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Resourcing and Materials

The purposes of resources

KEY IDEAS

- Resources are used for diverse purposes such as input, scaffolding and reflection

- The same resource can be used in multiple ways to enrich learning

- Teachers are critical users of resources

The multiple uses of resources

Resources are sources of input for language learning – that is, instances of language which present the learner with material to develop learning. They are a way of exposing learners to different modalities of language use; spoken, written, technologically mediated; to different registers; and to input beyond that provided by the teacher. Traditionally, the main resource for input has been the textbook, and this may be supplemented by authentic texts from a range of sources: written texts, video or audio texts, music, multimedia, etc.

Resources may also be used as ways of promoting output, either spoken or written. Such resources form a starting point for language use and may be linguistic or non-linguistic in form to prompt discussion, description, etc. Such resources include oral or written texts, artefacts, games, websites, etc. More recently, there have been a number of new technological resources which provide opportunities for both input and output by permitting interaction.

Resources can also be used to provide scaffolding for learning. Such resources may provide models to guide learners' language use. These may be exemplars of a particular spoken or written text type, or they may be frameworks for developing a text which provide partial structures to speaking or writing. Resources used as input can become resources for scaffolding either through modification or through different ways of using the text to focus beyond surface elements of grammar and vocabulary.

Resources can be used to stimulate reflection. This is different from using a text simply to generate language use in that the latter may be descriptive or narrative while reflective work is deeper and introspective. Again, such resources do not need to be different from the resources used for input. It is rather a case of using resources differently by developing questions and activities around them to stimulate deeper thought, affective response and analysis of feelings, conclusions and interpretations.

There is not a neat mapping between purposes and resources. Rather resources can be used in multiple ways. The key is to have resources which open up multiple possible uses and allow for flexibility and creativity in teaching and learning. The process of resourcing language learning involves much more than selecting the resource. Effective teaching involves being a critical user of all resources and using resources flexibly to enhance learning opportunities. Any resource is only an instance of possible representations of language, culture and learning and there will always be other possibilities not found in the particular resource.

Selecting resources

- Selecting resources is based on theories of language learning and culture

- Selecting resources is a process of matching resources and learning goals

For many of us, the selection of a textbook that will support our languages learning program has been a critical resource decision. Textbooks by their nature pose some problems as resources for use in language learning as they are not designed to meet the needs of particular learners, respond to local needs or provide locally relevant content. For most of us, therefore, resourcing language learning involves more than a textbook and we are likely to supplement, or even replace, textbooks with other materials more relevant to our own learners and our teaching goals.

The process of selecting any resource is one of evaluation and evaluations need be made against our teaching stance and particular purposes. Such questions as 'Is the resource suitable for the level of the learner?', 'Will students like the resource?', or 'Can I use the resource in my teaching context?' are useful but need to be related to our theories of learning and our ethical positions. Developing a critical awareness of resources includes considering answers to questions such as the following.

- What does the resource contribute to developing meaning-making and interpretation, awareness of language and cultures and their relationship?

- What opportunities to explore language and culture does the resource provide?

- How does the resource allow learners to make connections between their own lives and experiences and the target language and its speakers?

- What opportunities for exploration does the resource afford students?

- How does the resource connect to other resources, or how do the components of a resource connect with each other?

- What sort of learning will the resource enable? What will it build on and what could be done next?

- What more will be needed to use the resource to its fullest effect?

Authentic resources

KEY IDEAS

- Authentic materials expose students to actual contemporary language use

- Authentic resources enlarge understandings of language and culture

One concern for language teachers is the authenticity of resources for languages learning. Authenticity can be seen in a range of ways. Materials may be considered authentic because they are designed by native speakers for native speakers rather than for second language learning. Alternatively, authenticity has been considered in terms of what is done with the resource rather than in terms of the resource itself, which may be purpose-made for the task. In reality, both are important in the selection and use of resources. Authentic materials expose learners to actual contemporary language use rather than idealised or old-fashioned structures. They bring learners into closer contact with the real world of the target language and culture and enlarge our understanding of what language and culture are. Most importantly, they are developed/created within the cultural context of native-speakers and are imbued with the assumptions, values and ways of communicating particular to that culture.

However, authentic resources do not of themselves guarantee relevant and authentic learning and resources do not exist independently of the teaching and learning context in which they are used. Arnold argues that the tension between the teaching-learning situation and the original communicative purpose of the resources being used is resolved if several types of authenticity come together: authentic materials and learners' purposes, authentic materials and authentic interactions, authentic responses, authentic participants, authentic status, settings and equipment and, authentic inputs and outputs (Arnold, 1991:237).

In adapting the resource, teachers need to be mindful of the following (Liddicoat et al, 2003:68).

Authenticity of purpose	The resource needs to be intrinsically of interest or have an extrinsic purpose (as in the case of maps, menus, etc) if it is to engage learners
Authenticity of response or task	Learners need to respond to the resource in an authentic way (thus what students are asked to do with a resource is, at least as important as its origin)
Authenticity of conditions	The conditions for language use need to be reflective of the conditions for use of the resource in the 'real world'

Authentic resources also need to be 'graded' to ensure that they are challenging for students, and extend their intercultural and linguistic development. Some factors influencing the complexity of the resource include: predictability (ie commonly used, predictable phrases); experiential knowledge (ie language used, social context or situation, and information provided are easily recognised by the learner); sociocultural distance; level and nature of support provided; and the level of cognitive processing required.

Adapting resources

KEY IDEAS

- Adapting resources allows teachers to maximise their value for particular learners

- Resources need to be personalised to allow for learners to connect with them

No resource can completely meet the needs of individual teachers and their learners: all will require adaptation for use with particular groups of students. While textbooks may be considered to be fixed and unchangeable – a resource to be followed faithfully and systematically – they are, like other resources, starting points for teaching and learning and can be supplemented, adapted or changed to suit teaching goals and students' interests (Littlejohn, 1998).

Authentic materials – resources not designed for language learning, but invaluable for promoting learning – may also need to be adapted for use in the classroom by:

- providing additional language support, for example a glossary, explanation of terms
- providing additional information relevant to understanding the resource, eg additional resources showing different aspects of the same basic issue
- providing scaffolding to assist in using the resource.

Materials developed specifically for learning present a generalised frame for learning, but this learning needs to be placed into a context, considering among other things: the goals of the teaching; the interests, needs, experiences and knowledge of the students; the age of the students; their language learning history, etc. Textbooks present generalised, fictional material designed to be used by any teacher with any learner anywhere. This means that there may be little that connects directly to individual students' lives and provides something with which they can engage. The key challenge facing teachers is to personalise the resource for their students. This means adapting

or supplementing resources so that there are links to the life and experiences of the learners and multiple paths to engagement with the resource. In many cases, personalising a resource may not be a case of personalising the stimulus material but rather of personalising the ways in which the learner works with the material, allowing space for interpretation and individual connections.

The selection and adaptation of the resource are important, but the most important element of resourcing is planning ways to use it. In particular, it is important to consider what learners will actually do with the resource. Each task developed around a resource, or set of resources, constructs a way of engaging with language and culture. Tasks can limit opportunities for student engagement: for example a text reading task may ask students to engage only with superficial issues of locating information in the text, however the same text could be used for developing interpretation, analysis and reflection, personal engagement with themes and issues, comparison with other texts or questioning aspects of the text's message.

Contemporary resources

KEY IDEAS

- Language and culture are dynamic

- Resources must have contemporary relevance for students

Languages and cultures change, as do the interests of students. It is important that students have access to contemporary resources which represent the language and its cultures as dynamic, vibrant and valid. Resources must have some relevance to the contemporary reality of the learner.

While not all resources need to be contemporary, it is important that students do experience the contemporary in language, whether this be the fads and fashions of youth culture or any other dimension of contemporary life. Technologies provide ready access to the contemporary world and provide many resources which can be adapted readily to teaching and learning. Technologies provide not just texts for input, but opportunities to explore new ways of using language. For example, text messaging provides connections between the learners' language experiences in their own communities and language practices in the target language.

Using resources critically

KEY IDEAS

- Effective teachers are critical users of their resources

- Any selection of resources only ever presents a partial picture of language and culture

Any resource, whether it be a textbook, a published teaching resource or a resource created by a teacher, needs to be used critically. All resources are developed through the understandings of language, culture and learning that the resource developer brings to the task. This means that every resource is both subjective (because it represents one individual's – or in some cases, a small group's – views and objectives) and constrained (because any resource can present only a limited insight into a language and its attendant cultures).

Resource development is subjective and subjectivity is a normal part of human functioning connected to the underlying values and theories that a person brings to any situation. When a teacher uses materials developed by someone else, these underlying values and theories may or may not be in accord with those of the teacher using the material. If there is a conflict, the use of the materials may be problematic and they may not achieve the learning the teacher had chosen the resource to develop. Similarly, if we design resources without awareness of the values and theories that we ourselves bring to the design, then we may discover that the material we develop does not work adequately to achieve our purposes.

The constrained nature of resources is an inevitable result of the processes of selection, design and ordering. The more a resource is targeted at a generic population, the more constrained it is likely to be as the designers can assume little shared knowledge with the end users. As Yoshino (1992) argues, in spite of the best intentions of writers and editors, learning materials, and especially the cultural information in learning materials, is frequently characterised by cultural reductionism and cultural relativism (see also Papademetre and Scarino 2000). By cultural reductionism, he means that information is usually presented in a way which strips away the complexity, variability and subtlety of culture and represents speakers of target language as homogeneous and stereotypical. Cultural relativism involves the drawing of distinct differences between two cultures which establishes an 'us-them' relationship between the learner and the target language and cultures. This oversimplifies and over-emphasises the differences and makes it more difficult for learners to draw connections between themselves and others and to develop intercultural ways of seeing the world.

Any resource which is selected, adapted or created should be critically examined in relation to the following.

- How is sociocultural and linguistic learning included? Is there any bias?
- How is the cultural information linked to the target language?
- How is the cultural information linked to communication?
- Does the resource reflect contemporary or traditional culture?
- Does the resource present a cultural aspect from the locus of the target culture, from another culture's perspective or from the perspective of the culture's own diaspora?
- Are you in a position to judge? Why? Why not?

Being a critical user does not have to mean that the teacher has to abandon using a textbook or materials developed by others. It does mean thinking carefully about what the resources present to students. It involves seeing the limitations and omissions in the resource and deciding how to deal with these: by supplementing them with other perspectives, by replacing some parts of the resource with new material, or by working with students to see the limitations and omissions.

Relating resources to each other

KEY IDEA

- A resource does not exist in isolation but needs to connect with other resources as part of a learning program

The relationship among resources is also an important dimension for resourcing language learning. The resources used with a class are often the only experience of the language and culture available to most students. From these resources and the interactions around them, students gradually build up an image of the language and the cultures they are studying. If the resources are disparate and unconnected, focusing on the momentary learning episode only, then it may be impossible for students to develop any coherent sense of the language and cultures and to see only randomness and fragmentation.

Each resource is a single instance of language and culture. Learning occurs as students draw connections among these instances to develop deeper understandings. Connections among resources can be of several different types, including:

- resources which add new content
- resources which add new perspectives on existing content
- resources which add new information about aspects of existing content
- resources which add complexity to interpretations
- resources which introduce challenges to current understanding
- resources which introduce personal perspectives
- resources which respond to learners' questions or interests about content.

Learners as resources

KEY IDEA

- Resources are not simply texts and materials: learners themselves can become 'the resource'

The language produced by learners themselves is another key resource, especially when it involves interpretation and the expression of personal perspectives. Where learning activities promote open-ended possibilities, different interpretations or responses may be juxtaposed as a way of seeing multiple perspectives of the same issues and of generating commentary and further thinking. Students' written or oral responses can be the stimulus for further work. Learners' families and communities provide an extended resource base for linguistic and cultural analysis. Such an approach increases the scope of resources for learning, validates diversity of interpretation and provides challenges for further learning and analysis.

Developing a resource bank

KEY IDEA

• A resource bank should provide a range of engaging learning experiences

In order to provide resources for a range of learning experiences which are up to date and engaging, teachers need to gather, adapt and create resources for a resource bank. Resource banks can include 'hard' and digitised materials, and be organised by theme, purposes, modes, text-types, perspectives or tasks.

Questions for reflection

1   How do you use the resources available to you to construct an image of the target language and cultures for your learners?

2   If you use a textbook, what experiences of language and culture does it provide for your learners? What additional resources may be needed? Where could you get these resources from?

3   How could you use your own learners as a resource to support language learning?

4   In what ways could parents, families and communities provide opportunities for linguistic and cultural analysis?