

Supplementary materials? What are they? Well, they can comprise anything from books of listening materials or dialogues, to compendiums of puzzles, problems and games, and books containing discussion topics and ideas for role play activities. Basically, they are books for dipping into. They are not coursebooks – or textbooks, as we call them in Malaysia. They are ‘solo’ books which contain a number of activities which, more often than not, vary in kind, intensity and length.

There is a veritable flood of supplementary material on the market, especially material geared to the adult learner of intermediate level. Titles like Frank, Rinvolucris and Berer’s **Challenge to Think**, Andrew Wright’s **Games for Language Learning** and Alan Maley’s **The Mind’s Eye**, etc... introduce the teacher – and students – to a whole new world of imaginative, innovative ideas for improving the teaching and learning of English as a second or foreign language. And many teachers who are using these supplementary materials in TESL situations abroad are beginning to question whether such dynamic material should remain supplementary in their work, or whether they should become the ‘core’ of their teaching, thus replacing the textbook.

Needless to say, such a radical stance has not yet been adopted by Malaysian teachers of English. Many teachers of English here never use supplementary materials and of those who do, many do not take supplementary materials seriously. They may use them to fill in the last few minutes of a lesson. More often than not, they do not plan for the use of supplementary materials.

Why then use supplementary materials at all in the classroom? The first reason is that supplementary materials are really and truly designed to ‘supplement’ the coursebook (textbook). No prescribed coursebook is totally ‘self-sufficient’ or ‘all-embracing’. A coursebook can never be truly comprehensive. If it were, it would be hundreds of pages long – and extremely costly. Most coursebooks are written for a specific target group, for example, lower secondary students in Malaysia

or students taking the communicational syllabus in Forms 4 and 5 in Malaysian secondary schools. As such, they follow the prescriptions of the syllabus fairly rigidly. They introduce grammatical items or language functions unit by unit and these are practised within the unit. Sometimes they are not even recycled so that students may never ‘learn’ a particular item or function again in his coursebook. The teacher just hopes that the students have grasped the item or function the first – and last – time it is taught. So the practice a student gets in each unit or chapter is intensive. It is not extensive at all. It normally does not provide for practice in a variety of contexts. And this is where supplementary material comes in. If a teacher wants to provide extra practice in a variety of realistic contexts he has two choices – or three. He can write his own supplementary materials to suit his students’ needs or he can shop around and look for suitable published materials or – as many teachers do – he can let the students entertain themselves in those idle minutes when the textbook material has been exhausted. Obviously, the first alternative is preferable if the teacher has the time and the ability to write tailor-made supplementary material. The third choice should be discouraged. That leaves the second choice – the planned use of published supplementary materials to supplement the coursebook.

A second reason for using supplementary materials, and one which is linked to the idea that the textbook can never be ‘all-embracing’, is the need to use extra materials to supplement skills which are dealt with skimpily in the textbook. For example, the teacher may want to give his students more reading practice or more guided writing work, or maybe he wants them to have dialogue practice on a particular language expression that has been introduced in the textbook. Often too, in mixed-ability classes, there are groups of students who work faster and better and who need extra, preferably stimulating, material.

A third most important reason for using supplementary materials in the classroom, is that they

provide variety in the English lesson. Pity the poor student — and teacher — who has to face the same coursebook lesson after lesson, month after month. Thus, supplementary materials can add interest and variety to lessons and are always a pleasant change for both teacher and students.

It is important to realize though, that supplementary materials cannot replace coursebooks or syllabuses. Students like to have a coursebook. It gives coherence and direction to a course. It reassures them that they are progressing even if this progression is in terms of completing units and not in terms of actual learning. Both teachers and students want concrete evidence that 'learning' is taking place.

If you decide to use supplementary materials, what supplementary materials should you use? One of the first considerations is finance. Can the school or the students afford to buy supplementary materials? Are the students allowed to buy them? Can the school afford class sets or one copy for the teachers' library? If there is absolutely no money available, then you, the teacher, are left with no choice but to produce your own materials. If you have a limited budget — and most English departments do — it is best to choose only those materials which you consider really useful or those that you yourself would find very difficult to produce.

If money is available from the school or if there are already lots of supplementary materials in the staffroom or library from which to choose, how do you go about it? First, you must be very sure of what supplementary materials you want to use. For instance, you are teaching a class of Form 4 girls and you want something to supplement

Exercise X in Unit X of the student's text. Furthermore, you need enough material for X number of minutes during X number of lessons. Once you are as specific as this, it makes looking through contents pages and indexes of supplementary materials so much easier and quicker in order to locate exactly what you want

Once you have located what you initially think is suitable material, go through it carefully to check that it really is suitable before deciding to use it. This selection process takes a lot of time though less time than writing original materials. But it is an essential process, one you cannot avoid. And it is only when you have used the material in the classroom that you can assess its suitability. It is always a good idea once you have used a supplementary exercise, to make a written assessment of it. Keep a notebook containing the source of the material, how you used it in the classroom and for what purpose, and how you rate it. There is nothing more frustrating than looking for the same material a year later and not being able to locate it.

Once a teacher has begun to use supplementary materials in a planned and systematic way in his English lessons, he should notice an improvement in his lessons. Bad lessons are always depressing but good lessons can never be achieved without a certain amount of work on the teacher's part. There are so many lovely ideas in the newer supplementary books that teachers, if they use them, will not fail to instil an enthusiasm for learning English in their students which is lacking in the one-text programme. Let us hope that more teachers will take supplementary materials more seriously and will introduce them in their teaching.