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Exploring Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research

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This article is part of a collection of practitioner research on the theme of "Exploring Grassroots, Innovative, and Creative Approaches to Language Learning Materials Development Through Inclusive Practitioner-Research" for Issue 8 of the Learner Development Journal (LDJ8), edited by Anna Costantino, Assia Slimani-Rolls, and Nour El Houda Bouacha. Published once a year, each issue of the Learner Development Journal follows a Community of Practices approach over a period of approximately 18 months in which contributors work together, under the guidance of the editors, to share, respond to, and develop their research and writing.

Review of *Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design* (Dat Bao, 2018)

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This practice-based book review examines Dat Bao's (2018) edited collection of articles titled Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design. Comprising 13 articles, the volume features contributions from prominent figures in English Language Teaching (ELT) materials development, such as Alan Maley and Brian Tomlinson, alongside fresh insights from emerging practitioners. This collection of articles aims to highlight innovative approaches to improving ELT course materials through the implementation of creative pedagogies, specific resources, and the active involvement of educators and learners in materials development as a response to concerns related to current practices in coursebook design.

この実践的書評は、Dat Bao's (2018) 編集による「Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design」の論評を目的とする。この書籍は13の章で構成され、Alan MaleyやBrian Tomlinsonといった英語教育 (ELT) の教材開発における著名な専門家による寄稿や、新進気鋭の実践者からの新しい見識が収められている。この論文集の目的は、創造的な教授法やリソース、教材開発における教育者と学習者の積極的な関与を通じて、現在の教科書デザインに関連する課題に対応し、ELTの教材改善を図る革新的なアプローチを示すことにある。

Keywords

creative materials development, innovative coursebook design, creative pedagogies, teacher and learner involvement in material development

創造的な教材開発、革新的な教科書デザイン、創造的な教授法、教材開発における教育者と学習者の関与

Introduction

As a teacher of German as a Foreign Language and co-author of a textbook for high school students of German at the intermediate low (ACTFL) / B1 (CEFR) level, I am deeply committed to employing creative pedagogies and innovative teaching methodologies. My foremost goal is to optimize the effectiveness of these learning/teaching materials to support students in acquiring proficiency in the German language, rather than mere rote learning. According to Language Testing International, a licensee of the American Council on the Teaching of Language (ACTFL), language proficiency entails the ability to effectively use a language for real-world purposes and to communicate across all modes of communication: speaking, writing, listening, and reading (LTI, n.d.). This implies that language acquisition transcends gaining declarative knowledge, such as vocabulary, grammar rules, and cultural nuances. Instead, it involves imparting procedural knowledge, instructing students on how to use the language in context by engaging students in real-world activities and exercises that reinforce these concepts and skills.

My keen interest in innovative teaching approaches led me to explore Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design and

write this review. In this process, I learned that existing concerns within the ELT community regarding the limitations in current coursebook design - the lack of creativity, personalization and learner involvement - are not unlike the ones raised within the German language teaching community here in the United States. Curious to learn more about the innovative approaches to the material development discussed in responses to these limitations, I delved into Bao's collection of articles with the intention of applying their findings to enhance my own coursebook design process and teaching. Throughout my review, I will draw upon my personal experiences as a German language teacher and coursebook developer to offer insights and reflections on the topics presented in the book.

Attending school in Germany in the 1990s meant that I was able to "learn" multiple languages, including English, French, and Italian. However, I did not truly acquire any of them. The emphasis was on teaching factual knowledge over practical application in real-world contexts. As a result, I am still able to recall many verb conjugations and grammar rules, yet when asked to speak in French I find myself at a loss. This led me to opting against the traditional way of teaching languages through explicit instruction of grammar, memorization of vocabulary, and dissemination of cultural facts, when I chose to become a language teacher.

During my initial years in the profession, many of the teaching resources at my disposal were largely outdated in content and failed to align with contemporary research, theories, or best practices in second language acquisition (SLA). Consequently, I found myself compelled to create my own curriculum centered around the communicative approach and acquisition driven instruction (ADI), an approach that focuses on the implicit development of proficiency. I dedicated myself to exploring and applying creative pedagogies and innovative teaching methods rooted in performance-based approaches, such as role-playing and improvisation.

Additionally, I focused my energies on creating dynamic, interactive learning environments where students are immersed in real-world contexts and exposed to authentic materials in hopes to paint a realistic and current image of the German-speaking world. My students actively participated in numerous collaborative initiatives organized by the Goethe-Institut, including projects like *Das Bild der Anderen* (Goethe Institute, n.d.) or the German-American Virtual Exchange (GAVE) (Smith, 2020) in conjunction with our partner school in Nagold, Baden-Württemberg, Germany. Through these enriching experiences, my students have been immersed in authentic German language use, connecting both learners of German and native speakers through cultural exchanges. These projects provide invaluable opportunities for students to learn German in a natural, immersive environment, fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also cultural understanding and appreciation. Integrating language learning with an understanding of the cultures associated with the target language equips learners with the valuable intercultural awareness and communication skills necessary to promote meaningful cross-cultural interactions. In this type of learning environment, students have the opportunity to unconsciously internalize language patterns through exposure, practice, and interaction, leading to an implicit understanding of the language and its cultures.

When I was asked in late 2019 to co-author the InterKulturell® Intermediate textbook for high school students learning German at the intermediate low (ACTFL) / B1 (CEFR) level, I had no hesitation in accepting the offer. However, I quickly became aware of the inherent limitations of writing a textbook which led me to my "puzzles": How can I ensure that my materials engage learners in meaningful ways, allowing them to interact dynamically and personally with the target language? How do I create activities that inspire creativity and encourage students to use the language in real-world contexts, while simultaneously

responding to diverse learning environments, cultural contexts, and individual student needs?

With this context in mind, I was intrigued by the opportunity to explore Dat Bao's (2018) collection of articles in Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design to explore the extent to which ELT materials development in various parts of the world diverge or cohere with both our practices and our challenges in L2 curriculum design here in the USA. I was also curious to learn more about the authors' understanding of what creativity and innovation might look like in the context of materials development and what the authors suggest could be done to "go beyond" the current trends to involve the learners in material design. In this review, I approach Bao's compilation of articles from two perspectives. First, I adopt a conventional book review structure by providing an overview of the book. Then, I follow with a critical analysis of its content, focusing on each of its three sections. Throughout the review, I assess both the relevance of the book's insights to the readership of this journal and their connection to my personal experiences as a coursebook developer and teacher, approaching the review as both a general academic critique and as a reflection on its practical application to my own work.

Overview of the Book

The collection of articles is thoughtfully organized around three areas of debate in materials development. The first section, Improving ELT Materials Through Creative Pedagogies, focuses on theoretical frameworks and innovative perspectives on the traditional approach to ELT materials development. This is followed by Improving ELT Materials Through Specific Resources, which highlights practical examples and case studies of how creative materials can be applied in the classroom to foster engagement, critical thinking, and student-centered learning. The book concludes with Improving ELT Materials Through Teacher and Learner Involvement, which places emphasis on the active participation of teachers and learners in materials writing while further exploring ways to personalize the learning experience. Instead of summarizing the questions and solutions presented in each article individually, this review focuses on the shared insights regarding current trends and issues in coursebook design as highlighted by the authors.

In the preface, Bao urges the reader to engage in reflection regarding contemporary materials development. Bao highlights the significance of grounding such reflection in "empirical research and pedagogical conditions for creative learning" (xii), with the ultimate goal of "expanding current practices in coursebook design" (xi). This call to action finds support in the collective voice of both esteemed and emerging practitioner researchers in the field of ELT materials development included in this collection of articles. These authors emphasize the pressing need for ELT course materials to embrace innovative approaches and perspectives that go beyond the common practices.

Part 1: Improving ELT Materials Through Creative Pedagogies

In the opening article, Making Typical Coursebook Activities More Beneficial for the Learner, Brian Tomlinson demonstrates that classroom exercises--closed questions, controlled conversations, True/False, matching exercises, and sentence completion--"typically feature[d] in L2 coursebooks have changed very little in the [last] 50 years" (p. 21). While these activity types are "relatively easy to write, easy to use, can be readily employed as classroom tests and provide easy practice in doing typical examination-type tasks," he

argues that they "have very little value in facilitating language acquisition or in helping learners develop communicative competence" (p. 36). Moreover, these activities lack room for creativity and learners' personalized participation. In my own experience as a textbook author, I have often encountered similar arguments in favor of such tasks from both publishers and teachers. Publishers frequently argue that these types of activities must be included in textbooks because teachers expect them. They are straightforward to grade, as there is a clear right or wrong answer, and they do not require a significant amount of classroom time. However, while I understand the practical benefits of these activities—especially for busy teachers managing large classes—I share Tomlinson's concerns about their limited value for language development. In my work, I have seen how relying too heavily on these tasks can diminish opportunities for creativity and meaningful language use, leading to a more passive learning experience. To strike a balance, I have worked to incorporate more open-ended, creative tasks in the textbooks I co-authored, aiming to provide teachers with flexibility while still offering practical, easy-to-grade activities for certain contexts.

In chapter 3, Creative Materials: An Oxymoron?, Alan Maley discusses the limitations of creativity in coursebook materials. He notes, "By definition, the materials are put together by one group of people (authors, publishers, ministries, teachers) for use by another group of people (learners, teachers, etc.). This presupposes that those who make the materials already know what will be suitable for those unknown people who will use them" (p. 35). This raises questions about what creative materials are, as Maley asks "(D)o we mean that the creativity is somehow inherent in the ingenious way the materials have been devised? Or do we mean that the materials somehow produce a creative reaction or response from learners?" (p. 35).

While it is clear that textbook authors cannot account for every classroom context or fully anticipate the diverse assumptions and backgrounds of the teachers and learners engaging with their materials, I believe there are fundamental principles of creativity and learner involvement that should guide our design process. I strive to create materials that encourage active participation, enabling learners to express their own ideas rather than simply responding to predetermined prompts. I also prioritize adaptability, ensuring that the materials can be easily modified to meet the diverse needs and preferences of learners. Since the InterKulturell® Intermediate textbook is designed for classes with multiple levels, we offer many activities as "Level Ups," called *Einen Schritt weiter* (One more step)*,* making tasks more complex for advanced students. Additionally, we provide suggestions in the teacher notes accompanying each activity explaining how to differentiate or expand the tasks (see the example page from Unit 1 My Life, My Home in Figure 1).

Finally, I emphasize collaboration by designing tasks that promote interaction and dialogue among students, fostering a sense of community. For example, in the InterKulturell® Intermediate textbook, I created the *Unsere Globale Gemeinschaft* (Our Global Community) project-based learning tasks which are aimed at promoting student engagement with the German language and the cultures of the German-speaking world through research, discussion, and presentation activities. In one of these hands-on projects, students design birdhouses inspired by their research on architectural elements used in buildings from German-speaking countries.

18.1 Einen Werbespot analysieren

As they watch this commercial, students may wonder at first what is being advertised. A helpful approach is to have students describe what they see in the video to determine what product or service is being promoted (**Handlung der Szene**, **Personen: Geschlecht, Alter, Aussehen** etc., **Dekor: Räume, Landschaft** etc.). You may also present this video without sound as a movie talk in which you describe what you see.

Next, have students analyze the commercial using the AIDA principle. Ask additional guiding questions such as: **Wer soll das Land besuchen? Warum? Wie wird das Land „verkauft"? Welche Emotionen werden angesprochen? Passt der Inhalt des Werbespots zum Ziel?**

Resource(s)
Video

ACTFL Standard(s)
Communication: Interpretive
Cultures: Products

Answers
Answers will vary.

18.2A/B Einen Werbespot kreieren

Tell students to refer back to the AIDA-Principle as a starting point for discussing how to effectively advertise the product they have selected. Once they jotted down their responses to these questions, distribute the storyboard graphic organizer to help them organize their ideas and outline the sequences of scenes of their commercial.

For **18.2B**, remind students that every group member should understand the script and their role in filming the commercial. Once the commercial is recorded, have students edit it using readily available apps. While student groups present their finished products, the rest of the class should take notes on how well the various parts of the AIDA principle were followed.

Resource(s)
Storyboard graphic organizer

ACTFL Standard(s)
Communication: Presentational

Answers
Answers will vary.

Kapitel 1 | Mein Leben, meine Heimat

18 Werbespots

Die Industrie- und Handelskammer hat einen Wettbewerb ausgeschrieben und du möchtest mitmachen. Dafür musst du einen kreativen Werbespot produzieren. Der Werbespot soll ein Produkt aus deiner Region auf eine originelle und ästhetische Art und Weise bewerben.

18.1 Einen Werbespot analysieren ▶ 🎤 (Authentisch)

In diesem Video wird Werbung für das Land Liechtenstein gemacht. Ziel ist es, Menschen zu motivieren, Liechtenstein zu besuchen. Seht euch das Video an und beschreibt, was ihr seht. Analysiert es dann nach dem AIDA-Prinzip und schreibt Notizen.

Attention (Aufmerksamkeit): Wie wird die Zielgruppe angesprochen?	Interest (Interesse): Wie wird Interesse für das Produkt geweckt?	Desire (Begehren): Wie entsteht beim Zuschauer der Wunsch, das Produkt kaufen zu wollen?	Action (Handlung): Wie sorgt der Werbespot dafür, dass das Produkt wirklich gekauft wird?

18.2A Einen Werbespot kreieren 💬

Kreiert in Gruppenarbeit einen 10-30 Sekunden langen Werbespot für ein lokales oder regionales Produkt. Nutzt ein Storyboard zur Skizzierung der Szenen. Präsentiert eure Werbespot-Idee eurer Klasse.

18.2B Einen Werbespot kreieren - Ein Schritt weiter! ⊕ 💬

Erstellt in Gruppenarbeit einen 10-30 Sekunden langen Werbespot für ein lokales oder regionales Produkt. Nutzt ein Storyboard zur Skizzierung der Szenen und nehmt den Werbespot dann auf. Präsentiert eurer Klasse den fertigen Werbespot.

Schloss Vaduz, Liechtenstein

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Scaffold

To help groups with **18.2A** and **18.2B**, provide these pointers:

- The best commercials are funny, memorable, unique, or have an interesting character and tell a story.
- Use bookending: same statement at start and end of commercial
- Slogans use rhymes or repetition
- Logos can have letters, a word, or a drawing, or these can be combined
- Many commercials dedicate the last five seconds to a still image of the product, logo, or company with accompanying commentary

Differentiate

Alternatively for **18.2A**, create a poster board to advertise a product. Draw attention and interest to the product by making it unique so people want to buy it.

Figure 1. Example Page With Accompanying Teacher Notes

Figure 2. Example Collaborative Project with Accompanying Teacher Notes

In our textbook design, my co-authors and I have actively sought to create a diverse range of open-ended materials that cater to various learning styles, preferences, and interests. Many of these materials have been or will be tested in the classroom before inclusion in the textbook, allowing for continuous adaptation and enhancement to ensure that learners have choices and that teachers retain the flexibility to decide which activities to include or exclude. To further support or challenge learners, we are also developing differentiated activities for the online workbook.

According to the different authors in Part 1, creativity is difficult to define. Noting "creativity is often defined as freedom from control" (p. 5), Bao juxtaposes this definition with Tan Bee Tin's statement that creativity can be promoted by decreasing freedom, as "the constraints in creative tasks can provide opportunities for learners to act and think creatively and independently" (p. 96). Tan Bee Tin's argument here is that too much freedom hinders learners from exploring new avenues. They may fall back on previously acquired language patterns and vocabulary, if they feel lost in the ambiguity and complexity of the assignment that requires them to create something new. In cognitive psychology this is known as "cognitive fixation tendency" (p. 101). Tin gives an example of an exploratory study on task constraints where the same pair of students were assigned two tasks with different levels of freedom. Task 1, a highly constrained activity, instructed the students to write a 4-line poem with the first letter of the word "time": Write an acrostic on "TIME." This encouraged the students to explore and transform their language more than Task 2, which gave the following instruction:"Write a simile on "Hope is like parking spaces": Give two reasons.-which let them have more freedom with the task. In Task 1, the formal constraint of starting each line with a specific letter pushed students to engage with new language and meanings. In contrast, Task 2 allowed the students to rely on familiar ideas and language, resulting in

less linguistic exploration. The freedom in Task 2, combined with already well-established background knowledge, led to cognitive fixation for the learners and limited their creativity.

Thus, the question arises: How should authors design language learning tasks that invite learners to use the target language in creative ways, stretching them beyond communicating about known topics to generate language that combines "existing familiar ideas in an unfamiliar, unusual way" (p. 100)? Tin suggests the following features when designing tasks to facilitate linguistic autonomy and creativity within the language learner:

- focus on the unknown/new meaning rather than on known meaning;
- focus on partially defined goals rather than on well defined goals;
- disciplined and imaginative use of constraints rather than freedom to broaden possibilities. (p. 103)

The emphasis on "partially defined goals" highlights the challenge of striking a balance between providing enough structure to guide learners while also leaving room for them to engage in the creative process, as the task unfolds in the classroom. In practice, Tin recommends implementing a two-phase approach that promotes creative and language exploration: (a) an idea generating phase, and (b) an idea exploration phase. In the initial stage, students are encouraged to brainstorm ideas without focusing too much on linguistic accuracy, encouraging students to draw on their imagination and previous knowledge. In the second phase, students use this pool of ideas and to develop them further with the goal of expressing their ideas more precisely within the constraints of the task.

The authors of the chapters included in the first part of Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development make several suggestions about what can be done to improve ELT materials through innovative efforts and creative pedagogies. One of the easiest approaches proposed here, in my opinion, is the rethinking of typical coursebook activities. As mentioned earlier, these activities often lack value in facilitating language acquisition and communicative competence. These activities should be redesigned to provide rich, meaningful input, engage learners cognitively and personally, and offer authentic opportunities for language use and communication. Tomlinson argues that this can easily be done by "make[ing] alterations to how we use them, both when developing new materials and when adapting existing materials…The most obvious way is to open them up so that they involve the learners" (Tomlinson, p. 26). For example, closed questions like Did you like the movie? can easily be transformed into open-ended questions such as What aspects of the movie did you find most interesting, and why? so that learners are invited to think more deeply about a topic and connect their answers to their personal experiences and own lives. When material developers incorporate open-ended activities, such as idea generation, strategic planning, and the production of something new into their materials, they provide opportunities for students to unleash their creativity and critical thinking skills while completing the assignment. This approach allows students to synthesize their knowledge and come up with more elaborate and creative responses, thereby tapping into their full potential.

Part 2: Improving ELT Materials Through Specific Resources

The second section of the book highlights several approaches to enhancing ELT materials using specific resources, such as process drama, literature, ICT integration, and online materials and tools, to foster creativity.

In Hae-ok Park's article ELT Materials Using Process Drama, process drama is highlighted as a method that actively involves both students and their teacher in the "co-creat[ion] of [role play in] an imaginary context" (Park, p. 110). Unlike traditional performances where

students have memorized their lines ahead of time, participants in process drama improvise their dialogue within a structured context in the moment. For instance, many textbooks designed for the world language classroom include a chapter on clothing. Typically, students learn the names of various clothing items and related adjectives (colors, patterns, sizes, etc.). Students use these adjectives to describe what they or their peers wear, focusing on using the correct adjective ending. When they engage in dialogue or role playing, students are often instructed to ask for and give opinions about clothing, or simulate a shopping experience where they practice language skills like asking for prices, sizes, or availability. Teachers could make this more creative by inviting students to participate in a process drama centered around the theme of finding the perfect prom outfit. In this example, students prepare for prom by assuming various roles, such as themselves, their prom date, their parents, or the store clerk. Based on their characters' preferences and budgets, they all need to find an outfit that matches with their prom date, yet also meets with their parents' approval. During the role play, they "shop" for outfits, interacting with one another to ask questions, provide suggestions, and negotiate choices in the target language. The activity culminates in a reflection session where students discuss the challenges they faced and the language skills they developed. To extend the activity, students can participate in a mini-fashion show, showcasing their chosen outfits while explaining their selections, or write a diary entry from their character's perspective about the prom experience.

Over the years, I have had great success using performance-based and drama-based activities as well as improvisation in my classrooms. I strongly believe that they are one of the most effective pedagogical tools available to language instructors. I usually start with easy and short performance-based activities, such as "Reverse Charades" (Figure 3) where the class has to act out the displayed word and the person in front of the class has to guess the word.
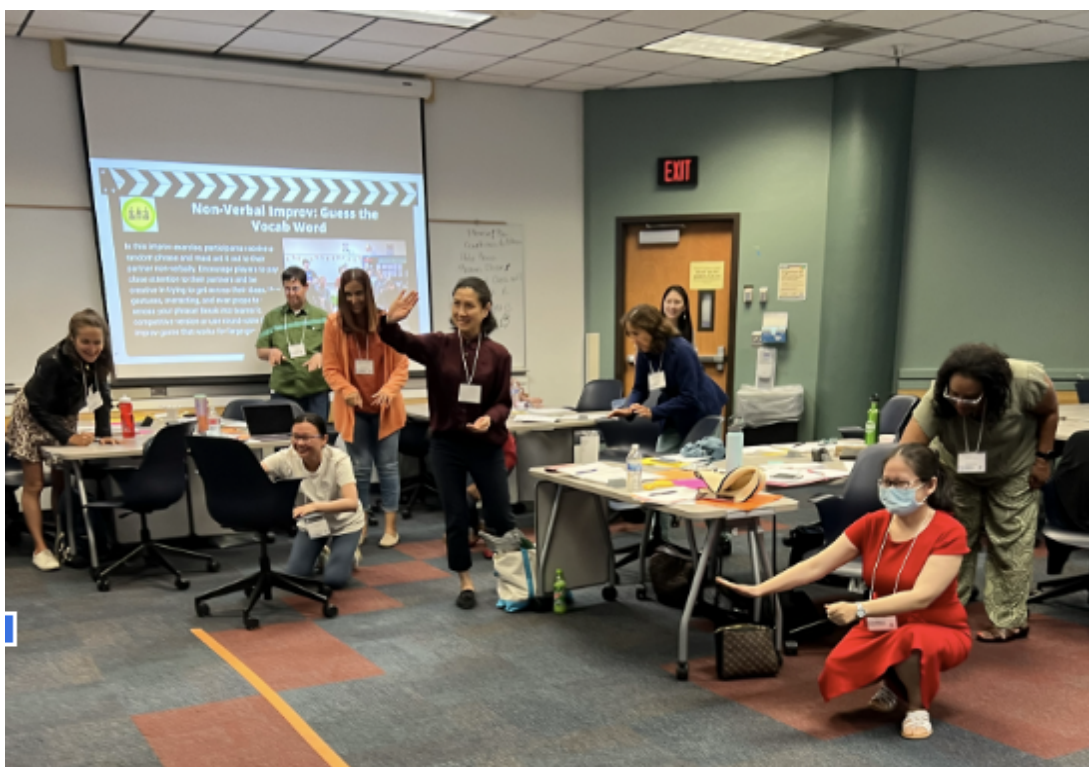

Figure 3. Reverse Charades

Another activity is "Yes, and then...," in which two students take turns describing their daily routine using the past tense. One student starts by saying, "This morning, we woke up, and...," and their partner adds to the story, " Yes, this morning we woke up and we turned off our alarm." In advanced classes, I make use of Francis Debyser and Jean-Marc Caré's method called *La Simulation Globale*. Here, students are immersed in real-life, interactive, and simulated situations that require them to communicate in the target language. Students enrolled in the third or fourth year work on 10 minute-long theater adaptations of literary works, such as *Max und Moritz* or *Emil und die Detektive* (Figure 4) which are then performed at local theater competitions.

Figure 4. 10-minute Adaptations of Literary Works

In his article, "Living in the Materials World: Why Literature Has a Place Here," Paul Hullah voices concerns about the diminishing presence of literary texts in ELL curricula. He emphasizes that properly selected texts, where learners "must know 98-99% of the words" (p. 128), can effectively engage and motivate disinterested English L2 learners. Poetry, in particular, he states, is an inspiring teaching resource that should be preserved. According to Hullah, interpreting poetry enables learners to personalize their language learning experience, encouraging them to find value in their personal interpretation of language and to overcome their expectation that all assignments must have correct or incorrect answers (p. 127). Here, Hullah also introduces a structured approach consisting of eight activities (pre-reading, word check, working with the text: cloze activity, listening/reading aloud, comprehension activity, response, personal/emotional response, discussion/ debate/essay/presentation, and review/conclusion). This approach demonstrates how poems or pop song lyrics can successfully be integrated into language learning contexts.

Another way to encourage learners to act creatively with the target language according to Dat Bao and Xiaofang Shang, as highlighted in their article ICT Integration in Second Language Materials: Challenges and Insights is through the integration of Information

and Communication Technology (ICT). The limited theories and implementations of ICT in language learning poses a challenge. The "perceptions and attitudes" of teachers and learners "towards the use of technology" are often poor, leading them to prefer traditional "face-to-face interactions" (p. 141). Many educators face significant barriers due to a lack of knowledge and the expectation to develop ICT skills independently. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, many educators were forced to adapt to new technologies and digital platforms on the fly with little to no training and under impossible deadlines. Additionally, the genesis of generative AI presents further challenges, especially for educators with limited digital literacy or access to resources, leaving them unsure how to incorporate these tools into their teaching effectively.

Coursebooks can play a significant role in overcoming these problems by helping teachers to come up with "creative technological ideas" and by guiding them toward vetted "online resources" (p. 143). I believe that collaboration between teachers and material developers increases the chances that attempts to integrate ICT into the curriculum are successful. In the context of the InterKulturell® series, we encourage teachers to incorporate various web tools and applications aligned with recommended activities, such as using an interactive bulletin board to facilitate discussions through short videos or a design platform for making digital posters or flyers. Teacher guidance is provided in the margin of the teacher edition of the textbook, detailing how they might effectively integrate the suggested tool or app into their own classroom environments.

Part 3: Improving ELT Materials Through Teacher and Learner Involvement

The contributors in this section place emphasis on the active participation of teachers and learners in materials writing, while also exploring ways to personalize the learning experience.

In the article Localising the Genre-Based Approach: Lessons for Materials Development in Thailand, for instance, Rajeevnath Ramnath emphasizes the challenges that English Language Teaching (ELT) materials face in addressing genuine language acquisition needs in Thailand. Ramnath critiques the fact that many ELT materials are designed to meet specific pedagogical "expectations" (p. 181), which in the Thai context often leads teachers to prioritize preparing students for entrance examinations or employment opportunities over focusing on language development. This "teach to the test" mentality detracts from a more holistic approach to language learning, which should center on language use and development itself rather than exam performance (p. 182).

Ramnath draws on Alan Maley's influential work, Inputs, Processes and Outcomes in Materials Development: Extending the Range (Maley, 2003), which highlights the narrow focus of many teaching materials. Maley notes that traditional ELT materials often exclude more engaging and culturally rich texts such as folktales, poems, and advertisements, favoring instead dry, expository texts or heavily adapted literary content (p. 182). Such materials can limit students' engagement with language and hinder their ability to explore different communicative purposes and textual genres.

In response, Ramnath adapted their own teaching approach, particularly in the Theory and Practice of Reading and Writing course within an MA ELT program, to a genre-based approach to teach English. He encouraged students to explore authentic texts and write across genres—such as fictional narratives, recounts, and argumentative texts—helping them move beyond seeing writing as purely a linguistic product. In doing so, students not

only engage more meaningfully with the language but also develop a deeper understanding of how language functions in different genres and contexts.

In my opinion, the most significant outcome of this course was the students' decision to use their texts to develop materials in their Materials Development class. Despite their initial struggles with "creating original activities for a group of unknown students" (p. 188) and moving beyond the typical activities found in traditional textbooks, such as multiple choice questions and literal comprehension exercises, this experience helped boost their confidence as both language learners and future educators. As Ramnath concludes, the reason for this is that "if teachers develop materials, they are likely to be better motivated to teach those materials" (p. 189).

Drawing parallels to my own experience in developing materials with college students for an extracurricular German club at a charter school in the southwestern United States, I observed similar challenges. The students, despite their experience in creative language use, often lacked the pedagogical background to design effective materials. They required more guidance than expected, as they struggled to translate their own learning experiences into functional teaching materials. This gap between theory and practice mirrors Ramnath's observation that students, even when exposed to a broader range of genres, may still face difficulties in applying their knowledge to actual materials development. However, once the materials were successfully designed and used during the German club meetings, the students' ownership and pride in their work could clearly be seen.

Echoing Ramnath, there is also an expectation here in the United States that textbooks include certain exercises, activities, and tasks that support teachers in preparing students for specific tests. While this is generally true, I would argue that this is not to the same extent as seen in the English textbooks used in Thailand. In our case, as authors of the InterKulturell® series, we definitely aim to prepare students for passing the Advanced Placement German Language and Culture Exam (College Board, n.d.), which is often taken after four years of studying German at high school in the USA. Such practical aims have their place in the world of language acquisition, as they have obvious academic and professional benefits. While assessments that seek to rank students or prove their professional competence will never be perfect, it would be counterproductive to ignore them given that achieving some kind of professionally recognized competency is often the primary reason students pursue studying a language in the first place. What these articles argue, and I agree with, is that true language competency, which includes academic and professional competency, is best achieved with a mixed approach that empowers students to build stronger cognitive bridges through the use of more dynamic forms of learning.

Another article in this section of the book that caught my attention as a textbook author was Bangladeshi EFL Teachers' Views on the *English for Today* Textbook by Mohammod Moninoor Roshid, Md Zulfeqar Haider, and Hosne Ara Begum. In this article, the authors Ara Begum. In this article, the authors evaluate *English for Today*, the primary textbook used in Bangladeshi government-approved secondary schools. The evaluation process involves various criteria, including linguistic, sociocultural, pedagogical, technical, and general aspects. Surveys conducted with ELT teachers revealed positive perceptions of the textbook's focus on grammar rules and student-centered activities, but also highlighted shortcomings, such as insufficient vocabulary recycling and a lack of organized vocabulary lists. Furthermore, the authors found that inexperienced teachers had a "more positive perception" (p. 231) of the content than experienced teachers, as "the mean perception of the experienced teachers [were] generally found to be higher than those of the beginner in all selected areas expect two, [...] presentation of vocabulary and indication of pedagogical approaches" (p. 230).

I believe the difference in perception could stem from several factors. Experienced teachers generally have more extensive classroom experience, which allows them to critically evaluate and adapt teaching materials more effectively. Additionally, their deeper understanding of pedagogical and methodological approaches may lead them to appreciate less obviously apparent aspects of a textbook, such as its structure, content, or curricular goals. Inexperienced teachers, on the other hand, might be more focussed on immediate practical application of the textbook, such as the ease of implementing the materials into their daily lesson plans or how content might be adapted to fit the diverse learning needs of their students. The two areas where their perceptions align--presentation of vocabulary and indication of pedagogical approaches--suggest that both beginner and veteran teachers recognize limitations in these aspects. Vocabulary presentation is a clear, tangible element that all teachers can observe and assess, and the indication of pedagogical approaches might be either underdeveloped or too implicit for all teachers to navigate confidently, regardless of their experience level.

Despite these challenges, the study commended the textbook's physical design, the way it caters to diverse learning styles, and its potential to foster creative and critical thinking. Roshid et al. emphasize that textbooks play a significant role in language teaching and learning, serving as the second most important factor in foreign language education after teachers. Textbooks provide structure, language content, pre-made tasks, and cost-effective learning resources. However, they also come with limitations, such as potential gender biases, lack of cultural and linguistic diversity, and limited encouragement for student creativity. These issues often arise from the long shelf life of textbooks, which are difficult and costly to replace. Older textbooks tend to be overly prescriptive, making them less adaptable to social and cultural changes that influence student learning.

As Roshid et al. point out, "developing an appropriate English textbook [or any language textbook] is a challenging task [...]. It requires time, energy, and expertise, and special consideration" (p. 232). Even when all contributors are experts in the field, some content, such as cultural facts, can become outdated by the time the book is published. This underscores the importance of continuous evaluation and improvement of teaching materials, as seen with *English for Today*, which provides "a number of avenues to exploit creativity [and] promote critical thinking" (p. 228).

Conclusion

In reflecting on the "puzzles" central to my practice—engaging learners meaningfully and fostering their creativity in dynamic, real-world contexts—this exploration of ELT materials development has revealed valuable insights. Incorporating approaches like process drama, literature, ICT integration, and genre-based tasks underscores the importance of active, student-centered engagement. These methodologies allow students to interact with the target language in ways that are personally relevant and culturally meaningful, transforming passive learning into an immersive experience.

Drawing from my own experiences in incorporating drama and improvisation, as well as collaborative materials development, the challenge of balancing creative engagement with practical constraints remains a key focus. Just as my students have thrived through activities like role-playing and theater performances, so too must materials be designed to reflect the diverse cultural and linguistic realities learners face. By integrating technology and interactive tasks, we can offer more personalized and adaptive resources that cater to various learning environments and needs.

Ultimately, this dialogue between creativity and structure reminds us that the most effective materials are those that invite learners to take ownership of their language use. Whether through process drama, ICT integration, or literature, the goal is to create spaces where students not only use the language but also see its relevance in their lives. In doing so, we respond to the diverse cultural and educational contexts in which we teach, ensuring that our materials remain dynamic, responsive, and engaging.

In conclusion, this exploration of ELT materials development highlights the crucial interplay between creativity and structure in designing effective language learning resources. This dialogue is particularly relevant in my practice as a German language educator and textbook co-author, where I constantly navigate the challenge of engaging students meaningfully while accommodating diverse learning environments. The insights from Dat Bao's compilation, Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development, reveal a pressing need for innovative approaches that empower both educators and learners. By incorporating methodologies such as process drama, ICT integration, and genre-based tasks, we can transform conventional paradigms and offer culturally relevant language experiences that resonate with students on a personal level.

As we strive to design materials that foster authentic interaction with the target language, the goal remains to create dynamic and responsive resources that invite learners to take ownership of their language use. This requires a careful balance of creativity and practicality, where flexibility and adaptability are prioritized. Ultimately, our commitment to fostering learner agency and engagement is essential to addressing the ongoing puzzles in materials development. Moving forward, it is imperative that we integrate these principles into our teaching practices and coursebook development, ensuring that creativity remains at the forefront as we respond to the diverse cultural and educational contexts in which we operate. In doing so, we not only enrich our students' language learning experiences but also contribute to a more vibrant and innovative landscape in language education.

Review Process

This article was open peer-reviewed by Stacey Vye and Katherine Thornton of the Learner Development Journal Review Network and Andy Barfield from the Journal Steering Group. *(Contributors have the option of open or blind peer review.)*

Author Bio

Originally from Pforzheim, Germany, Melanie Mello has lived in the U.S. since 2005. She is an accomplished educator specializing in German language instruction with over 16 years of teaching experience at the elementary through the collegiate levels. Melanie has been recognized for her outstanding contributions to language education, including being named one of the five finalists for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' Teacher of the Year Award in 2020 and honored as the Distinguished Alumna of the College of Humanities & Fine Arts (CSU, Chico) in 2023. Currently, she is teaching German as a Faculty Associate for the School of International Letters and Cultures at Arizona State University and co-authoring the intermediate-level book in the Interkulturell series (Wayside Publishing). As a German Educational Multiplier within the Goethe-Institut's Teacher Training Program, she actively promotes the advancement of German language education in the USA.

Melanie Melloはドイツのプフォルツハイム出身で、2005年からアメリカに在住している。ドイツ語教育の専門家として、小学校から大学レベルまで16年以上の指導経験を持つ優れた教育者である。2020年にはアメリカ外国語教

育評議会の年間優秀教師賞の最終候補者5名のうちの1人に選ばれ、2023年にはカリフォルニア州立大学チコ校人文・美術学部の優秀卒業生として表彰された。現在、アリゾナ州立大学の国際言語文化学部の准教授としてドイツ語を教えながら、中級者向け教科書のInterkulturellシリーズの共著者としても活動している。また、ゲーテ・インスティテュート教員研修プログラムのドイツ語教育推進担当として、アメリカにおけるドイツ語教育の発展に尽力している。

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