

# **Let's Listen to the Learners**

Brian Tomlinson

The point I want to stress today is that we don't listen enough to our learners.

We don't listen enough to what:

- they have to say about life
- they have to say about learning a language
- they need
- they want

And yet:

Learners only learn:

- what they want and need to learn;
- when they want and need to learn it.

We could help our learners by listening to them more and we could do this:

**1 By involving them in decisions** about:

- their curriculum (e.g. Zambia; Ottley (2016))
- their coursebooks (e.g. Namibia, India, Japan)
- their objectives (e.g. Moscow; Lyon)
- their class (e.g. Bell College)
- what they do in class (e.g. Iraqi diplomats; options)
- their assessment (Edwards & Burns, 2015)

# What learners say about their coursebook

Modugala, M. (in press). Listening to children's perceptions and experiences of English language teaching material. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Papers from the British Council English Language Teaching Research Partnership Award Project*. New Delhi: British Council.

Thirty "seventh grade students (14 boys and 16 girls) of a government aided school in Karnataka, India" evaluated their coursebook. What do you think they said?

1. "too much grammar"
2. "wanted activities as opposed to language practice exercises"
3. wanted a lot more opportunities for listening and speaking
4. preferred to focus on one skill at a time

## 2 By giving them opportunities to:

- choose their own texts (e.g. Indonesia reading texts and class libraries; web activity (Tomlinson, 2013); Sub-Saharan project)
- adapt their materials (Saraceni, 2013; McGrath, 2013)
- choose their own activities (e.g. *The Happy Haven*(Arden & D'Arcy, 1962))
- devise their own activities (e.g. I'm a bully (Tan (2010))
- write their own texts (e.g. Novel writing in Vanuatu; PALM (Promoting Authentic Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts)

The **Erasmus+ project PALM** (Promoting Authentic Language Acquisition in Multilingual Contexts) will design a platform of authentic materials for children and young teenagers developed by the children and teenagers themselves.

[www.ucy.ac.cy/eng/documents/2018.pdf](http://www.ucy.ac.cy/eng/documents/2018.pdf)

### **3 By encouraging them to:**

- express themselves

Example 1 - Diaries

*28<sup>th</sup> Monday 2015*

*Today I had Malayalam recitation competition. And got the, what? What do you think Secra? 2<sup>nd</sup> prize for Bhratanatyam. I am too lazy today.*

*Drawing: Me in the lazy mode.*

(George, 2017)



Example 2 – Personal Response Questions  
e.g. *Bumblebear* (Shireen, 2016)

**By encouraging them to:**

- communicate information (e.g. presentations)
- be creative (e.g. stories, poems, novels)

#### **4 By providing ways of giving feedback:**

- talking to learners about how they learn
- inviting feedback on trial materials (Jolly & Bolitho, 2011; Bouckhaert, 2015; Edwards and Burns, 2015; Alessandra Mulling)
- task talk-aloud protocols
- weekly forums
- e-mails to the teacher
- Research (problem of ethical clearance)
- Learner conferences (e.g. MATSDA – [www.matsda.org](http://www.matsda.org))

# References

Arden, J. & D'Arcy, M. (1962). *Three plays*. London: Penguin.

Bouckaert, M. (2015). Perspectives on ELT materials development: Student teachers' voices. *Folio*, 16(2), 9-15.

Edwards, E. & Burns, A. (2015). Action research to support teachers' classroom materials development. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 10(2), 106-120.

Jolly & Bolitho, R. (2011). A framework for materials writing. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Materials development in language teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 107-134). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

George, J. (2017). Diary writing as a vocabulary building activity for English language learners. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Papers from the British Council English Language Teaching Research Partnership Award Project*. Delhi: British Council.

McGrath, I. (2013). *Teaching materials and the roles of EFL/ESL teachers: practice and theory*. London: Bloomsbury.

Ottley, K. (2016). Why one-size fits all is not fit for purpose, The problem with mass-produced teaching materials and how one might creatively and sensitively confront this problem. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *SLA research and materials development for language learning* (pp. 268-279). New York: Routledge.

Modugala, M. (in press). Listening to children's perceptions and experiences of English language teaching material. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Papers from the British Council English Language Teaching Research Partnership Award Project*. New Delhi: British Council.

Saraceni, C. (2013). Adapting courses: A personal view. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 49-62). London: Bloomsbury.

Shireen, N. (2016). *Bumblebear*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Tan, B. (2010). *Come into my world: 31 stories of autism in Singapore*. Singapore: Oxford Graphic Printers.

Tomlinson, B. (2013). Developing principled frameworks for materials development. In B. Tomlinson (Ed.), *Developing materials for language teaching* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp. 95-118). London: Bloomsbury.

# E-mail

If you want these slides please e-mail me at:

[brianjohntomlinson@gmail.com](mailto:brianjohntomlinson@gmail.com)

For information on the MATSDA Conference on  
Meaning Focused Materials go to:

[www.matsda.org](http://www.matsda.org)