

ELT Teachers as Online Material Developers

Ahmet Başal [1]

[1] Yıldız Technical University
Education Faculty
Department of Foreign Languages Education
İstanbul, Turkey
ahmetbasal@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Online education has gained acceleration especially with the developments in ICT. This model of instruction is now widely seen in many fields, and language education is no exception. Nowadays, many institutions are giving language courses online. In ELT Departments, there have been material development courses for prospective English teachers. However, creating online materials is not an issue dealt effectively in these courses. There have been few books and articles providing information to ELT teachers about the material development process with a technology-oriented approach. As these teachers will most likely give online English courses in the future, the curriculum of these courses should include online material development issues. The aims of this study are to investigate the fundamentals of material development for online English courses and produce a set of practical recommendations to the teachers, in particular to ELT teachers.

Keywords: *Material Development, Online Language Education, ELT*

INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of internet, many universities or other educational institutions have attempted to carry their education online. Such a transition normally has brought about challenges for teachers to overcome. Teachers should have considerable knowledge about online education to perform effectively in this environment, because this new delivery model has marked differences when compared to traditional educational settings. One of these differences is related with the delivery of the content and the material type. The content in online education is not provided only with text-based materials. Using only text-based materials such as *Pdf* or *Word Document* is not an appropriate and effective way for online education, because technology gives us many opportunities to enrich materials with animations, simulations, audio and video components, hyperlink etc.

Many languages have been taught through distance education (Adiyaman, 2002) and English is no exception. The field of English language teaching requires the adoption of technology more when compared to other disciplines (Kartal, 2005). The materials used in English Language Teaching (ELT) are one of the most important components of instruction. In addition, they pave the way for effective teaching and learning in language education (Núñez Pardo & Téllez Téllez, 2009). Language teaching in online settings has wider opportunities in terms of material development. These materials can be more effective with the use of advances in computer technology, raising the degree of interaction between the content and the student.

English teachers have always supported their students by adapting the materials they use or developing new materials to fulfill the specific needs of them. In fact, ELT departments of universities in Turkey have been offering material development courses in their curriculum to train English teachers since material development is an important part of being an effective language teacher. However, there have been few books and articles providing practical information to English language teachers about the material development process with a technology-oriented approach. This study has attempted to provide practical guidance for English language teachers on the material

development process by bearing in mind the opportunities offered by ICT.

Roles of Online English Teachers

The transition from a traditional language classroom to an online language-teaching environment has influenced the roles of the language teachers considerably. Online English teachers have assumed a different role in this environment; they become the sole developers of their course materials to a certain degree. However, material development is a challenging and demanding task. Besides having the knowledge of material development for online courses, it is necessary for online English teachers to have basic computer skills to achieve their roles as online teachers.

Online teachers should be well aware of their changing roles in online settings. Especially, when material development is considered, online English teachers have more responsibilities for the development of their course materials. In traditional English teaching settings, they mostly use the course books of the publishers and support-packs of these books. However, in online environment, English teachers cannot use text books or their digital version mostly due the copyright issues. Moreover, they should design and develop their materials according to the new delivery method that is different from the traditional one. At this point, they actually need to know online material development principles. In their list of the skills of teachers in distance education, Schlosser and Anderson (1993) suggested that designing and developing interactive materials with recent technologies and organizing the teaching resources for independent study are necessary skills for teachers.

Online English Materials

Materials are important resources for distance learners to achieve effective learning (Mutiara, Zuhairi & Kurniati, 2007). In online English teaching, the materials used are one of the essential components of instruction. According to Jones (1999) and Soo and Ngeow (1998), text-based materials are the dominant part of any computer assisted language teaching course (cited in Blake & Delforge, 2004). This is also the case for most of the online English courses conducted in universities, particularly in Turkey. However, using just text-based materials such as *Word Documents* or *Pdf* in online English courses makes no difference. In other words, if this type of materials is seen as online education, then it can be concluded that despite all the advances in ICT, distance education is still in its *crawling period* that was conducted through posting letters at the beginning.

In distance education, we can talk about three types of interaction: student-instructor; student-content; and student-student (Moore, 1989). Since materials are an integral part of online language instruction, the interaction between the students and content should be provided properly. If this interaction is achieved, it will have substantial benefits for the students. The advances in ICT have made it possible to develop online English materials more interactive, motivating and engaging for the language learners. Therefore, adding multimedia elements to online English teaching materials should be considered as an indispensable part of online material development process. With such an approach, the materials used in online English education can provide the desired benefits. These materials should have interactive properties that provide the utmost benefit for the students where and when there is no support of the teachers. In other words, *distance learners* deal with the materials alone. Therefore, the materials should *speak to them*, that is, the materials should present the content appropriate for self-study, allowing students to understand the content independently.

Online materials are advantageous when compared to those text-based materials in traditional learning-teaching environment. They are easily updatable. This will also reduce the cost of developing the material from scratch again. Updatability is an important aspect of online materials. If language teachers feel a need for a change in the material depending on the needs and level of the students, they can easily adapt the material. This can save time, money and energy.

Guidelines for Designing Online English Materials

Developing materials for online teaching is a demanding task. Online English teachers should be aware of some principles related to online material development. The guidelines can be the product of experimental studies and experiences of experts in the field. Howard and Major (2004; 104-107) have listed some of the guidelines for effective English materials. The underlying point in this guideline actually depends on the general principles in the field of language education. This list includes some sound recommendations for material development in language education, in particular English Language Education. The list includes the following guidelines;

English language materials
should be contextualized,
stimulate interaction and be generative in terms of language,
encourage learners to develop learning skills and strategies,
allow for a focus on form as well as function,
offer opportunities for integrated language use,
should be authentic,
link to each other to develop a progression of skills, understandings and language items.
should be attractive.

Tomlinson (2010) in his book chapter titled as “Principles of effective materials development” has adopted a similar approach while listing the principles of material for language education; however, he also gives some practical guidance to the material developers. He first mentioned about the principles of language acquisition from the literature, and then gave the related material development principles depending on these principles. His study is comprehensive and includes an in-depth analysis of the related literature. Some of the principles he listed are as follows:

- Materials should contain enough spoken and written text.
- Materials should include authentic language.
- Language input in materials should be contextualized.
- Learners should be exposed sufficient samples of language in authentic use.
- Materials should include activities that provide critical thinking and encourage learners to visualize.
- Materials should include interesting and engaging tasks.
- Materials should provide learners to produce the desired outcomes.
- Materials should provide a link to other subject areas.

Developing the online material for English teaching is mainly the responsibility of the online instructor. Online English teachers should have a robust knowledge about the language acquisition theories and material development principles derived from these theories. However, language teachers are also in need of practical recommendations in the process of developing online materials. The following list includes the practical recommendations to the teachers while developing online materials:

Using text-based material: Online education is not just delivering the content with solely text-based materials such as *Pdf* or *Word* document to the students. Teachers should use this type of materials where appropriate. However, it is good to add some multimedia elements into text-based materials to enhance their effectiveness. Supporting text-based materials with visuals has a positive influence on the student’s performance (Seghayer, 2001).

Linking within the material: Teachers should give hyperlinks within the material for words, phrases, video or audio components and direct the students to explore the subject matter. They should also give links to outer sources for supporting the content in their material.

Using web pages on the Internet: Teachers should browse the web for quality materials fulfilling the aims of their lessons and make use of them where appropriate. On the Internet, there are activities, videos, exercises and learning objects that teachers can easily integrate into their materials. While doing this, they should pay attention to

copyright issues.

Using videos: Teachers should use the videos that they prepare or videos from the video-sites such as *youtube.com*, *ted.com*, *schooltube.com*, *learner.org* etc. With these videos, they have a chance to *bring the world to their students*. The videos should not be used as they are. Teachers should add transitions, comments and quizzes on these videos in order to make them more engaging, attractive and motivating. These videos should be kept short; 5 to 15 minutes. Adding hidden words to various parts of the videos is a good way for teachers to check whether their students watch the video.

Using authoring tools: Teachers should know how to use authoring tools to combine texts, images, video and audio to develop a more effective teaching material. They can also get help when necessary since they are not expected to be computer experts. With the help of authoring tools, the developed material will be more motivating.

Using Web 2.0 tools: On the internet, there are many freely available tools called Web 2.0 tools, for developing online materials. Teachers should behave as *a web-watcher* for these tools and integrate some of the appropriate ones into their materials for improving their effectiveness. Some of these tools can be listed as *wallwisher*, *jogtheweb* and *voxopop*.

Having knowledge about LMS: Learning Management System (LMS) is a requirement for online education. With LMS, in addition to many things not within the scope of this study, the delivery of the content to the students can be conducted in an organized way. Whether software or a freeware, teachers should know the properties of LMS they use and opportunities provided to them with this system. The properties of the LMS have influence on the materials developed by the teachers to a great degree. Moreover, teachers can also convert their face-to-face courses into online courses with freely available ones such as *engrade*, *edmodo* or *schoology*.

Using Presentation Tools: Teachers should use multi-media elements even in a simple presentation. For instance even a *PowerPoint* presentation can include video, animations and audio elements. This presentation will most likely be more motivating for students, because it does not include only the text.

Using Communication Tools: In online education environment, communication tools such as forums, messages, discussions and chats can be accepted as online materials. For this reason, teachers should plan the communication in a way that helps the students understand the subject matter better.

Using Videos from Virtual Classroom: Virtual classroom is to some degree a substitute for classroom teaching. It enables live teacher instruction and feedback. These online classroom can be recorded as videos and these videos can also be used for further teaching activities. For this reason, preparation to virtual class is important for the instructor. The video is a valuable material since it includes the interaction between the teachers and the students. Students can learn a lot from these videos while re-watching it.

Using a Template: In online material development, teachers should develop a template, allowing consistence between the materials they develop. This template may have flexibility to some extent in order not to bore the students. It may also help teachers speed up the material development process with its structured appearance.

The practical recommendations for the development of online language teaching materials above depend on the researcher's experiences in online teaching and material development for online English courses. Therefore, they can serve as practical guidelines for language teachers in the material development process for online language courses.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Materials play a key role in language education. In online language education, materials are essential part of the learning and teaching processes. In traditional classroom settings, materials are mainly text-based and static (Cruz, Boughzala & Assar, 2012). However, in online education, interactive materials can be developed for creating better learning opportunities. In this learning and teaching platform, the responsibility of material development is mostly on the shoulders of the teachers. Therefore, language teachers should have the necessary skills for developing effective materials. To achieve this, teachers should have robust knowledge of the general and online material development principles. Practical knowledge for developing online language materials is also a requirement for the language teachers.

ELT departments training English language teachers have been using a program consisted of three components including language, science and practicum (Rahimi, 2008). Material development is in the scope of science and practicum component. In these components, prospective English teachers are taught about the material development

principles depending on the theories of language teaching. Moreover, in the practicum component, they learn how to evaluate language-teaching materials and make some observations. However, practical knowledge about material development for online courses is the missing part of this training. Considering the increase in the number of online language courses provided by many institutions, schools and universities, online material development should be given the required importance in ELT departments. The responsibility of these departments is not just to equip the prospective English teachers with theoretical knowledge, but also to equip them with the practical knowledge that are also the products of the principles depending on those theories. Teacher education departments should maintain the fine balance between theory and practice. In other words, reshaping the teacher education should start with constructing a bridge between theory and practice (Rahimi, 2008).

Prospective ELT teachers should be trained as online material developers. Because, all throughout the language teaching adventure, ELT teachers have been participating in the process of developing teaching materials; they adapt the materials they use, modify them or create them from scratch depending on the needs, levels, ages and interest of their students. However, this time, in online language education, teachers are in need of those skills more than ever. According to Rahman (2006), no materials for distance education can be developed without special training. Therefore, it is necessary to equip English teachers with online material development processes. To this end, curriculum of ELT departments should pay special attention to this subject. While doing this, emphasis should not only be on the principles of material development but also the practical knowledge depending on implementations of these principles. In other words, a technology-oriented approach to design and develop online language teaching materials should be integrated into material development courses.

REFERENCES

- Adıyaman, Z. (2002). Uzaktan eğitim yoluyla yabancı dil öğretimi. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology - TOJET*, 1(1), 92-97. Available from <http://www.tojet.net/articles/1111.pdf>
- Blake, R. J., & Delforge, A.-M. (2004). Language learning at a distance: Spanish without walls. *Selected papers from the 2004 NFLRC Symposium*.
- Cruz, Y.; Boughzala, I.; Assar, S.; , "Opportunities and obstacles for mobile learning in a Business School," *Communications and Information Technology (ICCIT), 2012 International Conference on* , vol., no., pp.58-61, 26-28 June 2012 doi: 10.1109/ICCITechnol.2012.6285824 Available from <http://ieeexplore.ieee.org/stamp/stamp.jsp?tp=&arnumber=6285824&isnumber=6285764>
- Howard, J. & J. Major. (2004). Guidelines for designing effective English language teaching materials. Available from <http://www.paaljapan.org/resources/proceedings/PAAL9/pdf/Howard.pdf>
- Moore, M.G. (1989). Three types of interaction. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 3 (2), 1-6.
- Mutiara, D., Zuhairi, A., & Kurniati, S. (2007). Designing, Developing, Producing And Assuring The Quality Of Multi-Media Learning Materials For Distance Learners: Lessons Learnt From Indonesia's Universitas Terbuka. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education-TOJDE* , 8 (2).
- Kartal, E. (2005). Bilişim-İletişim Teknolojileri ve Dil Öğretim Endüstrisi. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology - TOJET*, 4(4), 82-87. Available from www.tojet.net/articles/4411.pdf
- Rahimi, M. (2008). What do we want teaching-materials for in EFL teacher training programs? *Asian EFL Journal*,31, 1-17.
- Rahman, M. H. (2006). Developing course materials for open and distance learning: BOU perspective. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education (TOJDE)*, 7(4), 4.
- Schlosser, C.A., & Anderson, M.L. (1994). Distance education: review of the literature. Washington, DC: Association for Educational Communications and Technology.
- Seghayer, K. (2001). The effect of multimedia annotation modes on L2 vocabulary acquisition: A comparative study. *Language Learning & Technology*, 5(1), 202-232.
- Tomlinson, B. (2010). Principles of effective materials development. In N. Harwood (ed.), *English languageteaching materials* (pp. 81-108). NY: CUP.