

## **A GUIDE TEXT OR MANY TEXTS? “THAT IS THE QUESTION”**

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**T**he use of supplementary materials in the classroom has always been an essential part of the teaching and learning process. To restrict our teaching to the scope of one single textbook means to stand behind the advances of knowledge, in any area and context. Young learners appreciate any new and varied support that expands their knowledge of the world: diaries, letters, panels, free texts, magazines, short stories, poems or literary excerpts, and articles taken from Internet are materials that will allow learners to share more and work more collaboratively. In this article we are going to deal with some of these materials, with the criteria to select, adapt, and create them that may be of interest to the learner and that may promote reading and writing processes. Since no text can entirely satisfy the needs of students and teachers, the creativity of both parties will be necessary to improve the quality of teaching through the adequate use and adaptation of supplementary materials.

### **Rationale**

The General Law of Education (Ley General de Educación) has given schools more autonomy to decide what models of education to follow. This autonomy implies a new trend in the choosing of textbooks in the schools. There is no fixed and unified official curriculum, and the texts do not have to follow any rigid sequence from beginning to end.

The idea of using a “frozen text” that has to last for years has to be left aside. And here we

are not speaking about all the texts but particularly the English texts used in public schools. Nowadays, it is necessary to articulate the texts with the teachers’ needs since there isn’t any fixed or unique curriculum for all schools. Textbooks have become more a help and a guide than a straight jacket. On the other hand, it is important to establish a relationship between the school text and the audio-visual media the students might have access to, both inside and outside the classroom, thanks to television, Internet, videos, etc. We have to redefine the role of different media to supplement and even replace, if necessary, the strict use of the textbook in the classroom.

Some school texts have been criticised all over the world for being elitists, sexist, racist, ethnocentric, very urban, and oriented by just one ideology. For these reasons it is necessary for teachers to be able to analyse critically both the contents and the formats of our children’s books and to enrich them with extra material that enhances the kids’ knowledge of the world.

We don’t want to appear as opposing textbooks per se. Of course, they are the most common form of learning materials for language teachers. It is hard to think of a new teacher trying to sort out all the situations that are present in a classroom as well as teaching without the help of that useful tool.

What we are questioning here is the use of textbooks as the only answer for all the things

kids may require and need. Sometimes they are used in such a way that they do not permit the interaction of the learners or the possibilities for discovering other media. The proposal is to enrich books with other alternatives taken from the environment of both students and teachers.

Producing texts with a didactic function that does not offer challenges, but that offers a standardised and restricted vocabulary, and explanations that simplify concepts and do not allow the learner to work with the texts is not the ideal situation. Often teachers accept what the publishing houses offer without questioning the organisation or the contents of the books. If the books were chosen with the criteria of having them just as a guide for the teacher and the students, things would be very different.

Sometimes books are so rigid that they do not allow any other possibility or direction to the learner or the teacher. Fortunately, things have begun to change and this might be the moment to make the decision of introducing many and varied materials in our teaching, materials that have to be relevant and interesting for the students and that permit kids to analyse, discuss, interact, and, of course, allow the young learners to be creative and motivated during their process of learning English.

If we really want to be up-to-date in relation to what is happening in the world, we can't follow a textbook in a fixed manner or as the only source of information. This will make everybody uniformly shaped, unifying text, teacher, and context. At times we find that both teachers and students are thinking and interpreting the world in the same way, to finally discover that their thinking corresponds to the proposals of a text. We need dynamic and proactive individuals for changing stereotyped visions of life.

In opposition to some schools' policy of not using diverse didactic materials but only the guide book, we have learned from Freinet (in Fandiño, 1993) that it is a good idea to use the school library, free texts invented by the learners, the school press, the school newspaper, audiovisuals, and still dialogues and personal experience, as complementary materials to enrich the process of learning languages. Nowadays, the use of new technologies such as television, cable TV, overhead projectors, computers, internet, videobeam, etc., make up part of the daily lives of schools, and it is a good idea to take full advantage of them.

However, a question arises on the part of the teachers: If we are going to use all these materials as part of our common practice, how do we organise the contents around the objectives we, necessarily, have to follow? This is a valid question because we not only have to take into account the objectives, the contents, and the way we structure them to fulfil the requirements of the M.E.N., but it is our responsibility as teachers to develop in the kids a scientific feeling that they may need in their future as professionals and individuals of a new world. Inserted in this perspective is the development of knowledge around the English language.

As was proposed by Richards and Rogers (1986), after choosing an *approach* for teaching, that offers an explicit basis in theory, teachers have to think about *methodology* and then decide on the *materials* to be used to develop their classes. However, it is possible to make the decisions by focusing first on materials (design) and methods (procedure) to try to show how they respond to a theory (approach). The materials will be different if we choose a grammatical or structural approach; if the selection goes for the functional-notional; if the

syllabus is situational, topic-based, skill-based, task-based; or, if we decide to work with projects.

The methodology designed by *project work*, allows teachers to use technological resources plus others like signs, schedules, calendars, advertisements, menus, memos, notes, posters, etc., since for dealing with projects it is necessary to find information in many places: by asking people, checking in libraries, downloading from Internet, among others.

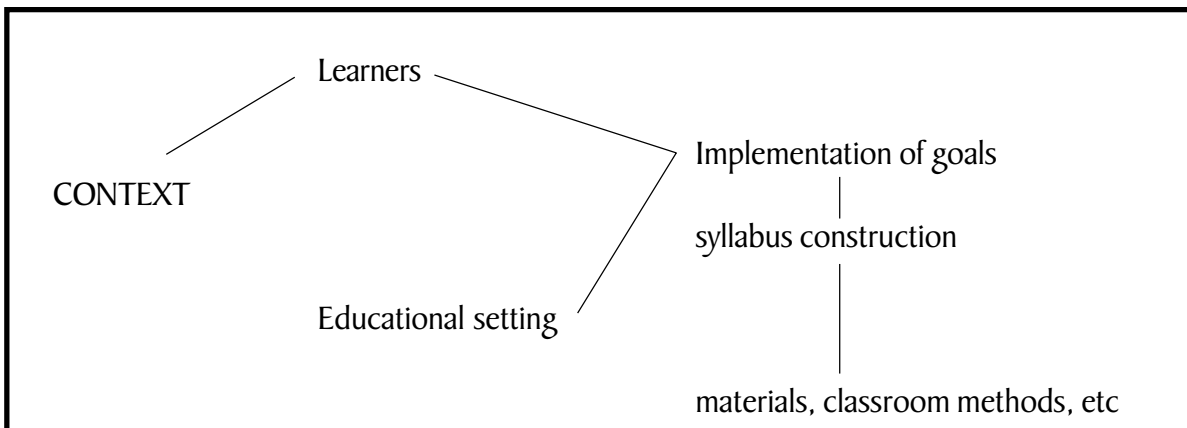
What is clear is that materials and methods cannot be seen in isolation, but are embedded within a broader professional context, as explained by McDonough and Shaw (1993) and represented in the figure below. It means that materials should be the result of the construction of a syllabus, which permits implementation of the goals proposed by the institutions and teachers and has taken into account both the learners and the educational setting; or, in other words, the context. The selection of materials and tests, the planning of individual lessons and the management of the classroom itself may agree and match the decision made around the syllabus design.

Following the same authors, before choosing complementary materials it is important that teachers consider the learners' *age*, specially for

selecting topics and types of learning; *interest* of the kids in the subjects and in the language; *level of proficiency* in English, to avoid making mistakes in relation to difficulty; *aptitude*, since learners may be good in some areas and not so good in others; *mother tongue*, that may affect the treatment of errors; *academic and educational level*, that will determine the intellectual content, the topic and the depth of study of the material; and lastly, *attitude towards learning* —teachers, institution, target language and its speakers are all related closely to *motivation*. *Motivation* might be affected by internal or external factors and people react to them very differently. Skehan (1998) says that motivation is related to success, but that it is difficult to distinguish if it is motivation that leads to success or success what incites motivation.

Other aspects to take into account while preparing and using materials are, for example: *the reasons students have for learning*, their *personality and learning styles*. These aspects can affect methodological decisions on the part of the teachers.

Working with projects and respecting the different learning styles of students may result in an optimal combination to develop a curriculum that accomplishes actual educational demands.



Project work or project learning corresponds to an educational philosophy that provides the direction and possible routes to a more democratic and participatory society : theme and task-centred modes of teaching and learning which results from a joint process of negotiation between all participants. It allows for both individual and small groups of learners. PROCESS AND PRODUCT realise a dynamic balance. It is experiential and holistic bridging the dualism between body and mind, or in John Dewey's words, "experience and thinking".

Working with projects permits the use of complementary materials that can be chosen to favour the development of the eight recognised intelligences distinguished by Gardner, precursor of the Theory of Multiple Intelligence. These intelligences are : linguistic, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, musical, spatial, intrapersonal, interpersonal, and naturalistic.

In Hernandez (2000), for making classes more humanistic and respectful of the learners' mental characteristics, it is necessary to perform activities that enhance not only the mathematical and the linguistic intelligences, but take care of other perspectives. That is why we, as teachers, have to deal with materials that enhance the development of other ways of learning and constructing knowledge.

If our interest is to make classes more *linguistic*, related to a linguistic approach to learning, materials like books, tape recorders, typewriters, stamps, books on tape, among others, might be considered appropriate enough. But, if the emphasis lies on a *mathematical mind*, the materials to select might be calculators, science equipment, math games, etc., for the kids to learn English with a mathematical base. For *rhythmic-musical*

*intelligence*, the best kinds of materials to use both outside or in class should be melodies and chants, and the promotion in the learners of the expression of their feelings through songs and playing musical instruments.

The collection of information using physical sensations, such as touch, smell, taste and sight and through the manipulation of objects is appropriate for learners with *kinaesthetic* intelligence. Children who possess *spatial-visual* intelligence prefer to work with maps, drawings, pictures, colours, videos and to think in a tri-dimensional mode. *Natural* intelligence has received some importance in the last few years and it permits the person to appreciate the specificity of nature, promoting the observation of the different phenomena that occur in the world. And, last but not least, we can recognise *emotional intelligence*, which beholds the interpersonal and the intrapersonal. The interpersonal has to do with the interpretation of the feelings of others and showing a lot of empathy for the happenings of those who surround them. Activities like discussions and social relations and roles of leadership would be very welcome for kids with this kind of intelligence. The intrapersonal, on the other hand, has to do with the understanding of oneself, an ability that permits its possessors to become independent and analytical learners. Materials that permit the students to work on their own and that encourage quiet time would be the most relevant for these kinds of children.

If we as teachers were conscious that human beings do not all think the same way, due to the different development of their minds, when preparing our syllabuses we should take care of bringing to the classroom activities that facilitate the kids' learning and which correspond better to their learning styles, other

than mathematical or linguistic, which have been prevalent in our educational system for decades. The spectrum of human abilities is very wide, so that misusing the learners possibilities is a waste that we can not afford any longer.

Finally, the proposal of introducing project work in our ELT will permit both teachers and learners to bring to the classroom other materials, different from a "frozen" text book, that will enhance the eight human intelligences in the schools ; and if we ally them to an ethical sense, at the same time that we make our classes more varied, ludic, and more related to the reality of the students of the XXI century, we can be contributing toward working for the broader good.

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