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# **CROSSING THE BORDER FROM A CALL LAB TO THE REAL WORLD: A MATERIAL DATABANK FOR AND BY TEACHER-TRAINEES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Kelly (1996) maintains that a teacher needs a great deal of information in order to function well in his/her profession. The expectation of a teacher is so high that many are unable to cope with the demands of the trade. There are so many resources and avenues for teachers out there to be able to go beyond the norm of the profession. With the nature of training many new teachers are exposed to, there are so many things that they can do to help their learners. Yet, when asked if they had been able to go beyond the norm of the profession, many confessed that they do not usually have the time needed to seek out, read and organise information so as to be able to practice more than what is stated in the textbook or even the syllabus. This paper will explain the effort taken by the Education Faculty of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in instilling collaboration amongst its teacher-trainees in building a material databank by the teacher-trainees and for the teacher-trainees.

### **WHAT IS EXPECTED OF A NEW L2 TEACHER**

A teacher plays a very critical role in imparting and sharing knowledge

with students in any classroom, be it a content subject or a skill-training subject like language learning. In an English language-learning classroom in Malaysia for example, to be able to teach the skills of the language well and to be able to motivate the students to learn or pick up the language which is foreign to them, a teacher teaching the language needs to be equipped with numerous skills and knowledge to be able to convince the students that learning English is fun, is not difficult and is worth the while. An English language teacher is required to have high proficiency level in the target language so as to be able to handle different situations and different level of proficiency of students, which more often than not consist of, mixed ability groups (as far as language is concerned). Only by being proficient in the target language will the teacher be able to become the role model for the students. In addition to the above, a teacher teaching the English language is also required to have the skills and expertise in classroom management.

With a mixed ability group consisting of students having different levels of motivation and attitude to learn the language and different perception about the language it is no surprise that many teachers feel burned out after just several weeks of the semester. In addition a teacher has the responsibility to impart knowledge to the students with syllabus to follow and complete within a stipulated time allocation. As a motivating factor for the students, a good language teacher will go the extra mile of producing teaching aids and materials creatively, beyond what is given in the textbook or workbook. For what reason, you may think would a teacher want to torture herself/ himself in doing something beyond the norm when the materials are already there in the textbook or workbook? This is done for the simple reason of adding variety to the materials as studies have shown that students' level of motivation and attention span improves tremendously just by using anything but the textbook (Haddad, 2002). Also, our students today live in an information age where they are more exposed to a variety of ways of getting information – the book is not the only way to learn new things - they do not condone to drill and practice anymore (Fontaine, 2001); they

do not appreciate turning over the pages of the textbook and staring at still images anymore; they prefer hands-on experience of doing things; they want to be active learners rather than just sitting and listening to what the teacher has to say. They want to be involved and be part of the learning and teaching process. In short, they want to play some roles in their learning endeavour. With this new expectation of the students, a teacher will have to progress with time and try as much as possible to meet their expectations.

With the integration of IT in many sectors including education, a teacher has yet another skill to master, Information Technology in Education. However, having the skills and expertise in handling a computer is not that bad after all as teachers from across the globe have proven that they are able to use the technology to share ideas and materials together through collaboration between them.

## **COLLABORATION AMONG NEW L2 TEACHERS**

### **Why Collaboration is Necessary**

Collaboration amongst teachers is one area of which teachers, especially those under training or fresh graduates can work together in and share tips about the profession between them. Collaboration is seen as an asset in teacher education because in doing so we will be able to gather experts in the field from all corners of the Earth to share their resources. As a result, a teacher will no longer feel isolated or feel totally cut-off from other fellow teachers as he/ she has a team behind him/ her. In fact collaboration, if done well, will maximise the quality of the teaching, as whatever is done in the classroom would have already been thought of or figured out not just by one but many teachers.

Collaboration amongst the teachers will also inculcate cooperation amongst the group members as collaboration instils sharing of ideas and experience, it gives practice on collaborative

work, gives the members the hands-on experience of building materials relevant to their needs. Above all, collaboration between them will complement the computer knowledge that they have gained over the years.

### **Why Collaboration with the New L2 Teachers is Necessary**

As many of us are fully aware, teaching, especially language, is not a simple job in an era where many still think that English is not that important to master. The reason why the teacher-trainees have been the focus for the building of the material bank is that, this group is the ones with the least experience in material writing. They need more exposure and practice in building their own materials. However, it is this younger generation who have had ample exposure to using computer technology as they have had the opportunity to have ICT integrated in their learning programme. In addition, we are now living in an era where demands on the use of computer technology is high so with the knowledge and exposure that the teacher trainees already have, it is best to tap on their expertise as they are a lot more familiar with the technology as compared to teachers who have little, if any, knowledge in the area of computer technology.

### **Areas of collaboration**

There are many areas of which the teacher-trainees' expertise can be tapped on. These areas include the following:

#### *Designing and adapting materials*

As part of their training, the teacher-trainees have been exposed to the skills and expertise of designing and adapting materials for classroom use. With this knowledge and exposure, the teacher trainees know what to adopt and adapt, and how much to adapt and how to adapt materials. These skills are about the most basic things that they need to do in material preparation. With the nature of exposure to web sites use that they have been given, these teacher-trainees should not have much problem in surfing the net for relevant materials especially when

the Net is liken to be an Aladdin's cave, full of information.

### *Reviewing and Evaluating Software*

The teacher-trainees have also been given the skills and training in evaluating language-learning software. With the number of software flooding the market today, teacher-trainees need the skill and expertise of choosing the right software for their students. Since evaluating software is not something that they can do over a very short period of time, (as it is time consuming) it is a wise decision to keep a record of the evaluation matrix of the software that the teacher-trainees have evaluated and keep a list of them for future references. Thus in the future, for example during their teaching practice, if the need arise for doing something beyond the textbook, a teacher trainee can browse through the databank of evaluated software and pick one that is most suitable for the pupils.

### *Designing language learning websites*

The teacher-trainees have also been exposed to not just evaluating language-learning websites but also designing their own language learning sites. Thus with the knowledge and exposure to web site review and evaluation, the teacher trainees would have mastered the details such as the characteristics of a good web page and thus should be able to come out with their own language-learning site.

### *Writing lesson plans*

Writing lesson plans is one of the most basic skills that a teacher should have. As part of their training to become full-pledged teachers, the teacher-trainees are required to prepare lesson plans for their teaching, such as for use in their Microteaching sessions. This skill is repeated several times in other subjects too. So with the continuous exposure to prepare lesson plans, coupled with their ability to adopt and adapt materials, to have the knowledge and exposure to review and evaluate language learning software, it is seen as beneficial to tap on these skills and expertise that they have so that the time and effort that they have used in coming out with the materials will not

be seen as a total waste of time. In addition, in the long run, it will be useful for even the teachers who have been in the profession much earlier than they do but had not had the opportunity to be exposed to the extensive use of the computer technology.

### *Constructing activity sheets*

As maintained earlier, the attention span and the level of motivation to learn a language as foreign as the English language can be improved with the addition or introduction of any form of materials other than from the textbooks. Thus, among others, the teacher trainees are constantly being encouraged to attempt to produce their own activity sheets. What with the availability of so much material on the Net, coupled with the computer knowledge that they have been given, and skills they have mastered in using some of the basic software such as those offered in Microsoft word, the sky's the limit as far as producing interesting, eye-catching, attention-giving teaching materials.

## **THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE MATERIAL DATABANK**

Many would think that the skills and knowledge already transferred to the teacher-trainees would be sufficient to prepare them for the profession. However, some may want them to go beyond what they already have- since team working and cooperation, are among the traits we are instilling among the students, why not extend this to include the teachers, so that they can set examples and become role models to their students.

### *The purpose of the construction of the material databank*

Some may ask why it is necessary to construct the material databank for the teacher-trainees. Firstly, the answer is as simple as, to give them the opportunity to build their own materials using the technological knowledge that they have been exposed to. Secondly, in the process of constructing it, the teacher-trainees will be required to exercise team

working and cooperation among themselves in order to accomplish their mission of building the databank. Thirdly, the teacher-trainees will also be required to exercise and practice the art of negotiation amongst them because whatever they prepare, whatever they produce will have to meet a certain standard, thus a lot of cooperation, negotiation, etc. will be exercised. Fourthly, the material databank is not done just for the sake of doing it, but it is done so that it will become a reference site for the teacher-trainees so that it can provide them with innovative ideas in the future to bring into the classroom. Fifthly, because the teacher-trainees are required to build the databank, it teaches them the skill of management where they will be required to manage the information, including selecting relevant materials so as not to repeat the same materials. This will give them a lot of practice to prepare materials so much so that preparing their own materials in the future will not be seen as a burden or an impossible task to do. Thus, instead of just becoming users of materials produced by others, they themselves can be a part of the material writers. Last but not least, the materials in this databank will be useful not only to the teacher-trainees. But they can become a source of materials for those already in the profession, especially those who had not had the opportunity to be taught and exposed to the technology. All in all, the material databank is not only beneficial to the teacher-trainees but it can also be useful to a wider circle of people within the profession.

*The responsibility to construct the material databank*

The responsibility to construct the material databank lies in the hands of the teacher-trainees themselves. They need to negotiate amongst themselves as far as the content of the databank, the arrangement of material, the sequence of the materials, the layout, the number of materials, and the list goes on. The lecturer acts only as a facilitator, guide and advisor to guide them in the process of constructing the databank of materials. Also, the lecturer will oversee the quality of materials produced and act as editors in the process so as to maintain quality of the materials produced.



## **THE CONTENT OF THE MATERIAL DATABANK**

The material databank consists not only of a particular type of material but a mixture of many different types of materials useful in the context of Malaysian schools. So in the process of constructing it, the teacher-trainees are required to follow the KBSM content and syllabus as practised in the Malaysian secondary school system.

The materials compiled include lesson plans, activity sheets, PowerPoint slides, review and evaluation matrix of evaluated language learning software, and last but not least, the addresses of language learning and teaching websites produced by the teacher-trainees themselves.

## **THE ADVANTAGES OF BUILDING THE MATERIAL DATABANK**

There are several advantages of building the material databank. Firstly, it increases the variety of materials available for use among the teacher-trainees and practicing teachers alike. Secondly, due the vast number of materials produced over the years, more and more materials are available for use by the teachers. Thirdly, it increases the number of choices of teaching aids that can be brought into the classroom of which they can also act as supplements to what the teachers already have. Some can be used as supplementary materials for skill enhancement. The construction of the material databank also make the teacher-trainees more versatile not only now but also in the future as they become practitioners of computer technology, material developers instead of just users of the materials and last but not least, during the process the construction of the material databank, many soft-skills are being incorporated including communication skills, negotiation skills, team working skills, just to name a few.

## CONCLUSION

There are so many things that can be done in preparing the teacher-trainees to become not just a graduate in the field of English language teaching but also versatile individuals who are capable of incorporating the computer technology in the classroom. They can be trained to be more than just disseminators of knowledge - they can be material writers, technology users, facilitators, advisors, mentors, and others. It is all up to us, the trainers to mould them to become what we want them to be especially in meeting the government's aspiration of producing technology users in the future.

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