Between the Keys

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JALT
THE JAPAN ASSOCIATION FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING
全国語学教育学会

Working Together

Jim Smiley
MW-SIG Coordinator

Greetings, fellow Materials Writers,

The New Year is upon us, and in what has now become an unfortunate tradition we present the final 2008 issue of the Between the Keys. Far from being any indication of a lackadaisical MW-SIG board, the main reason for the customary delay lies in the changing of the guard at the JALT National Conference. This time we see two long-standing officers depart. A hearty round of thanks goes to Cameron Romney (Membership) and Kristofer Bayne (Publications) who leave their chairs to Paul Nadasdy and Simon Cooke. Personally I have enjoyed a thoroughly top-class professional relationship with Cameron and Kris and am sad to see them go. They were tremendous supporters of our SIG. I'm sure that we all wish them the very best for the future. Change is of course the life-blood of an organisation, and I welcome Paul and Simon into our officer ranks believing in their abilities and ambitions in maintaining our systems and standards. Welcome aboard, gentlemen.

Continuing on the board are Greg Goodmacher (Programmes), Scott Petersen (Treasury) and myself (Coordinator) as elected positions. In addition, Suzy Conner remains our Recording Secretary and John Daly continues to maintain our Yahoo! Group mailing list. If you're not on that, please contact John <john-d@sano-c.ac.jp>.

The recent JALT National Conference had a very strong materials line-up as well as our own forum (thanks, Greg) and special presentation by Dorothy Zemach. We followed our forum with a dinner which was well attended by the forum speakers and a fair number of our own members. JALT2009 will have Scott Thornbury as a plenary speaker, and currently we're negotiating with the JALT Conference team about how to use Scott with the MW-SIG most effectively. More on that anon.

Before that event (Nov 21-23: Granship, Shizuoka), we have two further conferences to look forward to. The Pan-SIG will host their 8th Annual Conference at the Nagareyama campus of Toyo Gakuen University in Chiba on May 23 and 24th.
<http://pansig.org/2009/>

Our programme last year at Kyoto was excellent, and I urge you to get your submissions in to help create an even better line-up this year. The plenary speakers are J.D. Brown and Deryn Verity. Neither will discuss specifically MW-related topics, and currently we're considering a few possibilities for our own featured speaker. The other event is a mini-conference with West Tokyo on September 26. The format is simple: four presenters speak for 90 minutes before and after lunch. We have Chuck Sandy, Alastair Graham-Marr, Mike Hood and myself. The theme and specific content has not yet been finalised, but the mini-conference should be a treat for those living in the Tokyo and surrounding areas interested in materials.

Longer-term members will remember that a few years ago we tried to start a couple of programmes whereby those wishing to learn more about materials development could be paired with more experienced writers, our Tutor System, and one whereby members who wanted their works critiqued and perhaps trialled could be paired up, our Buddy System. A few pairs were generated then folks seemed to have forgotten about it. I'd like to remind you that we can still do this. Writing tends to be

an isolated experience. Getting in touch with like-minded professionals for a focussed chat can be tremendously beneficial on a number of levels. If you're interested in being paired up, drop me a line <sendaismiley@gmail.com>.

Finally (leaving the best for last), the MW-SIG has a new officer position. Our new Honorary Chairperson is a title given to an individual whose efforts and abilities we wish to recognise. The holder will be someone who has achieved a high level of materials output, is an expert writer and has given something back to our professional community over the years. I'm delighted to announce that the Honorary Chairman for 2009 is Marc Helgesen. Marc qualifies superbly on all counts and arguably has contributed more than any other individual towards the development of other writers in Japan. He has been our Plenary Speaker (Pan-SIG 2007), forum presenter this year, a guest commenter on submissions to our writing contest and has penned numerous articles for Between the Keys. Great to have you on board, Marc.

And I wish all of you a productive and happy 2009.

Arra best

From the Editor
Simon Cooke
Publications Chair

As we look forward to the teaching challenges that await us in 2009, surely it would be a good idea for us to examine how we have developed as educators in the last year? how did I improve? What aspect of my teaching am I still unsatisfied with? With regard to the materials that we have used and developed, we should also be reflective upon what 'worked' and what did not and the reasons for the success or failure of those classes.

As tonic to those stresses, this issue of BtK contains articles to ease the most tired of teaching minds this winter and help prepare us for the year ahead.

Marc Helgesen gives us some excellent hints on how we can help to improve the quality of both our own materials and those of our fellow materials writers, in the pursuit of improving our students' English language skills. Spread the word? Participating in the MW SIG: your key to instant karma!

One of my teaching-related resolutions for 2009 (apart from, as with all the readers of this SIG newsletter, making more contribution to the SIG) is to be more receptive to materials which, at first glance, I have thought beyond the ability of my students. With the simplest of tweaking or simply by not underestimating my students' ability, I have had some very rewarding teaching experiences. Jim Smiley's article, which questions the way in which we interpret our students' cognitive skills in the English classroom, addresses this point directly. Jim details how we might go about creating motivational linguistic goals by providing problem-solving tasks and gives the example of methods used to solve an interesting and challenging logic puzzle.

Finally, if the thought of preparing another term's worth of materials for your students is spoiling your good feelings at the beginning of 2009, look no further than Greg Goodmacher's article. Greg describes successful classes in which his students were asked to develop and present materials for their own classes and classmates.

May I take this opportunity to offer you my best wishes for 2009.

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The Missing Piece: A look at language modification

Jim Smiley
Tohoku Bunka Gakuen University

Introduction

Low ability in English does not equate with an inability to think. Our students are often brainy, but we might overlook their cognitive skills when concentrating on their linguistic output. To remedy this, use brain teasers in your classroom materials; you will soon see your students' brain cogs turning. Creating original brain teasers would be a difficult option for many materials writers, and the numerous online resources for brain teasers favour native speakers of English[1] (NS). There are some EFL sites[2] and, of course, teachers may use these resources directly. However, there are only a few EFL resources and teachers are limited to the option of modifying NS texts.

Language modification helps bring NS texts within the reach of our students, interesting and challenging tasks can be created relatively easily. The corollary of this is to consider student language outcome and prepare support for student output. Together, engaging input and achievable language practice work to make viable and motivational materials. Using a brain teaser to demonstrate that advanced thinking skills can be generated through simplified language, some techniques and tools for language modification are presented.

The Missing Piece

Original

A rectangular birthday cake has a single rectangular slice missing, and you want to divide what's left equally between you and a friend, with a single straight cut. How? (No, you don't cut the cake horizontally? One of you wouldn't get any frosting. There's an elegant answer.)

–from http://www.charlieanderson.com/microsof.htm[3].

Language Modification

Lexis

As is, mid-intermediate and above students would probably understand the question, but the challenge is to modify the input for lower level students. No context is provided at all on the web page, but contextual support would be useful. At least three areas of contextual gaps may be observed: background to explain why the cake is cut and is rectangle, without which some students will not be able to imagine a non-round, irregularly shaped cake[4]; an explanation of why the cake needs to be cut equally, as the computational nature of the task may be undermined by some students'

sense of give-and-take to accept a smaller piece; and the final graphic state of the cake as the original teaser is given in text only. Some students may not be able to visualise the task. The first and second may be done by describing the cake and expanding on the theme of wanting to share a cake present in the original or by creating a new context, one that is believed to be more accessible to students. To help with the third conceptual gap, having students re-constitute the cake state might be a useful preparatory activity, or simply providing a graphic clue would keep the overall time used shorter.

A few items merit consideration at the lexical and structural levels. Nation's Baseword lists[5] are a useful resource for deciding approximate levels for lexis. Baseword list 1 represents the top most common, and arguably the most valuable, 1000 words in English and is derived from the British National Corpus[6]. List 2 contains the next 1000, and list 3 the next 1000. He presents them as headwords and each list contains many derivatives and therefore comprises far more words in total[7]. An analysis of the original text in Nation's Range programme gives the following data:

30 words, or 78.95%, of the text is contained in Baseword list 1, 3 words/ 7.89% from list 2 and 5 items not in any list. Such word lists can at best only be a guide to lexical familiarity Japanese students may have with English words. Writers in Japan will of course be aware that both 'birthday' and 'cake' will be known to most students. These will not require alteration. The remaining items may be taught as a part of the materials or changed. Items actually present in list 1 might also need thought depending on target students' prior learning and the writer's experience and current needs.

Range Analysis Data

Word List	Tokens/%	Types/%	Families
One	41/ 80.39	30/ 78.95	29
Two	4/ 7.84	3/ 7.89	3
Three	0/ 0.00	0/ 0.00	0
Not in the lists	6/ 11.76	5/ 13.16	??
Total	51	38	32

Table 1 Range Output 1: Token and Types

Base Two	Families	Range	Frequency
Birthday	1	1	1
Cake	1	2	2
Straight	1	1	1

Table 2 Range Output 2: Words not in BWL 1

Base Two	Families	Range	Frequency
Elegant	1	1	1
Frosting	1	1	1
Horizontally	1	1	1
Rectangular	1	1	2
Slice	1	1	1

Table 3 Range Output 3: Words not in any list

Structure

Lexis change is rarely completely independent of collocative or structural change, so the following discussion is interlaced with a consideration of how the vocabulary and context is altered. What comprises grammatical difficulty is a question far more complex than collating and ordering lexical information. The easiest and most available tool would be any modern course book series that has a grammar component. This component will likely set out a series of grammar structures from simple to complex notwithstanding localised sequence differences due to topic, function or other consideration. The creation of a personalised structural sequence is a worthwhile task for any materials writer. I used mine as a rough base for this analysis[8].

The actor in the first clause of the sentence is omitted and 'you' become the actor in the rest. However, that the implied verb in 'with a straight cut' takes the 'you' actor may not be clear to all students. Omitted clauses are a feature of NS discourse. Writers for learners need to be aware of these omissions and to consider filling them out as is deemed necessary. Existentialism aside, what is omitted is debatable. At the contextual level, for example, does the cake need placement? Does there need a reason the cake was cut initially and by whom? Does the 'want to divide equally' require explanation? What could, or should, follow the single question word 'how'? One implication missing in the question was immediately filled by the author in parenthesis, feeling that that option, at least, should be ruled out. Structural omissions include 'to this question' after 'There's an elegant answer', 'you need to cut' before 'with a single cut', 'from it' after 'missing' (otherwise interpretations may include 'the slice was stolen') and 'from the cake' after 'what's left'. In this short example, looking for omissions becomes a bit academic, but writers always need to be on the look-out.

The actual surface-level structures may be confusing. The construction '[something] has [something] missing [from it]' is not one beginner students come across. There are other potential problem areas, but perhaps most noteworthy is the ironic use of 'you' in the implied imperative sentences. The actual divider of the cake does not exist, as the whole event is a realisation of an abstract mathematic problem as a logic puzzle. Yet the 'you' will be the metaphorical cutter of the cake. This places the grammatical 'you' as the object of the imperative command, set apart from the 'you' who 'wouldn't get any frosting', the receiver of the direction not to cut horizontally. The very next clause utilises the plural use of 'you'. Most students learn the imperative without the 'you', and the multiple uses of the term might confuse a number of readers.

Readability statistics can be useful as an indicator of possible difficulty of texts. On-line tools are readily available[9], but these favour NS texts. For EFL texts, there are only a couple of formulas, and probably Greenfield's remains the most accurate[10]. Using his formula[11], the input text is rated at 74.8. Like the Flesch-Kincaid index, it is out of 100, with 100 being very easy) and 74.8 indicates that the text is likely to be suitable for lower-level learners.

Input text analysis

The following text was selected as a potentially suitable one for lower-level learners.

"Situation: A rectangular cake is on the table. Someone has eaten a smaller rectangular slice from the cake. Problem: Two brothers want to eat the cake. They don't want the other brother to have more cake. They asked you to cut the cake for them. Each half of the cake needs to be exactly the same size. The shapes do not need to be the same. Question: How do you do it? Rules: 1.You must cut the cake from the top. 2. You must use only one

straight cut."

Vocabulary

A Range analysis returns the information that 'edge' is in Baseword list 2 and that 'rectangle' is not in any list. Both of these terms may be covered in the materials, and so the input text may be judged to be acceptably safe (at least at the BNC 1000 word level. I would still expect many lower-level students to struggle with 'exactly', 'shape', 'size' and 'straight'.)

Structures

The structures ("A is on B", present perfect for resultant situation, "A wants B", "A doesn't want B", "A doesn't want B to [verb]", "A asks B to [verb]", "needs to be", "must" for command with condition) are varied and represent a set from a language area with which many lower-level students may not be familiar. Therefore the particular placement of such a brain teaser activity needs consideration in light of students' past learning. However arguably with exception of the present perfect for resultant state, all of the other structures may be thought appropriate for an elementary level course book and usable in this activity.

Student Output Support

Let us assume that students understand the question and the answer. Now they need help in producing language to describe their solution. Depending on the educational philosophical overview of the writer for the particular class group, output support may take a number of highly differing forms. For example, functional-notional syllabus type of support may focus on the use of the imperative verb for getting things done; structural ones on verb manipulations; skills ones on (e.g.) producing a text that conveys the meaning; and so on. Whichever type is used[12], the amount of scaffolding may also vary. As there is no magic formula for deciding how much and of what type to use, individual writers must carefully consider the particular needs and abilities of their target

audience. Furthermore, writers need to ask if the point of the activity is about language output, or other aspects such as increasing global comprehension skills, creating engagement chances, developing motivation, giving students a feeling of success in understanding, and so on. Again, only one from the range of possibilities is shown.

The answer requires the middle points of both rectangles being found and a line from the edges of the overall shape through both middle points being drawn. Cutting along that line will result in two pieces of the same area but not necessarily the same shape. A simplified version of that is:

- 1. Find the middle of the big rectangle. Mark that point.

- 2. Find the middle of the small rectangle. Mark that point.

- 3. Draw a line between the two points.

- 4. Draw another line along that line all the way to the edges.

- 5. Cut along that line[13].

Effectively, this simplified text becomes a hidden input text and can be treated in the same way as any other input text. A Range analysis returns the same information as the input text: that 'edge' is in Baseword list 2 and that 'rectangle' is not in any list. Again, this text is acceptably safe.

Page layout

The issue now becomes one of procedure and page setting; how is the graphic, language and activity process information to be set out on the page? The preparatory stages' set up, likewise, needs thought; should it be in a separate file for the teacher, put in the students' worksheet as an enlarged rubric (for the teacher's benefit), developed into an actual set of preparatory activities, or simply ignored to keep language bulk down in order to focus on

the actual activity itself? I have elected to present the set up in a simple graphic form, and as the issue of page layout goes far beyond the scope of this article, here is the student handout in rough form[14].

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The Missing Piece

Situation: A rectangular cake is on the table. Someone has eaten a smaller rectangular slice from the cake.
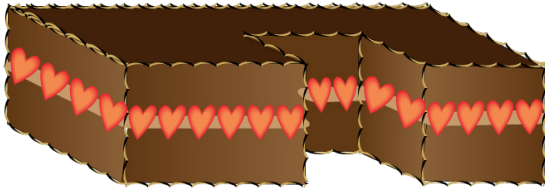
Problem: Two brothers want to eat the cake. They don't want the other brother to have more cake. They asked you to cut the cake for them. Each half of the cake needs to be exactly the same size. The shapes do not need to be the same.
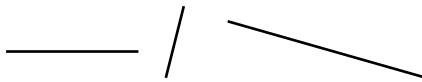
Question: How do you do it?

Rules: 1. You must cut the cake from the top.
2. You must use only one straight cut.

Language Help

rectangle (n) rectangular (adj)   square (n) square-shaped (adj)
2 long sides + 2 short sides   all sides the same

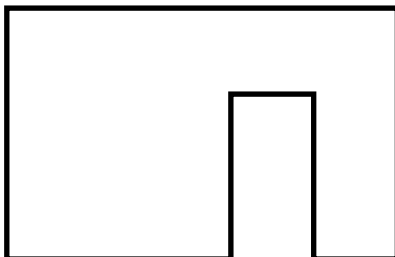These lines are straight.   These lines are not.

To cut =
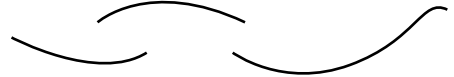
Word Box

draw   edges   finally   find
mark   points   small   then

Use this rectangle to help you.

Fill the gaps using the word box.

1. First, find the middle of the big rectangle........... that point.

2. After that,.......... the middle of the.......... rectangle. Mark that point.

3........... a line between the two...........

4........... draw a line along that line all the way to the...........

5........... cut along that line.

The two parts of the cake will be the same size.

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References

[1]An excellent source for NS teasers is TeacherTube http://www.teachertube.com/gvideos.
php?urlkey=BrainTeasers&gid=42

Typical sites are like Psychtests.com http://www.psychtests.com/mindgames/

[2]SabreIngles: http://www.saberingles.com.ar/teachers/brainteasers.html

And one in Dave's ESL Café: http://www.eslcafe.com/idea/index.cgi?display:1170291024-23421.txt

[3]Accessed Dec 13 2008

[4]A Google Japan image search delivered a single rectangular cake on the 4th page of images

[5]Nation reference http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/staff/paul-nation/nation.aspx

[6]http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/

[7]List 1: over 4000 items, list 2 over 3700 and list 3 over 3100.

[8]http://materialswriters.org/betweenthekeys/14_3/14_3.pdf pg 24-25

[9]http://www.editcentral.com/gwt/com.editcentral.EC/EC.html

[10]Greenfield, J. (2004). Readability Formulas For EFL. JALT Journal 26[1]. pg 5-24.

[11]The formula is: 164.935-(18.792*words per sentence)-(1.916*letters per word).

[12]See Brown, J. D. (1995). The elements of language curriculum. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, in which seven systems are explained more fully.

[13]Starting with "Draw a line from the middle of both rectangles" implies that both middle points have already been found or will be found before drawing the line.

[14]What could not be shown in the format of these pages is that the handout is in two sections with the 'Language Help' information onward being separate from the initial set up of the teaser. ⬛

Students Becoming Writers of Teaching Materials

Greg Goodmacher

At one point in my teaching career, one of my classes contained a large number of students who were studying to become teachers. It occurred to me that the responsibility of teaching a language lesson based on a song to the rest of the class would benefit each student. I first did this with songs and later with newspaper and Internet articles. The responsibility of writing teaching materials, I believed, would make each student study and focus more on aspects of the English language. As students concentrate on developing their teaching materials, they have to concentrate on the language points more deeply than if they were working on teaching materials that had been provided in a textbook. Also, stu-

dents tend to pay attention when their friends are at the front of the classroom. In addition, future teachers, I assumed, would probably want to learn more teaching techniques. The responsibility of designing teaching materials and teaching with those materials also stimulated the students who were not planning on being teachers. No one really wants to look foolish or unprepared when they become a "teacher" at the front of the class.

The first step in the process was to introduce various methods of using songs. To do this, I wrote a list of these methods, handed them out to the class, and briefly explained each method and what aspects of language the methods were useful for developing. The

students had the freedom to choose whatever they wanted to teach with the song: listening, writing, speaking, reading, grammar, vocabulary, etc. The aforementioned list included such suggestions as creating cloze activities with either complete words removed or with letters of certain sounds removed, writing questions based on vocabulary in the songs, writing questions based on song content, making vocabulary matching exercises for words in the lyrics, creating reading exercises with song lyrics whose lines had been scrambled, facilitating role plays based on characters in the song lyrics, assigning role play interviews between reporters and the musicians, writing true or false statements based on song lyric content, and many other song-based teaching ideas.

The second step was to pass out both a brief explanation of the assignment and a time schedule for students to sign. The explanation and part of the schedule are shown below. The schedule covered two semesters since the class was for two semesters. Due to the large class, some students worked together in pairs.

What You Must Do for the Song Teaching Activity

Find a song that you think would be good for teaching English. Create a language lesson based on that song. Depending on the difficulty of the song, you might have to teach new vocabulary. You must have a pre-listening section, a listening section, and a post-listening section. You must decide if the song would be best used to teach English to children, adults, beginners, intermediate students, advanced students, etc. Tell why you made your decision regarding the level. You can find lyrics on the Internet, with music CDs, or in books. I have song books that you can look at if you would like. Be prepared to use your song in class. Tell me the name of your song and choose a date to teach your song. Sign the list today.

You can tell me the name of your song later, but you cannot use the same song as another student. One student will teach a song every class until all students have done so.

April 21.	Your Name(s)	Your Song
1. April 28.	_____	
2. May 12.	_____	
3. May 19.	_____	

Two problems developed, but they were resolved. The first was that some of the student teachers would go over the time period of approximately fifteen to twenty minutes that I had set. I had to remind students that finishing all of the activities was not necessary because we had other material and information to cover as well. The important points were that they were gaining more teaching skills while focusing on the English language. The second problem was that some of the lazier students repeated the same type of language lesson. After the third student created a basic cloze listening exercise, I told the rest of the class that no one else could do that. Each student had to create a lesson that was unique.

The students' feedback for this activity was extremely positive. Due to the good feedback, I decided to prepare a similar activity. Students were asked to create reading exercises based on newspaper articles or articles that they downloaded from the Internet.

The procedure involved showing students various reading exercises found in reading textbooks. These also involved pre, while, and post-reading exercises. The students examined true false comprehension questions, synonym matching exercises, prediction exercises, matching vocabulary with definition exercises, and others. Each student had to find a short reading text, create teaching materials for it, and then use their materials with a small group of students. This time, I arranged the students in groups of five. Each student led

his/her lesson, and when the lesson was over, another student became the "teacher."

In the end of the class evaluation survey, some students pointed out the materials developing exercises as particularly interesting and beneficial. It seems that turning students into teaching materials developers is a very effective way of promoting learning, and it is one that I believe students recognize as a valid teaching method.

Pan-SIG 2009 Call for papers

Deadline Feb 15, 2009 (for May 23-24, 2009)

The organizing committee of the JALT Pan-SIG Conference 2009 invites interested applied linguistic researchers to submit presentation proposals for the 8th Annual Pan-SIG Conference, which will be held on Saturday and Sunday, May 23rd and 24th, 2009 at Toyo Gakuen University, Nagareyama Campus, in Chiba.Two types of proposals will be considered:

1. Reports on completed research & 2. Works in progress

Proposals are invited for papers (35 minutes and 10 minutes Q and A), workshops (120 minutes), and poster sessions (120 minutes). Please send:

(1) an abstract (250 word max.), a title (50 characters maximum) and

(2) personal information (name, affiliation, contact details)

The abstract should be sent by e-mail as an attachment in plain text, Microsoft Word or PDF format. Please include your name, institution, phone number, and e-mail address of the main presenter (in case of joint presentations). The subject line should say Submission for MWSIG or Submission for other (if the submission is not related to one of the participating SIGs). All submissions to be sent to the following e-mail address: submissions@pansig.org by no later than February 15, 2009.

For fuller details, please check http://pansig.org/2009/

JALT2008 Conference Proceedings

The JALT2008 Conference Proceedings should be published online by July or August this year. Its main mission is to be a fair reflection of the academic achievements of last year's conference. More than 150 papers have been submitted making The Proceedings JALT's largest single publication. Many volunteers are working to prepare the papers. First, each paper is evaluated anonymously and indepedently by two readers. They make recommendations for possible improvements or, in relatively few cases, recommend rejecting the paper. Viable papers are assigned an associate editor to counsel the original writer.

As we near the end of January, we already have about 20 editors, each of whom takes care of five or more papers. We need about 10 more editors. As an editor, you would consider the recommendations given by the two readers, and would give guidance, feedback and encouragement to the original writer. The original writer works to improve the paper until you are ready to recommend it as finished and ready for publication.

What you need to contribute is your own good critical judgment, your skill in appreciating the strengths of a paper and appreciating where and how it could be improved, in both its presentation of argument and its use of English. What you get back is… up to you, but maybe: a good growth opportunity and certainly a nice new line on your resume.

Interested parties should contact Alan Stoke <ams-tut@gol.com>.

Toot Your Own Horn
Simon Cooke

This, my first appearance as editor in the noble pages of Between the Keys, seemed as good a time as any to make your acquaintance via this column.

I have been lucky enough to have two of my essays published in previous issues of 'Between the Keys' (issues 13 [2] and 16 [3]), aided by Jim Smiley and his exhaustive help and advice. Thanks must also go to my predecessor, Kris Bayne, whose large boots I shall attempt to fill.

I am currently working in Sendai Ikuei Gakuen high school, teaching English and the occasional lesson of French to junior and senior high school students.

My first experience in teaching English came during the third year of my French degree course at university. Apart from the daily team-teaching class requirements, I was also asked to teach the class by myself once a week. 'Hah!' I thought. 'No stifling textbook use in my classes!' Determined to make an impression on the students during that first semester, I exhausted myself preparing and performing for the students what amounted to hour-long monologues. It was only upon receiving student feedback at the end of that first term that I realised my classes, which the students had kindly rated as 'okay' were devoid of any tangible content or skills for the students to apply to their language learning. In attempting to appeal to students on a personal level and preaching to them as an expert in English language use, I had negated my responsibilities as a teacher. There were no tangible goals created for the students to aspire to and no tools offered to help them to reach those goals.

I am ashamed to admit that I retreated back to the safety of the textbook, photocopied prints of activities and reams of written class work for me to mark and return to the students.

When I returned to England to finish my university study, one of the lectures was on the topic of French gothic architecture. I arrived at the lecture theatre expecting to be bored to tears by descriptions of people and their innovations in pointed arches, ribbed vaults and flying buttresses. To my surprise however, the course was one of the most fascinating for me that year, thanks to the delivery style of the lecturer and the hints given through his lectures of other hidden stories waiting to be told. Those stories would then be shared at later tutorial group meetings, rather than the standard, perfunctory 'suggested further reading' lists given at the foot of most other handouts. I remember being taken with this idea of 'nudging' students to play a role in the growth of their own knowledge, before sharing those independently learned facts or stories within a small group for peer comment and appraisal. I remember reflecting upon how this method of teaching would and could have been applicable in my year in France and determined to review my teaching practice if the opportunity arose again.

That chance came at the end of my final year at university. I was asked to be my university's representative on its teacher exchange programme with the Sorbonne University in Paris. In addition to English conversation classes, I was required to teach several undergraduate classes of English phonetics per week. The course to be followed required

the students to use a largely uninspiring textbook or translation and transcription drills. In an attempt to make the classes as upbeat as possible for the sake of both ourselves and the students, a colleague and I developed a series of materials which required students to make teams and to complete tasks at various 'stations', rotating stations after several minutes. The translation/transcription drills were replaced by sentences referencing cultural and/or social up-to-date activities or news items. The students were given group grades and were encouraged to help each other during the activities. In the weeks to follow, students were asked to design the stations content themselves. The resulting classes were vibrant and industrious.

The success of these classes appeared to be due not solely through something that we had done in the selection of the materials, but in the creation of a context in which the learning was taking place? a context which was mediated by exploiting all the tools available in the classroom? the students, the teachers and the materials. The concept was a revelation to me. I had begun to look outward, to what was going on with the learners in their reactions to the materials presented and to each other. From this new perspective in my role as joint 'participant' in the classes, I began to enjoy both my teaching, seeing students engage in the learning process and creating materials to help foster the communicative environment.

At that time, I still had no theoretical knowledge concerning the concepts of task-based learning or student-centred teaching, but simply sought satisfaction in carrying out classes that 'worked'. After coming to Japan, I began to reflect further upon the whys and the hows of effective classroom management and materials and curriculum design. That interest led me to begin a masters degree in linguistics.

Reading of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory was central to my understanding of student/teacher potential in the English classroom. I began to understand how the effectiveness of materials design, in my concept of a communicative classroom, could stand or fall on the consideration or exclusion of intersubjectivity in the shared context of the classroom. I think my studies also helped me to become a more responsible teacher in this respect, finding ways and creating materials to help students reach the next level of their learning.

I think a key element in my growth as a teacher is that I have been lucky enough to be able to work in teaching environments in which I have had the freedom to design, trial and adapt materials with a variety of students of different ages and educational backgrounds. I think that access to reams of online materials and the existence of groups for debate means there is little excuse for my standing still and being content with my current skill-set.

My teaching practice today is enhanced by the development, trial and revision of materials that is inspired by my students and colleagues. Our sharing of a variety of teaching methods and materials borne of diverse environments continues to encourage new perspectives and reflection on our own teaching practices. Long may it continue! ¡▆

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NOTICE

Working Together
Marc Helgesen

Author: English Firsthand (Longman), Workplace English (Longman), PELT-Listening (McGraw-Hill) and other books.

In creating materials, we all have different interests, talents and roles to play. I think one of the functions of the Material Writers Special Interest Group (MWSIG) is to facilitate the development of each other's skills in creating new and exciting materials for our students. I am reminded of a publishers' road show in Taiwan years ago. Authors and reps with various companies moved up and down the country, doing workshops and trying to get our ideas and books -- in front of teachers. After some long days, we'd often end up in a bar or restaurant, sharing ideas and stories. On this particular occasion, the talk turned to the intense competition between companies. John Raby*, a rep for Oxford-Taiwan at the time said: "We need to remember, this is a sport. It's not a war. How many books you sell is like the points on a scoreboard." I think it is a good metaphor. We can compete during the day, but just like after a game, it is nice to share a beer and a story with other people you were just competing against. As writers, even though we compete, we are all in the same game: we're trying to make materials that help students learn English better.

Here are a few simple ways we can help each other.

-- Give feedback on other people's manuscripts/activities/etc. Publishers often hire people to review manuscripts (and if you get asked to do so, it is a good idea. Soliciting reviews is one way publishers identify people they think have potential to be authors).

But beyond those formal reviews, a lot of authors share activities they have written for their classes and hope to include in a book. A successful textbook has to be accessible to people whose teaching situation, students, teaching-style and educational philosophy isn't necessarily the same as yours. Giving feedback (feedforward?) is a way MWSIG members can help each other.

-- Or we can take it a step farther: classroom materials really need to be piloted. I'm sure we all test our materials in our own classes. That's good and important but it is also very useful to have your materials tested by other teachers who know the material less well, who don't know the assumptions you are making (sometimes you might not be conscious of all of them) and who don't necessarily completely share your teaching philosophy. Having a fresh pair of eyes looking at your work is a great way to spot weaknesses in materials. As SIG members, we can help each other with this. It seems like a logical outgrowth of networking.

-- Just being involved in the MWSIG is facilitates networking. Volunteer. Write something for Between the Keys. Attend sessions and colloquia at JALT2009 or the Pan-SIG conference. As you get involved, your network will naturally grow.

-- Consider presenting your ideas at JALT2009 or your local JALT chapter. Presenting will get you feedback from other teachers. And you just might get noticed by publishers (and publishers love authors who can present well - it is great for promotion). Don't wait until your book is already published. Get your ideas and your name in front

of an audience before you launch. And, in the process, you'll probably get to know other material writers. And, in sharing experiences and ideas, everyone will find ways to improve their own books, and to improve ELT.

*I met John when he was working for Oxford University Press. He later worked for and wrote for Longman. So he's a good example of the truism in ELT publishing that it is always a good idea to get along with people from other publishers. Sooner or later, they'll be working for your publisher or you might want to do a book with theirs.

MW-SIG AGM Report 2008

Present: Eight regular members and three new members
1. Officer Reports:

Programs Chair: MW has hosted speakers such as Dorothy Zemach, & Marc Helgeson. Events included "Getting Published" round-table.

Membership Chair: (Jim in abstentia) Membership is about 110 members, & has been stable.

Publishing Chair: (Jim in abstentia) Between the Keys went online 2 years ago, which has saved MW a substantial amount of money.
2. 2009 Elections:

Treasurer: Scott Peterson, by acclaim

Membership Chair: Paul Nadasdy, by acclaim

Program Chair: Greg Goodmacher, by acclaim

Publishing Chair: Simon Cooke, by acclaim

Coordinator: Jim Smiley, by acclaim

Recording Chair: Suzy Connor, by acclaim
3. Discussion of MW SIG functions to new members.
4. Non-elected officers:

Layout: Jim Smiley

Web: Scott Peterson

Web: Yahoo: John Daly

International Affairs: Dan Droukis
5. Kris Bayne passed out a handout inviting participants in other materials related presentation to publish in the BTK.
6. 2009 Activities

Evaluate past activities. Are they worth repeating?

Invite Scott Thornbury to Pan SIG

Creating materials; intensive material writing
7. Pan-SIG Conference in Chiba May 23-24. Call for papers deadline February 15.
8. Announcement of MW dinner that evening.

Respectfully submitted by Suzy Connor, Recording Chair

On the Inside

The Materials Writers SIG is dedicated to continually raising the standards in the creation of language teaching materials, in all languages and in all media, whether for general consumption or for individual classroom use. The editors encourage participation from colleagues using new media or teaching languages other than English.