

A pathway to enhancing ELT coursebook development: A qualitative study exploring collaboration between materials writers and teachers in Austria.

*Klara Emprechtinger**

This study

- highlights the relevance of materials development for materials writers and teachers;
- analyzes existing evaluation processes of coursebooks involving teacher educators, materials writers and teachers;
- explores materials writers' and teachers' views on enhancing communication and collaboration;
- provides implications on how the collaboration between stakeholders involved in language learning and teaching could be improved with regard to the development of coursebooks.

1. Rationale

It is widely recognized that coursebooks play a key role in the ELT classroom and serve as the main teaching resource among many English teachers around the world (Richards, 2014, p. 19). Despite their ubiquity in language learning, commercial publications are often criticized for their “inflexibility, shallowness, and lack of local relevance” (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018, p. 3). It is well known that teachers frequently express dissatisfaction and frustration with coursebooks, as they have the impression that their needs and wants are not adequately catered for and that coursebooks are predominantly developed by theorists with little experience in everyday teaching practice. Masuhara (2011) acknowledges the central position of teachers in the materials development process and highlights the need for establishing

*e-mail for correspondence: klara.emprechtinger@univie.ac.at (University of Vienna, Department of English and American Studies)

This contribution is based on the author's Master's thesis. Please see Emprechtinger (2020) for a more extensive discussion of my work.

“efficient and effective systems [...] in order to empower teachers” (Masuhara, 2011, p. 249). According to Masuhara (2011, pp. 249-252), the following lines of approach can contribute to making teacher voices heard and enabling involvement in coursebook development:

- The need for objective measurements of the quality of published coursebooks
- Stricter and more systematic material selection procedures
- Establishing methods of feedback routes of users’ evaluation
- Establishing systems for teachers’ needs and wants to be reflected in the production processes
- Wider perspectives in teacher development
- More acknowledgement of the teachers’ non-teaching expertise and workload (Masuhara, 2011, pp. 249-252)

Besides the implementation of the above-mentioned considerations, she calls for a general improvement in communication between materials producers and materials users (Masuhara, 2011, p. 249).

While materials development has existed for a long time as a practical activity among materials writers and teachers, materials development has also gained a foothold as a popular field in academia since the mid-1990s (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018, p. 1). As Tomlinson (2016) explains,

[m]aterials development is a practical undertaking involving the production, evaluation, adaptation and exploitation of materials intended to facilitate language acquisition and development. It is also a field of academic study investigating the principles and procedures of the design, writing, implementation, evaluation and analysis of learning materials. (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 2)

Looking at the practical dimension, teachers and materials writers produce, evaluate and adapt materials as an integral part of their everyday work. In turn, researchers investigate underlying principles and procedures and further aspects of materials production, materials evaluation, and materials adaptation which aims at informing practitioners. Tomlinson (2016, pp. 3-8) points out that engagement with materials development from a theoretical standpoint brings positive effects for a range of stakeholders such as teachers, materials writers and publishers. Thus, training in materials development for pre-service and in-service teachers contributes considerably to professional development and can promote career opportunities (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 3). At the same time, materials writers and publishers can benefit from sound education in materials development. A thorough understanding of the materials writing process and the underlying principles and procedures can facilitate the collaboration among materials writers and editors, can accelerate development processes and also enhance the effectiveness of materials. However, it has been criticized that publishers and Ministries of Education do not seem to be aware of the wider significance of materials development for materials writers. Only a very limited number of such courses are offered, and it seems that little effort is made to organize more educational opportunities for professional materials writers (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 6).

Yet, strengthening the exchange between theory and practice of materials development for language learning purposes could be the key to enhancing coursebook development. Pogelschek (2007) puts forward four recommendations to establish and intensify connections between research and practice:

- introducing people working in the publishing industry into textbook research.
- integrating textbook research into the professional development of editors and authors.
- familiarising researchers with the making of teaching and learning materials.
- communicating textbook research findings to teachers (Pogelschek, 2007, pp. 105-106).

The proposals for enhancing the communication and collaboration among the different stakeholders formulated by Masuhara (2011) and Pogelschek (2007) presented in this section seem very promising. However, it seems as if there is no research on how materials writers and teachers view these measures and how they assess the practicability thereof.

A number of surveys have investigated the production of global coursebooks (Prowse, 2001; Johnson, 2003; Atkinson, 2007; Hadfield, 2014); however, there have been few empirical studies into how materials writers go about writing local coursebooks (Pogelschek, 2007) and how various stakeholders collaborate in the development process of local coursebooks. This study therefore sets out to gain a deeper understanding of how materials production, materials evaluation and materials adaptation are carried out among materials writers with regard to an Austrian ELT coursebook, namely the *way2go! Coursebook* (Born-Lechleitner et al., 2017). Furthermore, the attitude of the materials writers and the teachers towards more intensive cooperation was examined. Set in Austria, this is probably the first study to undertake qualitative interviews with a materials writing team and a selection of teachers using this coursebook in their ELT classrooms.

2. Research questions

The key research question of this study is the following:

RQ1

How can the collaboration between researchers, textbook writers and teachers be improved in order to create more effective coursebooks for the Austrian ELT classroom?

From this overarching question, several sub-questions have been derived focusing on the viewpoints of materials writers and teachers:

- RQ1.1 Which evaluation and feedback processes were implemented throughout the development of the *way2go! Coursebook*?
- RQ1.2 What are the materials writers' views on collaboration with writing team members, editors, teachers, researchers and the approval committee of the Ministry of Education?
- RQ1.3 What are the teachers' views on collaboration with materials writers, publishers and researchers?

3. Study description

The present study applies a qualitative approach, as qualitative methods offer an effective way of investigating relatively unexplored areas and thereby lay the foundation for further research (Terhart, 1997, p. 30).

3.1 Sampling and participants

The sampling procedure applied is criterion sampling with elements of convenience sampling. The participants of the study can be divided into two groups, a materials writing team and a group of teachers.

Eligible materials writers who matched the selection criteria of being involved in both the development of a new concept of an ELT coursebook and the realization of the actual coursebook were identified with the help of a publishing company. Accordingly, five co-writers of the *way2go! Coursebook* (Born-Lechleitner et al., 2017) were selected as participants of the study. The *way2go! Coursebook* series is intended for students aged between 15 and 18 years old attending academic secondary school (AHS), upper level in Austria (OeAD-GmbH, 2021). The writing team consisted of four teachers and one university lecturer. Although the collaboration was described as very organic and included all levels such as brainstorming, global feedback and proofreading, there was a certain division of duties. The different areas of responsibilities include the following: curriculum coordination, speaking tasks, writing tasks, listening tasks, creative tasks, writing and adapting texts, and vocabulary.

The second group of participants consisted of six teachers who actively use the *way2go! Coursebook* as their main source of materials in their ELT classrooms. Teachers from four different schools with five to 34 years of teaching experience were interviewed. The schools are located in Styria, Upper Austria and Vienna. With regard to different school types, four teachers work at an academic upper secondary school (Bundesoberstufenrealgymnasium, BORG), and two of them teach at academic secondary schools involving both lower and upper levels (Gymnasium, AHS Langform). With the exception of one private school under public law, all of the schools are state-run.

3.2 Instruments

Data for this study were collected using two different sets of semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen as it allows the interviewees to reflect on their knowledge, actions and views (Cohen et al., 2018, 506) and elaborate on relevant issues that evolve during the interview, while at the same time being guided and directed by the interviewer (Dörnyei, 2007, 136). The interview guide comprises several sets of topics containing various open-ended questions with prompts and probes (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 511). The interview sessions were held online using a video conferencing software and lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

3.3 Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyze the interview data. Once the interviews were transcribed applying Hoffmann-Riem's (1998) broad transcription system, a total of eight hours and 15 minutes of interview data were coded using MAXQDA (2020). Theory- and data-driven

codes were employed in the coding process. Codes based on previous publications, in particular Atkinson (2007), McDonough et al. (2013), Hadfield (2014) and Wipperfürth and Will (2019), build the core of the coding system. Given the exploratory nature of the study, several codes also emerged from the data itself (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 685). Having completed the coding process, core categories were identified, relationships between categories were analyzed and frequencies were calculated (Cohen et al., 2018, pp. 679-680).

4. Findings

In the following, the results of both the materials writers' perspectives and the teachers' perspectives will be outlined.

Which evaluation and feedback processes are implemented throughout the development of the *way2go!* Coursebook?

Extensive feedback from writing team members and the editor are characteristic of the writing process of the *way2go!* Coursebook. Besides these major sources of evaluation, piloting and reviewing by academics and teachers were organized by the materials writers on an informal small-scale. To exemplify, an experienced teacher colleague was asked to review parts of the coursebook. In response to feedback, all team members showed an abandonment capacity which means that they are willing to abandon a task and change direction after having developed it over a longer time span. Abandoning, adapting and revising tasks are seen as integral parts of the development process.

What are the materials writers' views on collaboration with writing team members, editors, teachers, researchers and the approval committee of the Ministry of Education?

Concerning the materials writers' views on strengthening the collaboration among different stakeholders in materials development in the future, the majority of materials writers generally expressed a positive attitude. A range of different kinds of collaboration considered useful by the materials writers include the following: education in materials writing for materials writers and teachers, educating teachers in the use of coursebooks, engaging more with research literature on materials writing, expanding and intensifying reviews and evaluations by researchers, piloting, the analysis of learner's needs and interests, and learner feedback. However, upon closer questioning, doubts were expressed by some of the respondents. In particular, the most experienced materials writer in the team sees no need and benefit in a closer collaboration between researchers, teachers and materials writers. Above all, a more active participation in the professional discourse, an increased exchange with the research community and more guidance from outside sources such as dyslexia therapists or experts on educational neuroscience is seemingly not considered necessary by the majority of the materials writers. Reasons for not consulting further experts are the perception that sufficient expert knowledge is available within the team and that involving too many parties might interfere with the development process. This may result in disregarding research findings and certain learner groups such as multilingual and neurodiverse learners not being considered in the coursebook.

Table 1 presents an overview of factors promoting and impeding a potential closer collaboration mentioned by the interviewed materials writers.

Table 1: Facilitating and hindering factors for enhanced collaboration according to materials writers

Facilitating factors	Hindering factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • establishment of networks and platforms for stakeholders in materials development • high-quality education for materials writers and teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited time • limited money • limited audience • inadequate feedback provided by reviewers

According to the materials writers, success criteria for enhanced collaboration are professional networking on the one hand, and high-quality education for materials writers and teachers on the other. The first criterion refers to the existence of networks which facilitate cooperation among stakeholders. The second criterion for success is the provision of relevant and applicable input in seminars and workshops tailored to the materials writers' and teachers' needs. Despite the general support of the idea of improving the cooperation among stakeholders, hindering factors prevailed in the responses. These involve limited time, limited money, limited audience and inadequate feedback. Short development cycles, materials writing alongside teaching duties, and lack of willingness to get involved on the part of overworked teachers seem to make the feasibility of an improved cooperation impossible. Another factor which impedes collaboration is the fact that the payment of membership fees discourages materials writers from joining networks and platforms for professional exchange on the subject of materials development. To join *MaWSIG (Materials Writing Special Interest Group)*, for example, a fee is payable. What is more, Austria being a small country, the materials writers see too little demand for researchers, materials writers and teachers who would participate in workshops, seminars or conferences provided by Austrian networks and platforms for stakeholders involved in materials writing. Furthermore, reviewers often do not provide valuable and useful feedback. A case in point is that teachers request content in the textbook which is not feasible due to copyright or other framework conditions set by the publisher.

What are the teachers' views on collaboration with materials writers, publishers and researchers?

With respect to the teachers' views on collaboration, existing cooperation and contact with educational publishers and materials writers are hardly present. The teachers largely expressed a positive view on intensifying collaboration with other stakeholders in materials development. Desired forms of collaboration could involve in-service training in materials development and participation in evaluation and feedback processes. While some teachers prefer procedures that allow for mutual communication such as evaluation meetings, focus group meetings or interviews with materials writers and editors, others would prefer less time-consuming ways of collaboration like questionnaires. The table below shows a summary of factors which teachers identified as potentially fostering or inhibiting a more intensive cooperation.

Table 2: Facilitating and hindering factors for enhanced collaboration according to teachers

Facilitating factors	Hindering factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • in-service education in materials development • publishers’ initiatives • face-to-face / online / regional / school-based / regular meetings • actual implementation of feedback • appreciation and reward for the extra workload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • limited time • long distances for evaluation meetings / in-service education • lack of commitment among teachers to get involved • distortion of data (e.g. specific teacher type)

As can be seen from the table, the teachers expressed a wide range of ideas that would facilitate an improved cooperation. Possible ways of collaboration raised during the interviews include classroom observation, in-service education, evaluation meetings, interviews, piloting, questionnaires and reviewing materials. Success factors that would make these forms of collaboration possible involve the provision of in-service education in materials development, publishers’ initiatives for organizing evaluation procedures, the organization of regional face-to-face or online meetings which take place on a regular basis, the actual implementation of feedback in future coursebooks and the necessity of acknowledgement of the extra workload in terms of appreciation and reward. However, a number of hindering factors were raised regarding a potential implementation of an enhanced cooperation and exchange of theory and practice. Like the materials writers, teachers identified the time factor as the main barrier for more extensive collaboration. As the number of lessons when teaching full-time and the scope of duties has increased, teachers are less likely to volunteer for doing additional work related to coursebook development. Especially when they would need to travel long distances for taking part in evaluation meetings or in-service education, they lack the commitment. As a consequence, it might be difficult to recruit teachers who are fully equipped with the necessary expertise for carrying out systematic materials evaluation. Another issue is that it is very likely that only a certain type of teacher – mainly motivated and experienced teachers – participates in such evaluations, which means that there is not a full range of different teacher types represented in the materials evaluation process.

5. Implications and conclusion

The findings imply that an improved collaboration between researchers, materials writers and teachers can only happen if the framework conditions are changed on the part of publishers, research institutes, the Ministry of Education and schools. Based on the evidence from the interview data, a range of recommendations could be deduced of which selected examples are outlined as follows. Publishers should take a more active role in organising the implementation of coursebook evaluations. Researchers are advised to engage more extensively in the exchange of knowledge with practitioners. The Ministry of Education is supposed to transform the approval process into an effective feedback mechanism. And schools are expected to improve support and guidance for teachers being involved in collaboration with publishers in materials development. Besides, more educational opportunities in materials development for pre- and in-service teachers as well as for materials writers are likely to have a positive impact on enhancing the use and the quality of ELT coursebooks. To make a profound transformation of framework conditions possible, it is vital

that schools and publishers reduce time pressure on teachers and materials writers and create a supportive setting by providing time, acknowledgement and financial resources for more open communication and more intensive collaboration among these key stakeholders in materials development. What is needed is a rethinking of how collaboration and feedback processes are perceived; teachers, schools, materials writers, publishers and the approval committee of the Ministry of Education need to embrace cooperation as an important stepping stone for professional development and effective collaboration.

References

- Atkinson, D. (2007). Investigating expertise in textbook writing: Insights from a case study of an experienced materials writer at work. In M. KhosraviNik & A. Polyzou (Eds.), *Papers from the Lancaster university postgraduate conference in linguistics & language teaching*, Vol. 2: Papers from LAEL PG 2007 (pp. 1-20). University of Lancaster.
- Born-Lechleitner, I., Brunner, S., Harkamp, A., Holleis, E., & Kaplan, A. (2017). *way2go! 5 Coursebook* (1st ed.). Österreichischer Bundesverlag Schulbuch.
- Bundesministerium für Bildung, Wissenschaft und Forschung. (2021). *Standardisierte Reife- und Diplomprüfung (SRDP): Lebende Fremdsprachen* [Standardised school-leaving examination (SRDP): Modern foreign languages]. Retrieved from <https://www.matura.gv.at/srdp/lebende-fremdsprachen>
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. Routledge.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2007). *Research methods in applied linguistics: Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methodologies* (1st ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Hadfield, J. (2014). Chaosmos: Spontaneity and order in the materials design process. In N. Harwood (Ed.), *English language teaching textbooks: Content, consumption, production* (pp. 320-359). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hoffmann-Riem, C. (1998). *Das adoptierte Kind: Familienleben mit doppelter Elternschaft* [The adopted child: Family life with dual parenthood] (4th ed.). Fink.
- Johnson, K. (2003). *Designing language teaching tasks*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Masuhara, H. (2011). What do teachers really want from coursebooks? In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (pp. 236-266). Cambridge University Press.
- McDonough, J., Shaw, C., & Masuhara, H. (2013). *Materials and methods in ELT: A teacher's guide* (3rd ed.). Wiley.
- OeAD-GmbH, Austria's Agency for Education and Internationalisation. (2021). *Euroguidance – Education and careers guidance across Europe*. Retrieved from <https://www.bildungssystem.at/en/school-upper-secondary/academic-secondary-school-upper-cycle>
- Pogelschek, B. (2007). How textbooks are made: Insights from an Austrian educational publisher. In M. Horseley & J. McCall (Eds.), *Peace, democratization and reconciliation in textbooks and educational media: Ninth international conference on textbooks and educational media* (pp.100-107). Iartem.
- Prowse, P. (2001). How writers write: testimony from authors. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (pp. 151-173). Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2014). The ELT textbook. In S. Garton & K. Graves (Eds.) *International perspectives on materials in ELT* (pp. 19-36). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Terhart, E. (1997). Entwicklung und Situation des qualitativen Forschungsansatzes [Development and situation of the qualitative reserach approach]. In B. Friebertshäuser, A. Langer & A. Prengel (Eds.), *Handbuch qualitative Forschungsmethoden in der Erziehungswissenschaft* [Handbook of qualitative research methods in educational science]. Juventa.
- Tomlinson, B. (2016). The importance of materials development for language learning. In M. Azarnoosh, M. Zeraatpishe & A. Faravani (Eds.), *Issues in materials development* (pp.1-9). Sense.
- Tomlinson, B. & Masuhara, H. (2018). *The complete guide to the theory and practice of materials development for language learning*. Wiley.
- University of Vienna. (2016). *Teilcurriculum für das Unterrichtsfach Englisch im Rahmen des Bachelorstudiums zur Erlangung eines Lehramts im Bereich der Sekundarstufe (Allgemeinbildung) im Verbund Nord-Ost* [Partial curriculum for the subject English within the framework of the Bachelor's degree programme to obtain a teaching profession in the field of secondary education (general education) in the North-East association]. Retrieved from https://senat.univie.ac.at/fileadmin/user_upload/s_senat/konsolidiert_Lehramt/Teilcurriculum_Englisch_BA_Lehramt.pdf
- Wipperfurth, M., & Will, L. (2019). Wann entscheiden sich Englischlehrkräfte gegen die Arbeit mit dem Lehrbuch? Eine explorative Studie [When do English teachers decide against working with the textbook? An explorative study]. In D. Ruisz, P. Rauschert & E. Thaler (Eds.), *Living language teaching: Lehrwerke und Unterrichtsmaterialien im Fremdsprachenunterricht* [Living language teaching: Textbooks and teaching materials in foreign language teaching] (pp. 191-212). Narr.