

# English Teaching *professional*

Publishing for continuous  
professional development

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# Teacher Development

(some recent article topics)

- MA or Diploma?
- Getting into ELT management
- Becoming a creative teacher
- Going freelance
- Effective preparation for teacher training
- Making the most of observing/being observed
- Teaching in Second Life
- Secrets of staffroom harmony

# Teacher plus

- ✦ Looking for new experiences within the profession?
- ✦ Interested in different ways of developing beyond the classroom?
- ✦ Hoping for tips on how to extend and enrich your professional life?

**Teacher Plus** is a series which focuses on specific areas in which you can step outside the strictly teaching sphere.

## Writing a graded reader

**Sue Leather** has some tips for teachers who want to try their hand at creative writing.

**D**o you like the idea of writing stories? Earlier in this series, I wrote about getting into writing for publication, suggesting that it could be a good move for teachers looking for new challenges outside the classroom. For this article on writing a graded reader, I've gathered ideas from extensive reading experts about the joys of writing fiction for learners.

### What are graded readers?

Graded readers are books especially written for language learners. They help students to read systematically by moving from easy to more difficult language. They are called 'graded' because they come in levels, and each level is carefully controlled in terms of vocabulary, grammar and sentence complexity. In many ways, they can be seen as a kind of bridge to the reading of books intended for first-language readers.

Graded readers allow students to access extensive pieces of text, written with the aim of providing reading for pleasure: stories, in other words. The idea is that, if the books are at the right level, students can just read and enjoy them, without having to struggle through incomprehensible language. They can be existing stories which are adapted, or original stories written specifically for language students. Many teachers are familiar with adapted versions of novels

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by writers like Dickens or Austen, and may use them as supplementary material inside or outside the classroom. In recent years, though, there has also been an interesting growth in original fiction written for adult and young adults, and a number of publishers are now producing original work by writers in our profession.

In many parts of the world, graded readers of all types are widely used in and out of the classroom

Whether it's an adaptation of an existing novel or an original, there is plenty of research to support the idea that extensive reading is really effective in helping people to learn a second language. A good short survey into the research can be found in 'What is the secret of extensive reading?' by Philip Prowse, series editor of Cambridge English Readers.

### Why write a reader?

Writing a graded reader can be a stimulating way to develop both your writing skills and your professional profile. It can also be profitable. In many parts of the world, graded readers of all types are widely used in and out of the classroom, and there is a huge world market for them. Many of the big publishers, and some smaller ones, produce at least one series. An additional attraction is that graded readers tend not to go out of print as quickly as some other books – one of mine has now been in print for 20 years, for example – so the chances of getting royalties on your work for years to come are high. Furthermore, the publication of readers as e-readers, downloadable to

devices such as Kindle, is only likely to diversify and enhance sales. All in all, there are plenty of reasons to have a go at writing a reader!

### Exploring the genre

As with other types of publishing, a good way of getting an idea of the field is to do some research. Have a look through publishers' catalogues and websites and find out what kind of graded reader lists are being published by the different publishers. Then go to a good ELT bookstore, if possible, or go online to find yourself a good collection of readers from different publishers' lists – and read! Learner fiction is a genre in itself, different in some ways from other types of fiction writing, and most people have to study it at least a little before they can write it successfully.

Hooks at the ends of chapters and lively dialogue are particularly important

Alan Maley, board member of the Extensive Reading Foundation and successful reader-writer, suggests: 'To write a reader that will grip your audience and make them want to read you to the end, you need a strong plot, a small number of credible and engaging characters, and some realistic-sounding dialogue.' This may be true to an extent of all fiction, but since the second language reader has limited access to the language, there are some aspects of narrative writing that need special focus and attention. Features like a compelling opening, showing action rather than telling the reader about it, hooks at the ends of chapters and lively dialogue are particularly important in graded readers.

# My lessons as a learner

**Anne Margaret Smith** polishes her Polish.

For several years I have taught the elementary-level ESOL learners in my college, many of whom are Polish, and I thought it would be interesting to put myself in their shoes, and perhaps pick up a few words of Polish to help me in the class. So, in September 2009 I signed up for a beginners' Polish class, running one evening a week, and I was right – it was actually fascinating. In this article I would like to share a few of my reflections on the experience.

I am not going to focus on how useful it was when I could translate a few words for my Polish learners; that is probably something that many teachers experience frequently. I will simply comment that, since I do not use a coursebook with my English class, and nor did my Polish teacher, I was surprised how closely the ESOL lessons I was teaching and the Polish lessons I was attending followed the same progression from introductions, letters and numbers, through colours and classroom objects, to family members and jobs – before finishing the term, of course, with Christmas customs. These language areas were simply the ones we (independently) felt our learners needed most immediately (and could handle with minimal grammar input).

Apart from the cultural insights I gleaned through learning the language, the most useful lessons I learnt from this ten-week Polish course were to do with classroom dynamics, the activities we undertook in class and the factors affecting the attendance of adult learners. This last aspect is perhaps the most crucial for keeping a course running, so I will start with this.

## Attendance

Probably teachers in most settings are familiar with the challenges associated with keeping adult learners on a course. My Polish class started with just eight participants; by the end of the course we were down to five attending regularly, but this was not a problem for us, since it meant that we were able to have a lot of teacher attention. Two of the other participants were also involved in teaching Polish students, and two had Polish partners. Our motivation was, therefore, collectively quite strong, but even so, none of us managed to attend every session.

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Finding the mental and physical strength to concentrate for another two hours after a full day's work proved to be a challenge in itself. As the term wore on and I began to wear out, the evenings became darker and our classroom even colder. One week in November, after a particularly long, tough day, despite my best intentions I

# From TDU to CPD

**Bahar Gün** suggests that winning teachers' approval is fundamental to a successful development programme.

**M**y 20 years' experience as a teacher educator, most of which has been INSET (in-service education of teachers), has taught me one thing: you can never win with teachers! I am aware this is a strong comment to make, but maybe after reading the following true story of a Teacher Development Unit (TDU) in a university setting in Turkey, you can see why I make it, and maybe, if you are a teacher educator yourself, you will even agree with me, simply because you have had similar experiences in your own work context.

## Background

All teacher development programmes in English language teaching settings are aimed at achieving the same goal: to contribute to the teachers' professional development. Institutions try different routes to achieve this common aim. Some try informal methods, such as allowing the teachers to discuss their common concerns and brainstorm possible solutions to commonly-shared teaching problems. Others do it more formally, with a structured teacher development programme in place. As Richard Watts has pointed out, such programmes are often geared towards the interests of the course organisers and/or the authorities rather than those of the teachers themselves. According to Richard Rossner, in most teachers' opinions, *'teacher development has to be bottom-up, not dished out by managers according to their own view of what development teachers need ...'*

The TDU in our institution was established to provide in-service support and development to enable English teachers to achieve their full potential, operating on the premise that teachers who continue to learn are more effective. Since the school was established six years ago, the TDU has been organising

structured developmental activities for the teaching staff. The activities conducted in the last five years include classroom observations, workshops (trainer-led as well as teacher-led or led jointly by trainers/teachers), swapshops, short courses and in-service certificate programmes. The types of the activities offered were determined by the trainers of the unit as well as the school administrators, and the teachers' opinions were asked (workshop topics, for example) through questionnaires.

*Teacher development programmes are often geared towards the interests of the course organisers rather than those of the teachers themselves*

Teachers' attendance at workshops was mandatory. This was the situation when a decision was made to carry out a feedback study on the effectiveness of the TDU activities three years ago. What follows is the story of that study and what happened in the next two years.

## Feeding back

Feedback obtained from the teachers through questionnaires, structured interviews and focus groups showed that, despite some overall positive comments, they were not entirely happy with the development activities for the following reasons:

- Although many teachers found classroom observations useful, some believed that observation was only suitable for less experienced teachers.

- When being observed by a more senior colleague, teachers argued that the classroom situation was unnatural.
- Teachers thought that the workshops were too frequent, unsuitably scheduled, insufficiently practical and tended to be repetitive. They wanted the workshops to be optional, but expressed interest in being involved in workshop presentations.
- They indicated that the swapshop meetings, group discussions of the following week's teaching material, were too frequent and not very effective.

## Re-thinking the programme

Taking all the feedback obtained into consideration, the TDU Activity Programme was redesigned for the following year. Observations for developmental purposes did continue; workshops became optional and were fewer in number. The workshop programme was advertised, and those who were interested signed up for the workshops they wanted to attend.

Teacher involvement in the preparation and presentation stages of workshops continued, and swapshop meetings were abandoned for that academic year.

Towards the end of the year, another feedback questionnaire on the TDU activities conducted that year was given out, but yet again, the teachers indicated that they didn't think the TDU programme had been very useful. Their reasons this time were:

- Observations themselves, as well as the post-observation feedback sessions, could cause stress on the part of the teachers when trainers were critical and feedback was non-constructive.
- Teachers thought workshops should be more practice-based rather than theoretical; also the pace of the

# Write your own course

**Amy Lightfoot** says do-it-yourself course design can be a very real option.

**H**ave you ever been faced with a group of students with needs that are so specific that there isn't a suitable coursebook? Or maybe you discover that your class or one-to-one student has a really jagged profile – for example, fabulous vocabulary but very weak in grammar. Perhaps there is a demand for a course on a particular skill like speaking, and you just can't find a book that covers suitable topics. In these situations you have two options:

- 1 Trawl all the coursebooks and photocopiable activity books that you can get your hands on and piece together a course.
- 2 Write the course from scratch yourself.

Clearly the latter is a much more interesting option, with the potential to be a real learning experience. I recently completed a speaking skills coursebook to be used by the British Council teaching centres in India. I would like to share with you some of what I learnt during the process, and identify the key factors that need to be taken into account to make a course-writing project a success.

First of all, let's be clear: writing a course, no matter how short, is never going to be a simple task and it will *always* take longer than you think. Having said that, it can be an incredibly rewarding experience and, if done well, can provide your students with a totally tailored course which meets their needs better than any mass-produced coursebook could ever hope to.

## Focusing on the students' needs

Carefully considering your students' needs is probably the most important stage of the project:

- What are the learning outcomes that the course will need to address?
- What are the students' current strengths and weaknesses?
- What type of language or skills do they need to learn?

A well thought-out and carefully targeted needs analysis will help you to identify these issues. Take time to consider whether there actually is already an established course that you could use. After all, there's no need to reinvent the wheel.

## Planning the project

You will need to think about whether there will be other groups of students with similar needs or a similar profile in the future – is this course going to be a one-off, or will it be used by other teachers and groups? Perhaps there will be certain parts of the course that will be able to be recycled and others that are group-specific. In either case, it's a really good idea to work with at least one other teacher to develop the course, as the end product will benefit from your inevitably different teaching and planning styles. Make sure you think carefully about how you will divide the work and ensure uniformity throughout the course. One way to achieve this is to have one person take responsibility for writing the students' materials and the

other for writing the teacher's notes. Alternatively, you could have one person writing the skills-focused activities and the other writing the language-focused ones. However you do it, it's vital to sit down together and plan the entire course before you begin writing. Here are some questions to consider:

- What are the course objectives?
- What language and skills will need to be covered?
- What methodology will best suit these?
- How long does the course need to be?
- What kind of format are you going to use?

Draw up a course overview that details what each lesson or unit will cover. Look at the beginning of a few published coursebooks for an overview template to use as a starting point. Think about how you will do any listening skills work:

- Will you need to record your own listening activities?
- Will they be scripted or unscripted?
- Who will provide the voices and technical skills?

Finally, decide how you will pilot the course and start making any necessary arrangements.

## Researching the content

Gather together examples of materials that cover similar topics and language points to the ones you have chosen to include. Both published materials and the internet are excellent sources of inspiration. Look at how the activities and exercises are structured and, importantly, how the rubrics or instructions are worded. Writing clear, level-appropriate instructions for an activity can be one of the most difficult things to do. Remember that you will need a variety of activity types that cater to different styles. If the lessons are going to centre on a topic or a task, research ideas for reading and listening input as well as writing or speaking activities. Finally, be aware of international copyright laws. As a general rule, nothing can be copied word-for-word and no pictures cut and pasted unless you have written permission.

# The teacher as construction worker

**Tim Thompson** builds his students' abilities by standing back and overseeing.

Typically, we imagine teachers doing something to the students (ie helping/forcing them to learn) but, in successful teaching situations, the teacher and students must do something together. It is with this in mind that I am proposing the image of the teacher as a construction foreman, working on a construction project (a semester or school year) armed with blueprints (lesson plans). The article will be of most relevance to teachers of secondary, tertiary or adult language and skills classes, such as academic writing or presentations, in which the students are able to work independently for at least half of the class time in English.

## Building a project

Generally, a foreman on a construction site oversees the project and ensures that every member of the team knows their job and carries it out to the best of their ability. Foremen don't carry bricks or weld things together, they make sure everyone stays on task and finishes on time. Teachers in language classes shouldn't be that different. We should make sure that everyone is contributing to the project – which is improving the students' mastery of the language, or learning a skill through the medium of English.

Teachers can't do the learning for the students. We must teach *them* how to do it. Our lesson plans act as blueprints, which build upon each other to complete the project successfully and achieve the overall goal for the semester or school year. We, as the foremen, show the students how to do the work and then get out of the way and let them do it.

## Laying the foundations

For successful teaching, you need a strong base. Just as in construction, teachers must lay a foundation. Spend the first few weeks showing the students what to do. If you create a format for your lessons, the students will learn how the time will be used, where they should sit and what

they should have prepared. That way, they can focus all their attention on the learning goal(s) for the course. For example, my business English projects class students know that Tuesdays are for presenting and Thursdays are for learning about and preparing for the next week's project. The students always know how much time they will have and are able to plan accordingly.

## Cementing the goals

A series of short-term goals adds up to a successful long-term project. Set an attainable long-term goal and let the weekly lesson plans build towards it. In my presentation skills class, I focus on one aspect of presentations each lesson. I also incorporate information on how to score a presentation so that by the middle of the semester, the students are able to prepare adequately for and score each other's mid-term exam presentations.

## Placing the first bricks

Workers won't be experts until they gain some experience. I try to start the semester with easy tasks and let my students see early progress without worrying too much about making mistakes. In my business English projects class, the students' projects are only graded according to participation. This allows them to take risks without fear of a bad grade, and gives them an opportunity to make mistakes which they can learn from. I stress every class that this is their opportunity to shoot for the moon, and we conduct 'post-mortems' after every project to assess what could have, and should have, been done differently.

## Overseeing the work

The job of the foreman or teacher is to assign tasks and monitor progress, acting like a manager, not a worker. In student-centred classes, the teacher's job is to assign responsibilities and give feedback. In my presentation skills lessons, I get the students started, discuss a learning point between the first and second set of small-

group presentations, and give feedback on individual presentations at the end. The students know what to do by the third week of the course and do the majority of the talking. They can see how much is expected of them and generally rise to the challenge. In skills classes, like presentations and writing, the students can only improve by spending as much time practising the skill as possible. That means less talk from me and more practical activity for them.

## Raising the walls

Students must learn to crawl before they can walk, and walk before they can run. Proper progression allows them to focus on their short-term goals and taste success along the way. In building terms, you can't build the roof until the walls are up. In my writing classes, the students start with topic sentences, and turn them into paragraphs the next week. I don't permit them to write more until they have demonstrated that they can do the basics. They continue with various types of paragraphs until the middle of the semester, and then they write actual essays over the second half. By starting slowly and building up to the essays, the students experience a sense of progress and achievement, and don't feel as if they are being thrown in at the deep end.



Once our students become fluent and can understand almost everything we say (this is more common at university level), the tendency to 'overteach' becomes stronger. This tendency must be avoided, and we must take advantage of the students' ability to work with each other in English. By thinking of ourselves as construction foremen, we are better able to visualise our role in the classroom as facilitators, sources of advice and providers of feedback. We assist the students in their building of a tower of learning and can be proud in the knowledge that we provided the design as well as the motivation to build it.



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# Benefits of publishing articles

- Sharing ideas benefits the profession as a whole.
- Publishing enhances your profile as a teacher and can improve your job prospects.
- Writing about your experiences is a form of reflection, which is good for your teaching.
- You will read what other people have to say and keep up with the latest thinking.

# What to do next

- Find a magazine or journal that you like.
- Read lots of articles and think about what you could contribute.
- Get in touch with the editor and ask for their guidelines.
- Write your article and submit it.