They All Have a Story to Tell

– Helping Learners to Express Themselves

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Tongue-tied Moments?

Have you ever been tongue-tied? Have you experienced those awkward moments in which you are stuck for words? Or words may come but they turn out to be inappropriate ones! One of my favourite cartoons from Far Side starts with Tarzan swinging from tree to tree before meeting Jane. In his mind he has been rehearsing what to say in an eloquent, elegant and fluent manner. Now is the crucial moment: the words came out, "Me Tarzan. You Jane" and he gets so annoyed with himself.

Such a state of being tongue-tied seems to happen when you least want it, as Tarzan would agree, during a very important interview, on your first date with the ultimate person of your dreams, or in the presence of a traffic policeman.

Have you felt such frustrations as an L2 learner? Some L2 users may testify that such an awkward tongue-tied state is not an exception but the norm.

In this paper, I would like to firstly explore the sources of why L2 learners may find it difficult to express themselves, be it in a spoken or written format. I will

then investigate how current coursebooks may or may not be designed to help L2 learners become able to express themselves freely. I will go on to describe various ways of helping learners to become less tongue-tied and start enjoying telling their stories and I will also provide a few examples of creative writing and text-driven materials. I will finally discuss principles behind the examples so that teachers and materials writers could apply them to the classroom or to materials development.

L2 Users = 'The light-footed dancer in an overblown astronaut suit'?

Eva Hoffman (1998) describes how she felt when she immigrated to Canada as a teenager in her autobiographical novel called 'Lost in Translation: A life in a new language':

> … these days, it takes all my will to impose any control on the words that emerge from me. I have to form entire sentences before uttering them… My speech, I sense, sounds monotonous, deliberate, heavy – an aural mask that doesn't become me or express me at all. … Perhaps the extra knot that strangles my voice is rage. I am enraged at the false persona I'm being stuffed into, as into some clumsy and overblown astronaut suit… (Hoffman, 1998, pp.118-119)

Many EFL learners even at higher linguistic levels report having gone through more or less similar experiences when they lived in English speaking countries. In fact, I was one of such frustrated L2 learners when I spent a year as an exchange student in a high school in Wisconsin, USA. The biggest disappointment was myself. I had done very well in Japan during six years of learning English. I was used to having lots of friends and playing active roles at school. But in the States even a dog seemed to understand English better than I

could. I felt frustrated, humiliated and helpless for not being able to express myself in the way I could in Japanese.

An ongoing study of ESOL students and also my own investigation revealed that L2 learners in English speaking countries seem to feel inadequate in many ways (Hann et al, in press; Masuhara, 2000; Masuhara, 2009). Firstly, L2 learners may have a lot of experience and be respected in their own countries but in a new environment all their life's luggage and assets seem out of place or useless. So there is a feeling of displacement. Secondly, no one seems to realise or be bothered to see that they are an equally intelligent and capable being behind the L2 struggle. L2 learners may feel they are placed in a social fringe among the majority of L1 users who share their culture. Thirdly, they have to live with an uncomfortable awareness that their performance in L2 always seem to lack the nuances, depths and sophistication they are able to achieve spontaneously in L1. In this sense, L2 learners suffer from a feeling of loss of control. Finally, they find L2 classroom materials to be trivial, uninteresting and irrelevant. Apart from a lucky few, many seem to have a poor learning experience all through their long years they spend in language classes.

L2 learners in English as Foreign Language contexts may not have to face day-to-day pressure but they are often apprehensive and reluctant when it comes to speaking or writing. So much so, that teachers may be inclined to avoid such speaking or writing tasks altogether if they can.

Where do L2 learners' frustrations come from when expressing themselves?

Some of the reasons why L2 learners become reticent when expressing themselves seem to derive from gaps that they cannot fill between:

- mental maturity and language ability

- aspired and achieved levels of linguistic control in relation to their target

- aspired and achieved levels of social acceptance/respect

- required and available resources

- what is offered in class and what they really want/need

Are coursebooks helping the frustrated L2 learners?

Do coursebooks address these gaps? My literature review (Masuhara & Tomlinson, 2008; Masuhara et al, 2008) revealed that the solutions on offer seem to be simplification, language practice and error correction as summarized below:

Sources of L2 learners' frustration	Typical coursebook solutions
• Imbalance between mental and linguistic ability • Low linguistic control • Social displacement • Inadequate resources • Poor L2 learning experience	• Simplification • Language practice • Error correction

Simplification as a solution?

Recently I had a chance to teach EFL to lower-intermediate undergraduate students for a couple of terms in Oman. The coursebook was written by an award-winning author for the Middle-Eastern context but I was rather disappointed with it in many ways. All I could see in unit after unit were simplified texts which seemed largely alien and irrelevant to the learners' lives in Oman. Furthermore,

the texts were rather short, bland, and not cognitively or affectively engaging because they were often written to teach the language points rather than to achieve genuine communication, resulting in real life outcomes. Even the texts with authentic sources had been linguistically simplified.

Adults do simplify their talk when they speak to children. A Professor in neuro-physics will try to use a more listener-friendly account of his expertise at a conference for general public. Widdowson (1979, p. 184) differentiated 'simplified version' to mean mechanical linguistic simplification from 'simple accounts' to achieve communicative modification according to the audience and purpose. Simple accounts primarily focus on achieving communicative effects (e.g. surprise, engage, entertain) as well as getting the message across. Simplification done purely from a linguistic point of view often takes away the texture of the original and goes against what Second Language Acquisition reports, as Tomlinson (forthcoming) summarises, "A pre-requisite for language acquisition is that the learners are exposed to a rich, meaningful and comprehensible input of language in use". Short texts often lack the redundancy, recycling or gradual build-up that characterises language in real life use.

Masuhara et al (2008) conducted an extensive review of most of the eight EFL adult courses submitted by UK publishers. This confirmed that even coursebooks at Intermediate level are often linguistically simplified to avoid potential comprehension problems for the learners.

Language Practice

Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008) evaluated General English materials from beginners to advanced and noted that "the lower-level books appear to treat the learners as being low level in experience, intellect and maturity" (2008, p. 30). Their survey reveals that both the learners and teachers reported that "… the topics tend to be trivial and the activities are unlikely to stimulate the learners to think and feel" and the activities are "too easy, irrelevant and boring". No wonder L2 learners struggle to speak or write: most of the time there is nothing to respond to in the texts or in the activities.

Masuhara and Tomlinson (ibid, p. 31) also noted that the activities in most coursebook samples across all levels included stock examination type exercises such as true/false, multiple-choice, matching, gap filling and sentence completion. They speculate that materials writers are focusing on providing pre-determined input and responding to the market demands for exam preparation rather than on facilitating intake, language acquisition and development.

Masuhara and Tomlinson (2008) did acknowledge that the materials at Upper-Intermediate and Advanced levels provided texts with depth on varied topics and that the activities were more engaging. But this means that the majority of intelligent and capable L2 learners at lower levels are not getting the necessary exposure to real language and are deprived of the optimal conditions for language acquisition and development (See Tomlinson, 2008 for an overview of different kinds of materials used around the world). The learners at lower linguistic levels, for example the Sultan Qaboos University students I had, are no less intelligent

and mature as those in higher levels and yet they were only exposed to unengaging texts and tasks.

Masuhara et al (2008) in their extensive review of adult GE/EFL noted a new tendency in the last 7 years: writing has been very much side-lined in coursebooks, if included at all. The problem here comes from the fact that some General English cousebooks cater for short-term visitors to English speaking countries as well as EFL learners around the globe. GE learners expect listening and speaking to take place in classes and many of the coursebooks seem to have given in to such demands and neglected the value of extensive writing as a means of self-expression, creativity and life skills. As Masuhara et al 2008, p. 310) say, "Writing could give purpose to reading and language discovery. Feedback and revision provides individual development opportunities."

Are teachers helping the frustrated L2 learners?

The students' seeming lack of motivation sometimes drives some teachers to resort to using tests as a reason for the students to study English. I have experienced such a case in Oman. Marking of students' writing in examinations were left to the teachers but common complaints in the staff room were about students' inability to spell, lack of vocabulary and grammatical inaccuracy.

In the case of Omani university students, they were intelligent 18 year olds who made linguistic errors but were far more capable of self-expression in English than they were given credit for. To be realistic, however, I should stress that the learners were only capable of self-expression when they were encouraged to

express themselves and when I made myself available to provide them with some of the language they needed at the time they needed it.

When I revealed my view above in the staff room, some teachers said to me, "Yes, but what about their mistakes? We're teachers. We have to help them!!" For those teachers writing meant checking their progress and helping students meant error correction. What students are expressing was not the primary focus.

Effect of error correction?

What are your own views of error correction? Here is an interesting testimonial from a student in U.K.

A boy wrote a poem

A boy wrote a poem.
It was from homework from class.
He wrote about cliff-tops,
And how the winds pass.
He just let it flow
From his head to his pen,
But his spelling was bad,
"C, do this again!"

A boy wrote a poem,
And thought of his mark.
And this time he checked it
And wrote of the dark.
He changed and corrected,
Gave it in the next day.
He got "B+ Good effort"
and threw it away.

Negative association in the classroom?

I would argue that what error correction does is to create a negative association between the learners' "act of production" and "being punished". There is a lot of research that seem to indicate that error correction does not help the learners (Truscott, 1996; Truscott, 2008). Just like the boy in the poem, when L2 learners receive their creative writing assignments with corrections in red, learners may look at the grade, at their mistakes and that will be the end. What remains with them is less confidence, less self-esteem, and less motivation.

The question then is how materials and teachers can help the L2 learners fill in the gap and start to feel less tongue-tied? I would argue strongly that what teachers and materials should do is to create a positive association of "Express and be empowered".

I would argue what learners need are:

- Rich, varied, and meaningful exposure to language in use

- Living in the language experience

- Opportunities for self-expression

- Socialisation and publication experience

Materials That Help Learners to Tell Their Stories

So what kinds of materials might help the L2 learners to tell their stories? When I say "They all have stories to tell", I am not only referring to them telling their life stories. For such an attempt, I would like to recommend Tomlinson (2003b). He describes a case in Vanuatu of how he helped domestic science and handicraft

students with very little English to write novels of their lives. The learners really got involved in writing, made remarkable progress and gained confidence.

What I mean as well is to place as the main objectives in our teaching procedures to provide L2 learners with opportunities for them to:

- Experience living in the language

- Express themselves through various means

- Learn to notice important features of language they need

- Learn, share, and work together with peers, family and community

- Obtain tools and strategies to achieve autonomy

Approaches may take various forms.

- Physical games, music, dance, drama, etc

- Collaborative learning

- Language/pragmatic/strategic awareness

- Creative writing & publication

- Text-Driven Approaches

Physical games, for example, make less linguistic demands but learners can make use of their existing strengths to express themselves (See detailed discussion in Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2009a; Tomlinson and Masuhara, 2009b). Hae ok Park (2010) provides an account of how process drama offers living-in experience and helped her Korean secondary high school students to become able to notice important features of language in use and learn to work together with peers.

Barker (2009) and Barker (2010) investigate the effect of free voluntary out-of-the-class interaction as a way to improve linguistic fluency and confidence.

In this paper I am going to focus on Creative Writing & Publication and a Text-Driven Approach and on providing examples.

Frame-Based Materials – Stem Poem as a kind of creative writing

By Frame-Based Materials, I mean those materials that give learners a specific focus or some constraints to spark off creativity just like a photographer uses a frame to extract only the essence of her experience. There are many ways of giving such frames. You can find a lot of great ideas in Maley & Mukundan (2005) and Holmes & Moulton (2001).   See also Maley (2009) for information about "The Asia Teacher-Writers Project", a creative writing project in which teachers in Asia are encouraged to produce literary texts in English for use in their classes.

Alan Maley & Mukundan explain "Stem Poems work by asking the writer to use identical beginnings to the line of the poem (the stem) and to complete them differently", and provide several interesting examples of Stem Poem (2005, p. 1).

Back to my example of the undergraduate students EAP classes at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. In my first class, I decided to use the Stem Poem Alan Maley presented at an IATEFL conference. I had never taught Omani students before so I wanted to know what they are like and what they can do. I asked 35 students to write a short poem using the following stem:

I've never …

I've never …

I've never …

But I've always …

Here are two examples of what students wrote:

Omani student A:

I've never been to India.

I've never learned Indian language.

I've never had an Indian friend.

But I've always eaten Indian food.

Omani student B:

I've never drawn pictures.

I've never listened to music.

I've never drunk.

But I've always learned from Qur'an

The students found the Stem Poem to be novel and fun. I was impressed with what I saw so when the students were ready I asked a few students to read aloud what they wrote. A big applause followed. After collecting students' poems, I typed them all, gave out a copy each in the next class, suggesting that they showed their poems in English to their family and friends when they went back to their village the following weekend. The stem poem gave a frame which helped the learners to focus on the meaning, the important language features were highlighted, and the students could share what they had achieved with peers, friends and family.

As you can see, however, there are a few minor language lapses. Should I or should I not correct them? I decided not in this case because it is free writing which is written for pleasure and self-expression. I did not want to create the negative association between "Produce and Be Punished" and I wanted to establish an "Express and Be Empowered" environment. I would argue that teachers should differentiate:

1) speaking and writing for pleasure and self-expression

2) speaking and writing for socialising

3) speaking and writing for publication.

Obviously the speaking and writing for publication would involve focusing on improving accuracy, fluency, appropriateness and effectiveness.

My objectives of giving the stem poem task in my first class in Oman were:

- for me to find out about who my students are and what they are capable of

- for learners to try something new which is fun

- for learners to build up confidence that they can write a poem in English easily

- for learners to raise their self-esteem by being praised and appreciated by their classmates, teacher, friends and family.

For these objectives, error correction would have been more damaging than helpful.

In later classes, I set up a collaborative interview project which the students had to present in front of the class. The Omani students were given a brief to entertain, inform, or persuade. The students welcomed language awareness and advice on

effective presentation strategies and they were very willing to participate in self-, peer- and teacher-editing processes. Coursebooks typically ask learners to discuss a given topic or write a letter or an essay without specifying who they are addressing, what the purpose is or what real-life outcomes they are aiming at. They are seldom or never given opportunities to learn through revisions and editorial processes. Most coursebooks only ask for output of language, seldom or never outcome as a result of language use. There is no reason for doing so apart from the need for language practice. Also, learners are merely corrected without any acknowledgement for what they said. No wonder learners are reluctant to speak up or write.

One exception to this seems to me to be the new Writing Coursebook produced in house for Level 1-2 (Elementary to Lower Intermediate) at the Language Centre in Sultan Qaboos University (SQU). Each unit of the course involves stimulus exposure to an engaging text followed by a real-life writing task for a particular purpose to a specified real-life audience (e.g. writing to an English newspaper in Oman, publishing their stories in established international websites). The writing process involves three levels of drafting with self- and peer-editing using different criteria for each stage. Al-Busaidi & Tindle (2010) describe this materials development project and report the results of the analysis of improvement in the writing exams as well as very positive feedback from learners and teachers.

Recent studies on the efficacy of error correction seem to provide us with insights on how different approaches may be best employed at different stages. Lasagabaster & Sierra (2005) report the consensus among teachers and students in

that the most efficient corrections occurred when more time, longer explanations, and use of different correction strategies were utilised. Chandler (2003) compares four different kinds of error correction methods and reports how the students rated self-correction to be most informative and useful. Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen (2009) found that different error corrections were more effective at different stages.

Frame-Based Materials – Haiku Poem and Photo Haiku

Let's move on to Haiku and Photo Haiku. Let me firstly explain what haiku is to establish a common understanding. The original haiku was a form of Japanese poetry which was established in the 16th century. Now its English version has made the Haiku poem an international property. My google search gained 10 million hits, including adverts for international Haiku competitions and on-line interactive Haiku development software!

Haiku poetry has strict construction rules. Haiku in English has only 17 syllables which are divided into three lines: five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, five in the third. A haiku traditionally contains a *kigo*, seasonal reference but it is not always included in free-form or non Japanese Haiku.

An example of Haiku is like this:

> Above the frozen trees
> Brilliant Orion arises
> This long winter night

My favourite ones include: Windows Haiku. According to an email sent to me, it has been suggested that Microsoft should replace incomprehensible error messages on the computer screen with Windows Haiku such as:

Chaos reigns within.
Reflect, repent, and reboot.
Order shall return.

A crash reduces
Your expensive computer
To a simple stone.

Program aborting:
Close all that you have worked on.
You ask far too much.

One way of using haiku to help students to achieve self-expression is to use Photo Haiku. It is wonderfully easy and fun. Imagine that you have been walking along a river in Japan during a cherry blossom season. You have just stopped to appreciate an interesting sight and taken a photo with your mobile like the photo below.

Are you in the mood for a Haiku poem?

Mr. Wada, the man who took this photo, felt like this:

Branches of cherry blossoms
spreading low along the moat
looking like dragons.

See how Haiku gives a focus and intensifies the viewing experience?

What Mr. Wada did was to launch a Japanese website in which he displayed his collection of photo haiku to share with a wider audience. The hits of his website increased day by day and he started to receive emails from his fans. Gaining more confidence, he wanted an even wider audience and more challenge, so he started to translate his photo haiku into English. He realised that translation helped him to clarify what he wanted to say.

Through Photo Haiku Mr. Wada experienced living in a language, expressed himself, socialised, and improved his English in an autonomous way through

publication. Mr. Wada didn't receive any error correction but got a lot of feedback which helped his self-esteem to rise and gain confidence. The positive experience spurred him to read Haiku poems written by the great poets in the past. Realising that there are international fans of Haiku, he started to write Haiku poems in English. He also surfed the net and appreciated English Haiku. He started to learn English more seriously because he wanted to find phrases and expressions that best approximated his perception and emotion. Through his English photo haiku websites he is now receiving acknowledgement and praise from around the globe.

Mr. Wada's example shows how self-expression has given him motivation to develop further and learn more. There might be a Mr. Wada in your L2 classrooms. With mobile phones the learners are used to taking snap shots. They can add a haiku poem and send it to friends – real life communication with a specific target audience and purpose.

Materials for Self Expression - Text-Driven Materials

Brian Tomlinson developed The Text-Driven Approach through his materials development projects (Tomlinson, 2003c). He also provides great examples of text-driven materials using extracts from authentic contemporary literature (Tomlinson, 1994).

An example of Text-Driven Material

Let me tell you about a class of Intermediate students on an adult evening language course. The learners are of mixed nationalities and occupations. My

example of a text happens to be a poem but Text-driven materials can be developed with any text, for example, a piece of music, a painting, an advert, an extract from a video, a web page, etc as long as it is potentially engaging. It can even be a description of a packet of vegetable seeds. The lesson goes like this:

1. Hi, class. Today, I'm going to read you a poem called 'Dream World'. What do you think it is about?

2. Well, the poem is mainly about work. Any changes in your guesses?

3. In your minds, think of things that bother you at work. If there are a lot, you may note them down on a piece of paper.

4. Would you like to find out what the people around you have thought of? Find a partner and have a chat. You don't have to talk about what you don't want to.

5. In groups, pairs or individually, list the things that disturb you at work on a piece of paper.

6. Listen to the poem "Dream World". *(Read the poem. The students do not have an access to this written poem at this moment.)*

> In a work where no one's perfect
> Everyone's given a break
> No cliques exist at all
> We're friends with each other
> There's nothing to judge
> Be yourself
>
> Wouldn't you want to wake up
> today late for work it's ok
> No ones going to yell
> walk in with a smile
> they'll all smile back

As they hand you a pile

Here's the work you missed in the hours you slept in

Good luck and have fun

If you need help, ask anyone.

How nice would it be to live

In a world with no deadlines

Or no rules or laws.

You wouldn't have to worry

About getting in trouble with your flaws

Holly Somer

7. What do you think triggered this poet to write this poem?

8. Form a group of three. Next to each stanza of this poem, write what you think is likely to happen in real life.

9. You are going to write a poem "My Dream World". If you're working in pairs or groups, write 'Our Dream World'.

10. Go back to the list you made in 5 "Things that disturb you at work". Next to each item in your list, write what it will be like in your dream world.

11. *(Distribute the poem as a handout)* Using the poem as a model, try to write "My/Our Dream World". Write your name(s). You can use a pen name if you wish.

12. Get together with another person, pair, or group and read your poems to each other. Have a chat about the poems.

13. Stick your poems on the wall.

14. Go around and enjoy what others have written.

15. We're going to send our poems to some websites and newspapers. Could you please recommend one that you liked especially?

OK. There are so many good ones. If we are to narrow down to three, which ones would you choose?

I'll read the selected three poems for you. Let's decide which one we'd like to send for publication.

16. *(Write the selected poem on the board)*

   Normally for the poem to be accepted, the poems are firstly circulated among the reviewers.

17. You're the reviewers of the website/papers. What do you think? Any suggestions?

18. Here are some of the poetry websites. Try them yourselves and find a poem that you like. Some websites will send you a poem of a day to your computer/mobile. You can subscribe to them.

19. From now on whenever you feel disturbed at work, try to think of what will happen in Your Dream World. Add to your own poem and revise it.

   Try publishing your own poems. You could create your own website and publish your poems as well.

They all have stories to tell – using the learners as resource

In his chapter in "Portraits of the L2 learner", Vivian Cook (2002) investigates coursebooks and finds that L2 learners are often misrepresented as helpless strangers who are always asking for help from native speakers and he strongly argues for the use of the term L2 users rather than L2 learners.

I would argue that it would be a great loss if we do not take advantage of the rich resources that L2 learners can bring to our classrooms. Photo Haiku and Text-Driven Activities are just two examples out of many such options that will help L2 learners open up and tell their stories and release light-footed dancers from overblown astronaut's suits.

A Checklist for Evaluation, Adaptation and Development

A checklist for the materials may come in handy in evaluating, adapting and developing our materials:

To what extent do the materials provide the learners with:

- "Living in the language" experience?

- Opportunities for self-expression?

- Opportunities to socialise?

- Opportunities for language awareness?

- Opportunities to publish?

- Opportunities to be autonomous?

Here's a little present for the readers

Finally, in my search for a good text I have come across a lovely verse. I would like to share this with you to end this paper. It is called A Celtic Blessing:

May you see in what you do the beauty of your own soul.

May your work never weary you.

May your work release within you wellsprings of refreshment and excitement.

May you never become lost in bland absences.

I would like to add one more blessing that I thought of:

May you help your learners to express themselves and gain inspiration and pleasure from doing so.

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