

## How to write effective classroom materials

<http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/seminars/how-write-effective-classroom-materials>



Rachael Roberts

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So, you want to put your creative talents to good use by designing excellent and engaging materials for your English lessons but you don't know how to get started. Look no further! Rachael Roberts, in less than an hour, gives you the material design recipe you've been looking for!

### Session summary and objectives

In this session Rachael Roberts will consider how our beliefs about language learning can (and should) impact on our materials, and she explores what some of these beliefs might be. She then shares a simple materials design template (based on Hutchinson and Waters, 1987) for producing complete lessons. She offers a useful variety of 'do's and don'ts' based on her own experience as a professional materials writer. The seminar is packed with plenty of practical examples and sound advice.

### Who is this session for?

- Novice teachers who are looking for recommendations around materials choice for lesson planning.
- Experienced teachers who are looking for guidelines on materials writing or course design.
- Teacher trainers who focus on materials production.

### About the speaker

Rachael Roberts is an ESOL teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer now based in the UK.

### Before you watch

In your opinion, what are the main characteristics of really effective classroom materials?

### Real life practice

#### Task 1 Materials evaluation

Choose a coursebook that you are familiar with. Select a chapter or unit to review. Use the following criteria and questions to analyse the materials:

#### Content

1. Is the topic interesting to your students?
2. Is the topic suitable for your context?
3. Will it stimulate conversation in class, and after class?
4. Will the students be able to bring their personal experience and background knowledge to the topic?

#### Language focus

1. What is the main language focus within the unit?

2. Is the language presented in an effective way?
3. Is the new target language suitable for the level of the students? Is there any language recycled from previous units in the book?

#### Tasks

1. Are there different activity types, which allow for a change in pace and different interaction patterns?
2. Will students have ample opportunity to practise the new language through the tasks?
3. If desirable, is there a good balance of activities across the skills – reading, listening, writing and speaking?

#### The water cooler test

Does the material meet what Rachael Roberts calls ‘the water cooler test’? This is a measure of interest and usefulness. So, will the students want to continue talking about the topic when the lesson is finished?

An effective topic used in a lesson is one that has a high surrender value; this means it will be useful in a number of ways to the learners after the lesson, e.g. they can use it in real life or in an exam.

### Task 2 Creating your own material

Find a news or magazine text that you think will be interesting to the students in your class. From this text you need to identify:

- Topic - is it intrinsically interesting and relevant to the students?
- Language - what target language can you extract and focus on with the students contained in the text?
- Task design - think of at least three varied tasks that you can do with the text. Consider different interaction patterns between students and teacher for each task. Order the tasks in terms of difficulty, from controlled to freer practice.

Once you have designed your lesson, use it in class. We recommend two accompanying tasks for you to carry out:

1. Ask the students for their feedback on each aspect of the lesson – i.e. interest in topic, language input, and task design.
2. If possible, share your lesson with another teacher so they can try it out in class as well. Afterwards, ask them for feedback on how the lesson went, and adjust your lesson plan if necessary for the next time you will use it.

Does your lesson pass the water cooler test? Remember to store your lesson and the materials for future use. Refine the materials as you gain more experience in material design.

#### Top tips

In your opinion, what are the main characteristics of really effective classroom materials?

1. Check for lesson flow. See that there is a clear path through the lesson and natural progression.
2. Check for relevance and interest – it can be an old familiar topic (e.g. food), but it needs to have a fresh and stimulating angle to it that students will relate to.
3. Check that the linguistic demands are pitched to the right level for your students.
4. Check that the learners have sufficient background and cultural knowledge to engage cognitively with the topic.
5. Check for task variety and pace, ensuring sufficient individual and collaborative activity during the lesson.

### Join the discussion

Discuss this question with your colleagues, if you can:

1. Rachael Roberts refers to the term PARSNIPS in her talk, explaining that authors writing for large publishing companies are warned to avoid the subjects of politics, alcohol, religion, sex, narcotics, isms (e.g. sexism, racism), and pork. But often these are, by their very nature, the subjects that students are most interested in talking about. In your experience, which topics really ignite the interest and motivation of the learners you teach?