

Working with materials

Teaching language without textbooks

Creating your own resources

- 1 The term 'teaching resources' is often understood as only meaning 'written' or 'printed' materials. However, our classrooms, our environment and our community are full of teaching resources.
- 2 If you do create your own written resources, manage your time well, ensure they are inclusive, and make them interesting and relevant for your students.
- 3 The one resource available in every lesson is your students. Use them. Other non-written resources include the local environment, local community and 'found objects' (i.e. items which people have discarded).
- 4 Empower students by asking them to bring in their own resources to class, e.g. newspapers, photos or real objects.
- 5 Whilst technology provides opportunities for accessing resources, it's important that they are 'AAA' (accessible, appropriate, accurate).

Sowton, C. (2021). *Teaching in Challenging Circumstances*. Cambridge University Press.p. 166

Introduction

- 1** What are the challenges in creating your own written resources?
- 2** How could the following be used as language learning resources? Do you use any of these resources in your current teaching?
 - your students
 - your local area
 - people in your local community
 - found objects
- 3** What kind of learning resources could your students bring to lessons?

Learning resources in challenging circumstances

When learning languages in challenging circumstances, no written resources may be available, or else they may not be completely fit for the purpose. In such situations, you will need to develop / use your own resources. Although this may initially feel quite challenging, it may be easier than you think. Key to this is rethinking what we understand by the term 'resources'. This term is often interpreted as meaning 'written materials created by an expert'. But learning resources can, and should be, understood in much wider and more democratic terms than this. Four general categories of resources are therefore explored in this chapter: 1. written resources created by the teacher; 2. non-written resources identified by the teacher; 3. resources found or created by the students; 4. online resources used in the classroom.

Resources created by the teacher

- 1 Use your time well:** Don't spend hours on making something look beautiful as it's unlikely that most students will notice. Use your limited time efficiently.
- 2 Extract the maximum value:** Considering the time it takes to create resources, ensure they can be used and reused in different ways. For example, if you write a story, add a simple question at the end like: *Create an alternative ending*. This is an interesting and valuable activity which could easily take 15–20 minutes.
- 3 Be inclusive and avoid bias:** Ensure that all the students in your class (and the wider community) are fairly and equally represented in the materials which you create. (See ► [Chapters 3](#) and [21](#)).
- 4 Share the workload with your colleagues, if possible:** If you all create resources, they can be used in your different classes. If doing this, print the materials on the best quality paper you can, and keep them in a safe place (e.g. a file or folder) so that they can last for longer. Depending on your context, you might even be able to share these materials digitally with colleagues in other institutions.

Reading texts

When creating reading texts for your students, ensure that the text:

- is interesting;
- is an appropriate level (i.e. at, or just above, the students' current level);
- is an appropriate length (e.g. based on student level, time available, complexity of language);
- provides opportunities for interesting questions.

Listening texts / audio

Follow the same advice as for reading texts. If recording the audio, ensure that an appropriate model of pronunciation is used. A variety of voices and accents is useful and interesting for students. Ask colleagues to help you in doing this.

Grammar and vocabulary activities

Further information about how to teach grammar and vocabulary effectively, including tasks which require zero or minimal resources, can be found in ► [Chapters 15–16](#). You might want to create written resources in order to provide students with a written record of what they have learned in class, or as a way of checking their understanding. When creating a written record of what was learned in the classroom, follow the principles below:

- Be clear and concise (i.e. don't use long sentences / paragraphs).
- Focus on usage, not just knowledge.
- Use a 'question and answer' format.
- Give examples.
- Use images or diagrams where appropriate.
- Provide space for students to add their own notes / comments.

Written resources. Example

THE PASSIVE

Examples of the passive

- 1 *Arabic, French and English are spoken in Lebanon.*
- 2 *My car has been stolen.*
- 3 *Olga discovered she was being paid less than her colleagues.*

When should I use the passive voice?

You should use the passive when:

- 1 the speaker wants to emphasize the object (i.e. the three languages);
- 2 the subject is unknown or unimportant (i.e. 'someone', 'a person');
- 3 the subject is obvious (i.e. 'her company').

How do I make the passive?

The usual word order in English is subject-verb-object. In the passive, the logical object becomes the subject of the sentence:

Someone has stolen my car. → My car has been stolen.

To make the passive, use *be* as an auxiliary verb, and the past participle of the main verb (e.g. *are spoken, has been stolen, was being paid*).

Notes

Only transitive verbs (verbs which take a direct object) can be put into the passive. Intransitive verbs (which don't take a direct object) cannot - e.g. *stand, sleep, arrive*.

Non-written resources identified by the teacher

Teachers may not feel confident creating their own materials. Alternatively, teachers may not have the ability to produce (either by printing or photocopying) or to distribute (digitally) these materials to their students. In such cases, non-written resources can be used to teach language. Here are four techniques for doing this:

Students as a resource

Students know things. They are not a ► [blank slate](#). Although this may sound obvious, it frequently gets forgotten in the classroom. We need to move away from the outdated idea of language teaching, where teachers are the holders of knowledge filling up their students with information. We need to see our students as resources. Whatever the teaching and learning situation, wherever in the world you are, there is one thing which is always present: students. Two particular areas of student knowledge which teachers can use are their language experiences and their life experiences.

For example, imagine that the L2 reading text is about a journey. All students will have experienced a journey before, even if only a short one in their local areas (e.g. from home to school). Asking students to think about and share their experiences of journeys they have made (in L1 or in L2) can help them better understand the L2 text. Questions you could ask include:

- *Has anyone been on a journey before? Where did you go? Who did you go with? What happened during the journey? How did you feel?*
- *Why do people go on journeys?*

Local environment as a resource

Too often, we think that education can only take place within the four walls of the classroom. Good institutions, however, know and appreciate their local environment. There is a good relationship between the two. Understanding your local environment can positively influence how students learn language.

Monica lives next to the river; there are goats in the field; there is a mosque / church / temple on the hill).

- **directions:** *How do you get from X to Y?*
- **used to:** *How has the local area changed in the last 5 years / 50 years? (this could be in the students' own experiences, or asking their parents / grandparents)*
- **adverbs of frequency:** *Describe the climate in our local area. (e.g. it never rains in December; in February it is often dusty).*
- **language of description:** *My village is + adjective; There is / there are ... ; It's got ...*

Community as a resource

The local community represents a huge opportunity for language learning. There are people from many different backgrounds, doing many different jobs, with many different opinions. The local community is a rich resource. Good institutions understand the community where they are located.

Engaging with the local community also offers an opportunity for your students to learn more about who they are, and where they come from.

Found objects as a resource

There are ‘found objects’ in every community in the world. And although waste is generally considered a negative thing, we can use items which people have discarded positively for language learning. This is a real opportunity in environments where there are no other learning resources.

ACTIVITY: Upcycling

- 1 Collect found objects in or near your school (e.g. paper, leaves, plastic bottles). Ensure that none of the found objects are dangerous (e.g. sharp metal, broken glass). Note: you could also get students to collect the found objects for you.
- 2 Divide the class into groups. Give each group a pile of the found objects.
- 3 Ask each group to make something using the found objects. Let them use their imagination and creativity. If they find this difficult, give each group a specific thing to make (e.g. mountain; truck; market; television).
- 4 When complete, everyone looks at what the other groups have created, and tries to guess what it is. They can ask yes / no questions to the group which created it.

Resources found or created by the students

Depending on the context in which you teach, it may be possible for students to bring in materials themselves for use in class for language learning purposes. This process is empowering, and gives ► [agency](#) to the students. The resources, and how they might be used, include:

Newspapers: Available in most communities, newspapers are usually relatively inexpensive. They contain huge opportunities for language learning, and can be exploited in many different ways. Find some examples below of how they can be used in the classroom:

- If the newspaper is not in the target language, students can work in groups and translate parts of it (either orally or in writing). Different groups can then compare their translations and create a combined version (e.g. using the snowball approach, see ► [Chapter 10](#)).
- If the newspaper is in the target language, students can work in groups to act out the stories. This is a good test of their reading comprehension.
- If the newspaper is in the target language, it can be used as a platform for analysing text features (e.g. word order; sentence structure; paragraph structure; language and grammatical choice).
- Whatever language the newspaper is in, students can work in groups and retell the story from the viewpoint of a different person in the story (in the target language).
- Any pictures in the newspaper can be used together with the text, or on their own.

Photographs: Pictures are very rich sources of information, and are excellent source material for speaking and writing activities. Here are three activity ideas:

- As part of a **show and tell** activity, ask students to present a photo in groups / to the whole class and explain what is happening, and why the photo is important. Classmates can then ask follow-up questions.
- In groups, students **describe** what is happening in the photos. They can also discuss what they think happened immediately before and after the photo was taken.
- Groups are randomly given several photos, and have to **create a story** which uses them all.

Real objects (realia): When students are interested in something, they are motivated to learn the specific language needed to talk about it. Given this, ask them to bring objects from their homes, and to discuss in L2 what they are and why they are important. In class, this can be done in different ways. One way is to have it as a regular class activity which takes place once a week, at a fixed time – e.g. five different students do it every Friday morning. Another way is to do it as a regular whole-class activity – e.g. once a month every student brings in an object, and they talk about it in small groups. As students become more familiar with the activity, you can add more complexity to it, for example:

- A student describes the object (without showing it). The rest of the class / group have to draw it. The student then reveals the object, and explains why it's important.
- Students write a life history of the object (e.g. where it's been, where it might go in the future).

Student-created texts: An in-class procedure for creating and using student-generated texts is described below. Note that the first stage could also be done at home by students as a piece of ► [flipped learning](#).

ACTIVITY: Students' own reading worksheet

- 1 Students work in groups and write their own texts. Give a specific amount of time for this activity (e.g. twenty minutes). Give regular time reminders to ensure that they complete the text within time. Don't worry that the texts will not be 100% grammatically or structurally accurate. Their focus will be on things the students are interested in.
- 2 Once groups have finished writing their texts, they swap them with another group. They should then read the new text, and write comprehension questions based on this text. They should write them directly underneath the text.
- 3 A third group is then given the text and questions, and must answer them.
- 4 The text, questions and answers are returned to the original group, who then mark the answers.

Online resources

If you are able to share online materials with your class, think carefully about what materials you use with your students. It can be tempting to assume that all online materials are good quality, but this isn't true. You must be critical of these materials. Before deciding to use them, ask yourself whether the materials are 'AAA', which means:

- Are they **accessible**? Has the information been created in a user-friendly way which your students will be able to understand?
- Are they **appropriate**? Are the contents relevant to your students' language learning needs, and also their social, economic and cultural context?
- Are they **accurate**? Is the source of the information reliable, e.g. a well-known organization working in the language learning field?

Reflection

- What resources are available in your local area which you could use for language learning?
- What language and life experiences do your students have which you could use?
- How could you use the ideas in this chapter in your own teaching?

**materials taken from Sowton, C. (2021). Teaching in
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