

DEVELOPING MATERIALS FOR YOUNG LEARNERS¹

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***Abstract:** The article views the principles of materials development for young learners. It suggests a three-steps model in teaching materials development. The first step is reading and reviewing picture books and thinking of possible activities, the second one is choosing suitable video materials and creating activities for the corresponding age group – primary students or pre-school children, and the third step is creating their own stories, visualizing and digitalizing them and creating activities. Finally, it presents materials for young and very young learners developed by the student teachers at College – Dobrich, Shumen University.*

***Key words:** materials development, young learners, 21st century skills, literacy types*

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Introduction

Young and very young learners are an extremely dynamic audience. They play all the time, they live in the fairy world of games and tales. During this play they show and acquire interactive models, communicate and learn language, acquire language and communicative skills and strategies. Their motivation varies depending on whether the activity is interesting and funny for them. They need magic, they need emotion, rich visualization, and action. Their short attention span necessitates short and attractive activities, that they would take to their out of class play. On the other hand, they remember fast if proper strategies are used and with suitable activities for reinforcement and repetition, they retain material in the long-term memory. They get bored easily and at the same time they can repeat the same game or refrain a lot of times if they enjoy it. If they like the activity, we have found the key to successful learning / acquisition. All these characteristics have to be born in mind when designing activities and materials for young and very young learners.

Language teaching materials

In Tomlinson's opinion materials are "anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language" (Tomlinson 2006: 2) (audio and video materials, books, advertisements, etc.) and

"Materials development refers to anything which is done by writers, teachers or learners to provide sources of language input and to exploit those sources in ways which maximise the likelihood of intake: in other words, the supplying information about and/or experience of the language in ways designed to promote language learning." (writing books, telling stories, reading poems, etc.) (Tomlinson 2006: 2).

Materials have to provide experience or texts for the learners to respond to (Tomlinson 2013a). They have to ensure a whole person approach that provokes emotions, attitudes, opinions and ideas. "Materials should achieve impact (through novelty, variety, surprise, bizarreness, attractive presentation and appealing content)." (Tomlinson 2013: 28). This coincides with Ilieva's (2015: 142, 144) opinion that the strangest pictures and the expressions with rhymes are remembered for life and that the memory of the picture activates the expression (e.g. a ... ful of ... ("a glass full of

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apples”), “a frog jumping over a sock,” “a mouse jumping over a house”). Children remember best while having fun, laughing, enjoying the language play. Moreover, Cives-Enriquez (2013) recommends pleasant, relaxed atmosphere, stimulating environment and interesting classes even for adult learners.

On the basis of Shin (2006), Tomlinson (2006) and Stec (2016) we have reached to the following principles of materials development:

Materials for young learners have to be

- attractive (bright and colourful, with movement, to provoke emotions)
- interesting

Materials for young learners have to

- provide useful vocabulary and grammar in a memorable way
- provoke emotions and joy
- provide potential for practise (to provide rich context and opportunities for task development)
- develop 21st century skills and multiple literacies
- contribute to the holistic development of the child.

In Tomlinson’s (2013) opinion, developing humanistic resources, necessitates a multidimensional approach. This approach “aims to help learners to develop the ability to produce and process an L2 by using their mental resources in ways similar to those they use when communicating in their L1;” it is based “on the principle that using affect, mental imagery and inner speech is what we do during effective language use and what we do during effective and durable learning.” The materials we suggest in our three-steps model: picture books, video materials with songs, and digital stories are multimodal and multidimensional, they provoke affect and emotion, create integrative (or cross-curricular) links, aid the development of the 21st century skills and multiple literacies and contribute to the holistic development of the child.

Student Teachers’ Preparation

We teach the student teachers at College – Dobrich, Shumen University to apply these principles to topics, texts and activities. These students are going to teach primary school or pre-school children.

Step 1

As part of their language and methodological preparation in English language, 2nd year student teachers read at least 15 books for children (usually picture books). These are books like Goodnight, Moon by Margaret Wise-Brown, Peter Rabbit and other stories by Beatrix Potter, modern books for children like The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle (1969), Franklin by Paulette Bourgeois (1986), Monkey Puzzle by Julia Donaldson (2000), Nibbles, The Book Monster by Emma Yarlett (2016), The Odd Egg by Emma Garvett (2017). In connection to the nowadays situation (pandemia, online teaching, closed libraries), we allow using online libraries², in normal conditions students use real paper books but not traditional stories (Charles Perrault, The Grimm Brothers). We use books created for very young native speakers:

² <https://www.kidsworldfun.com/ebooks/>
<https://sooperbooks.com/story>
<http://www.magickeys.com/books>

children's books are rich in colour, rich in fonts and size of the text – they grab and retain children's attention, some of them have moving parts, flip covers – these pictures visualize the text and at the same time provoke emotional reactions.

The students make a reading diary containing the following information: title, author, publisher, year of publication, short biography of the author, short description of the content, the characters, etc. They respond the questions: What did I learn? (grammar and vocabulary), What will I teach the learners? (grammar and vocabulary). They consider topics for discussion, possible cross-curricular links, the multiple literacies and 21st century skills they can develop through the book and think of activities based on the book that can help them teach the vocabulary and grammar they have planned to, that can realize the potential cross-curricular links and develop some of the literacies and skills they have marked. In order to choose the literacies and skills they can develop, they fill in special literacies and skills forms for each book (for the literacies form see Ilieva 2021, for the skills form see the Appendix). These forms are open and the students add new items.

Ghosn (2013: 256) recommends using big books as a motivational factor, grabbing learners' attention because they present "highly contextualized language and repetitive refrains" and can include all topics: home, school experience, subject-matter related topics, they ensure interest, motivation, success, foster confidence.

Step 2

At the end of their second year, student teachers receive a list of topics:

- colours
- numbers
- fruits
- vegetables
- food and drink (countable / uncountable nouns and their determiners (a / an / some))
- meeting people, saying "hello" and "goodbye," greeting people
- animals
- family
- body parts and face, describing appearance
- clothes
- environment (river, lake, forest, park, mountains, sea)
- weather and seasons
- vehicles and *travel by*
- house (rooms and furniture)

They find free video clips with songs or rhymes on these topics. A criterion is that there is a text (with sentences) and not only enumerating words. Choosing these video materials, students have to bear in mind the characteristic features of young or very young learners, the most important points from their diaries (grammar and vocabulary they would teach, discussion topics, cross-curricular links), the two forms (literacies and skills), and they have to think of additional activities based on these materials for future primary school teachers and of a whole situation plan based on a number of activities contextualized by this video material for future pre-school teachers.

Rixon (2013: 235) finds useful and enjoyable to use "rhymes, chants or other fun and memorable oral / aural work" to familiarize the learners with the sound system

of English, Ilieva (2015) uses such materials for lexical approach work (for the acquisition of vocabulary and grammar through memorizing whole phrases).

Step 3

During their third year at the college student teachers create digital stories keeping in mind the characteristic features of their potential learners, the vocabulary and grammar they would like to teach, the topics they would like to discuss creating links to other subjects reinforcing the notions they have already taught in Bulgarian, and the forms (the literacies and skills they would like to develop through the story).

This three-steps preparation gradually leads students to creating their activities and finally their own materials.

Maley (2013: 176) discussing creativity in materials writing, describes “a whole new way of approaching language learning aesthetically, through integrating the use of the arts”, music, drama. He suggests that playing is important “both as materials writers, and in fostering the playful element in learning”. For creative materials writing Maley (2013) emphasizes as important “drawing on other domains, outside language pedagogy” (integrative links between the disciplines); relying on the learners’ creative potential, keeping in mind that “not everything is fun and games,” and at the same time “that delight and pleasure are an integral part of the process.” Using picture books as a basis of teaching, video materials as context of language and skills development activities and digital stories, is an example of creative language teaching to young learners. All these materials foster cross-curricular links, create context for language play and creative activities.

According to Kiddle (2013), digital language learning materials have to develop cultural and social competencies and skills as play (experimenting), performance, simulation, appropriation, multitasking, collective intelligence, navigation, networking, negotiation. He (Kiddle 2013: 193) also states that we need “materials and tools that allow embedding of multimedia content within a single area;” “materials and tools which allow the user to incorporate voice, video, audio, image and text.” Our final product, digital stories created by the student teachers, are such material, they unite all mentioned above. Cultural and social competences are included in the multiple literacies and 21st century skills and contribute to the holistic development of the child.

Materials created by student teachers

The results of the students’ work are

- 3 articles providing practical storytelling ideas, a story and activities to it:

The Adventure of the Three Sisters (Tsoneva 2020) is a story visualized with pictures by the author. There are four activities realizing cross-curricular links to other subjects. The author considers that the material can develop 13 types of literacies (language and discourse, visual, environmental and nature, nutritional, home, school, social, mathematical, evaluative, learning, emotional) and 16 skills (comparing and contrasting, describing, evaluating, explaining, tracking cause and effect, entertaining, imagining, improvising, listening actively, speaking, turn taking, collaborate with others, present, cooperation, compromise, communication).

Dara (Grozdeva 2021) is a story about the little Dara, her puppy Hera, their friendship and their adventures. Grozdeva (2021) suggests a lesson plan with six activities based on the story. She thinks she develops 11 types of literacies (language and discourse, environmental and nature, connections, home, social, kinesthetic,

mathematical, learning, emotional) and 19 skills (describing, explaining, tracking cause and effect, entertaining, imagining, improvising, questioning, analysing the situation, listening actively, speaking, turn taking, decision-making, collaborate with others, research, create, cooperation, compromise, communication, trusting others).

A Summer Memory (Tsoneva and Baychev 2021) is another magical story by Andreyana Tsoneva, illustrated by the author. There is also a song by Tsoneva and Baychev and a videoclip to the song created by Sofiya Yordanova (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfRCyBKXNRo&feature=youtu.be>). There are activities based on the story developing the learners' vocabulary stock, realizing cross-curricular links, activities connected to playing, singing, dancing. The publication is a product of team work. The story and the activities can develop 12 types of literacies (language and discourse, visual, environmental and nature, social, dance, kinesthetic, multimedia, evaluative, learning, emotional) and 14 skills (analyzing, describing, explaining, tracking cause and effect, creating, entertaining, imagining, improvising, listening actively, speaking, turn taking, collaborate with others, cooperation, communication).

- one digital book for children (Stoyanova 2020): the story of Fin losing his ears is a story of friendship practising animals, parts of the body, of the house, including adventure and investigation; it can develop 11 types of literacies (language and discourse, visual, environmental and nature, community, connections, home, social, kinesthetic, multimedia) and 18 skills (analyzing, describing, explaining, problem solving, tracking cause and effect, entertaining, imagining, questioning, analyzing the situation, evaluating messages, following conversations, listening actively, decision-making, collaborate with others, cooperation, communication, using emotional intelligence, trusting others).
- and a collection of stories (Ilieva 2020):

There are 11 stories created by the student teachers practising a variety of vocabulary and grammar, suggesting short activities after each story. They all provide context for teaching vocabulary and/or grammar items, for the development of 21st century skills and multiple literacies and contribute to various aspects of the holistic development of the child.

Conclusion

The suggested three-steps model equips the future teachers with a small corpus of picture books, of video-clips on key for the primary and pre-primary language learning topics and with a collection of digital stories (they are stimulated to exchange their materials). They have thought of possible activities on these materials and the whole group have discussed and given more ideas. All these materials and activities are considered in relation to fun and motivation, topics, vocabulary and grammar they can teach, the skills and literacies they develop, the aspects of the holistic development of the child they contribute to.

Appendix
Form for 21st century skills development

Title

| № | 21 st century skill | Tick if can be developed through this text | Integrative links to subjects | Activities |
|----|---|--|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1 | Critical thinking | | | |
| 2 | analyzing | | | |
| 3 | arguing | | | |
| 4 | classifying | | | |
| 5 | comparing and contrasting | | | |
| 6 | defining | | | |
| 7 | describing | | | |
| 8 | evaluating | | | |
| 9 | explaining | | | |
| 10 | problem solving | | | |
| 11 | tracking cause and effect | | | |
| 12 | Creativity | | | |
| 13 | brainstorming | | | |
| 14 | creating | | | |
| 15 | designing | | | |
| 16 | entertaining (telling stories, making jokes, singing songs, playing games, acting out parts, making conversation) | | | |
| 17 | imagining | | | |
| 18 | improvising | | | |
| 19 | innovating | | | |
| 20 | overturning (to get a new perspective) | | | |
| 21 | problem solving | | | |
| 22 | questioning | | | |
| 23 | Communication | | | |
| 24 | analyzing the situation | | | |
| 25 | choosing a medium | | | |
| 26 | evaluating messages | | | |
| 27 | following conversations | v | | |
| 28 | listening actively | V | | |
| 29 | reading | | | |
| 30 | speaking | V | | |
| 31 | turn taking | v | | |
| 32 | using technology | | | |
| 33 | writing | | | |
| 34 | Collaboration | | | |
| 35 | allocating resources | | | |

| | | | | |
|----|--|--|--|--|
| 36 | brainstorming | | | |
| 37 | decision-making | | | |
| 38 | delegating (“assigning duties to members of the group“ and expecting them to fulfill their parts of the task) | | | |
| 39 | evaluating (“the products, processes, and members of the group“ – consider “what is working well and what improvements could be made“ (Magner et al 2011 8)) | | | |
| 40 | goal setting | | | |
| 41 | leading | | | |
| 42 | managing time | | | |
| 43 | resolving conflicts | | | |
| 44 | team building | | | |
| | | | | |
| 45 | Flexibility | | | |
| 46 | set goals | | | |
| 47 | seek answers | | | |
| 48 | navigate information | | | |
| 49 | collaborate with others | | | |
| 50 | create something, evaluate their work, improve it, share it with the world | | | |
| 51 | Initiative | | | |
| 52 | question | | | |
| 53 | plan | | | |
| 54 | research | | | |
| 55 | create | | | |
| 56 | improve | | | |
| 57 | present | | | |
| 58 | Social skills | | | |
| 59 | cooperation | | | |
| 60 | compromise | | | |
| 61 | decision making | | | |
| 62 | communication | | | |
| 63 | using emotional intelligence | | | |
| 64 | using constructive criticism | | | |
| 65 | trusting others | | | |
| 66 | delivering on promises | | | |
| 67 | coordinating work | | | |
| 68 | Productivity | | | |
| 69 | goal setting | | | |
| 70 | planning | | | |
| 71 | time management | | | |

| | | | | |
|----|--|--|--|--|
| 72 | research | | | |
| 73 | development | | | |
| 74 | evaluation | | | |
| 75 | revision | | | |
| 76 | application | | | |
| 77 | Leadership | | | |
| 78 | identify goals | | | |
| 79 | inspire others to share those goals | | | |
| 80 | organize a group so that all members can contribute according to their abilities | | | |
| 81 | resolve conflicts among members | | | |
| 82 | encourage the group to reach their goals | | | |
| 83 | help group members solve problems and improve performance | | | |
| 84 | give credit where it is due | | | |
| | Total number of skills developed: | | | |

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