

Role of Research in UMSEP

John Moore
Pusat Bahasa
Universiti Malaya

Introduction

UMSEP was from the outset a research-based project. Research was seen not just as a bonus to course development, but as its life-blood. Research by a materials development team represents a considerable investment. At the end of the day, it is natural to ask, 'Would the materials have been any different if the research had not been done?' It is easy to be wise after the event and to argue that the ideas which are finally embodied in the materials could have come about just as well if the writers had, at the very beginning of the project, just sat down and put pen to paper. I think that the experience of UMSEP, however, shows that the role of research in materials development covers far more than merely feeding ideas directly into the materials. This paper outlines the contribution that research made to the project and tries to indicate the particular style of research that the UMSEP team evolved.

Why research

Unless we believe that practice is totally constrained by demands for instant and unreflecting action, we have to admit that there is a role in materials development for research. In the first place, any course of action adopted in materials development implies a choice (at least between the use of a certain type of learning activity and other types which might have been used but were not). This, in turn implies that a stance has, consciously or not, been taken and that assumptions have been made about the learners, the teachers and the nature of the learning task. It is reasonable to assume that materials development, in common with similar decision-making events will benefit from choice based on knowledge rather than choice based on pure inspiration. More importantly, however, materials development projects are funded by universities or other bodies who have invested considerable resources in the project's activities. The only way in which a project can be accountable and justify the choices that were made is by documenting the project's understanding of the factors likely to influence the shape of courses. The papers in this collection attempt to show not only how we documented research throughout the project but also how research was taken account of in reaching course decisions.

Putting the brakes on research

The question asked at the beginning of this paper suggests that it is possible to look back at a project such as UMSEP and reach two negative judgements. One judgement would be that the research had only negligible influence on the materials and evidence can always be found of lines of enquiry which were not taken into account when course decisions were made. As a team we tried to guard against devoting time to useless investigations. Key areas of research were identified in team discussions and general guidelines agreed on. The team then split up into pairs to carry out the investigations

agreed on and reported back on what emerged. We agreed that each bit of research would be written up and whilst this did prove time-consuming it helped ensure that research was focused and shared. It was clear, however, that it was necessary to remind ourselves all the time of why the research was being undertaken. This was documented early on in my paper 'Where are we going? The role of research in UMSEP' (WP 1). The question in the title, by the way, was not a rhetorical one. The paper outlined the areas of research likely to prove most profitable. These areas are discussed briefly in the final section of this paper. They also emerge clearly from the papers in this collection.

It is also possible to make a second negative judgement on a project such as UMSEP by arguing that the research actually harmed materials by imposing an arid style or by leaving no place for unpredictable inspirations which are necessary in any creative activity. It seems to me that the risk of harm is greatly increased if either of two well-trodden paths is taken. The first path is the one that leads deep into one particularly absorbing area of investigation, discourse analysis, interaction analysis, media utilization or whatever and then ignores the lessons from areas of the total language learning context. It is no good pouring research into needs analysis and ignoring what, for your learners, are the ingredients of a successful activity. We tried to guard against pursuing such a path by seeing the research as a problem-solving activity needed to help writers take particular decisions and not an activity to be undertaken for its own sake. This means pursuing research on several fronts simultaneously and matching the findings from enquiries in different areas. It also necessarily involves some sacrifices — when enough information has been generated for a problem to be provisionally solved the research has to be shelved.

The second path is also firmly linked to a misconception over the role of research in decision-making. This path assumes that the research findings are directly transferable into course-related decisions. Unfortunately, it is the case that the analysis of language data, for example, will not tell us how that data should be exploited in teaching. Neither should we set up experiments in the hope that they will 'prove' that one course of action is to be preferred to another. Research should be seen as an aid to decision-making not as a substitute for it. The real problem in using research findings is that they are often conflicting or particularly uncertain in a key area so that judgements inevitably have to be made by weighing up one consideration against another and by only partly informed guesswork. So there is no need for research to kill inspiration — it should both stimulate it and temper it. Moreover, we found it essential to use research as a means of changing the situation and not just to confirm that it was so.

How much research

How much of the time in a materials development project should we be engaged in actually producing drafts of materials and how much should we devote to investigating needs and wants, formulating general hypotheses and testing them? It will probably be clear from what has already been said that we saw materials as the tip of an iceberg, not research as icing on the cake. What is important is not only the form the materials take but why they are

as they are. In drawing conclusions from research data, in justifying the materials to each other and explaining why they are as they are to teachers and students, the project team learnt a lot. The gains in professional awareness and expertise that should result from course-related research are a vital but less tangible return from the original investment. It would be possible to take an extreme view, that by pouring one's energies into using research to devise formulae for materials development the actual construction of materials can be done on a production-line basis. We had numerous team discussions on this point. Some team members felt that the research was too constraining on materials writing, others felt that more research-based guidelines were needed. In practice, I think it is necessary to accept that people work in different ways but that the project should encourage those who prefer to follow their hunches to justify them and those who prefer to follow guidelines to be ready to leave the well-researched paths in coping with the unpredictable. It is extremely difficult to make precise statements about what the proportion of research to production should be as there are numerous occasions where the two meet. I would, however, say that in the case of UMSEP, there was one third of the project devoted heavily to research, one third almost exclusively to materials construction, and a third which was evenly mixed. In retrospect, I think the period in which research predominated could have been shortened but that time should be left throughout a project for writers to step back to speculate and reflect. This, in fact, raises a more interesting question than trying to artificially separate research from development, and that is the question of **when** activities which involve research are needed on a project.

When to research

If research needs are seen as flowing from problems encountered as well as problems predicted, then it is necessary for materials developers to devote some time throughout the whole project to research activities. This does not mean that we should be constantly going back on decisions or doing the groundwork all over again. The kind of research that will be needed will of course, vary from one stage of a project to another. And perhaps some of the activities I am considering as research would not normally be given that name. The research we undertook encompassed the following range of activities. First, there was a period in which problem areas were identified and key factors were investigated. Then there was a period of more speculative research in which hypotheses were developed — hypotheses both in the form of sweeping course proposals and actual samples of materials. The emphasis of research then shifted to the testing of hypotheses in the formative evaluation of materials, and lines of enquiry triggered off problems encountered in discovering what the effects of particular materials types were. For example, one of the more profitable areas of research, and one which could have been exploited even more than we were able to, was recording the actual language used by students when carrying out role-playing or problem-solving spoken activities. Here, as in other cases, the data collected can provide the basis for independent research which goes way beyond what is necessary to shape course decisions. One of the more useful spin-offs of a research-based project is that it can generate enough research projects to keep staff occupied well after the life of the original project. During the actual construction and editing of

final materials it was inevitable that research activities should be suspended but even here it is important not to overlook research needs. A project should not finish with the launching of a new set of materials and one of our aims in the final stages of the project was to identify research needs for the implementation phase of courses.

In practical terms this overall mix of research with materials production makes sense. No one can be creative all the time and I feel it is necessary to separate creative bursts with periods of reflection and speculation.

What kind of research

The first choice in the broad type of research is between large-scale quantitative research and small-scale qualitative research. What we had to decide, for example, was whether it is more useful to know that 600 or 700 students prefer exercise Y or what students a, b and c reported of their language learning experiences. What we found was that the more we realized that research informs rather than determines decision, the more value we attached to the results of informal qualitative-based studies. In fact we combined both, and I think there is value in this, just as there is value in a questionnaire leaving space for comments in addition to multiple-choice questions. One of our aims in the research was to try out and assess different methods of data collection and analysis—observations, audio and video recordings, interviews, questionnaires and so on. The conclusion seems to be that the two types of research should be used for different purposes — one, to find out whether something is true and the other, to attempt to discover why that should be so. Quantitative research is useful for providing evidence on which to confirm or reject hypotheses, qualitative research is most useful for generating new hypotheses and, in a project which is expected to be innovative, must have an important place.

Another kind of lesson we learnt over the project was the value of research in practical situations — classrooms and teachers' meetings involving students and teachers with the materials writers. Particularly in such tricky areas as teachers' and students' attitudes it proved far more valuable to have seminars or workshops with teachers and discussions with students rather than relying on questionnaires, however carefully designed.

Research into what?

The other kind of choice in terms of broad research needs concerns the areas into which research is to be undertaken. In 'UMSEP Research for Course Development: A Summary' (PR/5) I commented.

The dangers besetting research for materials development are either that the investigations are insufficiently focused and efforts are dispersed fruitlessly in all directions; or that, alternatively, research is so narrowly confined that one or more of the qualities (of materials) suffers.

In order to try and walk this difficult tight-rope we used the idea of different levels of research. The broadest level of investigation was what we called 'situation analysis', that is, discovering the salient features of the situation within which we were operating. It covers an initial investigation of aims, learners, teaching staff, institutions, cultural constraints and other situational

factors likely to affect the success of a project.

The aim of the situation analysis was therefore to brief team members on the situation within which we are working, identify key factors, obtain facts and figures for use in subsequent research and identify sources of information for future needs.

(Moore, J., 'UMSEP Research for Course Development. a Summary')

The analysis covered the educational setting, the professional context and career expectations, the national language background and students' psycho-social-cultural background. Clearly, there is little here which is going to influence directly the final shape of materials and it is the type of study that should not be prolonged beyond the first two or three months of the project's life.

The second level is that of current applied linguistics theory and practice. The aim here was not to re-invent the wheel but, by individual reading of short survey articles and seminar papers, ensure that we were familiar with relevant theoretical and practical published work. With regard to theory, we did not take a ready-made theoretical model and apply that but made use of a range of current work, not only in the area of discourse analysis but also in the more marginally relevant fields of interaction analysis, psychology of learning and management science. Our preliminary reading also included a study of relevant language teaching and management training materials as well as, very valuably, accounts of similar projects in different parts of the world.

The third level, moving closer to course design, is the investigation of factors likely to have significant influence on the shape of courses.

An initial assumption was that courses should not be based narrowly on one single set of factors (e.g. a rigorous analysis of needs) but should represent a blend of various inputs. These inputs can be grouped under four main headings. target uses of English, target learners' English language proficiency, relevant psycho-socio factors and. techniques for the design of teaching/learning activities.

(Moore, J., 'UMSEP Research for Course Development. a Summary')

This area is fully developed in Julia Lee's 'Research Inputs to UMSEP Course Design', another article in this collection

The fourth level is that which is closely bound up with the design and evaluation of courses, particularly syllabus design, collection and analysis of data for formative evaluation and teacher orientation and test development. These areas are reported in the subsequent papers on syllabus and materials design, testing and teacher training.

Underlying the various research projects that were undertaken in all these areas is, I think, the need to exploit fully data which is gathered. For example, when conducting surveys of needs, we made recordings of actual speech events — legal interviews or credit application meetings. This data was then analysed and formed a powerful input to syllabus design. The same data was then drawn on in devising materials — sometimes directly but more often in adaptation. From the same recordings or transcripts we were able to produce

testing activities. One of the problems of teachers working in ESP is to know what the language of the law or of business actually sounds like, so the same data is available to be used as a teacher training instrument. So research does bear rich fruits though these are not always what were intended — which brings me back to the question asked at the beginning of this introduction. I think that the UMSEP materials were influenced strongly by accompanying research but that the final value of the materials will depend on the ways in which the writers' creativity has been brought to bear on that research