the learners to use their judgement and experience to cope and they also have an opportunity to expose themselves to interesting issues around them. Motivation of the learners, together with meaningful classroom activities will likely create opportunities for learners to use language for second language acquisition. As Johnson (1995) puts it:

Theories that help us understand the complex relationship between classroom interaction and second language acquisition are based on two assumptions. First, the classroom represents an environment that is conducive to second language acquisition. The second is that what goes on in classrooms, for better or worse, involves communication, and thus can be viewed as some form of interaction.

It can be inferred that the teaching materials which encourage the learners to exchange information by performing both roles as the provider and receiver of the information are likely to create interaction, and eventually create opportunities for them to succeed in their language learning.

Teachers will be able to evaluate learners' performance and achievement more effectively. As there are no midterm or final examinations for ESL courses at VU FN, teachers can assess ongoing learners'

performance in the classroom, and at the completion of each learning outcome, teachers can assess learners' achievement by giving them assignments to do, such as group presentations or a written quiz. At the same time, teachers will be able to evaluate their materials to see if they are suitable for the learners or if there are any exercises or reading materials which need to be modified. This is a two-way process in which teachers can both assess the learners' achievement and the teaching materials. According to Haley and Austin (2004), the assessment of students and their achievements involves development of materials, processes, activities, and criteria to be used as tools for determining how well and how much learning is taking place. It also is an essential means of evaluating your planning and instruction as a teacher. From the writer's point of view, materials development techniques used by ESL teachers at VU FN are based on a more flexible approach, in which content and tasks are developed in tandem, generally leading to a more satisfactory and coherent product, as proposed by Nunan (1989) as follows:

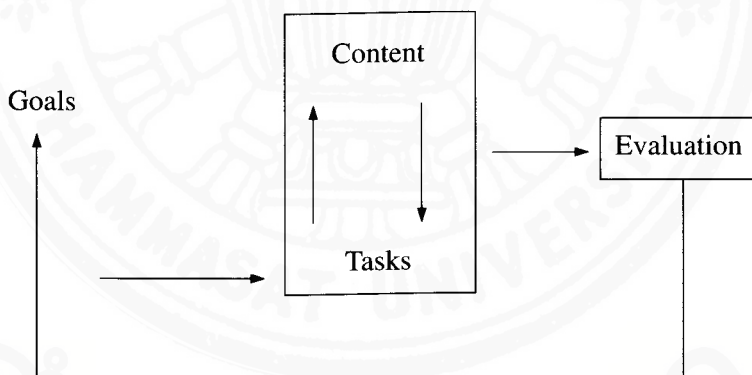


Figure 4. Nunan's flexible approach in curriculum design

According to Nunan (1989), in this model, content and tasks are developed in tandem so that content can suggest tasks and vice versa. There is also a feedback loop so that the results of the evaluation can be fed back into the curriculum planning process.

Using materials taken from the media, e.g. a video clip, helps students to learn not only English but also cultural differences. At VU FN, these

ESL learners come from different countries where the patterns of classroom communication are quite different. Thus, the ways in which these learners talk and act in ESL classrooms may be varied; for example, in Peter's class, there are quiet and reserved Chinese students, some talkative and outgoing Spanish and some aggressive Sudanese. However, by selecting interesting lesson topics that are challenging and motivating, these learners, no matter what background they come from, have an opportunity to use English and at the same time exchange their points of view and develop their ways of thinking in a meaningful way. Thus, second language students are faced not only with learning a new language, but also with a new social code of conduct (Johnson, 1995). To illustrate this point, the writer has chosen a class activity prepared by Peter Newnham. It was a video clip about "The Dictatorship in Haiti."

Subject: Certificate 2 Access O/A (Open Age)

Aim: To practice listening and speaking

Duration: 25 minutes

Seating: shooting star (normal classroom seating)

Most students attending this course are refugees from many countries with different ethnic and age background.

Before showing the video clip, the teacher introduces some concepts about the video and pre-teaches some necessary vocabulary the students may need to do the task. Then the teacher sets expectations for the activity by telling the students to concentrate on the content of each part of the video clip. Teacher plays the video and pauses at regular intervals to check students' comprehension by asking questions relating to the video clip and also requires students to express their opinion about the issues in Haiti based on their cultural grounds and idealistic norms. Surprisingly, the class generates a lot of interaction. Some students view the situation in Haiti indifferently while others react to it in a critical way because the situation in Haiti is very much like the one in their country as well.

Conclusion

The main overall benefit of preparing ESL materials and managing classroom activities within the framework of learning outcomes, assess-

ment criteria and evidence guides is that it helps ESL teachers to adopt a dynamic and flexible approach towards materials development and their instructional practices. Rather than relying on a single source of teaching materials, teachers can vary their materials topic and teaching techniques to match a specific group of learners. Much of what is involved in adopting a learner-centered ELT classroom approach is clearly concerned with effective materials development and classroom management. In doing so, teachers can kill two birds with one stone. This means if they prepare ESL teaching materials in an efficient manner by taking into account the syllabus and the learners' backgrounds, they will ease the task of classroom management, making their lessons more enjoyable and at the same time maximize learners' language learning. However, to design and develop the best possible ESL materials, teachers must take into account and follow all theoretically standardized steps in preparing their teaching materials as suggested by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) who stated that there are 7 main stages in preparing our own materials as follows:

This part is based on Figure 3 A materials design model by Hutchinson and Waters (1987).

Stage 1: Find your *Text (Input)*

Stage 2: Think of a *Task* that the learners could do at the end of the unit.

Stage 3: Go back to the syllabus. Is the *Task* the kind of activity that will benefit your learners?

Stage 4: Decide what language structures, vocabulary, functions, and content the *Text (Input)* contains. Which of these would be useful for the *Task*, i.e. what aspects of language and content can be usefully focussed on in the exercises?

Stage 5: Think of some exercises and activities to practise the items you have identified.

Stage 6: Go back to the *Text (Input)*. Can it be revised in any way to make it more useful? Try out any revisions on your learners, if possible. If nothing emerges, put it in cold storage (never throw a text or an exercise away; you might find a use for it later) and look for another text.

Stage 7: Go through stages 1-6 again with the revised *Text (Input)*.

For more details, see Hutchinson and Waters (1987, pp. 121-125).

Clearly, classroom observation and the survey of syllabus alone cannot be used to conclude that ESL materials development at VU FN is flawless. The long-term success of ESL teaching and learning at VU FN still depends on many other factors.

Firstly, course evaluation at the end of each term will be an invaluable aid in helping teachers adjust, modify or even change their teaching styles to result in the most efficient teaching and learning. However, providing students with an evaluation sheet may encourage a prescriptive stance rather than a collaborative one. In any case, teachers and course coordinators need to use their own discretion and judgement to evaluate the feedback and work together to create lessons with the right levels of cultural and linguistic complexity. Secondly, teachers may perform the role of collaboration with their colleagues, both in the creation of the materials themselves and in the subsequent reevaluation of that product. Thirdly, retraining of teachers in universities where innovations are progressing is probably needed. Finally, non-academic factors such as a lack of classroom equipment or facilities and teachers' welfare should be taken into account by administrators.

The situation of ESL teaching at VU FN is probably unique with regard to its scope. It requires the teachers to be proactive in their professional attitude and instructional practices. It calls for special attention and rigorous devotion from the teachers and collaboration from administrators to participate in the successful process of developing ESL materials.

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