
Brief Reports and Summaries

A Report on the RELC Regional Seminar : Materials for Language Learning and Teaching : New Trends and Developments (April 11-15, 1988)

Saree Kulsiriswad

Chulalongkorn University Language Institute

The 23rd RELC Regional Seminar proved to be one of the most memorable seminars on language learning and teaching in a long time. There were almost 600 delegates and participants both from SEAMEO member countries and non-SEAMEO member countries, to attend the 19 plenary sessions, 60 parallel sessions, 14 workshops and one special symposium. By themselves, however, the numbers are of no significance. The main point is that the seminar was successful in presenting a comprehensive survey of current trends related to the theory and practice of materials development as well as in attempting new developments within the field.

The seminar pursued the following objectives :

- to review the theoretical concepts underpinning the design and development of instructional materials that have been developed in recent years ;
- to survey the significant trends in the design, production and use of instructional materials ;
- to help the educational administration and teachers in developing guidelines for the evaluation and selection of instructional materials ;
- to study the effect that new developments in the design and production of instructional materials may have on teacher education and language teaching methodology.

On the first day of the seminar, the theme was "An Overview of Language Teaching Materials". Most of the papers explored the area of teaching materials and their roles. Materials should be designed that make full use of students' prior knowledge and that are also commensurate with the teachers' ability and knowledge. Tom Hutchinson also examined the role of materials in the classroom and within the wider context of the educational system. He focussed on the PROCESS model, as opposed to the INPUT model, in which the classroom is seen not as a channel for guiding input to the learner but rather as a communicative context which provides the learner with opportunities to learn.

The next theme was "Materials of Teacher Education". The day started with a paper presented by Diane Larsen-Freeman, in which she examined the use of video programmes and T.V. broadcasts in language teaching and materials development. She went on to maintain that use of this medium did not mean it should replace teachers. She also challenged participants to ask themselves what they could do with video that they could not easily do without it. Therefore, she insisted, training teachers to exploit the qualities of video fully also has implications for teacher preparation. One major implication is the emphasis on the importance of teacher education as opposed to teacher training.

The theme of the third day was "Materials for Language Skills", the main highlights of which were the papers by Anne Raimes and Ted Rodgers, especially the latter who was very good

at bringing a lively and entertaining atmosphere to the proceedings. He emphasized that materials and language tasks should support a co-operative/collaborative language learning effort rather than an individualistic type of learning approach. At the end of the day, a panel discussion was organized providing a forum for an in-depth discussion of topics of importance and interest to the seminar's participants.

On Thursday, emphasis was placed on "Materials for Distance Education" including television and radio. Case studies and papers on this particular topic were presented describing the role of media in distance language education. Late in the evening, there was also an RELC-BBC-British Council Symposium on "New Ideas for the Teaching of English in Southeast Asia". It featured brief talks by members of a panel of specialists, followed by questions from the audience.

On the last day of the seminar, the general theme was "Materials and Technology", the main focus being on the use of computers and computer programmes. It was also noted that technology is playing an increasingly important role in language teaching and even materials writing; the concensus of opinion, however, was it is not a substitute for teachers.

On the whole, the seminar succeeded in surveying current trends related to the design, development and use of instructional materials; it succeeded in providing a platform for a distinguished panel of speakers and specialists, enabling them to put forward their new ideas; and it succeeded in providing all participants with opportunities to have informal professional discussions with their colleagues and superiors.