

The Teacher Development Series
Editor: Adrian Underhill

Children Learning English

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Materials are an important resource for teachers in assisting pupils to learn English. In this book, I shall take a broad view of materials, meaning anything which is used specifically with the intention of increasing pupils' knowledge and experience of the language.¹ So materials could include textbooks, workbooks, story books, videos, cassettes, pictures, brochures, menus or other real-life artefacts. But it is not the materials in themselves which are important, but how they are used to help pupils' language learning. Take the example of a story book. A child might spend ten minutes happily looking at the attractive pictures, but this would not help him/her learn English. In order to use the story book for language learning, the child needs to engage in activities with the book which are intended, directly or indirectly, to provide experience of the language. And for that reason, I am going to focus on the activities which may be based on our materials; as for example the activities we find in textbooks, or which we need to create so that our materials will assist language learning.

In this chapter, we will consider:

- 1 **Teachers' views on creating their own materials**
- 2 **How to analyse and evaluate activities**
- 3 **How to select activities for language learning**
- 4 **The benefits of adapting activities and of creating your own**

The aims of this chapter are to provide you with the means of examining your teaching activities and to demonstrate some ways of creating, adapting, and evaluating activities. Developing your ability to do these things will give you more independence and greater control over what you do in the classroom.

1 Teachers' views on creating their own materials

In this section, I will start globally by considering the kind of situations which exist with regard to materials and some teachers' views about creating materials. This will help to establish a reason for encouraging teachers to get involved in materials design and analysis. In later sections we will then focus more specifically on activities.

Teachers' situations vary widely with regard to materials. Some have access to a range of textbooks and supplementary materials to choose from, some have to follow one prescribed textbook. Others do not use or do not have textbooks and produce their own materials. Most teachers, however, probably have access to at least one textbook. However, textbooks are designed for a general audience, and it may be that our textbook does not fully meet our pupils' specific needs. This prompts many teachers to adapt or create their own materials.

Task 1 Creating your own materials

- Do you create your own materials? If so, why?
- What difficulties are there in creating your own materials?
- Can you suggest any solutions to your own difficulties or to those mentioned below by three primary school teachers from Malaysia?

Do you think teachers should create their own activities/materials? Why?

'Yes, I definitely think teachers should learn to prepare their own materials. If we depend entirely on the textbook, it will not be suitable for the students, for they are of different levels and have different interests.' (Normah)

'Yes, but only if the teacher has experience of how to create materials. Teachers don't do it because they have textbooks and the idea of making up their own does not come into their heads.' (Roseta)

'Yes, I think so. Every teacher has a different teaching situation and pupils' needs will differ, so we can't say that the one textbook will be enough for them.' (Nalini)

What do you feel are the problems in creating your own activities/materials?

- Lack of ideas
- Time - always rushing against time so no time to prepare (Normah)
- Knowing what kind of exercises to design. If I was given an example, I might do it. We have no materials to fall back on, no handbooks to look at, to give me examples of what to do. (Roseta)
- Insufficient guidelines or models to give insights how to go about it
- Need time to make your own materials
- Monetary - may need to buy your own materials if the school does not have things, but it is cost effective in the end because we can re-use them (Nalini)

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The reason why teachers create or do not create their own materials depends on many factors including the amount of freedom they have, the time available, their interest and experience. The teachers above, all support in principle the idea of creating their own materials, mainly because it allows them to meet their pupils' needs better. However, you need to be realistic and consider what is possible as well as what is best for your learners. There is nothing intrinsically virtuous about creating your own materials. It can be very time consuming and often needs resources like photocopying facilities. In some circumstances, it may be better to adapt activities from the textbook or use the material in the textbook more creatively, rather than spending hours creating your own.

The Malaysian teachers summed up the most common barriers to teachers producing their own materials, which are

- lack of time to design materials/activities
- cost involved in making/photocopying
- lack of handbooks or reference books from which to get ideas
- lack of skills/expertise to design their own activities

This chapter will provide some solutions to your problems with materials by showing you ways of analysing, adapting and creating your own activities. By developing or improving such skills you will be in a stronger position to work out your own solutions to the problems you face. Here are some suggestions for overcoming the difficulties mentioned above.

Lack of time

Involve your pupils. Get them to help you in cutting, sticking, copying. They can also do the illustrations for you. You can gradually get pupils more involved in creating activities for each other. It gives them a real reason for using language and yet at the same time, it helps you to make more materials.

>> Pupil involvement pp136-8

Cost involved in making/photocopying

Getting together with other language teachers in a school or district to make materials and then sharing them can help to overcome this problem. This works particularly well if there are several of you teaching in one school. Gavi Marcus from Sabah also suggested preparing a set of worksheets based on class exercises which could be laminated in order to make them last. Each learner group uses one worksheet and writes the answers to questions in their books. As the worksheets can be re-used, it saves photocopying.

Lack of skills/expertise to design own activities

If you have taught for several years, you will have a great deal of expertise you can make use of. The main thing is to have confidence and a willingness to try. Pupils will appreciate your efforts. If you have not had much experience, then it may be best to start by trying out activities from textbooks and then later adapting them in small ways. There are several teachers' handbooks which can give you ideas how to do this. You can learn from your experience, particularly if you get your pupils to help you by giving their opinions about the activities you have used with them.

Lack of handbooks or reference books from which to get ideas

Try to get together with other teachers in your school or locally in order to generate ideas. Or join a local teachers' group as a way of keeping in touch professionally and as a source of ideas. Take out a subscription to a magazine for teachers, eg *English Teaching Professional*, perhaps sharing the cost with another teacher.

2 How to analyse and evaluate activities

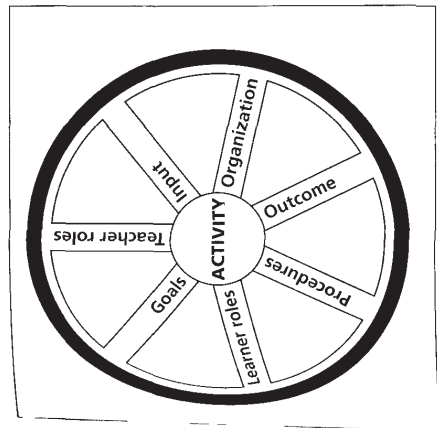
In this next section, I will move from considering materials in general to focusing on the kind of work or activities we give pupils to do in using materials. Individual learning activities are a very good starting place for teachers who are interested in adapting or designing their own materials as they are manageable in size. To adapt or design an activity would not take up too much of a teacher's time, but done on a regular basis could gradually develop his/her confidence. This could lead on to the design of several linked activities for a lesson, and later to the creation of a series of lessons to form larger units of teaching materials.

As we may not all share the same understanding of the term 'activity' I will begin by defining how I will use the term in this book.

A language-learning activity

- has a clear language-teaching goal
- has a clear and meaningful goal or purpose for learners
- has a clear outcome(s) for the learners
- involves learners in work or activity which requires the use of the L2
- facilitates language learning

If we want to create our own activities, it is helpful first to have a way of analysing them. This enables us to consider how and why they are constructed in the way they are. Here is a system I have adapted from David Nunan¹.



Goal The teacher's purpose or aim in using the activity, ie what he or she wants to achieve through the activity. The children's purpose in carrying out the activity.

Input The material that children will work on, eg text, oral instructions, etc.

Procedures What children actually do with the input, eg they read it or talk about it, etc.

Outcome What children produce as a result of the activity, eg a story book, an answer to a problem, a picture, etc. The outcome might vary from child to child or group to group. We can also distinguish between *product* outcomes, ie something tangible like a set of answers, a completed crossword, a drawing and *process* outcomes – skills, attitudes, etc which develop during the learning process, eg increased confidence, ability to work together.

Teacher roles The roles that the teacher will need to perform which are implied or suggested by the activity. For example, a drill will require the teacher to direct and control the children, whereas a communicative game will require the teacher to set up the task and then step back and monitor.

Learner roles The roles that the activity will require learners to perform. For example, some activities may require learners just to listen and respond as directed; others may require learners to make decisions or choices.

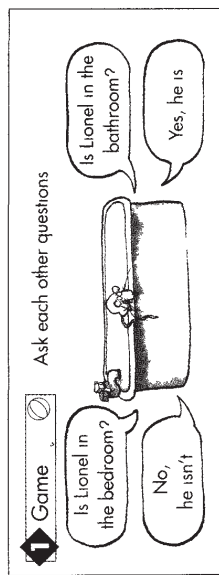
Organization The way the learners are organized for learning, eg as a whole class, in pairs, etc.

Task 2 Analysing a language-learning activity

Here is an activity taken from *Big Red Bus*⁵. It includes the teacher's notes and the excerpt from the child's book. Analyse it into the components listed above.

Step 3 Pupil's Book p. 44

1 Game Ask each other questions
1 Write living room, bathroom, kitchen, dining room and bedroom on the board. Tell the children to hold up their cut out of Lionel made in Pre-story, activity 2.
2 Put poster 7 at the front of the class, point to Lionel's cage and say:
Lionel isn't in his cage. Where's Lionel?
Choose one child and tell him/her:
Decide where Lionel is and whisper it to me.
Ask the other children to guess where Lionel is by asking questions such as:
S1: Is Lionel in the bedroom?
S2: No, he isn't.
S1: Is Lionel in the bathroom?
S2: Yes, he is.
The child who guesses puts the cut out of Lionel next to the correct room on the board. Then he/she decides where Lionel is and the game begins again.
3 You can play this game with the whole class or divide the children into two teams. In the second case the team with more guesses wins. When the children are more confident put them into pairs and play the game again.



Commentary ■ ■ ■

Here is a suggested analysis of the activity which takes account of the stated aims of the textbook authors.

Goals The teacher's overall purpose is to encourage pupil-pupil oral interaction through a guessing game. The children's purpose could be to guess successfully where Lionel is.

Input Words written on the blackboard, eg *living room, bathroom, etc*, poster at the front of the room, teacher's initial questions and instructions, eg *Where is Lionel?*, question and answer examples in the Pupils' Book.

Procedures Pupils guess where Lionel is through asking *Yes/No* questions. They stick the picture of Lionel next to the appropriate room word on the poster if they guess correctly.

Outcome The product outcomes for children are correct guesses and the attachment of Lionel's picture in the appropriate room, for the teacher they are the children's recall and use of *Yes/No* questions and names of rooms. The outcome will vary each time the game is played, ie the name of the room will vary each time a different pupil guesses. If the outcome is varied, then the activity can be repeated many times without children getting bored. The language structure could also be varied so that children later ask questions like *What is Lionel doing?* once they are familiar with the basic routine of the game. Process outcomes could include the development of positive attitudes to English, improved ability to take turns, etc.

Teacher role The teacher directs and controls. But at a later stage it is suggested that children may play in pairs, at which point the teacher would monitor rather than direct.

Learner role Pupils act as conversational partners with the pupil at the front by asking questions. They have to volunteer questions and the pupil at the front has to respond to them. Later in pairs they will have more freedom in deciding who will guess and who will respond.

Organization Initially pupils are organized as a whole class. Later it is suggested that they could be organized as two groups and later still, in pairs. ■

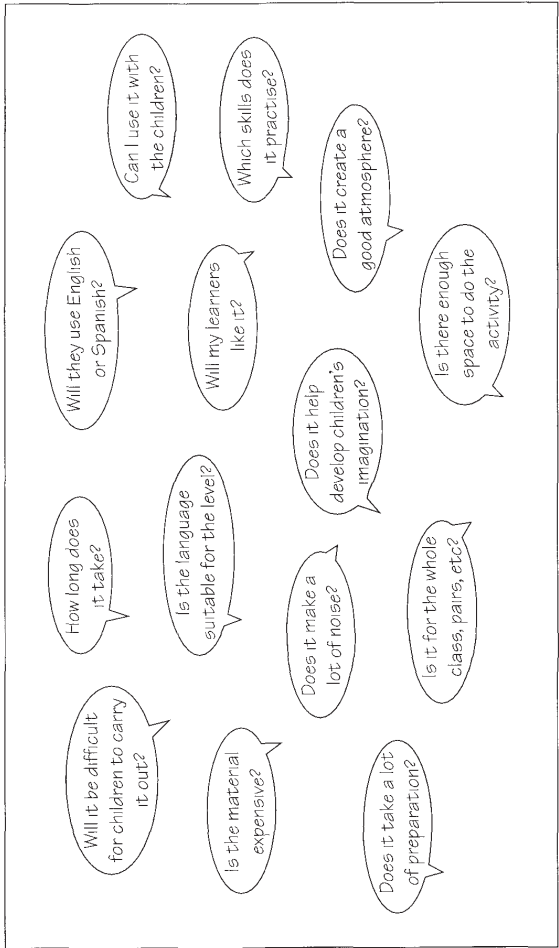
It is quite revealing to analyse an activity in this manner. Among other things, it allows us to decide whether the activity is appropriate for our own pupils' needs, how teacher-controlled it is, how much pupil participation is involved and so on. It also enables us to identify aspects which could be adapted or modified. For example, if we wanted to make the activity above more challenging, we could change the procedure so that children have to guess where Lionel is and also what he is doing. This means pupils have to ask two types of question, eg *Is Lionel in the bedroom? Is he riding his bike?* However, it is important to remember that we are only considering the potential of the activity at this stage. Whether this potential is realized depends on the way we implement it in the classroom and the way children respond to it.

3 How to select activities for language learning

Before you select an activity for use with your class, you will probably have a number of questions or criteria in your mind which guide your decision whether to use the particular activity, to reject it or to adapt it. This activity helps you to make those criteria explicit.

Task 3 Identifying criteria for selecting activities

- What are the questions you ask yourself when you want to select or design an activity to use with your pupils?
- When you have finished, compare your questions with those prepared by a group of Spanish teachers below.



Commentary ■ ■ ■

You may not be aware of asking yourself questions or having questions in your mind when choosing activities. This is because you do not usually need to make them explicit. But it can be helpful to bring them into the open from time to time so that you can reconsider them. This and later tasks are designed to get you to think about your own criteria for selecting activities by comparing them with the ideas you will find expressed by other teachers and professionals.

The Spanish teachers' questions show that teachers are concerned with many different aspects of an activity: the purpose of using the activity, its suitability for the given pupils, its management and whether it reflects appropriate language-learning principles. ■

There are five points to highlight. These draw on some of the points made by the teachers, and on those which we discussed in Chapter 1 related to developing an environment suitable for language learning. The five points we need to keep in mind are the need to:

- provide a clear and meaningful purpose for using language which capitalizes on young learners' desire to communicate, eg activities which involve a game, or puzzling something out or getting missing information from another person. All these make sense and are meaningful to young learners.

« p10

- challenge learners and make them think, so that they are more engaged and so process language more deeply There is a danger that activities are just used because they work well or because learners enjoy them We also have to think about what language-learning value an activity has
- provide activities which are enjoyable and interesting and which make children want to continue doing the activity so they get more practice, eg creating monsters, guessing, games with a winner or prize, 'hands on' or 'doing' activities like making masks However it is important that these all have a clear language-learning purpose so that children are practising language, and that they are not done just to keep pupils amused
- provide activities which create a need or pressure for children to use English One of the teachers above mentioned that pupils may use Spanish or the L1 when the activity is very exciting Because of the natural urge to win, they may 'cheat' or speak in their first language We need, therefore, to design the activity so that it requires children to use English at some stage, eg by making them record their answers in writing or getting them to report back to the class in English This increases exposure to and use of the language
- provide activities which allow children to be creative with language, experiment and notice language This will help them to test out their hypotheses about language and assist the development of their internal language system

The following checklist provides a summary of the main points to remember

Checklist for selecting or creating language-learning activities

Activity A		Activity B	
Learning purpose			
● relevance to language			
● learning/learning			
● If language skills included? (receptive and productive?)			
Learn			
● difficulty level			
● language level			
● enjoyment/interest			
Management			
● organization			
● amount of noise			
● type of material needed			
● length of activity			
● amount of preparation			
● needed			
● pace needed			
● pressure to use English			
● suitability for age group			

Activity A Activity B

Learning principles: Does it develop ...		
a positive atmosphere? language creativity opportunities to experiment and notice language? imagination? purposeful and varied language use? thinking skills?		

You may find the checklist above particularly useful

- when you want to choose an activity from a book
- when you want to decide whether to buy a particular textbook
- when you want to decide whether to use some activities you have found in a magazine or been given by another teacher
- when you want to design your own activity

When choosing or designing activities, we usually have a specific purpose in mind. For example, we want an activity to revise some vocabulary or to get pupils to use the language they have learned for communicative purposes or to practise independent reading skills. In the following task you will have an opportunity to apply the checklist as a way of deciding whether some activities are suitable for your teaching purposes

Task 4 Deciding on the suitability of an activity

Think of a group of learners you are familiar with. You are trying to choose suitable games to revise language you have already taught

- Look at these two games which teachers have devised for their (six to nine year old) pupils who have already studied English for at least six months. Complete the checklist above for Activity A (Who will finish first?) and Activity B (The Bottle Game). Use these three symbols

☒ meets the criterion

☐ you are not sure

☐ does not meet the criterion

You may find that not all the criteria are relevant for your purpose

The bottle game

Number of players The whole class or a smaller group

Materials An empty bottle

Organisation Children sit in a circle

Level Elementary

Language needed Commands
e.g. Sing a song
Walk like an elephant

Skills *Speaking*
Listening

Understanding and acting out the commands

Procedure ① All the children sit in a circle
② The teacher gives the bottle "a spin" while it's on the floor. When the bottle stops, the child who faces the top of the bottle gives a command to the child who is sitting opposite
③ If the child who is acting out the command fails to do it or doesn't understand, then both children are out

Preparation
★ Give them instructions for the game
★ Teach them some commands

Georgia Skordis
(created on an International Summer School in Leeds)

Who will finish first?

NO OF PLAYERS 3 – 30

MATERIALS REQUIRED Blackboard Dice

ORGANISATION Class divided in three equal groups

LEVEL Elementary

LANGUAGE NEEDED Numbers
Parts of the head
Simple instructions Come here!
Throw the dice!

SKILLS Counting
Reading
Speaking
Elementary drawing

PROCEDURE
1 Class is divided in three equal groups
2 The first child from the first group throws the dice. He gets eg no 2 and he draws a mouth on the group one face
3 The first child from the second group throws the dice. He gets eg no 5 and he is allowed to draw the hair on the second face and so on
4 If a child gets the same number as another member of his group got earlier (eg no 2 in the first group) he has to miss a turn
5 The winner is the group who first finishes its face

PREPARATION
– Check they can read and understand words written on the blackboard
– Check they understand the procedure

VARIATION
– We could change the words according to the topic we want children to practise eg 1 a flower in the vase 4 a table on the floor
2 a book on the table 5 a vase on the book
3 a chair under the table 6 a butterfly on the flower

N.B. Children should draw the picture in logical order eg first the table then everything else

(created by a teacher on an International Summer School in Leeds)

Commentary ■ ■ ■

Deciding whether the activities satisfy your chosen criteria will depend on your teaching purpose, your pupils' needs and your teaching situation. As there is no right or wrong answer to the question of suitability, the commentary below will highlight certain points that might influence your decision

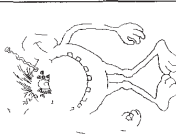
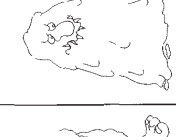
Criteria	Commentary
Learning purpose	The relevance of the games will depend on your purpose, but both seem suitable for revision or practice of instructions. Activity A involves counting and receptive language skills, ie reading and listening. It could also involve speaking if the teacher got children to comment on what they are going to do, eg <i>Five I am going to draw hair</i>. Activity B involves listening and speaking, eg giving and following instructions.
Learners	Both activities seem suitable for younger learners as they are simple to understand and carry out. Activity A requires children to be able to count up to six so it may not be suitable for very young learners (five and under). Activity B is more demanding in terms of language production as learners have to make up their own instructions. B could be adapted for use with any age of learners and any level. Activity A is less demanding linguistically and only requires pupils to read simple words and understand oral instructions. Activity A involves a winner and so is likely to appeal to learners' competitive instincts Activity B is more collaborative as it is in the interest of one player to help his/her partner to carry out the instruction; otherwise they are both out Both games involve physical movement, which is likely to appeal to younger pupils.
Management	Both activities are organized for the whole class, so in larger classes not all pupils will get a turn. So chances for practice are somewhat limited. However on the plus side, the whole-class organization means that you could keep tighter control if you feel this is desirable and so keep noise levels down more easily. Both activities could be done in groups once children were familiar with what to do. The whole class organization also means that there is pressure to use English as all communication is done publicly There is no preparation needed for either game. The only materials required are a dice and a bottle. Activity A can be done even in classrooms where desks are fixed to the floor. However Activity B requires an open space so children can sit on the floor. Both activities can be continued for as long as the pupils are interested.

Criteria	Commentary
Learning principles	Both activities are likely to create a sense of enjoyment and therefore contribute to a pleasant atmosphere. Activity B allows children to experiment with language and make use of their imagination, eg they can make up their own unusual instructions for their partners and in the process test out their hypotheses about language. Activity A creates a purpose for language use through the need to complete the face, though it is possible pupils will get frustrated if no group can finish the face, so the rules may need to be adapted so a group can win each time. Activity B creates the need to use language through the requirements of the game, ie the person to whom the bottle points has to give an instruction. Both games are likely to be motivating for younger learners. Both activities offer some element of mental challenge but in different ways. Activity A involves number recognition and memory skills, ie learners have to remember numbers which have already come up. Activity B is more challenging from a language point of view as children have to think up their own instructions and say them without support.

No activity can fulfil all the criteria simultaneously. You will need to decide what your priorities are. If you want an activity which allows pupils more freedom to use their own language, then *The Bottle Game* may be more appropriate. However you would need to consider carefully how to manage a lively class of younger children. When I watched a primary teacher use this game for the first time, the children were all so excited to 'have a go' that they became very noisy and boisterous. Activity **A** could be adapted so that children have to actually produce language, ie tell the class what number they have got on the dice and what they are going to do.

4 The benefits of adapting activities and of creating your own

You may be in a situation where you have to create your own activities or are encouraged to do so. If this is the case, the criteria on pp92-3 may provide you with a way of looking at your own activities from a different perspective. However if you have had no experience of creating your materials, a good way of beginning is to adapt those you find in textbooks or in magazines for teachers. This helps to give you confidence to get started. But whether you create your own activities or adapt them, the process of adapting or creating an activity to meet a need, the process of trying them out in the classroom and reflecting on how they work is a helpful way of gaining fresh perspectives on your teaching.

Here is an example of an activity which was adapted by a Spanish primary teacher from one I designed based on some monster pictures given in the magazine JEI [®] . The original activity was designed to focus mainly on reading skills.			
			
He has a pink body. He has blue teeth and blue hair.	He has a purple body. He has white teeth and white hair.	He has a blue body. He has yellow teeth and green hair. He has pink nails.	He has a green body. He has red teeth.

The teacher wrote the following instructions on the board for the (ten-year-old) pupils



Here is an example of the work of one of the pupils



After her lesson, the teacher considered how effective the activity had been, using the following questions as a guide

Objectives

To review parts of the body and get pupils to recognize them

How many of the children could do the activity successfully?

All of them

Could the slower children do the activity successfully?

Yes, they could with the teacher's help

Did the activity work well? Why?

Yes, it did because children liked the monsters and it was quite easy for them. It was also a new kind of game.

Were there any problems? Why?

Some children did not remember some parts of the body.

What was the children's response?

Good

Task 5 Reflecting on teaching/learning activities

- How did the teacher's activity differ from the original? Why do you think she adapted it?
- What do you think the teacher may have learned from the experience?
- Could she have thought more carefully about her use of the activity in the classroom?
- What are the benefits of trying out and then reflecting on your teaching activities?

Commentary ■ ■ ■

The teacher simplified the language of the descriptions to suit the level of her pupils, who were ten-year-old beginners. She did not use the pictures, but instead got pupils to draw their own pictures as part of the activity, which created more interest. So she adapted the activity to suit her own learners and teaching situation. She may have learned that it is important to prepare children before doing an activity, in this case revising the vocabulary they would need.

She wrote that all of the children could do the activity successfully. This seems unlikely, especially since she mentioned that some pupils did not know all the vocabulary. It is hard sometimes to detach yourself from your own teaching and look at it like a stranger. I find it often helps to get a friend to observe and give you a different perspective. It also helps to get pupils' opinions as this acts as a check on your own perceptions.

The process helps you to stand back from your teaching, think about the activity in a detached way about what worked and what did not work. You can then improve it for next time. If you do this regularly, it can help to keep you thinking about your teaching in a fresh way.

Summary

In this chapter you have considered

- *the reasons for creating your own activities and materials* The main argument for designing your own materials is to ensure a better fit between your teaching and the needs of your pupils. However there are problems to overcome such as lack of time, lack of expertise in designing materials, lack of resource or reference material and the cost
- *how to analyse an activity* into different components including teacher and learner goals, outcomes, input, procedures, teacher and learner roles, organization. Analysing activities into their components gives you a way of deciding on their usefulness and a way of adapting them to suit your purposes better
- *the kinds of criteria which you can use for selecting, creating or adapting and evaluating activities* for young learners. No one activity could satisfy all criteria simultaneously and you would need to decide on your priorities, depending on your goals and the needs of your learners on any particular occasion
- *the value of creating or adapting activities*, trying them out in the classroom and assessing their effectiveness as a way of reflecting on your teaching. This process enables you to stand back from the routine of your daily teaching and consider it from a different perspective, which may give you new insights into your teaching.

One of the main implications which comes out of this chapter concerns your role in materials development. The difficulty with any published learning materials is that they are designed for a global audience, not specifically for your pupils. So you have a very important role in selecting and adapting published materials or creating activities specifically for your own pupils. But in order to develop your ability, you need to be able to step back from your materials and analyse them in different ways to consider how they work, how pupils respond to them and your reasons for using them. If you can make explicit to yourself the basis for selecting, creating or adapting activities for pupils, by drawing on your understanding of the conditions which create a positive language-learning environment, you are in a better position to assess whether and why the activities helped you to achieve your objectives. You can then adapt or improve them. This increased awareness will enable you to gain greater control over your own teaching environment. You will be able to make decisions about using activities, based not just on a vague feeling or hunch but on clearly articulated criteria which are supported by your experience in the classroom.

References

- 1 This definition comes from Tomlinson, B. (ed.) (1998) *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 2 Both of these books provide useful ideas on using and adapting materials. Deller, S. 1990 *Lessons from the Learner: Student generated activities for the language classroom*. Harlow: Longman (out of print).
- 3 Grant, N. 1987 *Making the most of your textbook*. Harlow: Longman (out of print).
- 4 *English Teaching Professional* is published four times a year by First Person Publishing Ltd. It is obtainable from The Swan Business Centre, Fishers Lane, Chiswick, London W4 5EZ.
- 5 Nunan, D. 1989 *Designing Tasks for the Communicative Classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- 6 Lobo, M. J. and Subira, P. 1993 *Big Red Bus 1*. Oxford: Heinemann, *Teacher's Book* p95, *Pupil's Book* p44.
- 7 Theme Pack on Monsters *JET*, vol. 1, no. 3. This issue contained a whole pack of pictures and teaching ideas based on monsters. This magazine is no longer published, but collections of the articles and materials are published in *JET Primary Teachers' Resource Books 1 and 2*, Delta Publishing.