

ELT Materials Writing Projects: Challenges of Professional Communication

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Abstract

This paper addresses the challenges associated with collaboration on the ELT Materials Writing projects at the university level. The study looks into the professional, psychological and socio-cultural variables that might have caused the success or failure of these projects. More specifically, it examines the dynamics of group and peer communication which prevailed in ELT Materials Writing Projects at the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University. The paper concludes by offering guidelines that will help future writers to establish and maintain effective communication among team members to enhance their project chances for success.

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Key Words - communication, materials writing project, psychological and socio-cultural factors, team work.

Introduction

While there is a consensus regarding the centrality of textbook use in the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University, there is a dilemma surrounding the selection of suitable textbooks. Commercially produced textbooks are abundant, and sometimes they offer complete packages of materials. They are also easy to acquire as long as the institution has adequate funding to purchase them. However, there are inherent problems in most of these textbooks. They are produced for the global market and so are targeting a wide array of learners worldwide (Masuhara and Tomlinson, 2008). Moreover, these textbooks were not written based on needs analysis or research conducted in the local context, aspects which experts in the field deem very important (Klein, 1990/1991; Malik, 2010, Richard, 2001; Yan, 2007). As a result, the language and contexts used in these textbooks are contrived and so students can neither really identify with them nor find them stimulating or meaningful. Therefore, they are woefully inadequate for the Omani context since they are not tailor-made to suit the Omani learners' needs and culture.

For these reasons, adapting some of these textbooks to the Omani context has proven to be an expensive endeavor. The amount of supplementary materials produced for the purpose of

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adaptation is sometimes as voluminous as the textbooks themselves. Engaging in such adaptations is very time consuming and not worthwhile in the long run as authors produce new additions annually which render old adaptations obsolete as they might not go hand in hand with the content or structure of the new edition. Due to this and many other reasons, the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University has made it its task to produce its own materials which are appropriate for the local context in terms of language level, content and topics, skills, techniques and strategies in focus. However, many variables have played a role in the success or failure of these projects. These variables relate to the professional, psychological and socio-cultural environment which hosted these projects. A thorough investigation of these variables is hence necessary to find out what could make or break a materials' writing project - a step that could minimize future losses and increase success of these projects.

Brief description of the Language Centre at Sultan Qaboos University

Sultan Qaboos University (SQU henceforth) is the only national university in Oman which is government-funded and so it offers 100 % free education for its students. The university uses English as a medium of instruction in all its science based colleges, College of Commerce and several other specializations in the Colleges of Law, Education and Arts and Social Sciences. Since its inception, the university has realized the importance of equipping students with the prerequisite English language skills to help them succeed in their majors. To this end, it has established a Language Centre to teach English to all university students.

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Currently, the Language Centre teaches foundation level English (a non-credit program), credit level English which is mainly English for specific purposes (ESP) and English for academic purposes (EAP). Students start with the non-credit foundation English; and once they finish it, they take English credit courses which are divided into programs each of which focuses on a specific college. The English for Science Program, for example, teaches English courses that focus on content that is predominantly science based. The English for Engineering Program teaches English for Engineering, and so on.

Similar to all educational contexts, the three main ingredients in these programs are the students, the teachers and the materials used in the instructional process. The students are the recipients of the instruction. The teachers are the agents that deliver and direct instruction. They interact with students using certain instructional materials- usually in the form of textbooks- as a context for both learning and interaction. Therefore, textbooks are viewed as very important by most of the teachers at the Language Centre. Due to that, the textbook has always been of central importance in both the intensive and credit English language programs.

Examples of materials writing projects executed at the Language Centre

The materials writing projects implemented at the Language Centre are of different ranges and magnitudes. Some of these projects are quite extensive spanning across different programs or levels, and some are program specific. Many of these projects proved to be successful but

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some did not succeed in achieving the desired results. Success is measured here by the continuation of a certain project with regard to the ability of the project team members to build a common language and shared assumptions (Manathunga, 2009, p.38) and to produce materials that have worked with the target language learners. Lack of success is measured by the termination of the project due to conflicts of different sorts that arose in the team with regard to lack of synergy in the team, communication conflicts, ineffective performance of certain team members, malfunctioned internal and external communication practices, inability to produce appropriate, interesting and enjoyable materials and to work in teams across such cultural boundaries as boundaries “between various workplace cultures” (Esslinger and C. McCorkle, 1985, p.165).

One example of a successful extensive project was “Explore Writing” which focused on the lower three levels of the intensive program (levels 2, 3 and 4). The project was envisaged by the Language Centre administration following an extensive curriculum evaluation and revision project of the whole intensive program which was done in 2004 and 2005. The project aimed at producing writing materials using a text-driven approach and focused on providing meaningful language and context to students. The Language Centre wanted to market these textbooks at least in Oman to benefit other institutions which are looking for appropriate writing textbooks for their foundation students. Therefore, the centre took extra care in following copyright laws very strictly. To execute the project, the Language Centre

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administration planned the process very meticulously prior to implementation. Still, changes had to be introduced to the process owing to circumstances that emerged during the implementation process.

This huge writing project commenced with a call for applications to the position of “materials writer” that was sent via email to all Language Centre faculty in fall 2006. The call clarified the requisite skills, abilities and responsibilities that the potential writers should have, namely **cognizance** of the Arabic culture and Omani culture in particular; **interest** in writing teaching materials; **relevance** of experience; ability to work in teams; **willingness** to work in the Language Centre for at least four years after receiving training in materials writing; **awareness** of the various teaching and learning styles and strategies; and **ability** to accept constructive criticism and feedback from others and hence to alter the materials based on the received feedback. Materials writers had the right to a reduced teaching load as long as they were actively engaged in the project.

To decide which of the applicants matched these criteria a panel was formed. The panellists chose six team members to produce the required materials. To guarantee the production of high quality materials and smooth administration and management of the project, team members were asked to focus the materials writing task. Other responsibilities were delegated to a “think tank” team that would do the initial planning, administration and management of the project, an editorial board that would function as an internal referee body and that would

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perform on-going and final reviewing and editing of the materials, a “text bank” team that would collect texts and pictures for the writers to choose from, and a “designers” team that would draw pictures and illustrations befitting the Omani context.

The start-up of the project encouraged extensive reading of existing documentation found at the Language Centre especially those pertaining to the results of the extensive evaluation of the curriculum held in 2004 and 2005 as well as an extensive literature review of existing theories and approaches on teaching writing. In addition, the chosen writers went through rigorous training by two well known trainers who are textbook writers themselves. Throughout these tasks, the team of the selected writers met together, asked questions and shared ideas.

Indeed, the project was a joyful and rewarding experience. It provided its participants with the opportunity to be creative and demonstrate their own individual creativity, share their knowledge, experiences and skills and learn from the others and with the others. However, the members of all teams had many moments of frustration and pain. Regretfully, three of the six selected writers were asked to leave the team due to their inability to produce suitable materials. Two of these writers had difficulty adapting to the chosen approach for the materials and producing engaging materials. The third writer had a problem accepting feedback and could not adapt the materials to the students’ needs. Some of the members of the “think tank” faced problems in explaining the path to the success of the project and communicating their approach to the materials writers. Sometimes the writers went from mere consuming whatever was

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provided to them by the “text team” members instead of coming up with their own innovative ideas and creating their own texts, activities or assignments. In some cases the texts were chosen by the “text team” and suggested to the individual material writers who later contextualized and customized them to the needs of the students to their own liking. In these cases the procedures and approaches were sometimes not well communicated to the other writers or team members, and consequently were not accepted. The inability to share and to voice thoughts, ideas and opinions, and sometimes even to listen to the views of the others led to psychological and communication problems. These problems were made more complex when more experienced team members acted as mentors to their colleagues and insisted on their own classroom experiences, some specific methodologies and approaches to bear on the materials. However, members often discussed things and reached middle-grounds, something that contributed to the eventual success of the project.

Due to the support of the Language Centre administration and the hard work of the teams, this project was fortunately finalized yielding a series of excellent writing books called “Explore Writing” and are to be used for levels 2, 3 and 4 of the intensive program. The feedback that the materials writers received from teachers and students proved that the materials are working very well in the classrooms.

While the “Explore Writing” project proved to be a successful one, some other extensive materials writing projects, unfortunately, fell apart or got postponed to an indefinite time. An

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example of such projects is a speaking and listening materials writing project. This project was terminated or postponed due to a number of reasons, one of which is lack of synergy between the writers' perceptions regarding the approach to be followed in the envisioned textbooks. The project was too ambitious and the members required resources and equipment that were not readily available in the classrooms. A few conflicts happened between pairs working together due to difference in perceptions, ideas and personality factors. Therefore, a pair or two had to change members. The factors that led to the postponement of this project were very complex. The lack of a clear vision and a consensus regarding the approach coupled with personality clashes made effective communication quite impossible among some team members, which in turn caused the collapse of the project.

The Language Centre also commissions small scale projects, where there is only one writer supervised by a program coordinator. The materials produced by the writer receive feedback from the program coordinator (project leader) throughout the design process and revisions are made during the piloting stage. No professional training is provided in such individual projects and it is only experienced teachers who propose and conduct such projects.

Case study

The purpose of the study The present study endeavours to discuss the challenges of communication within the Language Centre project teams of materials writers, their perceptions

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about such aspects as team selection, team dynamics including various types of internal and external communications, final product and intended audience. By reporting the results of the survey the authors look into how to create synergy among the teams of material writers to achieve effective communication and enhance the chances for the success of future projects or teams.

Questionnaire History In materials development and writing, the role of the writer is not merely limited to the adaptation or creation of texts and exercises that meet the needs of his/her target students; rather, the writer acts as a mediator that negotiates ideas, beliefs about students' needs, learning capabilities and styles with other individuals and groups from within and without the Language Centre. Hence, the writer is by no means the first and the only party involved in the process of materials writing. At the Language Centre the writer is, on the one hand, an individual involved in various types of informal and formal internal communications, face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions (via e-mail and the virtual Language Centre website) with the other writers in the team. S/he and the rest of the team members are also involved in various types of external communications with two other bodies that are as creative as s/he is. The first body is the one that represents the students and their teachers, and the second one represents the editorial board. The editorial board functions as an internal refereeing body that provides detailed feedback on the materials to the writers. The board can accept or reject materials; therefore, it is a decision making body in its own right. The Director of the

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Language Centre is involved in the decision making process as s/he provides the general guidelines or the blueprints for the project. Although the writers do not often interact directly with her/him, they do sometimes meet to brainstorm, thrash out ideas and iron out disagreements. In large projects, the trainers and the designers are also involved in the process of providing feedback and so they serve as the external referees for the project.

The relationships between these parties and the writer or team of writers might not always be crystal clear from the outset to all involved. Although the roles of each member in the team are identified from the very beginning, these might change to adapt to new circumstances and changes in the group memberships or dynamics. Therefore, socio-cultural, linguistic as well as personal factors may play a significant role in the process of designing and developing the materials the three bodies have worked on. In the present study, the researchers were interested in investigating the dynamics of the communication processes between the parties involved in the materials design in order to shed light on what could contribute to the success or failure of these projects.

The process of communication in the Materials Writing Projects is often a two-way or three-way street. The writers have to communicate with the teachers piloting the materials; they answer their questions and receive their feedback regarding the materials and how the students responded to and interacted with the new materials in real life classrooms. The feedback of the pilot team is also communicated to the editorial board so that they may know how effective

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their prior feedback to the writers was. The writers also communicate with the editorial board and the external referees if there are any assigned in the project. These communications involve sometimes an intense negotiation of meaning so that all members arrive at the same understanding of a certain concept or reach a certain compromise when ideas are too different to converge in one path.

A similar approach to the identification of communication flows in materials writing projects is described by Esslinger and McCorkle who suggested looking at the many ways of communication aspects by building a matrix which would allow project management to focus upon goals or objectives for which communication is most critical (Esslinger and C. McCorkle, 1985). At the level of materials writing projects, the emphasis is on internal communications (within the team of writers, between the team members, pairs of writers and between these and the project manager) as well as external interactions with the editorial board, external referees or trainers, teachers and students who will use the final product. Therefore, the matrix logically includes such aspects as team selection, team dynamics including various types of internal and external communications, final product and intended audience.

To address the factors which have an impact on the effectiveness of communication between all the parties involved in the different stages of materials writing projects, a questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire consisted of eight parts, which contained “yes/no” questions which required participants to explain their answer or comment briefly on the items in question

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(Appendix 1). The inventory focused on such aspects as team selection, starting point of the project, the roles of the team leader, editorial board or internal referees, students and teachers' feedback and deadlines. It also attempted to elicit personal views and opinions of the participants as well as their advice to future material writers. For the purpose of this paper, the reported results will only focus on areas related to the process of communication that take place in materials writing projects.

The questionnaire was first sent as an email attachment to the Language Centre teachers who were involved in materials writing in the LC. Then, hard copies were provided for the writers. The writers were requested to complete the questionnaire, add any comments they wished to make, print it out and leave it in any of the investigators' mail boxes. It was explained that this questionnaire was part of an investigation of the challenges that material writers were facing in developing and writing materials and was aimed at improving the process of materials writing in the Language Centre. It was also clarified that the feedback about teachers' problems and concerns would be of great benefit since it would be conveyed to participants of future writing projects in order to assist them in performing their tasks and achieving the most out of their projects. The investigators also noted that it was an anonymous questionnaire and teachers were requested to be free to speak their minds. They were also made aware that the findings will be published as a research study.

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Participants of the study 19 from 30 writers answered the questionnaire because the rest were involved in small-scale materials development, revision or adaptation projects within courses in the programs they taught in, and therefore they thought that the questionnaire was not meant for them. However, there are a few teachers among the 19 who responded that they were involved in projects which they did individually.

Of the 19 writers who answered the questionnaire, 17 (89.5%) were female and two were males (10.5%). Two teachers (10.5%) were in their 30s, seven teachers (36.8%) were in their 40s and the majority of the teachers (ten – 52.6%) were at the age of 50 and above. As for their education background, the bigger group of the participants were MA holders (15 – 78.9%). One teacher (5.3%) had an MPhil, another had a Diploma in Language Teaching (5.3%) and two teachers had a PhD (10.5%). The participants had varied teaching experiences. Three teachers (15.8%) had a teaching experience ranging from five to nine years. Seven teachers (36.8%) devoted from ten to twenty years to teaching. Those teachers who had more than 20 years of experience in the profession made the biggest group of the research sample (nine – 47.4%).

However, most of teachers had quite a few years of teaching experience in Oman. 14 teachers (73.7%) worked in Oman from five to nine years and five teachers (26.3%) from ten to twenty years. This section of the questionnaire revealed that the writers are of varied characteristics which are an indication that the selection process was not dependent on any specific background factors except those that relate to the criteria specified for potential writers.

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Results and discussion

Team Selections When asked whether it was clear why each member of the writing team was selected, 12 participants (63.2% of the sample) expressed that they understood why the selection was made, while four (21.1%) of the participants stated that the reason for the selection was not clear, and three (15.8%) stated that they had been involved in projects that required individual rather than team work and therefore answered as Non-Applicable to this questionnaire item. This factor is quite important in team selection, for it clarifies as well as validates to each team member why s/he was chosen and what s/he can bring into the project. Closely related to this aspect is the need to understand the role of each member in the writing team and what s/he can contribute to the project. Ten participants (62.6% of the sample) reported that the role of each member of the team in the project was clear, while six participants (31.6%) reported the contrary, which represents a lack of an understanding of the quality of the work or experiences the members brought into the projects and the responsibilities assigned to them. The fact that some participants did not understand what their team members could contribute to the writing projects might have lead to lack of communication during the project. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that team members understand why each member was selected and what this member can contribute to the project. This is one of the basic factors that need to be considered during team selection.

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The participants were also asked about whether or not they had expressed their interest in joining a materials writing project before being invited to join the teams they worked in. 12 (63.2%) participants reported that they had, while four (21.1%) stated that they had not, and here again three reported this factor as Non-Applicable. The fact that the majority reported they had shown interest in joining writing projects indicates that they were driven and, therefore, had a chance of withstanding the challenges such projects might create for members.

When asked whether or not they had been given the freedom to choose a writing partner, eight participants (42.1%) of the sample- indicated that they had not, while seven (36.8%) stated that they had, and three participants reported this factor as Non-Applicable. Also, seven participants reported that they were not given the freedom to change their partners during the project, while six (31.6%) reported that they were given such an opportunity but did not indicate clearly whether or not they had indeed made use of it.

The sample was asked whether they regarded previous training in writing or material development as a must for members to be selected for a writing project. The majority of the sample (63.2%) stated that previous training was not a requirement for the involvement in materials writing project, while only 36.8% stated that it is an important requirement. The fact that two thirds of the sample considered previous training unimportant for the involvement in such projects indicates that the majority did not view such projects as challenging tasks but rather as tasks that require the use of the skills that they have acquired through teaching and

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classroom preparation. When asked about whether they had been involved in training in materials writing before starting their writing projects in the LC, 16 participants (84.2% of the sample) indicated that they had not had training before starting the projects. However, training was an integral part of large scale projects; such as the “Explore Writing” project and the listening and speaking project. The training was provided by the Language Centre and professional trainers were contracted to do the training.

Two teachers of those who participated in the study briefly commented that they had adequate training in materials writing soon after joining the team at the Language Centre. All the others explained that they had no previous formal training in materials writing and design. However, (89.5%) of the sample mentioned that prior to joining the project, they had relevant experience in industry due to on-practice learning. They had learnt a lot from their former peers, senior teachers and from participating in materials writing projects of different scales and calibres.

When asked about team dynamics, 73.7% of the participants reported that inter-personal relationships and collaboration between all team members were present. Verbalizing her perceptions about the collaboration aspect of the materials writing projects one, of the teachers pointed out that this was mainly collaboration between her and the partner she was paired with. Another teacher described the communication aspect as "a vital part of keeping quality of the materials and bending with the team". A third teacher commented that in her case the

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atmosphere was generally collaborative. In her opinion a team cannot be called efficient if it is "unable to intellectualize disagreements and move towards productive dialogue".

Starting point The participants were asked about issues relating to the starting points of their projects. When asked about whether they were provided with clear aims and objectives in the introduction to the writing project, 12 participants (63.2%) stated that the aims were clearly stated to them, while five (26.3%) disagreed, and two (10.5%) stated that it was not applicable to their projects. Also, when they were asked whether they were provided with guidelines describing the stages of the project, eight participants (42.1%) stated they were, while nine participants (47.4%) stated they had not received guidance, and two reported this factor as Non-Applicable. When comparing these two factors, we can see that there is a serious problem in some projects with respect to management. The fact that the aims of some of the projects were unclear to some of the writers and that they were not all provided with guidance throughout the stages of the project signals communication problems between project participants and the organizers or leaders of these projects, who were responsible for providing the writers with such crucial data and help.

In addition to the provision of clear aims, the writers were all provided with project frameworks to help them organize the components of each unit/book they were writing. When asked whether the unit/book writing framework was clarified or justified, a generally positive reply was given. 12 participants – 63.2% of the sample – stated that the framework was clarified,

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while three participants (15.8%) said it was not, another three gave a Non-Applicable response, and one gave no response. The writers were then asked whether the unit/book writing framework was usable or unusable. Two participants (10.5%) reported that it was usable, while four (21.1%) reported that it was not. Three other participants (15.8%) reported that their team amended the framework they were given, while another four reported that the framework was developed by the team. Another three participants gave no answer to this question, two others stated that this factor was Non-Applicable, and one participant reported that his team was not given a framework.

One of the participants of the study thoroughly contributed her personal opinion about the framework calling it “half the battle of materials design”. She remarked that the framework of the project she was involved in, though planned with attention to numerous parts and details, underwent several changes. In the course of the project the original framework was adjusted due to clearer vision of some conceptions that were related to the learners’ necessities, language level, and suitability of content with regard to the local culture. The framework also had to take account of a proper balance among skills, possibilities of integrating skills and layout issues.

When asked about the length of time it took the participants to know their exact duties, four participants (21.1%) stated that it took them very little time, while three others (15.8%) stated the contrary and another three stated that it took them 'some time' without being very specific.

One participant gave no response, while seven participants (36.8%) gave a Non-Applicable

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response to this factor. Only one teacher knew her exact duties from the very beginning of the project. One of the teachers clarified that it took the team she worked with quite a long time to start the writing process as such due to engaging in a lengthy literature review and framework development procedures. At that point she was not sure about her exact duties. Another teacher commented that her initial views of the project procedures, which were merely writing units for the course book, changed as she had to spend a lot of work on brainstorming the book design, consultations and project presentations prior to writing. The third teacher explained that the scope of her duties was “ever-increasing” and that made her feel resentful at times. The fourth teacher noted that it took quite a long time to arrive at a clear understanding of her personal duties and the fifth teacher commented with regret that her exact duties had never been specified.

The participants were asked about the length of time it took them to know the other members of the writing team. Eight participants (42.1%) stated that this factor is not applicable, while six others (31.6%) stated that it took them very little time. The latter responses were attributed to the fact that members of the team were mostly friends and colleagues, had frequent and long meetings, gave and discussed feedback, and piloted the materials together. However, for one teacher it took a few months until trust was really established. Interestingly, she noted that her personal respect for the other writers grew as she worked alongside them. Another teacher commented that getting to know each other even within the framework of a project is “an on-

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going commitment”. However, a third teacher noted that each team member in her case worked on his/her unit till the project collapsed and she did not know any of them personally.

The participants were asked to describe their feelings at the start of the project. Their answers and comments varied from a plain comment such as “don’t remember” to some invigorating descriptions. One teacher observed that she felt that it would be a huge responsibility and not an easy task as she had expected. She also noted that she felt stressed and confused. A second teacher wrote that although she was excited she was afraid as well. She thought that she wouldn’t be good enough and felt very nervous. A third teacher also expressed her uneasy feelings at the start of the project. She described herself at this stage as being apprehensive and anxious about the future results and product. She even remembered questioning herself about what might happen if she could not come up with an excellent product. A fourth teacher described her feelings as being daunting. However, she did not give any further explanation of the reasons or circumstances causing such feelings. Similar feelings were mentioned in one of the teachers’ responses, where she wrote that she felt lost, uncertain, worried, overworked and not appreciated. Interestingly one of the teachers described a controversial array of feelings from feeling daunted to feeling excited as she believed that she wanted to implement some changes and was eager to face interesting challenges. Her point of view was partially supported by another teacher who wrote that she began the project on a very positive note with considerably high expectations.

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Conveying her feelings at the time when the materials writing project started, one of the material writers who worked on an individual project (not a team project) described herself as being “in deep sea without a paddle”. She further added that when she participated in such a project for the first time in 2005 the environment for these endeavours was not yet in place. The work was based mainly on intuitions rather than structured guidance. The time given was woefully inadequate – only six hours of release time a week to produce a student’s handbook, involving anything from 350 – 400 pages of printed material and an accompanying teacher’s manual. This was in addition to teaching and office hours, preparation and marking, writing tests, coordinating courses and attending meetings. Editing and feedback were sporadic and cursory as no time was allocated to these essential stages of materials writing, nor was there any structure in place by way of an editorial board. The teacher was the researcher, writer, editor, layout expert and, in many cases, the person piloting the materials, taking notes and making revisions.

The participants were asked about the length of time it took them to produce the first few pages of material. One of the participants commented on her personal experience stating that it took her around a month. Another explained some pre-requisites for materials writing projects, namely, the identification of the gaps and limitations in the existing course books; analysis of the demands of the curriculum; studying the existing in-house materials to perceive patterns in

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exercises and tasks and layout. She also explored the need to constantly monitor the students' performance to identify issues which could be addressed by the materials.

Team leader and editorial board The participants were asked whether the team leader explained his duties and responsibilities at the beginning of the project. Eight participants (42.1%) gave positive answers, while five (26.3 %) reported the opposite. Three participants (15, 8%) did not give an answer to this question, and another three answered as Non-Applicable. When asked whether the team leader facilitated the communication of ideas and concepts, ten participants (52.6%) replied positively, while four (21.1%) stated that s/he did not. Two participants gave no reply, while three stated that this factor was Non-Applicable.

Nine participants (47.4%) also reported that the leader of their writing teams gave enough and useful feedback on the material they wrote. However, five participants (26.3%) stated that their leader's feedback was neither enough nor useful which was definitely a hindrance for them.

When asked whether the team leader was ready to solve the team members' problems, ten participants (52.6%) gave a positive reply, while five stated that their leader did not have this skill. Despite the high number of positive replies given to this question, when asked whether the team leader addressed problems immediately and took action, seven participants (36.8%) reported that their team leader did not do that, while another seven gave a positive reply.

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The participants were asked about whether the team leader was aware of problems with group dynamics and whether or not he/she took action to solve such problems. The replies were very positive to the first part of the question, but varied to the second. It is worth quoting one of the teachers who commented that it is “often difficult to know what to do in the situation when something is wrong with the team dynamics even if one knows about the problems and it takes time”. In her opinion, problems with team dynamics have ramifications far beyond the writing group. There is always a danger that “the problem person” may feel alienated and rejected.

When asked whether they felt free to talk about their problems with their team leaders, ten participants (52.6%) stated that they felt free to do so, while four stated that they did not. The rest of the replies were either Non-Applicable or empty. The participants also responded well to the question about whether the team leader directed the team in a particular course of action or engaged the team in decision making. A majority of the participants very highly evaluated their team leaders who could listen, be responsive, take actions when needed and set realistic deadlines. They noted that their team leaders were very experienced and in many cases encouraged the whole team to make decisions. Team leaders very often unfailingly gave complete freedom to the writers in their endeavour and were always ready to listen to problems and help to sort them out. Two teachers evaluated the dynamics of their team leaders as “poor”. One of them explained that she was not happy with the team leader, who in some situations acted more like a boss rather than a team member, whereas in others when he was aware of

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problems with group dynamics, he was not able to solve them. Another described her team leader as a person who was not in control of the project though he often acted as a boss. Moreover, that team leader often took credit for other people's work and blamed them for failures if there were any.

The participants gave useful comments about the qualities of a successful writing project team leader. The list of the qualities the participants gave includes being approachable, encouraging, resourceful, diplomatic, but firm, cooperative, realistic, flexible, supportive, understanding, respectful, honest, trustworthy, appreciative, available, democratic, decisive, “a motivator not a dictator”. It is very important for the team leader to have a prior experience in project management, to entertain a clear vision of the project and to possess excellent interpersonal and intercultural communication skills. The team leader should be able to work with a plan that has clear overall goals, a good action plan to achieve the objectives and have an ability to account for the risks and failures. The team leader must possess the ability to explain, listen, emphasize, decide, take action and collaborate. The team leader should appreciate the effort of each member and exhibit excellent project administration skills. In addition, as one teacher put it, “a team leader must firstly and foremost be a team player but someone who can also lead”. Moreover, as one of the respondents noted it is crucial for a team leader to facilitate the collaboration of his team with the other parties in the project and with other projects otherwise there will be “dissociation and no unified success”.

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When asked whether they understood well the duties and responsibilities of the editorial board members working with them on their projects, four participants (21.1%) gave a positive answer, while another four gave a negative one. And when asked about whether or not they felt the editorial board members' feedback on the material they had produced was enough and useful, five participants (26.3%) stated that it wasn't, while four stated that it was. The rest of the replies were either Non-Applicable or empty. One of the teachers mentioned that in her case, external communication with the board members and internal referees was well organized; the head of the editorial board would email writers and assign the time for face-to-face meetings.

Participants' Recommendations

To improve communication process in materials writing projects, the participants of the study suggested some recommendations that can be used as guidelines for future material writers. One of the teachers expressed her concerns about the start of the materials writing projects. In her opinion the writers' brief should be spelled out in detail, namely its objectives, the addressed syllabus, skills, grammar items, vocabulary list, layout, number of pages, appendices, length of materials and their origin (authentic or simplified) and format (workbook or textbook). She also emphasized the importance of regular communication between team members at all stages of the project, including first writing, editing, piloting, revising and final draft, printing and piloting. In addition, she mentioned that a materials writing project can take all the time of the teacher and a great deal of effort, as it is also important to design a holistic picture of the

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materials, to correlate materials to the course, to carefully work out the sections, to collect suitable articles, stories, newspaper reports, samples of student's writings, samples of exercises, tasks and pictures that seem interesting and can be used in the materials, to convince the authorities of adequate release time, to try out units with colleagues and to simultaneously work on the teacher's manual and write the answers to the exercises. This could give feedback on the workability of the exercises and can be used for the teacher's manual.

According to the opinion of the materials' writers at the Language Centre, feedback provision is very important for providing a better understanding of how the materials are working in the classroom. One writer also highlighted that piloting the materials gives useful feedback, so it needs to be done in all projects.

Former participants in the Materials Writing Projects believe that future materials writers should never get frustrated with feedback and comments. As one of the participants put it, "good writers need to go through a series of trials and errors". In her opinion, materials writing "cannot be done individually". Therefore, future materials writers should maintain a high spirit and accept group work and enjoy it.

Another participant explored the importance of being completely open to feedback and to have the best interest of the project at heart. She commented that the success of the materials can only

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be measured if they help students to learn and this “success can be achieved when you trust your team, when you are open and honest but polite when giving your feedback”.

A third teacher recommended keeping the needs of the students and the objectives of the course clearly in mind. She also advised writers to be prepared for hard work and multiple revisions of all materials.

A fourth teacher advised future writers to be patient. She also recommended them to be less emotional, because working in a big team, in her opinion, is “not easy”.

A fifth participant emphasized the importance of communication in future materials writing projects. She specifically mentioned the need to match personalities and create a spirit of collaboration and mutual understanding among team members.

The need to consider the writers' personality types when assigning partners and tasks in future projects was emphasized by another participant. Her point of view was supported by another teacher who wrote, that there was no need to impose on people to work together if they could not do that. This teacher also mentioned that there was no need to interrupt the momentum of the group by adding an extra person half way. An additional piece of advice was given by another participant who advocated employing local expertise. She explained that “they are more qualified as they are sensitive to local academic and educational needs”.

ELT Materials Writing Projects: Challenges of Professional Communication**Conclusion**

Effective communication is essential for the survival and prosperity of any work environment. It ensures the smooth flow and exchange of ideas and the establishment of a harmonious atmosphere among all stakeholders which reflects very positively on the workplace and leads to the successful accomplishment of tasks. Effective communication fends off conflicts and helps resolve those that arise due to the complexity of the work environment or human nature. In educational settings, the value of effective communication cannot be overstated. To bring about the best results and to fulfill educational objectives, schools and universities have to find ways to communicate their visions, missions and objectives to all staff and students. However, this might not be an easy task given the multitude of variables involved in these institutions.

Modern higher education institutions are often multicultural settings that encompass people from different countries, different backgrounds, different experiences, different disciplines and different qualifications. Depending on how universities view and utilize multiculturalism, this very aspect can either foster or hinder communication. To illustrate, working in teams to accomplish a certain objective or to carry out a certain task is a salient aspect of higher educational institutions. If team members have divergent values, views and ideas regarding the goals, objectives or the process of achieving or implementing the objectives, the tasks can cause schisms among team members, which might yield mediocre results or lead to the failure of the project. Many other factors can determine team dynamics of interaction such as the

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characteristics of the leader, her/his knowledge of the subject matter and the leadership style s/he adopts. Team dynamics can really make or break the assigned writing project.

Individuals who work in materials writing projects in language institutions, in addition to possessing some creative skills and competencies, should be able to network, work in teams, create multiple alternatives, learn and share. Effective professional communication among all the participants in such projects presupposes their abilities to establish constructive and meaningful relations, recognize individual culture-inclusive differences in traditions of materials writing and learn from them, manage disagreements and share experiences with others in a mutually enriching way. These abilities would benefit the production of better quality teaching materials. Such materials are produced only when there is effective communication between the parties involved in the writing project. Such communication resides in open dialogue, prompt response to feedback, learning from all parties involved, collaborating, imitating, and imbibing from “all the specifically human characteristics of development” (Vygotsky, p. 210).

Appendix 1**QUESTIONNAIRE TO MATERIAL WRITERS**

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Dear colleagues,

In an effort to improve the process of material writing in the Language Centre (LC), we are conducting an investigation of the challenges that material writers are facing in developing and writing materials. You are kindly requested to complete this questionnaire, adding any comments you wish to make. Your feedback about your problems and concerns will be of great benefit since it will be conveyed to participants of future writing projects in order to assist them in performing their tasks and achieve the most of their projects. Please notice that this is an anonymous questionnaire, so be free to speak your mind! Many thanks!

A. Team Selection

Questions	YES	NO
Was it clear to you why each member of the writing team was selected?		
Was it clear what each member of the writing team can contribute to the writing project?		
Had you expressed your interest in joining a material writing project before you were invited to join the team?		
Were/Are you given the freedom to choose a writing partner?		
Were/Are you given the freedom to change your writing partner?		
In your opinion, is previous training in writing or material development a must for		

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members to be selected for a writing project?		
Had you had any training in material writing before starting the writing project? If so, please explain briefly.	Explain or Comment Briefly	
Had you had any experience in material writing before starting the writing project? If so, please explain briefly.	Explain or Comment Briefly	
Were/Are there team dynamics and inter-personal relationships and collaboration between all/some of the writing team members? If so, please specify whether they were/are between 'ALL' or 'SOME' team members.	Explain or Comment Briefly	

B. Starting Point

Questions	YES	NO
Were you provided with clear aims and objectives in the introduction to the writing project?		
Were you provided with guidelines describing the stages of the project?		
Was the unit/book writing framework clarified or justified?		
In what way was the unit/book writing framework usable/unusable?	Explain or Comment Briefly	
How long did it take you to know your exact duties?	Explain or Comment Briefly	

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How long did it take you to get to know the other members of the writing team?	Explain or Comment Briefly
How can you describe your feelings at the start of the project?	Explain or Comment Briefly
How long did it take you to produce the first few pages?	Explain or Comment Briefly

C. Team Leader

Questions	YES	NO
Did the team leader explain his duties and responsibilities at the beginning of the project?		
Did/Does the team leader facilitate well the communication of ideas and concepts?		
Was/Is his feedback on the material you wrote enough and useful?		
Was/Is the team leader ready to solve your problems?		
Did/Does the team leader address problems immediately and take action?		
Were/Are you free to talk about your problems with the team leader?		
Did/Does the team leader direct the team in a particular course of action or was/is the whole team engaged in	Explain or Comment Briefly	

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decision making?	
Did/Does the team leader act as a member of the team or just a boss?	Explain or Comment Briefly
Was/Is the team leader aware of problems with group dynamics? If so, did/does he take action?	Explain or Comment Briefly
What, in your opinion, are the qualities of a successful writing project team leader?	Explain or Comment Briefly

D. Editorial Board and Internal Referees

Questions	YES	NO
Did/Do you understand well the duties and responsibilities of the editorial board members and the internal referees?		
Was the editorial board members' feedback on your material enough and useful?		
Was the internal referees' feedback on your material enough and useful?		
In what way was/is your communication with the board members and the internal referees organized?	Explain or Comment Briefly	
Were/Are any of the board members and the internal referees aware of any problems with group dynamics? If so, did/do they take action?	Explain or Comment Briefly	

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<p>In meetings with the board members and the internal referees, did/does the team leader act as part of the writing team, i.e. did/does he support the team members' work?</p>	<p>Explain or Comment Briefly</p>
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E. Material

Questions	YES	NO
Did/Do you have a problem with creating authentic material?		
Have you been provided with examples of authentic materials?		
Was/Is it important for you to produce materials that suit students' needs?		
Have you been challenged with the need to render the materials to correspond to the students' learning styles and strategies?		
Have you been provided with examples of engaging exercises/activities/tasks?		
Were/Are you restricted to certain types of exercises/activities/tasks?		
<p>Rank the following aspects of the choice of materials in the order of their importance to you:</p> <p>____ content "suitability"</p> <p>____ personal, academic and professional interest on the</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">OPTIONAL</p> <p>Explain or Comment Briefly</p>	

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<p>part of the student</p> <p>____ contribution to language learners’ experience and effective involvement in real life practices</p> <p>____ correspondence with the objectives and structure of the course</p> <p>____ sensitivity to integrated skills teaching paradigm</p> <p>____ sensitivity to individual learning styles</p> <p>____ sensitivity to the students’ language level</p> <p>____ matching with educational environment</p> <p>____ promotion of local culture heritage</p>	
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F. Students’ and Teachers’ Feedback

Questions	YES	NO
Were you provided with a list or criteria of students’ needs at the beginning of the project?		

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Were/Are you allowed to participate in the wording of the surveys, questionnaires, or feedback forms given to students?		
Did/Do you have free access to the students' completed surveys, questionnaires, or feedback forms on the material you have developed?		
Were/Are you provided with useful and comprehensive feedback from teachers on the material you have developed?		
Did/Do you involve your students in the writing project? If so, tick the type of involvement it was/is or describe briefly.	As team members _____ Pre-project surveys _____ Questionnaires _____ Feedback forms _____ Explain or Comment Briefly	

G. Deadlines

Questions	YES	NO
Were/Are the deadlines you were given for final material submission practical?		
Did/Do the editorial board members abide by the deadline for reviewing your work?		
Did/Do the internal referees abide by the deadline for reviewing your work?		

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When there is a problem with meeting a deadline, could/can the matter be solved in a collegial way?		
Did/Does the team leader support the extensions of deadlines if needed?		
In your opinion, what deadline is practical?	Explain or Comment Briefly	

H. Your Advice

What advice can you share with future material writers?

I. Information about You

Gender { } male { } female
Age { } 24-29 { } 30-39 { } 40 -49 { } 50+
Education { } BA { } MA { } PhD

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Total number of years teaching English			
{ } less than 5 years	{ } 5-9 years	{ } 10-20 years	{ } more than 20 years
Total number of years teaching English in Oman			
{ } less than 5 years	{ } 5-9 years	{ } 10-20 years	{ } more than 20 years

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