Developing personalised materials for your classroom – the easy way

Claire Hart suggests some simple ways of personalising resources.

Personalisation is having a bit of a moment right now. Ed tech companies see big dollar signs when they think about the potential of adaptive learning, which essentially involves using maths to personalise learning content to learners’ needs. ELT publishers are tentatively dipping their toes in the waters of personalisation and including some personalisable activities in their materials, such as role plays where learners play themselves. However, many EFL teachers seem to feel alienated from the concept of personalisation and some actively reject it. When I talk to teachers about why they feel this way, they usually say two things: they don’t have enough time to do it and, even if they did, it’s impossible to personalise course content and materials when you’re teaching a group because they’re all individuals. ‘Are you expecting me to create a different worksheet for each one of them?’ they ask. Well no, that would take a huge amount of time and would not necessarily prove to be particularly fruitful. What I would suggest is applying certain ‘personalisation principles’ to the creation of learning materials, which will enable you to benefit from the advantages of personalisation without taking up too much time.

There are two main ways in which we can do this:

1. **Personalise generic content**

   By this I mean taking what we could call generic models for materials and tweaking them in order to reflect the lives, interests and needs of a specific group of learners. Take a common exercise framework where students have to read a series of sentences (some correct, some incorrect), decide whether they’re correct and then correct the incorrect ones, for example. Here you can make notes on common errors that students make and good sentences that they’ve used during lesson time and then use these as the example sentences in this kind of exercise. You will save time because you won’t have to think of the sentences from scratch, but you will also personalise the activity and encourage students to invest more in it. It will help to raise their awareness of common mistakes they make and boost their confidence when they realise that sentences that they’ve written or said are being included as examples of good language use. You could make this activity more general by including examples of good and incorrect sentences which include a range of different language items, or you could narrow the focus to, for example, talking about the past or using adjectives and adverbs. You could create a master worksheet document, e.g. with examples of typical mistakes with false friends that your learners make. All you need to do is write out a range of examples, say 20, and then select and copy and paste eight or 10 that you frequently hear learners in a specific group making, into a new document each time, carefully naming the separate files to avoid confusion.

   Another way in which we can personalise generic content, while also saving time, is to give learners agency and authorship in the materials development process. Learners can design and write their own role cards for role plays, for instance. They can write texts about aspects of their lives, e.g. what happens on a typical day at work, and then give them to other students to read and use as the basis for comprehension, discussion or error-
correction activities. Learners are more likely to remember something they’ve read in English about Marco their colleague than a generic ‘Alan’ in a coursebook.

Recently, I created an exercise based on vocabulary errors that I’d noticed a group of learners making on a regular basis in their written work. I found examples of sentences from their essays where they’d clearly got the wrong word in English because they’d incorrectly translated it from their first language, then I figured out what the word they’d translated could have been and created a worksheet where they had to read that word in their first language in the context of the English sentence and find a better English translation for it that would work in that sentence. This really seemed to raise their awareness of how to, or how not to, use a dictionary and also of the importance of using the correct collocations when you’re writing.

Again, I can save the bare bones of this exercise as a template document and then modify it for other groups later on if I want to.

**2. Finding generic contexts for personalised content**

Here we start with the personalised content, which could be specific vocabulary, expressions or strategies that learners need to master, and look for generic materials that we can marry it with. When I’m teaching English for specific purposes and I have a specific vocabulary set of tangible items that you can see in pictures, I marry this specific vocabulary with generic games. For example, I’ve created a game of bingo that incorporates vocabulary for parts of formwork (molds for concrete, etc.). I found and copied pictures of 20 different formwork parts and put each one onto a separate card. I then give each learner in the group nine different cards arranged in a 3 x 3 grid and say the names of all 20 items, one after the other. If a learner has one of these on their cards, they turn that card over. The game continues with the aim being to get a row of turned-over cards and then a full house to win the game.

Another example would be to take an image or diagram of something which is relevant to your learners’ lives and their needs and ask them to label its parts or features. If you give students different images or diagrams to label, they could then exchange them in pairs or small groups and ask and answer questions about them, for example, about the position or function of the parts. Again, setting up an activity like this and giving learners the agency to effectively develop their own materials and ask the questions should enhance engagement and the amount of time learners spend actively using English.

One final thought, when it comes to creating personalised learning materials, it’s not only the text part of the materials that you need to think about, but also the visual aspect. If you use images from open sources, such as Creative Commons, make sure that any people you can see in them look like or are similar to the people you’re teaching and that the landscapes or settings look like those the learners are familiar with. This will spark greater interest in the materials from your learners and increase the relatability factor. Publishers consider these factors on a daily basis when developing materials for different markets and regions, so why shouldn’t we think about it too?

So, is personalising the materials you use in your lessons worth the effort you have to put in to make it happen? If increased motivation and engagement levels, greater memorability and more focused, and usually more effective, learning activities are things worth making an effort for, then yes. Besides, just about every published ELT author will tell you that the first materials they wrote were for their own classroom and, in most cases, those will have been personalised materials.

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