A Case Study on the Development of English Vocabulary Learning Materials for Young Learners

Lee, Bo-kyung & Kim, Haedong
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea

ABSTRACT

The aim of this presentation is to describe the procedures for developing English vocabulary learning materials for primary school students in Korea. To be specific, this presentation attempts to identify i) what difficulty the materials developer had in designing materials and ii) what procedures she has taken to develop the target materials. Two sets of English textbooks for American primary school students were obtained and the frequency of vocabulary was analyzed. On the basis of the analysis, corpus-informed vocabulary practice textbook was developed. A three-stage of pre-, main, and post-writing process was employed. The materials developer reported that at the pre-writing stage she had difficulty in typing and sorting a full-list of vocabulary presented in American primary school textbooks. At the main stage she had difficulty in writing a narrative which included key vocabulary. The detailed descriptions of difficulties and procedures presented here should be helpful information to organize an effective materials development program for training materials developers.

Key words: materials development / corpus-based

I. Introduction

This presentation attempts to describe ELT materials writing procedures. The target users of materials are Koran primary school students who study English from American textbooks for native English speakers. The materials writing process will be outlined according to the three different stages of pre-writing, main writing, and post-writing process.

II. Theoretical Backgrounds

1. Materials development

In the field of studies on ELT materials, theory and practice on materials development has recently become a well-acknowledged issue. Many specialized books on 'materials development' or 'design' have recently published, such as *Materials evaluation and design for language teaching* (McGrath, 2002), *Developing materials for language teaching* (Tomlinson, 2003), and *Designing authenticity into language learning materials* (Mishan, 2005). These books usually propose a certain type of materials for the development of ELT materials. With regard to the practical aspect of materials development, there have been some case studies on materials development; such as the Brunei textbook development project (Leburn, 1991), the Namibian textbook project (Tomlinson, 1995), the Rumanian textbook project (Popovici & Bolitho, 2003), or the *Spring Board* textbook project (Richard, 2001). These case studies should be helpful to organize an effective teacher-training program for

materials development or selection, evaluation and adaptation. This presentation also aims to provide useful information for setting up a materials development program or project.

2. Corpus-based materials development

The idea of using corpus data for classroom teaching and materials development is well known for ELT materials developers (Fox, 1998). Especially, McCarthy (2004) mentions that designing corpus-informed materials are special in the following ways; they are based on actual usage, specialized corpora can be analyzed and selected to meet the needs of particular groups of learners, the materials users can experience authentic language, and vocabulary can be prioritized on the basis of frequency and usefulness. As he mentions, the use of corpus data has a lot of positive effects for materials developers. This presentation aims to illustrate a specific usefulness of using corpus data for developing a vocabulary practice book.

III. Development Process

1. Contextual information

Recently, within the context of English language teaching in Korea, great attention has been paid to immersion programs. Accordingly, increasing interest in American textbooks for native English primary school students has emerged among teachers and parents. In response to this trend, lots of American textbooks have been imported and have sold well in Korea. Some learning materials which are intended to assist a learner in studying American textbooks have been developed domestically. Considering our young learners' difficulty due to social, cultural unfamiliarity with American textbook and its high-level academic vocabulary, it seems to be necessary to develop supplementary learning materials to assist Korean young learners using American textbooks.

2. Writing process

2-1. Pre-writing process: Vocabulary selection
Prior to the main materials writing, 'how to select the target vocabulary items' was the most important issue. Throughout an initial survey, it was found that, unlike Korea, American textbook publication has not been controlled by a national authorization system. In the USA, each state or each school has had a choice to select their own textbooks from several approved publishing companies' textbooks.

There have been about five major publishing companies' textbooks and they have been imported and have been available in Korea. Among the five publishing companies, two publishers' textbooks were selected with the criterion of 'popularity inside the States.' One was M publishing company's textbooks, and almost 40 % of the elementary schools in the States have adopted them. Especially, this company's textbooks were revised in 2007. The other was H publishing company's textbooks, which has been the choice of big four states (California, Texas, Florida, and New York) and been called 'the nation's choice.' In terms of subjects, only language arts and reading were taken into considerations and textbooks for grade 2 and 3 were chosen.

Through the above-mentioned process for the selection, four volumes from M Company and four from H Company, were finally obtained. Since the purpose of the supplementary materials was to assist learners to feel comfortable with the academic vocabulary in the textbooks, the vocabulary of the supplementary materials was selected on the basis of frequency of use. One hundred of the most frequently used academic vocabulary were selected for materials writing. In order to get this list of the vocabulary, the text of the eight volumes were converted into a computer text file, which were extremely laborious work, and the frequency-based word list[1] was obtained by Wordsmith tool 5.0. the one hundred highest-ranking academic words from the list were carefully selected and utilized for the main writing.

2-2. Main writing process: Creative and tortuous activity

After the target vocabulary list was obtained, the main writing process started. The concept of the book which the publishing company intended at the planning stage was 'an American textbook-based, enjoyable, amusing, and story-driven vocabulary book.' Therefore, in order to attract learners' attention and eventually help them acquire the words, the way of presenting the words was carefully considered.

The finalized manuscript was divided into three parts. The first Part 1 was a story-driven introduction of a new word and its family words (restricted to three items). The second Part 2 presented an expansion toward synonyms, antonyms and collocations. The last Part 3 includes the example sentences of the words which were extracted from the American textbooks. In introduction part, a short story was created by the author to explain the target words including family words. The story was written in Korean, but the target words were inserted into the story in English. This work was simultaneously the most painful and the most enjoyable since the target word and family words should be contextually included in one short narrative. In the second expansion part, three or four new words were presented with Korean explanations. In the last part of example sentences, three or four sentences including the target words or family words were presented with Korean translations.

2-3. Post-writing process: designing and proofreading

This last stage of materials development work was carried out with editors and designers of the publishing company. The author was also responsible for proofreading and layout improvement.   Figure 1 below shows, a sample page.

[Figure 1] The Tentative Design of a Chapter of the Book

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[1] The information on the size and other statistical data of corpus will not be included in this paper, but presented later on presentation.

IV. Conclusion

The conclusions which can be drawn from the experience of developing corpus-based vocabulary learning materials for Korean EFL young learners are these: 1) From the vocabulary selection to designing and proofreading, the materials developer should be well aware and in charge of all relevant work. It means that the materials developers are supposed to be an expert in all the related fields such as corpus-data analysis and materials designing. 2) Especially, corpus based data could be useful resources for materials writing as long as a materials developer is familiar with how to use the related computer software. 3) When writing a set of materials, the materials developer should always keep in mind that the final users of the materials are learners. It means the materials should be learner-friendly. The difficulties and procedures presented here will be useful information for future materials developers. We hope that we can access more studies on materials development in the future as well.

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About the Presenters

Lee, Bo-kyung received her MA from International Graduate School of English and is doing her PhD in TESOL at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Korea. She is the author of many ELT textbooks for adults. Her research interest includes materials development, writing and vocabulary.

Haedong Kim received his MA and PhD in ELT from University of Essex in the UK. He is an associate professor in English Education at Graduate School of Education at Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Korea. His research interest includes materials, program, teacher and learner evaluation.