



Learning Materials: The “Nucleus” of Language Teaching

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Abstract

Among some components of effective language classroom, learning materials indisputably play a focal role. They improve the quality of language teaching; facilitate teachers in doing their duties, and lead students to a higher level of understanding in learning. This research aims to discuss the notion of materials in language teaching. It made use of works of literature to outline the importance of materials in language teaching, and to analyze kinds of materials, which are relevant to language teaching. The analysis resulted in the classification of materials into two broad categories namely (1) created materials, which include course book, audio materials, and video materials; and (2) authentic materials, which cover authentic texts, movie/film, radio broadcasting, television program, graphs, maps, tables, and charts. This paper serves as an invaluable resource to facilitate language teachers in selecting appropriate materials for effective language teaching.

Keywords: learning materials, nucleus, language teaching

A. Introduction

Materials play a central role in language teaching (Garton & Graves, 2014). They are considered as the heart of teaching and learning process. Generally, it is believed that materials which are chosen selectively, and used effectively, will improve the quality of teaching and learning process. They can make the teachers easier in doing their jobs, and lead students to a higher level of understanding in learning. Ocak, Ozcalisan, & Kuru (2010) argue that materials make learning more enjoyable and understandable. Besides, materials make time allocated for learning pass effectively, and increase teaching quality as well. By its vital role, it is no doubt that materials should be put on the first priority in conducting teaching and learning process since they are fundamental in teaching and learning process (Garton & Graves, 2014).

There are many kinds of materials that teachers and students can use in teaching and learning process. For many years, we have largely used what is called course book. It has been the most popular material and used by millions of teachers and students worldwide. Garton & Graves (2014) states that course book is still ubiquitous and plays a fundamental role in language teaching around the world. It has become an almost universal element of language teaching (Tomlinson, 2014). As a matter of fact, however, course book is not completely flawless. Some say that it lacks of authenticity. Indeed, the notion of authenticity recently has become serious discussion among educators worldwide; they try to create materials relevant to the students' need in real context by inserting culture where the language is taught (Ciornei & Dina, 2015; Hasmiati, Hamra, Atmowardo, & Dollah, 2015; Beresova, 2015; and Meraji & Zamanian; 2014). Meaningfully, teachers can make use of authentic materials to improve students' communicative and cultural competence (Ciornei & Dina, 2015).

Talking of materials, it is inseparable from the existence of technology in the present days. With the constantly changing needs and improving technology of modern world, the recent trend in language teaching has become the use of modern technological tools (Secen, Sahir, & Alci, 2015). The rapid development of technology helps students understand the use of language in real context. Social networking sites and learning platforms, for instance, are powerful tools by which the students can learn language in authentic way. Teachers can maximize those tools to share meaningful materials with students. Urgently, the use of technological tools such as digital audio and video, the Internet, blogs, wikis, Virtual Learning Environments, etc. has put 'the possibilities of the adaptation and creation of a broad range of language learning materials into the hands of the teacher, but also into the hands of the learners' (Motteram, 2011 in Garton & Graves, 2014).

Due to the importance of materials in teaching and learning process, this paper provides thorough elaboration of what actually the meaning of materials is, and kinds of materials relevant to language teaching. This paper is expectantly beneficial for teachers and students to deepen their understanding about learning materials, with the purpose of achieving the better result of language teaching.

B. Literature review

There are some definitions of materials. According to Tomlinson (2011) materials are anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language. Sariçoban (2006) in Ocak et al. (2010) states that materials in a language class are a source of activity for students to practice and they improve a teacher's effectiveness. Ocak et al., (2010) also make their own definition of materials stating that materials are assisting resources that every student needs in learning process. Based on some definitions from the experts, it can be concluded that materials are anything which assists either students to learn and practice using language, or teachers to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning process.

Materials have multiple uses in teaching and learning process. Meraji & Zamanian (2014) state that language learning materials are the primary sources of information that help second language learners in the path of second/foreign language learning. In addition, Ocak et al. (2010) point out that the materials brought to the educational environment has the functions to yield a multi-learning environment, draw attention, increase the awareness levels of students, motivate, save time and enable a permanent and lasting learning. The amount of material that continues to be produced is not simply as one of the main 'tools of the trade' in the language

classroom but as ‘the visible heart’ of any language program (Tomlinson, 2014). Prior to this, Tomlinson (2008) proposed some importance of materials in language teaching as follows:

1. Some of them are providing a rich experience of different genres and text types;
2. Some of them are providing an aesthetically positive experience through the use of attractive illustration, design and illustration;
3. Some of them are making use of multimedia resources to provide a rich and varied experience of language learning;
4. Some of them are helping the learners to make some discoveries for themselves;
5. Some of them are helping the learners to become independent learners of the language;
6. Some of them are providing supplementary materials which provide the learners with experience of extensive listening and/or extensive reading;
7. Some of them are helping the learners to personalize and localize their language learning experience:
 - a. Personalization of learning systems is an effort towards making education more learner-centered, Personalization in education is considered very broadly where the learner can create learning experiences;
 - b. Localization of content which are relevant.

There is no doubt that materials are the fundamental source in language teaching. Knowing the nature of materials, however, is not enough for teachers. In addition to the knowledge of its nature, teachers should also be able to properly select materials they will use in the classroom. With regard to this, kinds of teaching materials applicable in language teaching, and considerations in selecting appropriate teaching materials are thus worth analyzing.

C. Methodology

This research used literatures as the primary data source from which the writers could outline the importance of materials in language teaching, and analyze kinds of materials relevant to language teaching. To clarify, the literatures included either research articles from reputable journals or books written by some key figures in the realm of learning materials. Information derived from the selected literatures were then analyzed and classified into some categories. Employing the constant comparative method proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985), each article or book was analyzed and learnt to compare all the information gathered from the selected literatures.

D. Findings and Discussion

As previously mentioned, materials are indeed the primary source in language teaching. They should be well-prepared by teachers in order that teaching and learning process run effectively. Careful selection of materials should be performed to make sure that the materials used in the classroom are relevant and appropriate to the students’ need. By analyzing related literatures, learning materials can be noticeably classified into two broad categories; created and authentic materials.

1. Created Materials

Created materials are materials, which are purposefully created for education. They are intentionally created to meet particular teaching and learning objectives. The following is the elaboration of some kinds of created materials, which included course book, audio materials, and video materials.

a. Course Book

Course book is ubiquitous and plays a fundamental role in language teaching (Garton & Graves, 2014). This belongs to printed materials. Hasmiati et al. (2015) state that course books are among the main elements of foreign or second language classrooms. They signify the unseen syllabus of the linguistic lessons in a definite package of curriculum. By its popularity and function, course book is considered as the heart of teaching materials in language teaching.

There is a wide range of choices in selecting course books, and it is not a simple task to choose one which is appropriate to the students’ need. Cunningsworth (1995) states that the wealth of published material that is available on the market today makes the selection of the

right course book as a challenging task, requiring teachers to make informed and appropriate choices when selecting course book and supporting materials. The selection of materials involves matching the given materials against the context in which they are going to be used and the needs and interests of the teachers and learners who work within it, to find the best possible fit between them (Tomlinson, 2014).

There are plenty of advantages of using course book in language classroom. Richards (2001) lists advantages of using course books as follows.

- 1) They provide structure and a syllabus for a program. Without textbooks a program may have no central role and learners may not receive a syllabus that has been systematically planned and developed;
- 2) They help standardize instruction. The use of a textbook in a program can ensure that the students in different classes receive similar content and therefore can be tested in the same way;
- 3) They maintain quality. If a well-developed course book is used, students are exposed to materials that have been tried and tested;
- 4) They provide variety of learning resources. Course books are often accompanied by CD, videos, teaching guides, and so on;
- 5) They are efficient. They save teachers' time, enabling teachers to devote time to teaching rather than materials production;
- 6) They can provide effective language models and input. Course book can provide support for teachers whose first language is not English;
- 7) They can train teachers. If teachers have limited experience on teaching, course book can serve a medium of initial teacher training;
- 8) They are visually appealing. Commercial course books usually have high standard of design and production and hence are appealing to learners and teachers.

In addition, Garton & Graves (2014) and Tomlinson (2014) outline advantages of using course books as follows.

- 1) It fulfills a wide range of practical needs, particularly in contexts where English is being taught in a non-English-speaking environment and where teachers either lack training or sufficient time to analyze each group's needs;
- 2) It helps provide a route map for both teachers and learners, making it possible for them to look ahead to what will be done in a lesson as well as to look back on what has been done;
- 3) It gives structure to lessons and to a course;
- 4) It saves time – teachers are too busy to prepare their own materials;
- 5) It gives a sense of security for teachers, particularly those lacking in training and experience;
- 6) It is reliable as it is written by experts and published by well-known publishers, with current theoretical approaches and methodological practices;
- 7) It can act as agents of change, allowing innovative ideas to be introduced within their structured framework in a way that enables teachers and learners to develop in harmony with these new ideas.

Course book, with its popularity worldwide, is in fact not totally perfect to be used in language teaching. It has some disadvantages as what we summarize from Richards (2001) and Garton & Graves (2014) as follows.

- 1) They may contain inauthentic language. In this case, authentic language are often ignored because course books are specifically written for teaching and learning and they are often not representatives;
- 2) They may distort content. In course books, the real issues happening in the world are often avoided;
- 3) They may not reflect students' needs. Since course books are often written for global markets, they often do not reflect students' interest and needs;
- 4) They can deskill teachers. Using only course book as the primary source, the role of teachers become reduced to that of a technician who presents materials made by others. Further, it can take away teacher's creativity;

- 5) They are expensive. Commercial course books are often sold in a high price so that it causes a financial burden for students.

Since there is always a possibility to choose the wrong course book, which might be irrelevant to the students' need, teachers need to be careful in selecting the course books. According to Garton & Graves (2014) effective course books do many of the things a teacher would normally do as part of his or her teaching. They should

- 1) Arouse the learners' interest;
- 2) Remind them of earlier learning;
- 3) Tell them what they will be learning next;
- 4) Explain new learning content to them;
- 5) Set clear learning targets;
- 6) Provide them with strategies to use in learning;
- 7) Help them get feedback on their learning;
- 8) Provide practice opportunities;
- 9) Enable them to check their progress.

Based on some points we have previously discussed, it is now clear to say that course books are still the heart of teaching materials in the classroom. Its existence is unbeatable, which means that it cannot be replaced by other materials. Considering that course books might have some aforementioned drawbacks, teachers should be selective in choosing the effective course books.

b. Audio Materials

According to Sarosdy, Bencze, Poor, & Marianna (2006) audio materials can be in the form of materials recorded for educational purpose. They are recorded with educational objectives and principles in mind. Some common examples of audio materials are interview with subject matter experts, recording of public lectures, live online discussion, and so on (the DLF Teaching Development Team, 2014). By using audio materials in the classroom, teachers are able to make their content more accessible to a wider range of students, and be creative with planning assessment tasks. In language teaching, audio materials provide students with the opportunity to learn the target language in academic context.

c. Video Materials

Video is an audiovisual material which assists students to learn at their own pace and consequently make learning process meaningful (Secer, Sahin, & Alci, 2015). Video is most widely used to introduce and stimulate interest in a topic (McGovern, 1983). In addition, there are some reasons to use video in language teaching (1) video contains context; it usually includes body language, facial expressions and artifacts, which serve as genuine audiences with whom the learners interact, (2) video gives emotional impacts; it establishes a connection with the unconscious mind and the emotions, and (3) video creates redundancy; it repeats same messages in two modes, visual and verbal (Hung, 2016). Related to how teachers can get videos, there are many published videos provided on the Internet, which are specifically designed for learning purposes. Besides, teacher can also generate their own videos as teaching materials.

2. Authentic Materials

While created materials are purposefully created for education, authentic materials, in turn, are not intentionally created for education. They are designed based on different principles such as journalism, entertainment, social purposes, etc. Although authentic materials are not specifically designed for education, they are also enormously potential for educational purposes. The following is the elaboration of some kinds of authentic materials relevant to language teaching, which cover authentic texts, movie/film, radio broadcasting, television program, graph, table, and chart, and map.

a. Authentic Texts

As previously mentioned that course book is considered lack of authenticity, there must be an alternative material that can fulfill the students need to have such a communicative competence. One of the ways is by bringing the real context of language use through authentic materials. According to Ciornei & Dina (2015) authentic materials can be described as anything created for native speakers of a language, we can use for our teaching purposes. One of the

authentic material forms that can be used by teachers is authentic texts. They can be easily found in magazines or newspaper (Ciornei, & Dina, 2015; and Tomlinson, 2008.)

Authentic text is a text created to fulfill some social purpose in the language community in which it was produced (Little & Singleton, 1988 in Ciornei & Dina, 2015). The term authentic has been used as a reaction against the prefabricated patterns of the textbooks while authentic texts were the non-pedagogical texts used to help learners improve not only their communicative but also their cultural competences (Ciornei & Dina, 2015). Authentic texts can be in the form of advertisements, brochures, menus, schedules, recipes, songs, and other items utilized in daily life (Moss & Lapp, 2010; and Ciornei & Dina, 2015)

There are some advantages of using authentic texts in language teaching. Ciornei & Dina (2015) state that the advantages of using authentic texts are: 1) providing exact examples of how the language is used by its native speakers or of the vast majority of target language users, 2) learners are provided with words and expressions used in real-life contexts, and 3) authentic texts are more informal, socially-centered and widely used. They can be a valuable material to complete the rules and patterns of course books.

Undoubtedly, authentic texts are potential to develop students' cross-cultural and literacy skills. Given those kind of texts, students will be more sensitive towards any kind of texts that they find in daily life. By matching the materials with students' need, teaching and learning process will be effective, and students will feel the different atmosphere in the classroom where they can see the real use of language.

b. Movie/Film

According to The F.I.L.M Project (no year) movies are truly modern-day storytelling instruments. They have the power to reach massive audiences, which is why they should, and do, matter so much to society. Whether they are stories of afar or just everyday existence, good movies are a way for people, particularly youth, to understand and relate to the world in constructive ways. The use of movie/film will challenge their way of thinking because they are in the process of constructing their identity. In language teaching, Donaghy (2014) states that there are some reasons why movie/film is such a good resource for language teaching. First, learning from movies/films is motivating and enjoyable. In this context, motivation is one of the most important factors in determining successful language acquisition. Movie/film, as a motivator, can surely make learning process more enjoyable. Second, as an example of authentic material, movie/film provides students with examples of language used in real situations outside the classroom, particularly language of real-life conversation. Third, the visual of movies/films makes it an invaluable language teaching tool, enabling students to understand more in interpreting the language in a full visual context. Fourth, movie/film can bring variety and flexibility in language classroom. In this case, movie/film can be used to practice listening and reading, and as a model for speaking and writing.

c. Radio Broadcasting

According to Sarosdy et al. (2006) radio broadcasts are types of audio materials which are scripted and edited based on the principles of journalism. Patel & Jain (2008) point out that there are various program in radio such as instrumental and vocal music (Sarosdy et al., 2006), both classical and popular, addresses, forums, debates, sports events, mysteries, religious broadcasts, quiz program, variety program, and so on. The variety of programs in radio will make students easier in learning the target language in real context. In addition, Wilson (no year) points out that radio enables students to learn the pace, pronunciation, and even the intonation of the target language. Radio allows students to learn the chosen language effectively, especially for oral comprehension and production.

d. Television Program

Television, which has an important place in mass communication, has a significant role in education (Saglik & Ozturk, 2001). It contains many programs that can be appropriately selected for teaching and learning purposes. Explanations related to the subject and examples can be presented visually, so the learner gets motivated, his/her desire for learning increases, and therefore learning and remembering become easier. Television may grant positive motivation such as attracting the learner's attention to a certain point or arousing attention with the movements of the camera's coming close, going away, and reflecting details. There are numerous programs that can be used as materials such as news, debate, talk show, quiz, advertisement, etc. that can serve as good resources to learn the target language.

e. Graph

According to Moss & Lapp (2010) a graph can be used to organize numerical information. Graphs can be helpful in detecting patterns and trends in data. When reading graphs, it is important to always read the title first, because it will provide a brief explanation about what the graph displays. There are many types of graphs, but graphs which are mostly encountered by students are bar graphs, pictographs, and pie graphs. Bar graphs can be used to compare groups or to show how something changes over time. Pictographs use pictures or symbols to show information. They usually include a list of categories. Pie graph displays information at one particular point in time. Pie graphs are circular graphs used to show the percentages of a whole (100%). In using graphs in language teaching, teachers can teach the structure of a particular graph (bar graph, for example) by asking the students, "What information is in the bar?" and "What do the numbers on the left mean?" (Price, 2017). This way, students' reading comprehension can be significantly improved.

f. Table and Chart

In addition to graph, table and chart can be maximized by language teachers, too. Moss & Lapp (2010) state "tables and charts organize data into rows and columns." The rows and columns have headings that tell students what kind of information is in each cell of the table. Unlike tables, charts have pictures as well as words to label the rows and columns. In common with graph, table and chart are also valuable in language teaching notably to improve students' reading comprehension. Teachers can train students to read important information either from graphs, tables, or charts. Students should ask themselves how the information shown in chart, graphic, or table supports the material they are reading (Price, 2017).

g. Maps

Besides graphs, tables, and charts, language teachers can also use maps as teaching materials. Moss & Lapp (2010) point out that a map is a two-dimensional representation of an area. The three important elements of maps are title, legend, and scale. The title gives a brief description of what is depicted on the map. The legend (explanation) tells what the map symbols represent (e.g., a star may represent a capital, a tree a national park). Since maps are smaller representations of actual areas, a map scale is used to show the relationship between distances on a map and the real distances between objects. Recently, teachers can make use of digital maps (e.g. Google Maps) to provide students with exciting learning environment. As an example of classroom activity provided by Utecht (2015), students can add markers at a particular spot in Google Maps. Then, they can create videos, or record their voices and embed them into a marker for others to learn about what happened at that spot. This activity will amazingly improve students' speaking skill as well as listening skill.

E. Conclusion

It is clear now to say that materials are crucial in language teaching. They contain meaningful contents by which students can learn language effectively. Course book, authentic texts, audio, visual, and audio-visual materials, multimedia materials, and ICT materials are powerful learning resources for students to learn language. Those materials complete each other. Reminding that not all materials are effective, it is a teacher's duty to select the appropriate materials for students. Unquestionably, by using those materials interchangeably depending on the situation and students' need, teachers will be more effective in doing their duties, and the goal of language learning can be achieved; having communicative competence. Put simply, materials are the "nucleus" of language teaching.

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