Principled Design in Locally-Produced E-Textbooks for Language Learning

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Abstract

With the advent of free authoring tools like iBooks Author and Inkling Habitat, the creation of digital learning materials for use on tablet devices is easily within the reach of any institution or individual. However, the temptation to package traditional paper-based materials and activities within a shiny new digital cover should be avoided. In fact, the features of locally-produced e-textbooks for language learning, such as targeted input and interactivity, make them ideal for following principles for material writing suggested by subsequent language acquisition-based research. This article will show how in-house course and book design, matched with the capabilities of e-textbooks on tablets, can better match research-based principles for materials development than traditional paper-based global textbooks and thus further subsequent language acquisition for learners. These principles include affective impact, relevance, confidence building, use of authentic texts, and purposeful communication. Thanks to the absence of many of the constraints faced by commercial publishing, locally-produced e-textbooks can incorporate design features that advance these principles within the technologically-integrated environment of tablet devices. In particular, such e-textbooks are well suited to the implementation of Project-Based Language Learning approaches in which learners collaborate in the target language to achieve concrete outcomes that they share in some manner with their peers and instructors. It is hoped that more individual instructors and institutions will be inspired to produce their own e-textbooks targeted for specific contexts and thus enhance the language learning experience for their students.

After a number of fits and starts, as chronicled by Chesser (2011), it appears that the era of entirely digital learning materials, or e-textbooks, is dawning. Serious resistance from students to the introduction of e-textbooks has been noted as recently as 2011 by Mulvihill, who points to a change of attitude due to "the widespread use of mobile devices, such as smartphones and tablets…their wide screens, touchscreens, and portability…come close to re-creating the print book experience" (p. 34). While Mulvihill correctly identifies tablets as important for student uptake of e-textbooks, she could not know that, with Apple's launch of iBooks Author at the beginning of 2012, a leap in the interactivity of e-textbooks was about to spur even greater acceptance, nay, excitement in classrooms around the world. Companies like Apple and Inkling threw down the gauntlet to commercial publishers to not just re-create, but surpass, the traditional textbook experience with in-book tools like instant feedback, 3-D images, and pop-overs. What promises to be even more important, however, is the relative ease of use of these new authoring

programmes, which permit individuals with no coding experience, after minimal software training, to create professional-looking, interactive digital materials. For language learning, this development could signal not only the dawn of the e-textbook era, but the beginning of the end of the global textbook age.

Despite their high production values and visual appeal, global language textbooks have a number of shortcomings (Gray, 2002). A principal one, as described by McKay (2003), is that the

"traditional use of Western cultural content in ELT texts needs to be examined. There are clear advantages to the use of source culture content. Such content minimizes the potential of marginalizing the values and lived experiences of the learners. Source culture content can also encourage learners to gain a deeper understanding of their own culture so they can share these insights when using EIL [English as an International Language] with individuals from different cultures." (p. 19)

Global language textbooks tend to serve up generic topics and themes that rarely connect directly with learners' lives in order to better engage them. This and other reasons have spurred some ministries and institutions in various countries to produce their own, locally-sourced textbooks, with quite positive results, as recounted, for example, by Popovici and Bolitho (2003) in Romania and Al-Busaidi and Tindle (2010) in Oman. Almost all these projects, of course, were for the creation of paper-based textbooks, but now e-textbook projects to be delivered on tablets are also starting up, such as at Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates.

As can be imagined, there is very little research into these new types of materials, except for a few small studies that indicate that university students who use e-textbooks in a course perform just as well, grade-wise, as students who use traditional textbooks (Murray & Perez, 2011, Rockinson-Szapkiw et al, 2013), though Daniel and Woody (2013) add that reading time was significantly higher with e-textbooks, possibly due to multi-tasking. On the other hand, Sun and Flores (2012) and Marques de Oliveira (2012) report positive levels of satisfaction among students who used e-textbooks. It can therefore be safely assumed that the use of e-textbooks does not negatively affect student success, but what can it do positively, especially in the area of language learning?

Theoretical Framework

Mayer and Moreno (1998), in proposing key principles for the design of multi-media learning materials, emphasise the importance of basing those principles on "a research-based theory of how students learn" (p. 1). In delineating principles that should inform the design of e-textbooks for language learning, it also makes sense to base them on what Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research has to tell us about language student learning. Interestingly, Tomlinson (2011) undertakes such a task, albeit in relation to materials development for language learning in general. He outlines 16 principles for language learning materials/textbook design, supporting them with copious references to SLA research and theory. Some of them, such as making sure "learners are ready to acquire the points being taught" (p. 12) and "the learner's attention should be drawn to linguistic features of the input" (p. 14), carry equal weight whether the materials are in paper or digital form. Nevertheless, it is the purpose of this paper to show, with examples from the e-textbook project currently underway in the Academic Bridge Programme at Zayed University, that locally-produced e-textbooks for tablet devices, with informed course and material design, are eminently suited to bringing to life the majority of those principles and thus better facilitate second language acquisition than the global paper-based textbooks employed in many institutions around the world. Thus, this paper will rely heavily on the design framework that Tomlinson (2011) proposes, and

interested readers are encouraged to review his article to investigate further the SLA research foundations on which his principles rest.

Connecting With Learners

One of the clear advantages of locally-produced textbooks is that they are by definition created by writers with an intimate knowledge of the specific learning context in which the textbooks will be used (Lund, 2010). Such projects also start from needs and wants of local learners and teachers, usually derived from multiple needs analyses. As a result, locally-produced e-textbooks have the potential to connect with the daily lives of learners in ways that global textbooks cannot—through locally-sourced texts, images, themes, and activities, language learners can use their developing language in contexts that are familiar and make sense to them.

Figure 1. Images within a task that connect with local learners' culture and lives. Note also the use of embedded instructions that avoid overcrowding the page with text.

This answers one of Tomlinson's (2011) principles for materials development: "materials should help learners feel at ease" (p. 9), which points to the importance of affective factors in language learning. Of course, "feeling at ease" is not only connected with the familiar topics and images that one would expect to find in a locally-produced e-textbook. As Tomlinson mentions, it is also related to the amount of white space in the textbook, and e-textbooks have, obviously, a large advantage in this respect over paper-based textbooks, which are constrained in terms of length not only in financial terms, but also in portability. E-textbooks for this reason can and should be designed to avoid the cramming of activities and texts onto a page that can so easily confuse and put off language learners. Texts and activities can be embedded in widgets, which have a relatively small visual footprint on a given page, but can expand to full-page format when touched. Consequently, there is room in e-textbooks for more images, attractively presented, perhaps with a quote or question that prompts thought on the part of learners, instead of the potentially stress-inducing crowded pages of some traditional textbook series.

Another principle put forward by Tomlinson (2011) is that materials should achieve impact: "when materials have a noticeable effect on learners…when the learners' curiosity, interest and attention are attracted" (p. 8). As mentioned above, locally-produced materials can count on greater success in this area in terms of contextualised themes, texts, and activities that connect to the everyday lives and interests of the language learners, but there are other facets of this impact that e-textbooks excel in. Tomlinson (2008) mentions variety as one of them, describing the constraints that globally produced textbooks usually operate under, "with each unit being the same length and following a uniform format to make timetabling, teacher allocation, and teacher preparation easier" (p. 7). E-textbooks, on the other hand, thanks to the relative ease with which they are produced, can afford to be much more flexible in their approach to learning modules. This is not to say that a haphazard approach to material design in e-textbooks should be the norm, but it does point in a direction away from a factory metaphor, where cookie-cutter units start and proceed and finish in exactly the same manner each time, towards a jazz metaphor, where material developers have a basic framework with common components, but "riff" on the order of activities and on the way that those components interact with each other, depending on what makes the most sense from the points of view of pedagogy and learner engagement. Of course, there must be design cues, both visually and textually (such as standard headings/sub-headings) that allow instructors and learners to navigate the materials comfortably, but this flexibility in e-textbook design could go a long way in alleviating the boredom that teachers admit afflicts learners when confronted daily by materials without the same degree of variety (Tomlinson, 2008, p. 3-4).

Overt Purpose

A third principle for material development that can be effectively met by locally produced e-textbooks is that "what is being taught should be perceived by learners as relevant and useful" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 11). Although, at first glance, this might appear to be largely a question of needs analysis and curriculum design so that objectives match the communicative goals of learners (including reaching possible assessment benchmarks), the key concept here is perception. A curriculum might be designed with the best intentions in the world for learners' future communicative and academic success in the foreign language, but if they do not clearly perceive the connection between a material and that success, then its effectiveness is undermined. Some might argue that making that connection is the responsibility of the instructor, but e-textbooks, through embedding, can also comfortably address the issue within the materials themselves. Through embedding into special icons, or perhaps even the material's subheadings themselves, curriculum objectives can be reworded for learner consumption, or, even better, real communicative contexts can be described (orally or in written form)

and then presented to learners when they touch the corresponding icon or heading. In this way, relevance and usefulness can be brought to the forefront of many tasks without adding to the length of the book.

Figure 2. Purpose for an activity in the form of future academic context embedded within a heading.

Paper-based textbooks try to do the same thing from time to time in short textboxes and the like, but e-textbooks, without the same space limitations and through embedding, can make overt purpose a core design principle, thus enhancing learners' perception of the usefulness and relevance of the materials to their communication needs.

Learning a subsequent language can be frustrating for anyone, and it is hard to avoid a certain fall in confidence when one's ability to communicate, so fundamental to our self-image, takes a plunge as one struggles with self-expression (Price, 1991). Tomlinson's (2011) emphasis on the role of materials in building confidence in learners, through the use of creative tasks that are not necessarily linguistic, is thus understandable (p. 10). Here again, an e-textbook on a tablet can potentially play a stronger role than traditional paper-based materials. Thanks to the rich app environment that tablets offer, and which can be incorporated, through widgets, in an e-textbook, learners' non-linguistic talents can be harnessed to express themselves about topics and texts through drawing, poster design, photography, and film-making.

Figure 3. Example of a creative activity asking students to construct a poster with a dedicated app.

Language learners, by responding to input and ideas creatively from within an e-textbook, and easily sharing the products of their creativity with their classmates and instructors, can experience a surge of self-esteem that can

help power them through the frustration that language learning sometimes engenders.

Project-Based Language Learning

The rich app environment mentioned above, and the way that e-textbooks can seamlessly link to such tools on a tablet, also makes digital materials conducive to a Project-Based Learning (PBL) approach. Project-Based Learning is "a teaching and learning model that…involves students in problem-solving and other meaningful tasks, allows students to work autonomously to construct their own learning, and culminates in realistic, student-generated products" (Thomas, Mergendoller, & Michaelson, 1999, p. 1). Dooly and Masats (2011) describe a sub-branch of PBL, Project-Based Language Learning (PBLL), where "activities are highly interactive and integrated so that while students are practising and developing language skills… they are also developing interpersonal skills such as team work and organization" (p. 43). Beckett and Slater (2005) point out that PBLL "promotes higher level academic literacy: language, thinking skills, and content knowledge" (p. 108), though they caution that research shows that not all students understand the value of this non-traditional approach to language learning. Nevertheless, from a second-language acquisition standpoint, PBLL follows the principle that "materials should provide the learners with opportunities to use the target language to achieve communicative purposes" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 15). Through collaboration with classmates in the target language on the successful completion of concrete outcomes in PBLL, language learners communicate with meaningful purpose both during the process and when presenting the fruits of their labour to their fellow learners. However, PBLL as an approach is difficult to implement in global language-learning textbooks because of the importance of projects being relevant to the local context of learners, the difficulty of properly scaffolding tasks for a specific audience, and the need for assurance of availability of resources for learners to complete their projects. On the other hand, locally-produced e-textbooks on tablet devices have the flexibility and versatility that make them extremely suitable for a PBLL approach. Flexibility is vital due to the potentially temporal nature of both topics and resources that might be used in projects, and such e-textbooks are relatively easy to revise, with amendments able to be delivered directly to the learners' devices. Another reason for the importance of the flexibility of e-textbooks in the delivery of PBLL is assessment. In the digital age, plagiarism and cheating have become serious problems in learning contexts (Ercegovac & Richardson Jr., 2004), and if, as should be, such projects are used for alternative assessment in a course, it is possible that the regular re-use of certain assignments could entice those students who have not kept up with their work to submit a project to their e-portfolio that was completed by someone else at a previous time. Although there are tools such as SafeAssign to check for this, it makes sense to discourage

it by providing alternative projects in consecutive terms, and substituting those alternative assignments is fairly painless within a locally produced e-textbook.

The versatility of e-textbooks on tablets also makes a PBLL approach easier to implement. Thanks to the integrated nature of the creative and technological tools on tablet devices, learners can easily switch back and forth from the e-textbook directly to apps that facilitate the project completion process. From mind-mapping tools, to environments where group members can share ideas, data, and materials, to presentation tools that go beyond the customary PowerPoint, tablets offer nearly seamless movement throughout the creative life of the project. Thus, for example, photographs taken on the tablet by one student can be shared electronically with another, who incorporates them with effects in a film-editing app on her tablet together with audio from another student, who has recorded it on his tablet from a text created by a fourth group member after researching on the tablet browser. The group can periodically meet, either face to face or in a digital environment, to discuss, in the target language, the project progress and give feedback to improve it, with a final presentation to their peers when they are satisfied with the result. While similar projects can and have been designed and delivered without technology, the variety of apps and their integration within a system that allows easy communication strongly suggests that the purposefully communicative and collaborative objectives of PBLL can be enhanced through e-textbooks on tablets.

The application of PBLL within e-textbooks can take on various timeframes, from mini-projects completed by learners within the hour, to weekly outcomes fed by input and activities from a particular unit, to course-long projects punctuated by periodic assessment/feedback junctures tied to specific skills and strategies that learners are expected to apply to their work. The judicious use of such projects, keeping in mind Beckett and Slater's (2005) caveats, in e-textbooks responds as well to Tomlinson's (2011) exhortation, based on SLA research, that "materials should not rely too much on controlled practice" (p. 22). Although the use of some controlled practice is useful for some types of learners, and provides confidence and comfort due to its familiarity, it appears that language use in such contexts does not easily transfer to freer use later (Batstone & Ellis, 2009). The meaningful use of language within PBLL, on the other hand, gives learners opportunities to apply their developing linguistic skills and discover gaps in their ability to communicate. By incorporating PBLL within locally-produced e-textbooks, material developers can thus promote acquisition, a sense of relevance and usefulness, and impact, through what Tomlinson (2011) calls "achievable challenge" (p. 8), among local language learners.

Project-based learning approaches within locally-produced e-textbooks also link with the principle that "materials should require and facilitate learner self-

investment" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 12). This refers to the ability of students to discover information for themselves and create their own understandings with little or no guidance from the instructor. Traditionally, textbooks have delivered information to relatively passive learners, who are then expected to assimilate and to some extent memorise facts. In contrast, PBLL gives students the chance to explore what kind of information is available, choose what they see as most relevant, and integrate it into their own (and their classmates', through sharing) body of knowledge.

Figure 4. Instead of being fed information, students explore the Internet for the information themselves.

The integration of a browser in a tablet-based e-textbook facilitates such building of knowledge by learners in other ways as well. For example, instead of a written or oral text presenting basic facts related to a theme at the beginning of a textbook unit, learners could be asked to find that information on the Internet themselves, singly or in groups, either from question prompts or from brainstorming key questions as a class first. Afterwards, members of the class can collaborate to build a more comprehensive knowledge base, perhaps in the form of a reference wiki. In this way, language learners are transformed from passive recipients of knowledge to active learners engaged with authentic texts, using their language skills for an authentic purpose.

Another principle for material development that can be clearly linked to PBLL within e-textbooks is that "materials should maximize learning potential by encouraging intellectual, aesthetic and emotional involvement which stimulates both right- and left-brain activities" (Tomlinson, 2011, p. 21). The aesthetic side of this has already been discussed in relation to the need to shore up confidence within language learners through the inclusion of creative, non-linguistic tasks in materials. The emotional aspect relates to the degree that the project topic or issue connects directly to the lives and interests of the learners, and locally-produced e-textbooks clearly have a better chance of achieving that connection than materials produced for a general audience.

Cognitive Modeling

As pertains to intellectual involvement by learners in the materials, a further advantage of e-textbooks is their ability to embed cognitive modelling, which "involves an expert's performing a task so that the students can observe and build a conceptual model of the processes that are required to accomplish it" (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991, p. 44). There is nothing new about the use of models in language-learning textbooks, especially in the teaching of writing. However, "students are unable to make use of potential models of good writing acquired through reading because they have no understanding of how the authors produced such text" (Ibid, p. 38). In contrast, cognitive modelling reveals to learners the usually hidden processes by which skilled users interact with language and texts. Such an approach can inform students' understanding not only of writing in a subsequent language, but also of the use of strategies and skills, such as the guessing of the meaning of unknown lexis in a reading text. In traditional paper-based textbooks, such strategies are described with static examples in what is called a "textbox". Due to space constraints and the disinclination to burden learners with what can be fairly dry reading, these textboxes can only scratch the surface of how such skills and strategies can be applied to specific instances. E-textbooks, due to their multi-media nature, can employ the principles of cognitive modelling in pedagogy through "videoboxes".

Figure 5. A videobox that takes students through a process in highlighting key information in a text.

Using apps like Explain Everything, materials developers can record themselves thinking through the process of using a skill or strategy, highlighting common decision points and factors in reference to specific examples. This recording can then be exported as a video that takes its place in a video widget within the e-textbook. Besides the obviously greater appeal of a video/audio presentation over the traditional text-based one, such videoboxes can be replayed, paused, and fast-forwarded. More importantly, they make normally mysterious processes like note-taking during a listening and writing from a blank screen more transparent to learners as they watch and

listen to expert users describe what they are thinking and doing step by step. Such an approach can be applied to virtually any language skill or strategy, and, if pitched at the correct level, has the potential to better involve language students intellectually in their learning and improve their understanding of how and when to use these skills and strategies.

Learning Styles

Another important dimension in terms of involving students more in their learning is learning styles. Tomlinson (2011) acknowledges this in his materials development principles as well, listing a number of learning styles such as visual, audio, kinesthetic, and experiential and states that "activities should be variable and should ideally cater for all learning styles" (p.18). While a variety of activities can be included in both paper-based and digital materials, one area where e-textbooks can supersede the former is in the presentation of activity instructions. Traditionally text-based and thus geared towards visual learners, task instructions in e-textbooks can be introduced through audio/video with the help of apps like Moviestorm, thus catering for audio learners as well.

Figure 6. Example of oral instructions for an activity.

Audio could also be embedded within icons or other visual design cues to provide learners with extra information or support. In comparison with paper-based textbooks, digital materials on tablets obviously offer tactile learners more benefits through the manipulation of objects on the screen with their fingers. More ambitiously, future e-textbooks, by virtue of their lack of space limitations, could offer a menu of alternative approaches to, say, grammar, depending on self-identification by learners of their preferred learning styles, whether they be analytic or experiential, with some learners choosing to sample all of them and thus receiving a more rounded understanding than in the more monolithic method of traditional textbooks.

Extended Authentic Input

A further area where e-textbooks potentially match

Tomlinson's (2011) principles of materials development is through the use of authentic input (p. 13). According to Gilmore (2007), exposure to more authentic texts in language learning allows students to encounter a wider range of expressions, lexis, and usages than are usually found in carefully-calibrated textbooks. Such exposure can be gained in part through extended forms of input. There has been much written about the positive effects appropriately-levelled, extended reading in particular can have on the acquisition of a subsequent language. For example, Maley (2008) lists greater learner autonomy, gains in vocabulary growth, development of general world knowledge, provision of comprehensible input, enhancing of general language competence, and improvements in writing ability, albeit with reference to some reading programme features outside the purview of a textbook. Interestingly enough, these effects are obtained even without the customary explicit comprehension checks and questions. Unfortunately, due to space and cost constraints, paper-based textbooks are unable to offer much in the way of long reading or listening texts that are extraneous to the main thrust of a planned lesson. E-textbooks, on the other hand, can alleviate this deficiency in two ways. The first is to provide links from within the e-textbook to lengthier topic-related and engaging reading and listening input on the Internet, which can be accessed directly from the learners' devices. The second way that e-textbooks can incorporate extended input is through tools like media or sidebar widgets. Such widgets, though taking up little space on a page, can hold long reading texts or audio talks supplementary to the principal progression of a lesson or unit.

Figure 7. An extended reading option taken from an authentic source.

Learners, depending on their interest and/or motivation, could sample such texts in their free time, without the need for their comprehension to be checked. It is true that such an approach within digital materials does not fulfill the ideal of an extended reading programme, where learners are free to choose whatever they are interested in, irrespective of the unit theme they are

currently studying. Nonetheless, e-textbooks at least have the capability to offer many more opportunities for easily accessible, authentic extended input than traditional paper-based textbooks.

A final principle that Tomlinson (2011) puts forward for material development, one that clearly suggests the future ascendancy of the e-textbook format, is that "materials should provide opportunities for outcome feedback" (p. 23). Authoring programmes like iBooks Author currently offer instant feedback on answers to questions, though for now question types are largely limited to multiple choice and matching. There is also the possibility, with coding resources, to embed other types of question widgets within e-textbooks, and third-party developers are beginning to offer alternatives as well, so the quality of automated feedback in e-textbooks will improve in the future. The ability also exists, again through third-party widget creators, to embed widgets that allow for text responses that can be emailed directly to the instructor for feedback from within the e-textbook, making the whole process more streamlined.

Figure 8. Automated feedback for a grammar awareness-raising activity. The Submit button setting can be changed to allow for emailing answers to oneself or an instructor.

Conclusions

To summarise, following are some of the course and book design features that future e-textbooks produced locally for tablet devices could adopt to more closely match material development principles derived from SLA research:

- themes, images, topics and activities that connect more directly with the lives of the target learners

- more variety, especially in terms of the way materials start, proceed, and end

- less density of text and information on a given page

- more opportunities for creative self-expression using non-linguistic skills

- greater overt attention paid to the purpose of activities, through embedding

- a higher degree of exposure to authentic input

through linking to outside sources, embedding listening and reading input into video and sidebar widgets, and asking learners to compile core knowledge and basic facts on their own from the Internet

- the use of cognitive modelling through screen capture videos to better elucidate the use of skills and strategies

- more fostering of different learning styles through the inclusion of multi-media, such as video/audio introductions to activities, and possibly adaptive activities

- the use of instant feedback tools

- the judicious integration of Project-Based Language Learning approaches

It is posited that by incorporating the design recommendations listed above, creators of locally-sourced e-textbooks will further second-language acquisition by helping learners be more at ease in their learning context and more engaged in their classes, increasing their perception of the relevance of what they are studying, bolstering their confidence levels, exposing them to lengthier input texts, catering to different learning style preferences, giving them opportunities to use the target language to communicate purposefully, and involving them as intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic beings, as described by Tomlinson (2011). Naturally, some training of instructors and learners will be required in order to familiarise them with the rationales for these new types of learning materials and with how to exploit them to achieve the above goals. That being said, the relative ease of production that software tools like iBooks Author allow, as well as the rapid spread of tablet devices worldwide, should lead to an increase in the next few years in locally-based e-textbook creation by individual institutions and instructors. Hopefully the result will also be more research into the specific effects their design features have on learner behaviour and attitudes, and subsequently greater understanding of the role digital materials can play in fostering language acquisition.

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