

# Using teacher-generated biography as input material

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*This article discusses the use of teacher-generated biographical material as a vehicle for introducing culture-based content into the classroom. The use of teacher-generated material is important, because whilst learners may wish for more cultural content, they do not always want to deal with the kind of 'issues-based' topics which typify many coursebooks, preferring instead to experience the L2 culture(s) in more accessible ways. Teacher-generated biography can provide precisely the accessibility that learners need, and through the personal life experiences, past and present, of the teacher, they can access numerous sociocultural themes at 'first hand'. This implies a new and perhaps novel role for the teacher as the producer and resource of input material, but it also implies new roles for learners, as active participants in materials development via co-operative selection/development of material. The rationale behind the concept of teacher-generated biography is described here with reference to adult General English students in Japan.*

## Introduction

The teacher as cultural resource

References to the importance of exploiting the learner's knowledge, background, and culture as a source of content for the classroom are fairly well documented in the literature (Cook 1983; Prodromou 1992, 1995: 20; Green *et al.* 1997: 136). Not so much has been written, however, about what the teacher, in the role of 'teacher-as-cultural-resource', can contribute personally to content. The need to consider this potentially rich and often untapped aspect of the teacher's repertoire arose in my own teaching situation as a result of demands from my students (pre-intermediate to intermediate level Japanese engineers, who were studying on an in-house General English course) for more emphasis on learning about Western culture in their classes.

'Big C' vs. 'small c' culture

What my students wanted, however, was to experience culture with a 'small c' (Adaskou *et al.* 1990; Tomalin and Stempleski 1998), that is, a more personalized focus on sociocultural aspects of the day-to-day lives and influences, past and present, of English-speakers, particularly in the UK and USA—countries to which some of my students may eventually transfer. A survey of standard coursebooks revealed a common focus on culture with a 'Big C', (Adaskou *et al.* 1990; Tomalin and Stempleski 1998), typically 'issues-based', and dealing with familiar topics such as 'the Environment' or 'Relationships'. This approach to teaching culture can often seem remote and rather abstract to students, and certainly, in my

case, I could not imagine my students being motivated or inspired by such input. At a deeper level, my students' proposal for more cultural input was prompted by the interest and curiosity which they felt toward me as a representative of the L2 culture married to a Japanese, and it seems that they were looking for some way to experience and connect at 'first hand' with the sociocultural and cross-cultural issues implied in such a scenario.

### Teacher biography as material

To return to the idea of 'teacher-as-resource', I began to explore the idea of utilizing teacher-generated biography as input material. This can range from teacher-created (and unscripted) written or taped material (see Appendix 1 for written input example); relating past or present events in the teacher's life; to simple realia items, for example, photographs, postcards, memorabilia, and official documents, such as marriage certificates, passports, and driving licences. Of course, using realia in the classroom is hardly a new idea. What makes it novel in this case is the way the material is used to focus upon the personal experiences of the teacher in relation to particular sociocultural themes, as a way in to a wider examination of the culture in question, dealing with cross-cultural issues along the way. Teacher-generated input of this nature offers an almost unlimited supply of rich, original, and stimulating material. It is also, in a sense, a tool of empowerment and recognition of the teacher as a 'significant factor in determining success of a new syllabus or materials' (Dubin and Olshtain 1986: 31). Teacher empowerment in this case does not undermine the principle of building a learner-centred environment, but rather enhances the idea by recognizing the importance of learner input in the overall context of teacher-learner co-operation in the central task of determining and developing content.

### Why biography?

#### Three main reasons

Block (1991) cites three reasons for using teacher-made materials in the classroom: contextualization, timeliness, and the personal touch. Teacher-biographical material, if carefully prepared and presented, can fulfil all of these conditions. The material is contextualized to the extent that it is created and presented as unscripted, authentic, input relating to events and experiences in the teacher's life. The question of timeliness is by-passed, in so far as whatever the time frame of the material, by virtue of being introduced to students by the main actor in the event, both the event and the material are bestowed with present-time relevance. But perhaps the most important of Block's three reasons is 'the personal touch'. As Block points out, personalized materials are appreciated and valued by learners as evidence of teacher commitment (ibid: 214). They are immediately more relevant and accessible to learners, as well, and therefore far more likely to achieve the objective of stimulating learners' curiosity as a prerequisite to motivating them to engage productively with the topic matter of each lesson.

### Why teacher-made?

The coursebook cannot provide everything—teacher imagination and creativity can fill the gap.

Allwright, commenting on the inadequacies of the textbook, observes:

The whole business of the management of language learning is far too complex to be satisfactorily catered for by a pre-packaged set of decisions embodied in teaching materials. (Allwright 1981: 9)

According to this view, the coursebook is not enough, since what is to be

learnt in the classroom consists of more than what the content of pre-packaged coursebooks can provide. Clearly, in order to achieve a balanced syllabus the teacher must supplement material according to the needs of particular groups of learners. The provision of teacher-generated, personalized biographical material offers a creative way to do this. Quite simply, in almost inverse proportion to the potential limitations of the coursebook, content derived from teacher-generated biography appears to be limited only by the power of the teacher's imagination and creativity. This is an important point which goes to the need to '... investigate the range of content types that may suit our students and our educational goals' (Cook 1983: 229), and then to feed this knowledge back into the classroom in the form of greater variety and diversity on the one hand, and more relevance in terms of learner interest on the other.

What about course goals?

As Johnson (1989) has noted, a major cause of mismatch between materials and learners results from mistaken assumptions on the part of materials writers about learners' proficiency levels. This type of mismatch is certainly not uncommon in my mixed ability classes. However, in many coursebooks one often finds a culture mismatch, caused by mistaken assumptions regarding the type of cultural focus that students are prepared to deal with. For some inexplicable reason, many materials writers assume that on reaching 'intermediate' level, students suddenly acquire an overwhelming desire to engage in discussion about world-important events. While the culture goals of my course could not be achieved by using material of that type, by creating site-specific cultural material, both proficiency and culture mismatches can be more easily avoided.

**Real vs. imaginary content**  
Teachers have real experiences too

Cook (1983: 229) points out that 'Typical content has been imaginary characters and information. "Real" content, based on the world outside the classroom, has been comparatively rare'. Cook goes on to list academic subjects, student-contributed input, literature, the culture of the L2 countries, and facts about the world, as examples of real content. The notion of real content is important for the provision of teacher-generated biographical material, since it touches upon a major aim of the course: to promote two-way cross-cultural communication in the classroom, and *not* teacher lectures/monologues. And so, whilst the initial focus of teacher-generated material will obviously be upon the teacher's experiences, the requirement for students to contribute actively and share their own ideas and experiences—as participants in content development—is explicitly recognized.

Is this authentic material?

Discussion about real content inevitably leads into the issue of authenticity. Authenticity (of materials and tasks) is a complex issue. Widdowson (1996) discusses authenticity as a feature of the learner's interpretation of the second language based on his or her 'primary experience of first language and culture' (ibid.: 68), rather than simply declaring it to be a function of the text itself. Lee (1995) takes a somewhat similar view, and develops this further by providing a framework for assessing and integrating the essential features of what she refers to as

‘text authenticity’ (is it originally intended for teaching or non-teaching purposes?) and ‘learner authenticity’ (the learner’s interaction with the text). My overriding concern in providing input material is to ensure ‘original purpose’ if at all possible, but otherwise to be pragmatic about how ‘authentic’ is actually interpreted in the classroom. By this definition, teacher-produced written or taped biographical input does not possess the authenticity of original purpose discussed by Lee (*ibid.*), but rather derives credibility from its existence as an accurate representation of real experiences. In any case, as Lee (*ibid.*: 323) points out, it is *perceptions* of authenticity which carry most weight in terms of ultimate student evaluation of materials. It seems reasonable to argue, then, that students’ perceptions of the input will often have more to do with the way the content *reflects*, rather than *is*, original source material—in this case, a true account of events in their teacher’s life, rather than a fictitious account of a remote textbook character.

**Teacher-student roles**  
Learner choice

Learner choice is a key feature of the materials development process, beginning with the initial choice of broad thematic area(s), and continuing with subsequent ongoing selection from teacher-compiled topic menus (Figure 2). Ellis (1990, cited in Green *et al.* 1997: 136) refers to the acquisition potential of allowing students free choice of topic, particularly appropriate, as Green *et al.* (*ibid.*: 136) note, in monolingual contexts (such as my own), ‘... in which the common cultural background of the learners might limit the range of topics of potential interest’. This bottom-up approach to determining content is central to the building of a learner-centred classroom in which students possess the confidence to attempt to express their own meanings through real language use, rather than simply engaging in ‘language-like behaviour’ (O’Neill 1982: 109).

Are teachers really  
‘deficient’ or  
‘different’?

I reject the depressing implications of a ‘deficiency’ or ‘difference’ view (Allwright 1981) of the teacher’s role in materials development, and would like to replace this with a more positive and empowering view of the teacher as an active and creative participant in the development process, and as a result, engaged in a continual cycle of professional self-development. Block (1991), echoing this need to see the teacher’s role in more enlightened terms, comments that:

... materials development is simply one more element within the larger concept of teachers taking responsibility for what happens in their classes. If we are to be reflective practitioners in the field of ELT, we need to consider all aspects of our teaching. I believe that preparing our own materials is one of these aspects. (Block 1991: 216)

‘Preparing our own materials’ in this way also means that as teachers *and* materials developers we really begin to ‘close the gap’ between ourselves and our students. In this more global and involving dual role it becomes even more important to understand our students, and to get to the very heart of what it is that they really want from their learning.

**Creating the materials**  
Themes, topics, and  
sources

Two basic types of biographical input material are envisaged: teacher-created written text or taped monologues/dialogues (Appendix 1), and personal realia. These may be presented in three different ways: as

‘authentic’ text-based material, as ‘realia collages’ on a unified theme (Appendix 2), or as individual realia items (see Figure 1 for suggested items).

<p><b>Photographs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>childhood</li> <li>holidays</li> <li>family</li> <li>places</li> <li>then &amp; now</li> </ul>	<p><b>Travel</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>currency</li> <li>tourist leaflets</li> <li>tickets</li> <li>souvenirs</li> <li>information sheets</li> </ul>
<p><b>Other</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>collections (e.g. comics)</li> <li>(childhood) toys</li> <li>musical instruments</li> <li>favourite CDs</li> <li>best 3 books</li> <li>worst (old) fashion item</li> <li>Christmas/Birthday cards</li> <li>sentimental items</li> <li>newspapers</li> </ul>	<p><b>Documents</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>wedding certificate</li> <li>birth certificate</li> <li>passport</li> <li>driving licence</li> <li>letters/postcards</li> <li>school report (maybe!)</li> <li>national registration (ID) card</li> <li>CV/Résumé</li> </ul>

FIGURE 1  
Examples of types of realia input materials.  
NOTE: All items should have some personal connection to the teacher.

Possible themes or topics shown in Figure 2 are, of course, site-specific, in keeping with the personalized nature of my particular teaching–learning situation. It should be immediately apparent, however, that the topics listed cover a diverse range of events and experiences, and also that many topics could be further sub-divided into smaller sub-topics. It is also important to emphasize that what essentially differentiates these ‘small c’ cultural topics from ‘Big C’ types is not so much the nature of the content itself, but the personalized context in which they are presented and worked upon.

<p><b>Childhood memories</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School days</li> <li>University life</li> <li>On vacation</li> <li>Birthdays</li> <li>Friday night out</li> <li>A day at work</li> <li>Around and about in the UK</li> </ul>	<p><b>Studying in Russia</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Moving around: life in 7 cities</li> <li>Family life</li> <li>Growing up in the 1960s</li> <li>Reaching 18 years</li> <li>A houseful of pets</li> <li>First date</li> <li>Working in France</li> </ul>
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FIGURE 2  
Possible themes/topics  
(based on my own life experiences)

Speak from the heart ...

Crucial to the process of establishing the credibility of the materials in general, and of their authenticity as determined by learners’ perceptions, in particular, is the idea that all teacher-made text should be unscripted. A basic outline of content may be prepared beforehand and read through several times, but during production (writing or recording), in order to preserve natural features of discourse, only brief notes should be used. They should never be created simply to demonstrate specific language items.

**Using the materials**  
A starting point

Materials should only be represented to learners as a starting point and stimulus for classroom interaction (Dubin and Olshtain 1986) from which teachers and learners can feel encouraged to ‘... develop their own alternatives according to their needs and personal preferences’ (ibid: 30). The presentation to learners of the content as menu-style items, open-ended in themselves, goes some way towards fulfilling the requirement of freeing students in the manner suggested above. From the teacher’s point of view, it may be that the concept of materials-as-starting-point only is best captured in the typological tables of possible content and tasks proposed by Lum and Brown (1994), and adapted to suit individual teaching–learning situations (Figure 3).

Source material	Skills focus	Levels	Activities/tasks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher-created written or taped biographical input</li> <li>• Realia</li> <li>• Realia collages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speaking</li> <li>• Listening</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Discourse</li> <li>• Vocabulary</li> <li>• Grammar</li> <li>• Pronunciation</li> <li>• Planning</li> <li>• Evaluating</li> <li>• Strategy use</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Beginner</li> <li>• Intermediate</li> <li>• Advanced</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Warm-ups</li> <li>Role play</li> <li>Simulations</li> <li>Discussion</li> <li>Brainstorming</li> <li>Narrating</li> <li>Interviews</li> <li>Communicative games</li> <li>Problem-solving tasks</li> <li>Drama</li> <li>True/false activities</li> <li>Gap-filling</li> <li>Matching</li> <li>Dialogues</li> <li>Listen for gist</li> <li>Listen for detail</li> <li>... and so forth</li> </ul>

FIGURE 3  
Teacher ‘Menu’—  
taxonomy of possible  
content and tasks  
(adapted from Lum and  
Brown 1994)

Materials should  
not constrain

It is important to ensure that material does not constrain in any way the learners’ willingness or ability to work upon it according to their interest and ability. This could occur if the material were made too specific by the assignment of worksheet-like instructions and tasks. Teacher-made biographical materials should be designed to work equally well when used as freestanding items (main focus of a lesson) or as supplementary items for integration into the body of a coursebook unit. Beyond these basic principles, material may be approached very much according to the usual style of the teacher, and given a particular focus according to the requirements of each specific situation (i.e. focus on lexis, functions, structure, discourse, skills, and so forth).

**Evaluating the  
materials**  
A learner-centred  
approach

In keeping with the learner-centred orientation of my classes, students are encouraged, via self-evaluation of content and tasks, to become fully engaged in exploring their learning (Green *et al.* 1997: 136) and thus to take responsibility for developing materials further. At regular intervals, students (and teacher, from observations of students on task) complete brief (*ad hoc*) evaluation schedules (Appendix 3), and then discuss in follow-up sessions how the materials worked in practice, and how both

they and the tasks might be improved for future use. The evaluation schedule items are designed to assess not only the material but also aspects of the whole context of use, including activities and tasks derived from it.

**Yes, but ... some possible problems**  
Time

The obvious question arises: What about the time element? Teachers are very busy people, and preparation time for some of these materials could be considerable. It is certainly true that preparation of the teacher-made written or taped materials will take time. But, faced with the option of continuing to endure unsatisfactory coursebook material (and then imposing this unhappy situation on students), or investing some time in creating materials based on '... topics and tasks that will engage students physically, emotionally, socially and intellectually in learning the new language' (Vincent 1984: 40), the choice seems clear. In any case, Block (1991) suggests a simple solution to the problem of time constraints based on the idea of sharing the burden of materials production via the introduction of an internally and/or externally operated materials-sharing scheme.

Teacher openness

There is no doubt that the use of teacher-generated biography as input material requires the teacher to give a great deal in terms of personal commitment and openness, and it is perhaps not for the faint-hearted to attempt this risky approach to materials development. But in my view the pay-off is considerable, and well worth taking the plunge. An important part of the teacher's function is to show learners what it is possible to achieve through the medium of true communication. But for this to be more than a purely superficial statement of intent, learners need to be encouraged to talk about topics of genuine interest to them (Vincent 1984) and over which they have exercised some degree of control. In my case, the broad topic area selected was culture, but this will clearly vary in other teaching-learning contexts, and, once again, simply serves to reinforce the potential for creativity, dynamism, and diversity which lies in the process of teacher-learner interaction at its co-operative best.

**Conclusion**  
Feedback and evaluation

The initial reaction and feedback on the materials in use with my learners has been extremely positive and encouraging, and certainly enough to convince me that the basic concept of teacher-generated biography as input material is worth developing further. It gives rise to a noticeable increase in the degree of active participation from students, and the results of evaluation schedules confirm that the new material is a powerful aid to motivating even the most passively-inclined members of the class. The material is not used in every lesson, of course, but on such occasions it becomes clear that the heightened teacher and learner involvement which results from the mutual exchange of personally relevant and meaningful content is a powerful force for generating real communication.

Future developments

Although quite short, the culture-rich input text in Appendix 1 offers a compelling insight into the culture of the L2 and provides a natural and stimulating basis for further exploration by teacher and students. It is, therefore, testimony to the great potential inherent in the fundamental

concept of using the teacher as cultural resource, for both content *and* materials. What needs to be examined further, perhaps, is the question of how to make the teacher-generated biography approach more accessible to learners for whom regionally-specific cultural input may not be appropriate or relevant. This can be done, I believe, by focusing on the experiential rather than the cultural dimension of the input, as a way in to whatever broad topic areas learners may have decided upon. Of course, to attempt to separate culture (-bias) from life experiences in this way is no easy task, but in view of the possible benefits as outlined above, it seems right to take up the challenge.

Equally important is the need to consider the contribution that non-native speaker teachers can make to the process of designing and presenting biographical material in the ways described above. Since teacher-biographical materials are designed to serve primarily as a stimulus and starting point for communication and interaction on relevant themes and topics, this type of content is equally accessible to non-native speaker teachers, who may design or adapt their own first language materials according to the needs of their particular teaching-learning situations.

Finally, it may also be interesting and productive to examine the possibility of learners contributing directly not only to the development of *ideas for* content, but also to the *production of materials as* content. This is a fairly common feature of my ESP classes, but it remains to be seen how the concept of learner-generated biography as input would be received by my (adult) General English classes.

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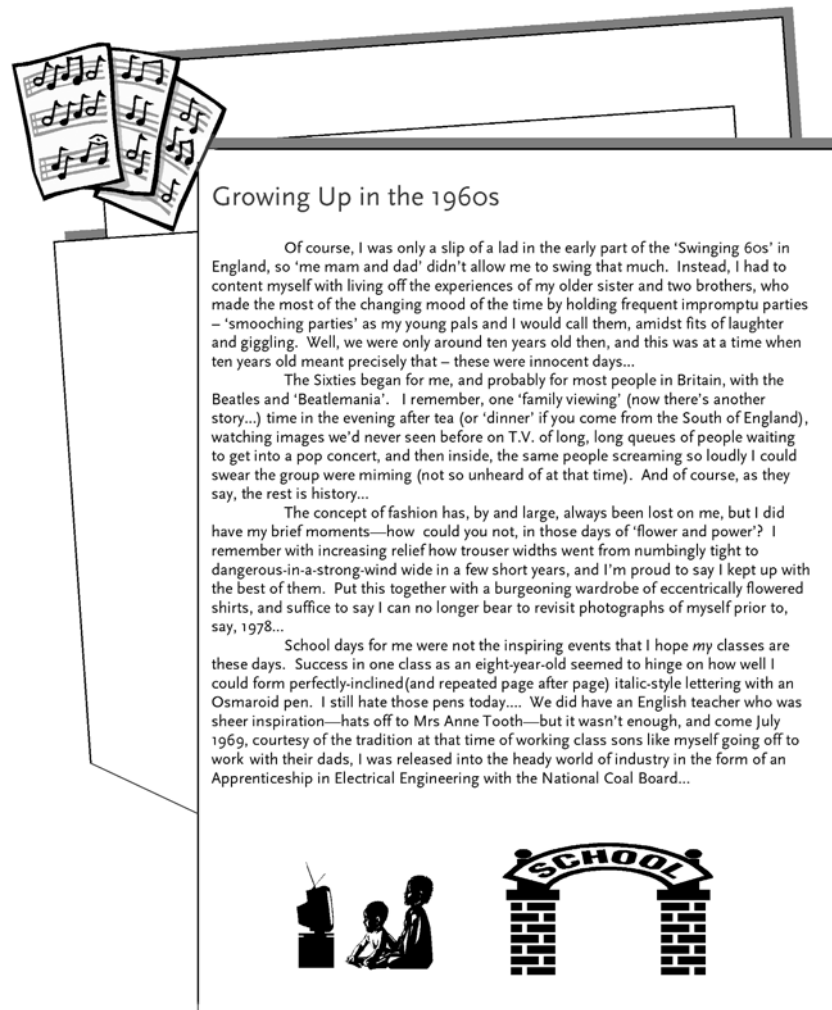
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### Appendix 1

'*Growing Up in the 1960s*'—Example of teacher-created biography input material.



**Growing Up in the 1960s**

Of course, I was only a slip of a lad in the early part of the 'Swinging 60s' in England, so 'me mam and dad' didn't allow me to swing that much. Instead, I had to content myself with living off the experiences of my older sister and two brothers, who made the most of the changing mood of the time by holding frequent impromptu parties – 'smooching parties' as my young pals and I would call them, amidst fits of laughter and giggling. Well, we were only around ten years old then, and this was at a time when ten years old meant precisely that – these were innocent days...

The Sixties began for me, and probably for most people in Britain, with the Beatles and 'Beatlemania'. I remember, one 'family viewing' (now there's another story...) time in the evening after tea (or 'dinner' if you come from the South of England), watching images we'd never seen before on T.V. of long, long queues of people waiting to get into a pop concert, and then inside, the same people screaming so loudly I could swear the group were miming (not so unheard of at that time). And of course, as they say, the rest is history...

The concept of fashion has, by and large, always been lost on me, but I did have my brief moments—how could you not, in those days of 'flower and power'? I remember with increasing relief how trouser widths went from numbingly tight to dangerous-in-a-strong-wind wide in a few short years, and I'm proud to say I kept up with the best of them. Put this together with a burgeoning wardrobe of eccentrically flowered shirts, and suffice to say I can no longer bear to revisit photographs of myself prior to, say, 1978...

School days for me were not the inspiring events that I hope *my* classes are these days. Success in one class as an eight-year-old seemed to hinge on how well I could form perfectly-inclined (and repeated page after page) italic-style lettering with an Osmaroid pen. I still hate those pens today... We did have an English teacher who was sheer inspiration—hats off to Mrs Anne Tooth—but it wasn't enough, and come July 1969, courtesy of the tradition at that time of working class sons like myself going off to work with their dads, I was released into the heady world of industry in the form of an Apprenticeship in Electrical Engineering with the National Coal Board...

## Appendix 2

Realia Collage (Possible site-specific topics: 'Wedding and Honeymoon in the UK', 'Sights of the UK', 'On Vacation', 'Tourist Spots', 'A Day to Remember'...).



## Appendix 3

Student and Teacher Evaluation Schedules.

### Student Evaluation Schedule

	Yes	OK	No	Comments
<b>A Goals and objectives</b>				
1 Were the main goals/objectives clear?				
2 Were the goals/objectives suitable for your needs?				
3 Were the activity and task goals clear?				
<b>B Content</b>				
1 Was the level of the material suitable for you?				
2 Were the topics/themes of the material interesting?				
3 Was the material easy to use?				
<b>C Tasks &amp; activities</b>				
1 Was the level of activities/tasks challenging enough?				
2 Were the language focus activities useful for you?				
3 Were the communication activities useful for you?				
4 Were pair- and group-work activities useful for you?				
5 Were the vocabulary building activities useful for you?				
<b>D Skills emphasis</b>				
1 Did the material provide a good balance of skills?				
<b>E Focus on you, the student</b>				
1 Did you enjoy using the materials?				
2 Did you participate actively in the activities?				
3 Did you manage to keep your interactions going well (by using suitable strategies)?				
4 Did you have good opportunities to express what you wanted to say?				
5 Did you enjoy having the opportunity to make choices in the material?				

Student Evaluation Schedule				
	Yes	OK	No	Comments
<b>F Physical appearance of the material</b>				
1 Was your first impression of the materials positive?				
2 Was the quantity of material sufficient for your needs?				
3 Was the design of the material clear and easy to understand?				

Teacher Evaluation Schedule (via Student Observation)				
	Yes	OK	No	
<b>A Goals &amp; objective</b>				
1 Overall, did the material help students to achieve appropriate goals/objectives?				
2 Were the goals of the material clear to students?				
<b>B Content</b>				
1 Was the level appropriate?				
2 Did the topic engage students' interest/motivation?				
3 Was task continuity effective?				
4 Did students exploit all opportunities for interaction in the material?				
5 Did students fully exploit lexis-building input?				
6 Did students follow a suitable pathway through the material?				
<b>C Tasks &amp; activities</b>				
1 Were activity and task goals clear to students?				
2 Was the level of tasks and activities challenging enough?				
3 Did students enjoy and benefit from real-world focused tasks?				
4 Did students enjoy and benefit from pedagogic tasks?				
5 Was the grading of activities and tasks appropriate for students?				
6 Was the sequencing of activities and tasks appropriate for students?				
7 Did students exploit/explore opportunities for negotiation of meaning?				
8 Did students use appropriate conversation management strategies?				
<b>D Skills emphasis</b>				
1 Did students employ appropriate top-down strategies?				
2 Did students employ appropriate bottom-up strategies?				
3 Was the integration of skills appropriate to students' needs?				
<b>E Focus on the learner</b>				
1 Were teacher intentions and student interpretations matched?				
2 Did students show a willingness to depend on their own resources?				
3 Did students express their own meanings?				
4 Did students work together cooperatively on tasks?				
5 Did students take responsibility for planning and evaluating their own performance, progress and learning?				

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**Teacher Evaluation Schedule (via Student Observation)**

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	Yes	OK	No
<b>F Focus on the teacher</b>			
1 Did the material produce the results hoped for at the design stage?			
2 Did the design of the materials allow flexibility during use?			
3 Was it necessary to adapt, omit or replace the material during use?			
4 If so, was this easy to do?			
5 Was the material easy to use?			