# Going digital: materials writing in the digital age

Kat Robb describes some of the issues writers are having to deal with as publishers go digital.

The shift from print to digital

Technology has changed the way people think, and the way people learn. While it is arguable when educational technology first became integrated into teaching and learning, what is clear is that the emergence of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) was game changing. In addition to the increase in computational power and the ubiquity of the internet, radical changes were made to the way teaching and learning could be delivered which consequently had a huge impact on materials writing.
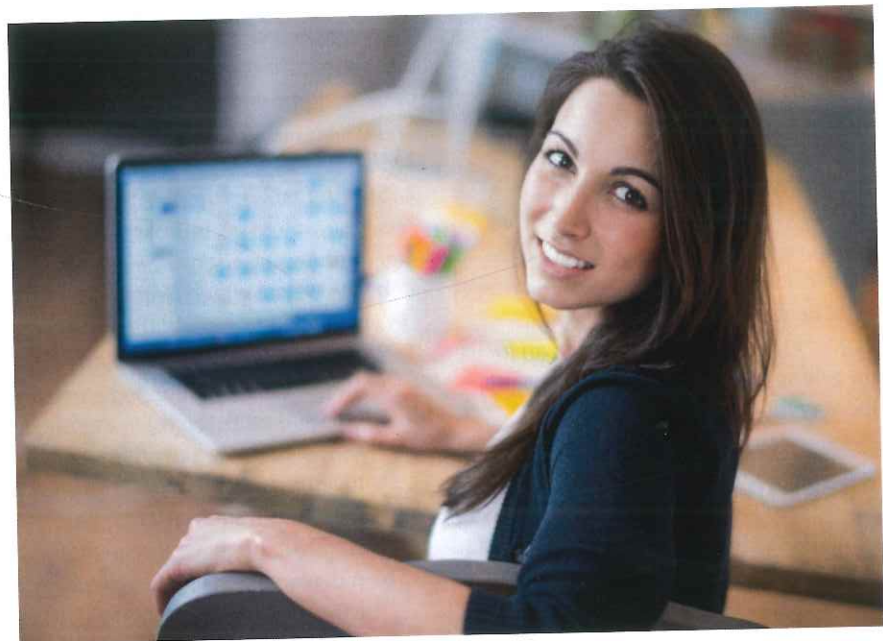
Materials

How can material meet the needs of all learners? The majority of printed material focuses on informing learners about specific language features and providing ways for them to practise it. According to Tomlinson (2012), materials can be categorised into five types:

1. **Informative** – informing the learner about the target language
2. **Instructional** – guiding the learner in practising the language
3. **Experiential** – providing the learning with experience of the language in use
4. **Eliciting** – encouraging the learner to use the language
5. **Exploratory** – helping the learner to make discoveries about the language

(Tomlinson, 2012: 143)

How does this framework map onto digital materials authoring?

The changing sands of societal habits, as a result of the increased incorporation of electronic devices in our lives, is having a huge impact on materials writing. Not only is technology steering the way learning is going, but society is also shaping the process and content of new technological innovations that are created around the demands and enquiry of society. Apparently, a picture speaks a thousand words, but does that also represent digital pictures? What about if the images are not static but dynamic, and they also incorporate audio? Have new technologies revolutionised digital authoring? Are pedagogical decisions and learning objectives changing in response to the way they are presented digitally or on an online platform from print format? In our keenness to embrace technology, are we forgetting the fundamental pedagogical tenets of learning?

The digital shift

Face-to-face learning has always had the potential to be interactive as long as there has been a teacher or another pupil to interact with. Now the interaction can stretch worldwide as a result of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Learning has taken on a different identity as blended courses, distance learning and technology creep their way into our bulging agendas. Distance learning has taken on a totally different shape, and

endless learning possibilities have been opened up because of the digital age we live in that is dominated by electronic devices. This is all good and well, but if the teacher-learner ratio is 1:15,000 as is often the case with a MOOC, how can we be sure learning or even interaction is taking place?

Some would argue that asynchronous learning is more convenient, and that this provides the opportunity for the learner to engage with learning when they are 'ready', and that the digital computer mediated environment opens up many more learning opportunities, and motivates learners because of the medium of presentation. One of the major issues with people wanting to learn a language is time. Time to attend classes, time to complete homework and time to review notes; and this is where digital learning has shaken up learning – while the learning still takes the same time, motivations have changed. Digital learning is self-directed with students taking more responsibility for their learning, by exercising learner autonomy and engaging with the learning process at a time that suits them.

Others would argue that in an e-learning context, a student is prone to frustration because of the technical skills required, the isolation, and because an online class lacks the built-in conventions of the traditional classroom. Ironically, many digital materials solutions try to replicate the face-to-face model by incorporating synchronous sessions to enable learners to feel part of a group or learning community.

Apps

One of the main influences for materials authoring regarding digital format has been from app design. The surge of mobile phone app design has also had a great impact on how digital technologies have been exploited for language learning. The addiction to smartphone use has resulted in the creation of a dizzying quantity of apps to satiate the screen culture hunger of society today, and so the cycle keeps running. What began as a digital dictionary contained in a tiny electronic square has evolved into entire language

learning courses contained within an app. The challenges of competing with software architects globally that are presenting language learning in this way are ever apparent when you try for yourself to design an online learning platform with a limited template. Ease of use is imperative because it can have a direct effect on motivation. If a digital learning tool is not user friendly, motivation is greatly reduced and this can have a negative impact on learning outcomes.

Going mobile

Learning no longer takes place strictly in a classroom, by correspondence course or at home. It is taking place on the move while learners try to take advantage of lost moments while commuting or waiting for an appointment, class or to meet somebody. Taking advantage of the time we dedicate to other less cognitive activities, we open language-learning apps, check our online learning platforms for messages from tutors and other participants, and listen to language learning podcasts. All of these changing faces of learning have resulted in a direct change in the way materials are created and presented. Not only have learner expectations changed in a society that is dominated by electronic devices, screens that are swiped, tapped, spoken to and watched, but the contexts and learning objectives have also changed. All these shifts, transitions and changes in learning, are quite obviously having a huge impact on the learning materials used, and of course authoring.

Instructional technology

The change in medium over which instruction is transmitted is a concern for materials writers who are not comfortable with educational technology and instructional design. In addition, there are the added challenges of glitches in technology when delivering a lesson that depends on a specific language-learning tool. A gap fill still continues to be a gap fill if it is delivered via a piece of software or online, but somehow it feels different, more exciting and perhaps more

motivating. Instructional technologists take great care to carefully select and design materials to ensure an effective delivery and that pedagogical needs are met, but this is not without a considerable amount of time and dedication. Meeting learner needs is easier when the learners are in front of you and lessons can be shaped accordingly, but when the person who has designed the digital learning material is different from the person delivering the course, problems can arise, and perhaps the user experience is not quite what it should or could be.

So what differentiates printed materials from digital?

When creating materials for print, I am considering how the teacher would be able to best exploit them to reach the learning objectives of the lesson. There will no doubt be a mingling activity, maybe even slips of paper with problem solution situations, and definitely a collaborative task whether it is based around written or spoken discourse. The same activity in a digital environment will usually be produced with the intention of self-motivated learning and the absence of a teacher, therefore the pedagogy changes. Take, for example, a functional language lesson about complaining. The printed materials may start with the model of a letter of complaint for students to identify the theme of the lesson, and have something to refer back to. The teacher could then ask students to discuss personal experiences of complaining together, finishing with an open-class discussion, and eliciting language to use when wanting to complain. Complaint situation cards could be distributed to the students, who in pairs compile a letter of complaint. If the same lesson were to be created for a digital context, I would start with a short video clip from YouTube to demonstrate the theme of the lesson and situate the students accordingly. There would be a set of questions to prompt students to think about personal experiences and make notes, but the lack of face-to-face interaction would require either more example videos or a different

channel of media being opened up, for example a podcast. This eliminates the collaborative learning in a face-to-face situation, unless learners are then prompted to share experiences in an online space. There is a big difference between a VLE that promotes this kind of interaction, and a digital course that the learner works through independently. If no feedback is given by other participants on the course or the course tutor, motivation often wavers. User experience (UX) and instructional design (ID) are the tenets of digital materials because if they offer a bad UX and the ID is not user friendly, learners will lose motivation and not continue.

Conclusion

I write both print and digital material for teaching and teacher training, and while I enjoy the digital authoring more, it is most definitely more pedagogically challenging because I am aware that

the tasks and activities have to motivate the learners/teachers to engage in self-study without the prompting of a teacher or trainer in a face-to-face context where printed materials are used. I think the distinguishing factor between print and digital materials is the interaction required because while printed matter is used in a face-to-face context, it is nowadays digitally produced, and the end product is print; whereas material produced for an online learning context remains digital, and can easily be updated and modified. The pedagogical goals in a face-to-face and online context may be the same, but the path of reaching them is considerably different. What differentiates language learning from other online courses is as McCarthy says, 'language learning is special, it is both the medium and the goal of the teaching and learning' (McCarthy, 2016: 218). Whether it be print or digital, let's maintain the goal of teaching and learning.

References

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