

The Impact of Teaching Materials on Learning English at Universities in Kurdistan

Zana Hassan

Department of English, School of Languages, University of Sulaimani, Sulaimani, Iraq

Abstract It is widely believed that learning or teaching a language in an academic environment is not possible without any materials. However, recently this argument has been put under scrutiny as to which types of materials motivate learners to learn a language. This paper focuses on the extent to which the current available 'printed' materials help learners to learn English as a foreign language (EFL) at Universities in Kurdistan, which is a region located in north of Iraq. Samples of the materials that are being taught at universities have been evaluated. The opinions of both English language teachers and learners have been taken into account by using 'mixed' method of research. Furthermore, the possibility making any changes in the materials will be another issue, this paper addresses. One aim of this paper is to discuss the impact of today's materials on EFL learning in Kurdistan. Another aim is to give a rigorous analysis of how materials help a learner to learn English language. This paper hypothesizes that the current available materials that are being taught at universities in Kurdistan provide a little, if any, help to English language learners to learn the language. This paper has been divided into two major sections. Firstly, the differences between teaching and learning materials are discussed. Then, the relationship between the targeted materials and targeted language learners is explained. Secondly, the arguments for and against the current available materials are scrutinized. Finally, some conclusions are drawn based on the analysis and discussions made throughout the paper

Keywords Teaching materials, Learning Materials, Material Evaluation, Materials and Language learning

1. Introduction

It has been said that learning a language in an academic environment is almost impossible without having some sort of materials. However, the contributions those materials would make to the process of learning a language has been under scrutiny. That is why this paper attempts to explain the connections between teaching materials and learning English in Kurdistan. To be more specific, it evaluates the impact of materials that are being taught at universities in Kurdistan on English learners. In order to do so, the opinions of English learners as well as teachers have been taken into account.

This paper falls into three major sections. The first section is the literature review in which terms like 'teaching materials', 'targeted materials and targeted language learners', and 'material evaluations' have been defined. The second section is devoted to the methodology followed in this paper. Finally, the impact(s) of the current 'printed' teaching materials on learners have been discussed taking the opinion of both the teachers and English learners at universities in Kurdistan into account.

2. Literature Review

This section is to familiarise the reader with what is meant by teaching materials and the difference between 'teaching' and 'learning' materials. Then the targeted materials and learners are identified. Finally, the importance of material evaluation, in order to realise the impacts that they have on English learners, is discussed.

2.1. Teaching Materials

There are various perspectives on the definition of teaching materials. Tomlinson (2003), for instance, defines it as 'anything which can be used to facilitate the learning of a language' (p. 2). Moreover, Nash (1999) defines material as 'aids in the learning process [which] facilitate the students' learning' (p. 1). Interestingly, the word 'facilitate' is common in both definitions. However, the methods by which materials can facilitate learning are different. One important way probably is to push or motivate the learner to participate in a real conversation or real language use (Harmer, 2007).

Although there are various types of materials, printed 'instructional' materials in the form of textbooks are considered to be the majority of the available materials nowadays (Tomlinson, 2003). Harmer (2007) explains those

* Corresponding author:
zanahassan86@gmail.com (Zana Hassan)
Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/edu>
Copyright © 2014 Scientific & Academic Publishing. All Rights Reserved

materials as the ones that give information on the language rather than teach the language itself.

It can be widely seen that this type of materials which teaches the knowledge of the language, according to Harmer's (2007) explanation, is the most common, if not the only, resource that both English teachers as well as learners depend on here in Kurdistan. Therefore, it is very interesting to see how both teachers and learners reflect on those materials which have been rigorously discussed in the last section of this paper.

2.2. Language Learners at Universities in Kurdistan

Ellis (1990) argues that there is enough evidence to support the argument that 'formal instruction' does seem to make a difference in learning a language. He specifically mentions the role of classes in learning the second language where the main focus is on 'implicit', not 'explicit' knowledge. What is argued here is that the learning process within a class should promote the amount of implicit knowledge that the learners receive. The way how this could be done is to make the class a place for interaction and communication (Ellis, 1998). Moreover, Scrivener (2011) believes that the materials can also facilitate learning by enhancing communication in a language class. Therefore, the successful materials are considered to be those which engage the learners to use the language in a real context (Harmer, 2007).

The language learners targeted in this paper are university students in Kurdistan who have studied English for quite awhile. They are adults who may or may not have an interest in learning English. The reason why they are so variable is that because they are admitted to English departments based on their grades in High school. This fact may greatly influence their motivation, or lack of it, which can affect the level of their achievement (Wag, 2009).

It is worth mentioning that universities in Kurdistan, which is a region located in north of Iraq, admit high school graduates to study their major in English as a foreign language. The learners who study English will receive Bachelor in Arts in English Language and Literature after four years in college. Therefore, they study subjects related to English language such as English Grammar, Writing, Comprehension, Morphology, Syntax and Semantics, along with subjects related to both English and American literature such as Drama, Novel and Poetry.

It is worth bearing in mind that Kurdish people generally have a 'positive opinion' on English language and they believe that having a university degree in English offers better job opportunities (Salisbury, 2004). Therefore, the reflection of those learners who are less motivated to learn English may affect the conclusions of this paper.

2.3. Material Evaluations

It is widely agreed that material evaluations is not an easy task to do. Tomlinson (2003) defines it as 'a procedure that involves measuring the value, or potential value, of a set of materials [which] involves making judgements about the

effects of materials on the people using them' (p. 15). Interestingly, Cirocki (2010) places more emphasis on 'criticality' and the 'learner' by stating that it is 'a process of measuring the worth of learning materials as well as forming critical opinions about how learners are affected by them' (p. 1). It can be understood that the process of materials evaluation focuses on assessing the influence of and making judgements about materials on its users in a particular learning context.

Concerning the significance of evaluation, Vasiljevic (2011) believes that it is crucial to evaluate learning materials as it assesses its effectiveness on the learners who use it. Furthermore, it allows teachers, the administration, and material designers to realize the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the learning materials. Therefore, it can be said that material evaluation helps developing the materials. Similarly, Richards & Renandya (2002) and Tomlinson (2003) consider material evaluations as a helpful tool in knowing the strengths and weaknesses of the learning materials. They suggest following some principled criteria for evaluating materials. These criteria not only help the evaluator to evaluate but explain how the evaluation has been carried out.

Another reason to have a constant material evaluation is that they are 'time-constrained' (Cirocki, 2010). What is meant here is that the evaluation of the same materials could have different outcomes if they are carried out at different times. That is why in order to know the value of materials, their effectiveness on the learners and compliance with the learning outcomes, a continuous process of evaluation is vital (Cirocki, 2010).

There is controversy regarding the types of materials evaluations. Ellis (1997) argues that there are two types of materials evaluations; 'predictive' and 'retrospective' evaluations. Vasiljevic (2011) concurs with Ellis (1997) in mentioning 'predictive' and 'retrospective' evaluations. Whereas Tomlinson (2003) maintains that there are three types of evaluations; pre-use, whilst-use and post use evaluations. It is worth mentioning that Ellis and Vasiljevic's predictive is similar to Tomlinson's pre-use evaluation and retrospective is like post-use evaluations.

Retrospective or post-use evaluation is the most important and valuable evaluation as it presents the real impact of the materials on the users (Tomlinson, 2003). However, a problem with this type of evaluation is that it is time consuming and sometimes 'impressionistic' (Vasiljevic, 2011, Ellis, 1997).

To focus on the post-use evaluation, Ellis (1997) argues that 'macro-evaluation' is a manageable way to evaluate materials. He defines macro-evaluation as 'an overall assessment of whether an entire set of materials has worked' (p.37). To do this type of evaluation, there are several ways of measuring the actual post-use influence of the material such as tests of what has been taught, questionnaires, examinations, interviews, dairies and evaluation checklists (Allison, 1999).

Almost all the researchers agree that teachers' evaluations

of materials are crucial for two major reasons. First, it is helpful for measuring the impact of the materials on the learners. Second, it encourages further development of materials. That is why this research has been carried out to present the opinions and judgements of the university teachers and university students in Kurdistan on the current English learning materials.

2.4. Targeted Materials and Learners

This paper attempts to take both the teachers' and learners' 'post-evaluation' on some specific materials at universities in Kurdistan. It should be mentioned that the linguistic materials are more of the target than the materials related to English literature. Moreover, within the linguistic materials, teachers and learners are asked about materials related to English Grammar, English Composition (Writing), English Comprehension and English Conversation.

It is worth mentioning that by looking at books related to the above mentioned subjects, most of them are more self-study books rather than a course book. English Grammar, for instance, is the subject where in most places use Murphy's *English Grammar in Use* is used in which it is written that it is a self-study book. Therefore, readers must be aware that this paper is limited to only those subjects.

3. Methodology

In this section the methodology of this paper has been discussed. The research method which is called a 'mixed' method is firstly explained. Then the samples that are taken for this research are identified. Next, the data collection tools are discussed. Finally, the ethical issues concerning this research have been addressed.

3.1. Mixed Method

Punch (2009) defines mixed method research as an 'empirical research that involves the collection and analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data' (p. 288). He explains the rationale behind mixed method research as using the combination of the strengths of both the qualitative and quantitative method while attempting to avoid their weaknesses.

Tashakkori and Creswell (2009, cited in Cohen et al., 2011) suggested different designs for a mixed research method. For instance, 'parallel mixed designs' when both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used simultaneously. Furthermore, the two approaches are interlinked to deal with specific research questions. Moreover, Punch (2005) argues that mixed methods provide accurate data to complete the picture of the issue under scrutiny. That is why in an attempt to give a relatively full picture of the issues, a mixed method has been used in this research.

3.2. Sampling

It is widely accepted that a piece of research cannot

include each and every one of the people to whom the research is related (Milles & Huberman, 1994, cited in Punch, 2006). That is why it is logical to take samples bearing in mind the timescale and representativeness of the research (Punch, 2006). Furthermore, O'Hara et al. (2011) believe that the way the samples are collected heavily depends on the extent to which the researcher claims generalisation of the findings. They argue that as long as the findings are not generalised, the researcher can decide on how the samples are collected.

This study investigates Kurdish teachers' and learners' views on English language learning materials at universities in Kurdistan. This type of sample is called 'purposive sampling'. Maxwell (1997, cited in Teddlie & Yu, 2007) defines it as a type of sampling when 'particular settings, persons, or events are deliberately selected for the important information they can provide that cannot be gotten as well from other choices' (p. 87). University teachers and learners are the selected groups of people here as the research closely related to them. Therefore, twenty university teachers have been interviewed and fifty university students given the questionnaire for the purpose of data collection.

3.3. Data Collection

In this paper, a questionnaire and interviews are used for data collection. Firstly, Hennink et al. (2011) argues that people who are involved in a questionnaire are called 'respondents', but for an interview they are called 'interviewees'. For the sake of distinction, these two terms will be used consistently throughout this research.

The first instrument used for collecting data was a questionnaire. Thomas (1998) defines a questionnaire as 'a series of questions people answer about their life condition, beliefs, or attitudes' (p. 162). In relation to the advantages and disadvantages of questionnaires, Thomas (1998) believes that questionnaires seem to be reliable, presenting honest results as they are anonymous, they are time and money saving and it can be answered at a convenient time for respondents. One of the main disadvantages of questionnaires is the possibility of respondents not returning them and often they are completed in a hurry.

The other instrument used for collecting data was interviews which are amongst the most widely used data collection methods in qualitative research (Punch, 2009). Cohen et al. (2011) explain the research interview as a conversation, mostly initiated by the interviewer, between two people in order to obtain some information relevant for the research in an attempt to answer research questions. Unlike conversation, interviews should have specific purposes with preparation by the interviewer (Neuman, 2000).

Finally, it should be motioned that the process of collecting data for this research has taken a lot of time and a big effort. The reason is because teachers and learners from different levels at different English departments have taken part in order to give a general picture on this issue. Therefore,

various opinions have been taken into account in data collection.

3.4. Ethical Issues

Punch (2009) maintains that it is inevitable to face ethical issues with educational research as it includes people or data collected from them. That is why it is important to consider ethical issues when collecting and analysing the data (Oliver, 2010).

Another issue related to the researcher's ethical duties is to keep the identities of the participants or respondents anonymous and confidential. Cohen et al. (2011) define anonymity as the 'information provided by participants should in no way reveal their identity' (p. 91). That is why the identity of none of the participants or respondents will be revealed in this study.

Newman (2000) believes that in a questionnaire it is not difficult to keep the identity of participants anonymous, whereas in an interview, despite the promises of keeping the identity confidential, the interviewer knows the interviewee. Therefore, in interviews anonymity cannot be guaranteed (Wengraf, 2001). However, the researcher should be very careful not to disclose the identity as it may hurt the participants and would be regarded as an ethical violation (Oliver, 2010).

4. The Impact of Current Materials

As it has been argued earlier, there are different arguments over the role of materials on the language learners. This section shows the reflection of both teachers who use those materials and English learners at universities in Kurdistan. For the sake of collecting data, a questionnaire is given to fifty students at various levels in different universities in Kurdistan. Moreover, the opinion of ten teachers who teach in different places has been taken into account.

4.1. Teachers' Opinions on the Materials

Teachers have different opinions about the materials. However, one point that most of them agree on is that those materials hardly take the learners' needs, variations and backgrounds into consideration. As the questions were to elicit the academic opinions of the teachers, they were given general as well as specific questions. Here is an analysis of the data collected from the teachers.

In an attempt to measure the appropriateness of materials, about one-third of the teachers believe that the materials are suitable, to a great extent, for the targeted learners. However, the other two-third argue that the current available materials are not suitable.

Concerning the reason(s) why they think the current available materials are not suitable, most of them say that the contents of the materials do not focus on teaching the language as they focus on the elements and the linguistic account of the language. Those teachers believe that learners should be first taught the language and then the knowledge of

the language. This idea concurs with Harmer's (2007) account on those materials. As Harmer (2007) argues that learner might feel intimidated if they first face the knowledge of the language when they know little of the targeted language.

Another issue that the teachers feel strongly about is the idea of sticking to one book each and every year instead of having various sources on the subject that they teach. Almost all the teachers agree that there should be different references to rely on at university level rather than having only one single book on a certain subject.

Regarding the benefit of the current available materials, teachers again vary in their opinions. Firstly, they unanimously agree that the mission of the various departments of English is not clear. It is important to highlight that there is an English department in college of language, Education and basic education at almost all universities in Kurdistan. Teachers believe that the vision should be clear in order to help the learners in the area that they are studying. For instance, one teacher says that teaching English Literature with English linguistics as well as Translation and French language at college of languages is 'catastrophic'. She elaborated that this is the job of four departments instead of one. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that the materials would be of much help to the learners after graduation.

The idea of sticking just to the current materials or bringing in other tools such as tapes, videos, CDs and other materials, nine out of ten teachers say that they bring other things to help the learners learn the subject. However, other teachers complain about the design of the class and the lack of technology in the class. They think that the class environment and the facilities are not helpful to bring other tools for teaching.

On the question of whether the current materials for teaching English at universities should be changed or not, the teachers all agree that there should be some sort of change in the materials. However, they have different opinions on how to make that change. Half of them say that there should be a committee to revise the materials and make some changes. Others believe that each teacher can make some amendments based on his/her judgments on the learners need and make the changes.

Interestingly, none of the teachers say that the current available materials are totally useless. Moreover, they believe that materials are not the only problem that the learners face. The diversity of the level, lack of motivation, the teaching environment and lack of technology use in the classes are some of the other problem in the way of learning English.

Finally, despite all the points mentioned above, teachers are all for a continuous change and modification of the materials in accordance with the learners' needs. Nevertheless, materials should not be blamed alone as learners may have very little or no motivation for learning. However, teachers agree on the role of the materials on the process of learning English.

4.2. Learners' Opinions on the Materials

In this section, the data collected from the learners is presented and analysed. It will be divided into some subsections according to the answer of the questions. The first part is on the role of the materials in the process of learning English. The second part is analysing the impacts and contributions of the current materials on the process of learning English. Finally, learners express their attitudes towards the current materials.

4.2.1. Role of Materials in Learning English

Generally, learners believe that materials could have a great role in learning English. Approximately 96% of learners think that materials are important in learning English. However, 4% believe that materials have a very limited, if any, role in learning English.

To know why they hold this opinion, each group has some justifications. For the first group, the learners think that studying English in an academic environment such as university, materials are an important source of 'input'. They ways how this input is received, however, vary from one subject into another. They argue that if materials are used to motivate learners and are designed to meet the learners' needs, then they are very crucial for learning English.

However, they think that materials are only one part of the problem. Similar to their teachers, learners mention some other issues such as lack of motivation, the time of the lessons and the university environment which does not facilitate learning to a great extent as hindrances in front of them.

It can be concluded that the almost all learners, except 4%, believe that materials have a great role in learning English. However, the materials should motivate the learners, facilitate learning and meet the learners' needs.

4.2.2. The Contribution of the Materials in Learning English

Concerning the possible impact of the materials on learners, they all believe that the materials have impacts on them in one way or another. However, they argue that the extent of the contribution that the current materials make to learning English is very limited.

More than two-third of the learners believe that the materials do not help them to learn the language for some reasons. First, almost all the learners complain about the content of the materials. They think that the subjects in those books are 'too theoretical'. They think that the focus is very much on the linguistic part of English rather than teaching it.

Another reason why they think that the materials are very little helpful is that learners think that the materials do not their future needs. Half of the participants in the data collection argue that 'very little' of what they learn is usable after graduation. That could one reason why learners are not very optimistic about the contributions of the materials to learning English.

Overall, in this part learners have strong feelings about the contribution of the materials on learning English. In spite of

the argument that the current available materials are of a little help, learners admit that the materials have some influence on them.

4.2.3. Learners' Attitudes towards Materials

This section is a general presentation of the reflection of the learners on the materials that are being taught at universities in Kurdistan. Learners were asked to give a grade out of 5 to the materials. Surprisingly, about two third has given 2 out of 5. However, others have given 3 or 4. Interestingly, nobody has given 1 or 5. It can be understood from this that learners feel that the materials are not good enough due to the reasons mentioned earlier.

Another question was to ask what they would change in the materials if they were given opportunity. Most of them said that they would change the content. Regarding the reason why they do so, they replied that because they are not helpful especially when learners are at low level of learning the language. However, others said that they would bring more up-to-date materials that go with the contemporary life.

Finally, from the learners' opinions, it can be said that the materials are not good enough for learning English. However, it should not be forgotten that despite the diversity of learners in their level, location and age, the conclusion is drawn based on the reflection of learners who took part in this paper.

5. Conclusions

Based on the discussions made in this paper, some conclusions can be drawn. First, the available current materials which are being taught at universities in Kurdistan are of a very limited help for the English learners.

According to the discussion made in this paper, one could infer that the current materials focus more on the knowledge about English rather than teaching it. As both teachers and learners confirm the impotence of the materials in learning, making some changes in the content of the materials are 'needed'. These changes should answer the meet of the learners after graduation and motivate them to use English in real communication. A final conclusion is that neither teachers nor learners believe that the current materials are 'useless'. This validates the hypothesis made in the abstract of this paper.

REFERENCES

- [1] Allison, D. (1999). *Language Testing and Evaluation: An Introductory Course*. Singapore: Singapore University Press.
- [2] Cirocki, A. (2010). 'Age is Only a Number: Evaluating and Modernising Dated EFL Materials'. In *MATSDA Folio*. Vol. 14. No. 2, December 2010.
- [3] Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011). *Research Methods in Education*. (7th Ed.) London: Routledge.

- [4] Ellis, R. (1990). *Instructed Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- [5] Ellis, R. (1998). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [6] Ellis, R. (1997). 'The empirical evaluation of language teaching materials'. In *ELT Journal*, Vol. 51. No. 1. P.p 36-42.
- [7] Harmer, J. (2007). *The Practice of English language Teaching*. (4th Ed.). Harlow: Longman.
- [8] Hennink, M., Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative Research Methods*. London: Sage Publication.
- [9] Nash, J. (1999). 'Learning Materials: their use and evaluation'. In *Lepra health in action*. Vol. 70. No.3.
- [10] Neuman, W. (2000). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. (4th Ed.) Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- [11] O'Hara, M., Carter, C., Dewis, P., Kay, J & Wainwright, J. (2011). *Successful Dissertations*. London: Continuum.
- [12] Oliver, P. (2010). *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics*. (2nd Ed.) Berkshire: Mc Grow Hill.
- [13] Punch, K. (2005). *An Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches*. (2nd Ed.) London: Sage Publications.
- [14] Punch, K. (2006). *Developing Effective Research Proposals*. (2nd Ed.) London: Sage Publications.
- [15] Punch, K. (2009). *Introduction to Research Methods in Education*. London: Sage Publication.
- [16] Richards, J. & Renandya, W. (eds.) (2002). *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [17] Salusbury, M. (2004), 'Kurdistan at language crossroads' in *Guardian Weekly*. Friday 25 June 2004. [online] Available at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2004/jun/25/tefl>. [Accessed August 5, 2013]
- [18] Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning Teaching: the Essential Guide to English Language Teaching*. (3rd Ed.). Oxford: Macmillan Publisher.
- [19] Teddlie, C. & Yu, F. (2007). 'Mixed Method Sampling: A Typology with Examples'. In *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*. Vol. 1, No. 1. January 2007.
- [20] Thomas, M. (1998). *Conducting Educational Research: A Comparative View*. Westport: Bergin & Garvey.
- [21] Tomlinson, B. (eds.) (2003). *Development Materials for Language Teaching*. London: Continuum.
- [22] Vasiljevic, Z. (2011). 'The Predictive Evaluation of Language Learning Tasks'. In *English language teaching*. Vol. 4, No. 1; March 2011.
- [23] Wag, B. (2009). 'Motivation and Language Learning' in *Asian Social Science*. Vol. 5. No. 1.
- [24] Wengraf, T. (2001). *Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage Publication.