

Learner-designed materials

At a glance

Language: Any

Level: Teacher development (pre-service or in-service)
The classroom activities presented as examples are mainly geared towards primary and secondary level classrooms up to approx. CEFR Level B1. However, the basic principle as well as most activity types are easily adaptable to suit older learners and / or higher ability levels.

Key words: Individual 'silent work', learner independence, creativity, little teacher preparation time

Teacher-oriented aims

- To enlarge teachers' repertoire of ideas for individual 'silent work'
- To encourage teachers to develop and adapt such ideas to suit their own classrooms

Classroom-oriented aims

- **Pedagogic:** To promote learner motivation, creativity and autonomy
- **Linguistic:** Depending on the individual activity, e.g. to consolidate vocabulary, to develop writing skills, to promote linguistic accuracy

All classes are essentially mixed-ability, and learners tend to work at different paces. For this reason, experienced teachers usually have a stock of activities or tasks in reserve to keep 'early finishers' meaningfully occupied. Although most published materials include components suitable for this purpose (such as vocabulary cards, workbooks or practice activities on CD-ROM), teachers who are new to second / foreign language teaching are often concerned about not having a sufficient stock at their disposal when they start out. The same applies when new course materials and / or methodologies are introduced and experienced teachers find that some of the extra material they have previously been using now needs to be replaced. A teacher development session centred around the idea of letting the learners themselves create activities for

classroom use is therefore welcomed by most participants and can be linked to a wide variety of other points on the teacher education syllabus, such as skills development, learner autonomy, assessment, etc. Participants will also appreciate the fact that the activities presented at the session (see "A selection of activities") are of the 'ready-to-use-in-class' kind, requiring little material and little preparation on their part.

Suggested procedure for the teacher development session

1. Brainstorming and categorising different forms of individual 'silent work'

- Lead into the topic by talking about situations where the need arises to keep individual learners meaningfully occupied (e.g. while they are waiting for the lesson to begin or for others to finish a task or a test). You might want to introduce the handy expression 'early finishers'.
- Participants brainstorm things that these learners can be given to do.
If your participants are experienced teachers, allow enough time for them to share tips and tricks from their own teaching practice.

Examples: Reading graded readers, completing extra practice activities, solving riddles and puzzles, doing homework, memorising vocabulary

- Participants categorise the activities they have brainstormed. Encourage them to refine activity descriptions which are too broad to be categorised (such as "doing homework") by giving specific examples.

Options:

- a) Choose categories suitable to your training needs (i.e. according to whatever particular concepts and distinctions need to be focussed on in your context).

Examples: Word – sentence – discourse / Vocabulary – grammar – skills / Language – subject matter / Focus on form – focus on meaning / Different task and activity types / Different levels of ability / Controlled – free(r) activities

- b) Participants work in groups to devise their own categories and group the activities accordingly, display the result on a poster.

- If there is an imbalance between the categories in terms of numbers of examples given, let participants reflect on why this might be and ask them to think of possible items to add where there are only few.

2. Brainstorming sources of material for individual 'silent work'

- Participants brainstorm sources of material for this type of work.
- Conduct a brief plenary discussion of benefits and drawbacks of different sources, their relative suitability in different situations / for different learners.
- If the learners have not yet been mentioned as a potential source of material, introduce the idea at this point: "How about letting learners create materials for each other?"

3. Looking at examples of learner-made materials and discussing them

- Introduce your participants to a number of examples of materials that learners can create themselves for use by other learners (see A selection of activities). If available, use authentic examples, i.e. ones actually created by learners. Present one or two examples for each category from Stage 1.
- For each example, participants discuss the following questions:
 - How could you teach learners to make the material?
 - What do you need to provide them with in terms of tools and support?
 - How much time would it take them to create the material?
 - Would you need to check and correct the outcome?
 - In what ways can the designers (i.e. the learners who make them) and the users (i.e. the learners who complete the resulting tasks) benefit from the material?

4. Developing further ideas

- Participants work in groups, thinking of further types of materials that learners could create themselves. They get ready to present at least one such prototype for each level to the plenum.
- Ideas are presented and discussed. Possible points for discussion:
 - Benefits to the learner (designer as well as user)
 - Potential problems and solutions
 - Possible links and synergies (e.g. with strategy development, formative and self-assessment, cross-curricular work, cognitive styles)

5. Adapting ideas to suit different ages / levels

- Participants work individually or in pairs, adapting one idea to make it suitable for younger or older, more or less confident, more or less advanced learners. You might want to remind them of certain relevant key concepts before they embark on the task.

Possible key concepts: Scaffolding, language support, providing a challenge, linguistic and cognitive complexity, thinking skills, learner needs, age-appropriacy

A selection of activities

The following are just a few examples of classroom materials learners can create on their own. They are grouped according to one possible classification system suggested in Step 1 (see Examples). For the sake of clarity of description, the term ‘designers’ is used to refer to learners creating materials, while those subsequently completing the newly created tasks will be called ‘users’.

Word level

1. Memory

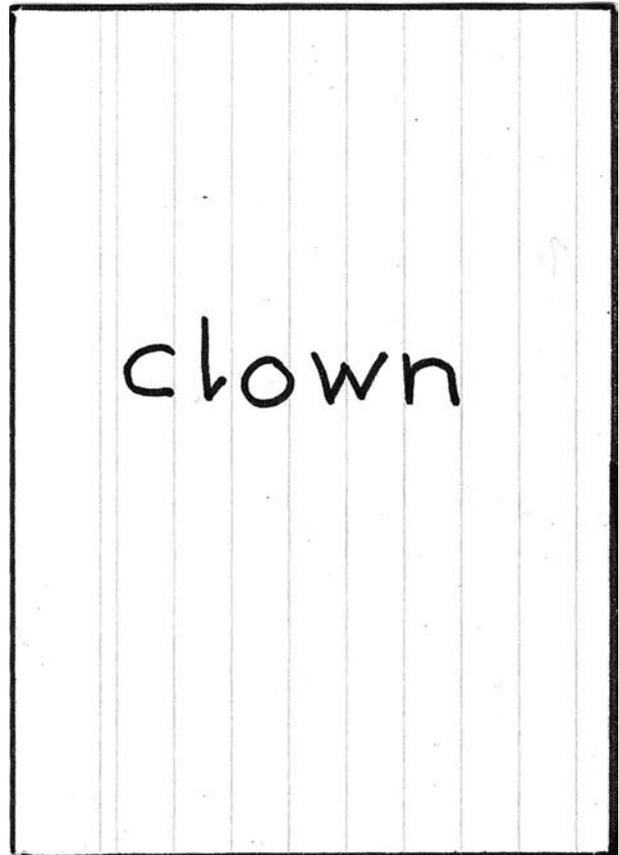


Instead of using a prefabricated set of cards to play “Memory” (also known as pelmanism), the class creates its own classroom set, expanding it as learning progresses: Working from their wordlists or vocabulary cards, designers draw items recently learned on plain white cards (either picture-pairs or word-picture pairs). The teacher needs to keep control over who is drawing what so as not to end up with multiple pairs of the same item.

2. Word search and crossword puzzles

To make a word search puzzle, all that is needed is an empty grid: 10 by 10 squares is a good size for beginners. Designers can either draw the grids themselves or the teacher can provide them with photocopied ones. They place words either horizontally or vertically in the grid, then fill up all the empty squares with random letters. The object of the game for users is to mark all the words hidden in the grid.

- For additional support, the words hidden in the grid can be listed next to the grid.
- Cater for more confident and less confident learners (designers as well as users) by letting them choose different sizes of grids (e.g. three sizes ranging from 8 by 8 to 15 by 15 squares)
- To make the puzzle more challenging for users, words can be placed diagonally as well as horizontally and vertically.
- Designers who want more of a challenge can use the empty grids to create crossword puzzles. If done ‘by



hand’, this is a very demanding task. Another option is to use puzzlemaker software.

I	N	S	E	C	T	N	O	PUPA
Z	A	F	G	H	E	L	M	USEFUL
L	U	P	U	P	A	T	S	RUN
V	W	I	N	G	C	A	F	UNDER
X	A	O	D	C	H	O	T	WING
Y	C	E	E	S	E	L	R	HOT
B	F	I	R	M	R	U	N	TEACHER
U	S	E	F	U	L	P	Q	INSECT

Sentence level

3. Question cards or questionnaires

Ask designers to prepare short questionnaires for classroom surveys or to write between one and three questions on a card. The questions can be linked to a particular topic and / or the designers be given a set of grammatical question prompts to work from, such as “Can you...?” / “Who.. / which / what?”, “Do / Does...?” The questions can then either be used in whole-class speaking activities or be distributed for written answers.

- For additional support, word banks or substitution cards could be provided.
- Variation: Designers prepare Test-your-knowledge questions based on some reading input.

4. Sentence-in-a-bag

Designers copy out sentences from their course books or another source, cut them up into random chunks or into individual words and put the pieces of each separate sentence in a small bag, pouch or envelope. These are placed in a box, ready for users to take out and try to put the original sentence back together.

- Variations: A more challenging variation consists in putting two sentences into one bag. The activity can easily be taken up to text level by applying the same principle to a short text, such as a joke.



Text level

5. Crazy texts

Designers either write a text of their own or change an existing one so that it contains a number of factual errors or ‘crazy’ statements. Users subsequently correct the errors so that the facts are correct. Additional questions can be added. This task format could be termed ‘self-adaptive’ as texts will vary in level of linguistic and academic complexity according to the learner’s level of proficiency.

Football

Football is a sport. You play it with a racket and a ping pong ball. You have to throw the ball into a basket. There are two goalies and twenty field players. The field is covered with ice and you wear skates to play it.

Instructions

1. Korrigiere die Fussballbeschreibung.
2. Zu welchen Sportarten gehören die Aussagen, die nicht zu Fussball passen?

6. Chain stories

Working from a prompt such as a picture, an object or an initial sentence, designers begin to write a story, then pass their story on to another learner to continue. Each further contributor to the story thus becomes a ‘user’ (of the previous designer’s material) as well as a ‘designer’ (for the next contributor) until someone brings the story to its completion.

- Variation: User-designers can decide if they would like to add another piece of text, an illustration or both to the previous writer’s part of the story.
- To provide additional support, the teacher can prepare picture prompts with word banks or other types of language support accompanying them.
- Variation for more sophisticated learners: Once the learners have been introduced to the characteristics of a haiku (alternatively a tanka, cinquain or other form of unrhymed poetry that follows fairly strict rules), the teacher can have a box of poem-sheets ready which contain the right number of lines and possibly one line already filled in as a prompt. Designers can fill in further lines and return the poems to the box for users to pick up and complete. The completed poems are displayed around the classroom.