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Insights into the Process of Material Selection in an ESL Classroom

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Abstract

Material selection, adaptation and production are essential in a language classroom. This process is commonly carried out by teachers whereby textbooks and reference books usually become the main resource. In such a scenario, students tend to become mere recipients in their learning. A study was undertaken to find out what happens when students have a say in what they learn. This study explored the process of material selection by 16-year old school students. Multiple sources of information comprising the social networking tools, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, as well as informal chats and Project Survey Sheet were used for the purpose of data collection. Data was analysed using the constant comparative method. Through this method, insights into the process of material selection by these students were uncovered. A Partnership Model for ESL Material Selection was also conceptualised based on the findings.

Keywords: *material selection, ESL, collaborative dialogue, social networking*

1.0 Introduction

The importance of materials in language teaching and learning is widely recognised as they support the teacher, complement the teaching and assist the student (McGrath, 2013). Whether the teacher uses a textbook, institutionally prepared materials or his or her own materials, or even materials created or supplied by the learners instructional materials generally serve as the basis for much of the language input learners receive and the language practice that occurs in the classroom (Richards, 2001). The materials used in

language lessons, the ways in which they are used and the activities in which students are invited to engage are all important indicators of the overall approach that underpins the lessons. Banegas & Velázquez, (2014) suggests that if the learning atmosphere is friendly, the learners themselves may openly suggest activities or topics they are interested in. A friendly learning atmosphere as defined by this study is the openness students are allowed to select materials for their own learning.

Our friendly learning atmosphere begins with students selecting material for the teaching and learning process. Material selection is essential in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom and is commonly carried out by teachers. In many Asian countries, such as China, Indonesia, and Vietnam, research shows a heavy reliance on textbooks as the main resource (Brown, 2014). These books are not only the backbone that holds up a language lesson (Salas, 2004), but may sometimes be the only resource for both teachers and learners to stay in touch with language.

While teachers are mired in the present, a textbook would have been developed a few years ago. Teachers have the task of teaching the students of today, in today's classroom, within the present curriculum, system and school environment. Thus, teachers are faced with practical realities of the current context while using a manual developed years ago (Tomlinson, 2016). Therefore, using teacher-selected English language teaching materials like textbooks may not always be highly engaging to students (Pryor, 2011) and the content can sometimes be outdated and irrelevant (Salas, 2004). Students need more materials that interests them and, that would help them become thoughtful participants in a socially rich environment for learning which features the everyday use of the language. Thus, to encourage such a learning environment, students should be considered as active participants in selecting materials and resources (Tomlinson, 2016).

In this material selection process, students not only have the opportunity to interact with one another, but they are also able to participate in collaborative dialogue in order to solve problems and build on knowledge (Swain, 2000). A number of studies have shown peer-peer collaborative dialogue to be an important aspect of second language (L2) learning (Shin, 2006; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007) because L2 learning 'occurs *in* interaction, not *as a result of* interaction' (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002). Moreover, in English language teaching, students need to have a voice so that their needs, interests, motivations, and creative selves become part of the classroom (Banegas & Velázquez, 2014) through authentic use of language in interaction.

Language in interaction during material selection enables students to contribute different pieces of information or build-upon others' explanations to jointly create a complete idea or solution (Hatano, 1993). They can collaboratively build knowledge and problem-solving strategies that no group member has at the start by acknowledging, clarifying, correcting, adding to, building upon, and connecting each other's ideas, suggestions, and perspectives (Hogan, Nastasi, & Pressley, 2000; Mercer, 1996). In such a scenario, students become active participants of the learning that takes place.

In Malaysia, English in secondary education is a mandatory subject. Being a global language for knowledge and commerce, students' motivation to learn English may be influenced by their desire to pass the subject. Teachers have been given textbooks to guide their teaching which are designed by experienced ESL teachers and the designing team may include lecturers from the universities or teacher training institutes, who may be previously school teachers (Zakaria & Koay, 2013). The Ministry of Education, Malaysia stresses that while it is compulsory for teachers to use the textbook, they can adapt materials from the textbook. Teachers are also encouraged to design additional materials. The learning and content standards which make up this prescribed curriculum is couched within fixed themes and topics that meet the requirements of the National Curriculum Specification and are sufficient for preparing students for public examinations (Zakaria & Koay, 2013). Therefore, it is the teachers who end up making decisions regarding students' interests, wants and needs which is determined by the impending public examination. The most common way is by selecting materials

from resources such as the textbooks and workbooks. However, Tomlinson (2008) states that teacher-selected ELT materials tend to underestimate students and fail to offer sufficient opportunities for them to learn outside the classroom.

Hence, there are calls for more research in the literature of material development, specifically in relation to its actual use. According to McGrath (2013), a lot of research looks at materials in the form of textbooks and very little research looks at the actual use of materials and language learning. Therefore, to add to the literature, this study investigates how the process of material selection by ESL students enhances language learning. The distinct feature of this study is the integration of technology, namely social networking tools in the process of material selection.

2.0 The Study

This study was conducted using a qualitative case study approach as it allows for the understanding of human learning and thinking processes within a specified context (Wertsch, 1991), and enables the interpretation of findings from the participants' perspective.

This case study involved a teacher and her class of 30 Form 5 ESL students in a public secondary school located at an urban area in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. These students were between the ages of 16 and 17. They learn all subjects in Malay except for English Language. English, being the official second language in Malaysia, is one of the compulsory subjects they will sit for in the major public examination, the Malaysian Certificate of Education (Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia) at the end of the year. Even though English is learned as a second language in school, for most of these students, it is a third language after their mother tongue and the national language, Malay. Based on their performance in the Form 4 final exam, it was observed that the general level of English Language proficiency among these students was between average and high with 73% in the high band and 27% in the average band. For the purpose of the study, the students were divided into 7 groups with 5 groups having 4 students per group and another 2 groups with 5 students each. Students were coded using S; S1 being Student 1, S2 being Student 2, and respectively.

This study began during the December school holidays in 2017 and continued when the school year commenced in January 2018. The teacher asked her students to choose their preferred social networking tool of communication, the result of which was WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. These social networking tools enables learning to take place anytime and anywhere (Yunus, Salehi, & Chenzi, 2012; Warschauer & Kern, 2000; Al-Shehri, 2011). Each group then selected their respective leaders and the leaders were asked to set up a WhatsApp group or Facebook Messenger group based on the theme they had selected. Ultimately the leaders became the administrators of the chat group they created. These social networking tools enabled group members to discuss the topic they planned to work on based on their choice of theme. It also ensured that discussions were not just confined to the language classroom during school hours, but went beyond that. The teacher was included as a member in all seven groups to allow easier communication with the students, as well as to monitor and facilitate the discussions. The exchanges that took place in these two social networking sites were the main source of data.

Another source of data was the Project Survey Sheet (PSS) which was used to obtain information from the groups. Each group was required to complete one project survey sheet. The PSS consisted of details that students had to fill up, namely, the theme, topic and group members' names. It also comprised a four-box grid that required information each group had to write on: reason(s) for choice of topic, resources used, presentation mode and activity for peers. For the purpose of this study information from the three grids were analysed with the exception of activities for peers.

The third source of data was the informal chats. Casual chats regarding the task set – material selection were held before, during and after class. Patton (2002) identifies these informal chats as the “informal

conversational interview” while Fontana & Frey (2000) call it “unstructured interviewing”. These informal chats enabled the teacher to “go with the flow” (Patton, 2002) and pursue information and clarification as insights into the students’ thought, opinions and feelings were revealed or as they emerged.

In order to analyse the data, the constant comparison method was used to compare data from the Facebook messenger/WhatsApp messages, informal chats and Project Survey sheets to develop data driven categories. Since language is the medium in which teaching and learning takes place, discourse (both spoken and written) is a good source of data to analyse to understand how knowledge and meaning in the classroom is jointly constructed through the process of developing resources for meaningful learning. A detailed description and analysis of spoken (informal chats) and written discourse (WhatsApp messages and project survey sheets) yielded insights into how the process of material selection by ESL students enhances learning.

3.0 Findings and Discussion

This section discusses several findings that emerged from this study, particularly student empowerment, joint construction of understanding the task, genuine interest, student-chosen issues vs teacher-chosen issues and talk or discourse scaffolds learning.

3.1 Student Empowerment

One of the themes drawn from the analysis of data was student empowerment. Data from the informal chats revealed that students were initially surprised when they were assigned the task. Never did they imagine they would have to identify a topic based on the theme given and carry out a research in order to share information with their peers. To them, it has always been the prerogative as a teacher to do so. Nevertheless, they complied with the instructions given. Three weeks into the assignment and there were no discussion going on. That’s when the teacher discovered that they were at wit’s end as they did not know how to start their task.

When the teacher got them started on the WhatsApp group chat, the discussion gradually began. However, at this initial stage, when they felt lost, they were highly dependent on her response as shown in the excerpt:

- S1: ...hm do we need to answer individually or as in a team answer?
S2: Teacher, can I answer like ...I’ll be focusing on haze ..because it happen every year
S3: Teacher, do we have to only focus on 1 example of the social issue or 1 people 1 example each?
S5: Oh we thought we are gonna wait for ur response

Nevertheless, the excerpts below revealed that as the discussions progressed, students seemed more confident in voicing out their opinion:

- S1: So how about we go back to the root and throw out ideas related to our theme?
S2: To be honest, I’m thinking about the trees in Malaysia...
S5: ... hmm that’s a good one...
S1: That’s a nice one. But hmm I’m not too sure ... I did a little research and apparently human overpopulation is also included in the theme [environment]

The excerpts demonstrate how students took ownership of their learning through discussion with their peers in order to arrive at a particular topic. It revealed how group members refer to and build-upon each other’s contributions (Hogan, Nastasi, & Pressley, 2000; Mercer, 1996).

Hence, an initial confusion of the task to choose the assignment topic turned into enlightenment as students celebrated the empowerment given to them to explore and reach a consensus.

3.2 Joint Construction of Understanding the Task

Data from the WhatsApp group chat revealed that students understood their task better after the group was created and members started chatting. For instance:

T: Social issues cover many topics. You have to zoom in on one

S: Oh...like bullying 😊

It was also observed that there was also a tendency for students to use emoticons to express their feelings when they had understood something.

Data from the WhatsApp group chat also revealed that there was flexibility in the discussion carried out and students could discuss at their own pace and convenience as shown by the excerpt below. Nonetheless, they always made it a point to reply to their peers in the process of getting their assignment done.

S1: Hey guys...we need u here.

S3: I'm at tuition now..Sorry

S4: Hey sorry, I was doing my research 😊

The length of discussion threads among students as well as the period of discussion dates in the group chat was analysed as shown in Table 1. Each group accomplished their task within one to one and a half months but the number of exchanges differed as they worked at their own pace.

Table 1: Length of Discussion Thread and Period of Discussion

Group Theme	Length of Discussion Thread (No. of exchanges)	Period of Discussion
Environment	88	16 Dec 2016 – 21 Jan 2017
Social Issues	29	11 Dec 2016 – 25 Jan 2017
Health	20	10 Dec 2016 – 04 Jan 2017
People	57	12 Dec 2016 – 07 Jan 2017
Values	42	09 Dec 2016 – 07 Jan 2017
Entrepreneurship	44	12 Dec 2016 – 25 Jan 2017
Science & technology	53	14 Dec 2016 – 12 Jan 2017

Findings from the Project Survey Sheet disclosed that in order to complete the task, students resorted to various resources but mostly the Internet as indicated below:

We searched through magazines, newspaper and internet.

Mostly, our resources are from the Internet.

The text is also quite reliable since it's from the official website

This feedback was obtained after the teacher had told them that information they needed for their project could be found around them and all they needed to do was to look at the right places, during a class discussion with the students.

In a nutshell, each group of students demonstrated the ability to work together as a team as they jointly created understanding of the task through discussions and resources while they worked at their own pace (Hatano, 1993), after the WhatsApp group chat was created.

3.3 Genuine Interest

This theme was derived from the informal chats the teacher had with the students, WhatsApp group chat, and project survey sheet. Students were inspired to research their topic when they realised that they were tasked to share new information with their peers:

- T: ... think about whether the topic you choose will enable you and your peers to learn something new or is it a topic of common knowledge
 S: I think ... the topic [haze] is way too common ... environment is a big theme, there's a lot of thing that we don't know ... I did a little research and apparently, human overpopulation is also included in the theme ... there's more to explore in the topic.
 [WhatsApp Group Chat]

They were interested when they felt that it was significant:

- Bullying is a common thing so people do not take it seriously. This upsets us as bullying is a serious issue. With this presentation we hope that our friends have better understanding how serious bullying is
 [Project Survey Sheet]

From the informal chats, it was discovered that students were enthused when the topic was driven by their own interest or by an experience they could relate to. When talking about the topic Mental Illness, one of the group members related she was drawn to that topic as she herself had suffered from mild depression and contemplated suicide when she was in Year 6 of her primary school. Hence, coming out of it, she felt that students should be aware of such condition.

The various emotions that students displayed drove them toward intensive research whereby they developed a deeper knowledge and understanding about the topic. Moreover, their curiosity of wanting to know what topics their peers had chosen, whether they would be 'teaching' them something new and how they planned to teach the lesson, triggered an enthusiasm to study as they looked forward to interesting and fun sessions. In other words, students showed genuine interest in the process of material selection, and this interest kept them alive in the discussion (Pryor, 2011; Salas, 2004).

3.4 Student-chosen issues vs teacher-chosen issues

In the project survey sheet students were asked to write their reasons for choosing the particular topic. Below are some of the responses:

... we want to raise awareness about mental disorders so we can help those who suffer from it. Furthermore, teens nowadays tend to watch pornography which causes them to think negatively and [be] affected mentally. On top of that the issues about mental illness are going to be more complicated when the public is lack of knowledge about the risks of the disease resulting in many not seeking treatment. We also chose this particular topic in order to improve the quality of life. For example mental health strengthens and supports our ability to have healthy relationships and make good life choices.

Our classmates are bullying each other whether they realise it or not. So we are hoping that they will stop their bullying as we will explain how bad the victims are affected. Without thorough explanation and talk we might make our friends feel braver to stand up for any victims of bullying. We also want them to be

more observant and concern towards their friends' feelings especially when their friends are getting bullied.

We think entrepreneurship is an interesting topic that not many people talk about. We want to let others know more about entrepreneurship and what makes it interesting.

The above responses basically indicate that students chose their respective topics in relation to their life experiences and what they deemed relevant.

However, for teachers in the Malaysian ESL classroom, the use of the textbook is required as it serves as a platform to aid the teaching and learning process. The content is determined by a panel of teachers under the curriculum development centre. Many teachers find these textbook useful especially when they do not have the time to look for other materials.

Hence, when students are made to choose a topic, they tend to choose something that is close to their hearts and something that they find relevant in their lives, unlike many teachers who rely on the textbook. Hence, there was rich information that went beyond the textbook (Tomlinson, 2008).

3.5 Talk Scaffolds Learning

The WhatsApp Group Chat revealed that the teacher allowed students to take control of their own learning. However, she intervened when necessary to prompt students to focus on particular issues, challenged students to provide reasons, and asked tentative questions to suggest alternative perspectives, brought them back to the issue at hand when they digressed, and commended them when they had made a good effort.

When they digressed, she reminded them *"Go back to my questions."* When she noticed that the discussion was not focused and students in a group had not identified their topics, she nudged them by saying *"Clue-research...!Be more hardworking Find out as much as you can and zoom in on one area – the internet is at your disposal"*

When there was too much cumulative talk (Mercer, 1996) whereby students acknowledge each other's ideas without disagreement (e.g. by repeating or confirming them) and tried to come to a consensus, without justifying, challenging, or questioning each other's ideas, she prompted them *"Guys, I don't see much of a discussion happening here-everyone seems to be 'pak turut' (a Malay colloquial term for someone who is always in agreement with others)."*

When she wanted them to think of alternate topics, she suggested, *"One consideration you may want to think about is whether the topic you choose will enable you & your peers to learn something new or is it a topic of common knowledge?"*

On the other hand, findings from the Facebook Messenger disclosed that students asked tentative questions to suggest alternative perspectives: *"why don't we search info about modern inventions and those 'smart' cities where they are designed to sustain live in the future. What do you guys think??"* They engaged with their peers' ideas, for instance, when referring to one of the group member's suggestion on modern inventions, another member posed this question regarding the website, *"But do they have enough info about that ... because if not I think we will have a hard time finding and presenting it."* They also challenged others to justify their thinking, for example, *"... don't you think that most of us are already well informed about the negative effects? The presentation will kinda be expected by our classmates. Well that's just my opinion. You?"*

Thus, the teacher's intervention and prompting when necessary not only allowed students the opportunity to explore their understanding of the issue at hand, it also helped to shape their thinking process. Students learnt

it is important to explain their own ideas and engage with others' ideas by questioning them and by challenging others to justify their thinking (Hogan, Nastasi, & Pressley, 2000; Mercer, 1996).

4.0 Conclusion and Implications

This study sought to capture the sense-making process, concerns, considerations and setting of parameters by the students before the actual material selection was made. It illustrated that students chose materials based on their own interests, needs and wants. They were motivated to have genuine conversations as they defined the parameters of the topics and materials selected. This process occurred *in* interaction as suggested by (Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller (2002) and enhanced language learning as it involved joint construction of knowledge. Students contributed different pieces of information and built-upon others' explanations to jointly create a complete idea or solution.

The teacher and her students embarked on a sense-making journey of scaffolding thought processes. With the help of a more skilled person, a process of negotiation and transformation enabled the less-competent person to carry out a task that the student could not perform without assistance, a process (Vygotsky, 1978) called scaffolding or guided participation. For example, students were given the topic Environment. They began by looking at haze, then moved on to air pollution and finally focused on human overpopulation. Students also looked at issues that were relevant and real to them (e.g. Health - Mental Illness). They voiced out that teens were watching pornography and could be mentally affected. The students selected issues they themselves were concerned with. Apart from that, the students took into account the validity, reliability, availability of their resources (e.g. science and technology - past and present). They were aware of the need to have sufficient information from reliable sources such as official websites.

An important observation was that the joint construction of knowledge was enabled through social networking tools, in this case, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. These tools not only provided a platform for students to connect with their classmates and teacher, but also functioned as the catalyst to develop and promote interaction and task completion. Thus, they helped expand students' learning and knowledge acquisition beyond the four walls of the traditional classrooms.

In addition, this study unveils that the "talk" about and around the topic for material selection showed students communicating confidently and competently. They also displayed critical thinking through calculated decisions made while collaborating with each other outside the traditional classroom, and via social networking tools, namely WhatsApp and Facebook. An important point to be noted is that these social networking tools helped to contextualise language learning for each group of students as they worked within their respective scope of theme and topic.

This study reveals that the process of material selection by ESL students results in meaningful and engaging learning experiences where students have a more active role, and a voice in their learning. Furthermore, the study suggests that students play an important partnership role in the process of material selection as shown in Figure 1, The Partnership Model for ESL Material Selection.

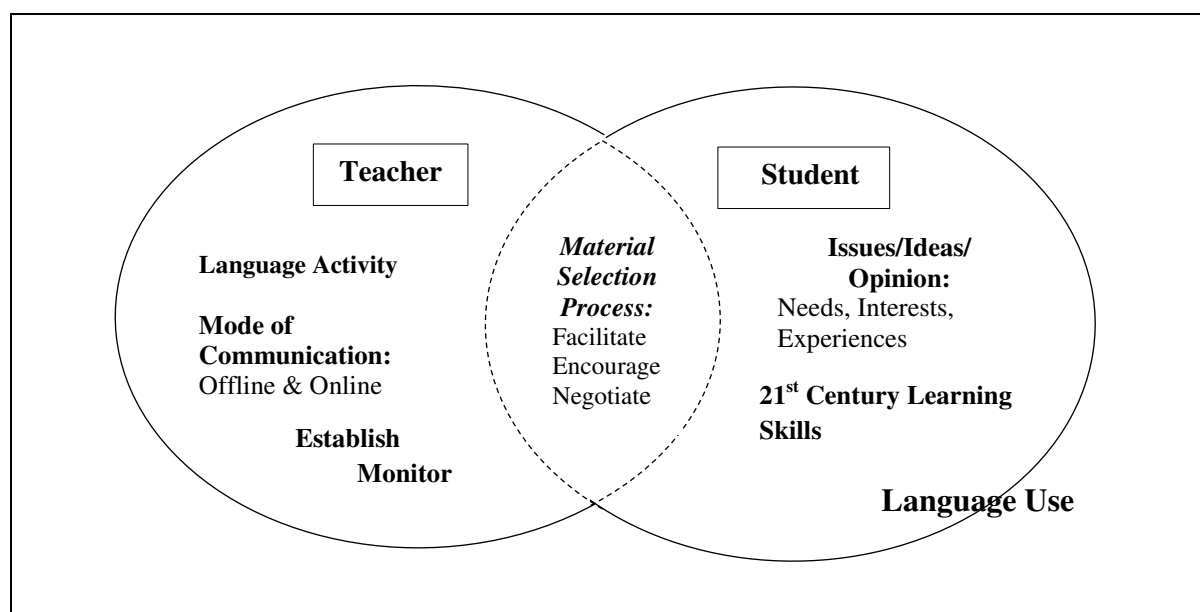


Figure 1: The Partnership Model for ESL Material Selection

The Partnership Model for ESL Material Selection describes both teachers and students as active participants in the process of material selection. The teacher establishes the language activities for the class, as well as the mode of communication, that could range from face-to-face to social networking platforms. The teacher then monitors the communication that takes place within the platforms established. The students, on the other hand, contribute ideas, discuss issues and provide opinions, based on their interests, needs and experiences in order to select the suitable material using the target language. During discussion, students are compelled to ponder, deliberate, reason and justify ideas put forward by their peers in order to arrive at a consensus to achieve a common goal.

As indicated by the area within the dotted lines, selecting the suitable material is a dynamic process where the role of the teacher and the student may overlap and is interchangeable. These new defining roles involve negotiating with, and encouraging one another, as well as facilitating the discussion in order to achieve optimum results and to enhance learning. In such a scenario, high levels of communication with the teacher as well as other students in the target language is evident, and peer collaboration is prominent. As a result, the language learning experience that ensues is a fulfilling, motivating and engaging one.

There are several implications of this study to teaching and learning. Firstly, it is important to incorporate students' partnership in the teaching and learning process. The inclusion of students as partners in the process of material selection empowers them to take ownership of their own learning. These would complement 21st century skills which is in line with global needs. Secondly, the approach of involving students in the process of material selection and using social networking tools is highly recommended. The use of social networking tools encourage the use of the target language with one another as well as with the teacher. Finally, heavy reliance on textbooks should be gradually decreased when the current needs of the students are not fully addressed to meet global demands.

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