

Textbook Projects: what we've given and what they've taught us

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Introduction

Between 1989 and 2006, Marjon provided training, support and consultancy to large-scale textbook projects in Romania, Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Costa Rica, India, China and Bangladesh. This paper is an attempt to stand back from our intense week-to-week involvement in three of those projects and, with the help of our partners in Romania, Russia and Belarus, to look at gains and lessons learned on both sides. In each case, the project was a long roller-coaster ride which we only survived through commitment on both sides and the incredible energy and dedication of the in-country teams of writers.

Beginnings

Each of the three projects which are the subjects of this paper began life under the auspices of the British Council. In Romania and Russia, they remained as Council-led projects throughout their duration. In Belarus, after the closure of the Council representation in Minsk in 2000, the project was taken over by Minsk State Linguistic University. Each of the projects was premised on the belief that state schools need English language textbooks which are tailored to the needs of indigenous learners and that these books are best written by teams of local authors coming from different regions of each country and drawn from the ranks of practising teachers, rather than by foreign writers aiming at a wider global market or by local university-based experts who have no day-to-day contact with the realities of the classroom. They were also based on a firm belief that a partnership with a British institution was the best way of providing training and consultancy support to the respective writing teams.

The Products

The books produced in the three projects are as follows:

Romania: The *Pathway to English* series, published by Oxford University Press covering the eight years of secondary school from Grade 5 to Grade 12.

Russia: The *New Millennium English* series at secondary level (Grades 5 to 11) and its 'little sister', the *Millie* series, for Grades 2,3 and 4 at primary level, both published in Russia by Titul in co-operation with Brookemead Associates (UK).

Belarus: The *Magic Box* series at primary level (Grades 1-4), published locally by Aversev, and the *Magic Tour* series at secondary level (still work in progress at the time of writing), published by Vusheshaya Shkola, the state educational publisher.

In each of these cases, the books had to go through established state approval processes to permit their use in schools.

Processes

It is not possible in a paper of this length to give a detailed account of all the stages, decisions and turning points involved in the projects. For a full account of the Romanian project, see Popovici & Bolitho (2002). Here it may be useful to list the roles we at Marjon undertook in each of the projects and then to comment on the implications for both sides.

- Advice on and participation in the selection of authors
- Training of authors (in Plymouth in the cases of Romania and Russia and in-country in Belarus where funds for UK training were not available)
- Team-building with the authors and project managers

- Facilitating regular in-country workshops with authors throughout the duration of the projects
- Reading and commenting on drafts as they are produced
- Language editing
- Support and consultancy to project managers
- Training the authors in teacher training and presentation skills
- Supervision of/ participation in audio recording sessions
- Documenting the project through regular reports

Textbook projects are by definition 'front-loaded' in terms of funding, time and commitment, which means that initiating them in the first place is in many ways an act of faith. In the three projects under review here, this faith has eventually paid off in a number of important ways, which I will mention later in this paper. What leads to these long-term gains is a slow and sometimes painful process of professional learning for all concerned.

No matter how thorough an author-training course might be, the most valuable learning takes place 'on the job', through the writing process itself. In my experience, materials development raises every possible issue related to teaching and learning a language. By working together with the teams in the three countries, I learned about the strengths and weaknesses of their existing language teaching traditions, about the interference problems faced by Romanian and Russian-speaking learners, about cultural similarities and differences, and about the personality, thinking style and individual preferences of each author. They also learned valuable lessons through working with each other as well as with me and my fellow consultants: how to make choices about and design an appropriate syllabus, how to write clear instructions and teacher's notes, about the grading and 'parcelling up' of material, about how to work with texts, about sharing ideas, learning from mistakes and working in a team. Through feedback from piloting the materials we learned that pet ideas sometimes need to be sacrificed to the greater good of the project and that what looks good on paper doesn't always work well in practice. Through working directly with publishers we learned about the constraints involved in book publishing (what the Russians so picturesquely call 'sanitary norms'), about planning and laying out material on a page, about writing clear art briefs and preparing and annotating tapescripts. The publishers in turn had to learn a new role, that of simply realising the writers' ideas rather than dictating them, and understanding and building on the benefits of multi-authored materials. We were all challenged on so many levels to re-evaluate our beliefs and practices, to take a fresh look at language and how it works and to find ways of accommodating new ideas into our existing value systems. And while some lessons proved to be transferable from one project to another, others did not; it was important never to take anything for granted. In short, each project came to be seen as a period of prolonged reflection and immense professional growth for everyone involved.

This, of course is all well and good on an individual level. But what about wider benefits to Romanian, Russian and Belarusian society? First and foremost, each project was, and still remains, an exercise in capacity-building. Where the opportunistic influx of British-authored materials into emerging marketplaces had threatened the livelihood of local authors and had threatened to initiate a process of 'deskilling', these projects have built authoring capacity. In both Romania and Russia, authors trained under the projects have subsequently written further material for local publication. In all three countries, the arrival of the new teacher-authored textbooks has challenged perceptions about writing expertise and has opened up a debate about methods, both fields normally dominated by university-based academics. Through extensive piloting and through training seminars based on the

new materials, teachers of English have had their voices heard in the development of the materials, part of a wider process of professional empowerment which has been further enhanced in the post-communist era in each context by the establishment of regional and national teachers' associations, resource centres and networks, in Romania and Russia with the active assistance of the British Council. In Romania, the project manager and some of the authors have since been involved in the production of an innovative Human Rights textbook and a Geography textbook in English; in Russia, two members of the team have gone on to write, among other things, an English for Science textbook. Project managers in Russia have advised the Ministry and the National Training Foundation on textbook development across the curriculum. In all three countries, authors have delivered training seminars and given conference papers nationally and internationally, and three of the Romanian team have led Summer Schools and seminars for teachers in countries as far apart as Colombia and Uzbekistan. Project managers in all three countries have gained invaluable experience in dealing with complexity (there's never anything simple or straightforward about a textbook project), in conflict resolution and in the management of innovation.

As a UK partner, through its consultants' work on these projects, Marjon has had a privileged opportunity to learn, at a deep level, about the culture, the education systems and the language teaching traditions of all the countries they have worked in at the same time as gaining unique experience in designing and delivering national textbook projects.

Content and Approach

Each of the series we have been involved in is characterised by the way in which local language teaching and learning traditions have been incorporated alongside judicious measures of innovation. Examples of this can be seen in the way grammar and vocabulary are presented and practised, in the way reading and listening texts are exploited, and in the scaffolding provided for speaking and writing tasks. Another example is the way in which the tradition of bi-cultural (Romanian and British/American) content and, in tough communist years, even mono-cultural (Romanian) content of language textbooks is replaced by the cross- and multi-cultural perspective in the Romanian *Pathway* series. While some deep-rooted practices such as reading aloud in class are actively discouraged, others such as teaching the basics of reading through phonics to primary learners who are new to the Roman alphabet, or including extracts from fiction for extensive reading have been retained and built upon. This blend of tradition and innovation seems to have been largely well received by teachers and learners alike.

One significant difference between these books and imported 'global' products is the presence, alongside material taken from contexts in the English-speaking world, of material and tasks related to the learners' own culture and social context. This is evident in the choice of texts, especially in the higher grades, but also in the tasks and projects which learners are asked to carry out. A further 'local' feature is the use of the mother tongue as a learning tool, sometimes in glossaries as a way of teaching lexis for recognition rather than production and sometimes in exercises for contrastive purposes. In the higher grades, too, translation is developed as a fifth skill, based on a realisation that it plays a vital part in intercultural communication and that many learners will at one time or another need to translate or interpret in either professional or social contexts.

The decisions behind each of these features were debated with authors until a consensus was reached, and the basis and implications thoroughly understood. The principles involved are explained in the introduction to each Teacher's Book, and these then form the basis of knowledge and confidence which the authors need to introduce their materials in in-service training seminars and conference

presentations. In Romania, the writers even produced a Methodology Handbook to accompany the *Pathway* series.

Impact

In all three countries, the books have provoked responses at all levels of education. Learners in all three contexts seem to have benefited in different ways. Evidence from piloting questionnaires, from the Romanian textbook project impact study and from contact with individual learners and teachers has indicated gains in a number of areas:

- improvement in all the language skills
- raised motivation to learn English
- development of research and reference skills
- enhanced independent study skills
- development of thinking skills
- development of social and interpersonal skills
- better preparation for university study and the world of work

Teachers have, on the whole, welcomed the materials, though there is plenty of evidence from piloting and other research that they need INSET sessions to introduce them to the principles as well as to help them with practical teaching ideas. In all three countries, there is a tradition of teacher-centredness, not only in language classrooms. Teacher-talking time is generally high. Teachers need support in seeing that there are other ways, and that if learners are to develop an ability to communicate successfully in English, they need to learn how to organise group and pair work and to trust learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. Clearly, there has been a greater demand for in-service seminars than the authors could handle alone, and in each country, we have been able to draw on the assistance of colleagues trained as trainers under separate but parallel British Council projects, and this has enabled textbook project managers to cast the net more widely in promoting interest in and understanding of the new books.

There has also been an impact on the development of national curricula and examinations, as these countries have sought to implement national standards and, latterly, to achieve comparability with international standards. Members of the Romanian team were involved in curriculum development, and the Belarusian and Russian initiatives have also had a direct impact on curricula. It is well known that lasting change at classroom level depends to a large extent on the washback effect of examinations, and examination reform has been on the agenda right across the region. The textbook authors have had to keep one eye on these reforms at every stage, and there was dialogue between the authors and the British Council Exam Project teams both in Russia (where the unified school-leaving/university entrance exam initiative became the subject of a huge, politicised debate) and in Romania. The exam teams had to take account of the new, more communicative, directions taken in coursebook and curriculum development in order to ensure that the new exams reflect these.

There has been an impact on publishers, too. Educational publishing used to be state monopoly right across the region. The *Pathway* series was started with the state educational publishers *Editura Didactica și Pedagogica* in Bucharest but the first books they produced were so chaotic and substandard that publication of the subsequent books in the series was put out to tender in Romania and the UK, and the contract was won by Oxford University Press through its International Division. The result was a thoroughly professional set of books, published specifically for the Romanian state school sector, which fully realised the authors' aspirations and

certainly had a profound impact on educational publishing standards nationally. In Russia, after an abortive start with a major UK publisher, a partnership was established between a private publishing house in Russia, *Titul*, and a specialist UK publisher, *Chancere!*, which subsequently became *Brookemead Associates*. This partnership gave the project the best of both worlds - in the UK, access to expert desk editing, text and pictorial archives and professional, native-speaker produced voice recording facilities, and in Russia, artists, lower production costs, a ready-made distribution network and market knowledge. In Belarus, the primary series has been produced by a go-ahead private company, *Aversev*, while the secondary series, as the books are distributed free to schools, had to be entrusted to the state publishing house, XXXXXXXXXX. The difference in production standards is palpable, and it is to be hoped that there may still be a positive long-term impact on practices in the state publishing monopoly. In all three countries, however, there has been productive and developmental interaction between the authors, ourselves as consultants, and the publishers.

It would be simplistic to pretend, however, that the impact of the projects has been uniformly positive. Where, as in Russia, a new textbook has to be approved by a federal committee of experts before it can be used in schools, there has been negative as well as positive feedback, and the authors have had to either make changes where the criticisms have appeared justified or to defend their position articulately and in writing where it has been misunderstood. Established textbook authors, some of them academics and others freelancers, have clearly felt threatened by the arrival of new authors and new and attractive products on a market where they may previously have enjoyed a lion's share if not a monopoly of sales. A popular response, in Russia and Belarus for example, has been to question the credentials of the teacher-authors to write textbooks, to 'talk up' local methodological traditions as exemplified in their own books and to criticise the 'Western' influences in the new books. It is noteworthy that this type of response has often been delivered as a monologue from the relative safety of a conference platform but seldom if ever in open dialogue. Irritating though these responses can be to us as committed teams who have invested and sacrificed so much to write these books, they are ultimately part of the learning experience. Together, we have been involved in far-reaching change initiatives, and understanding resistance is part of the process.

There has also undoubtedly been an impact on the British Council and its attitude towards textbook projects. There have been some failures, and when I started my own involvement I remember hearing from one long-serving Council officer who had better remain anonymous here, that textbook projects had a 'built-in self-destruct mechanism' and that they couldn't succeed. Our experience has shown that they can. They may be resource-heavy, time-consuming and potentially 'untidy' in project design terms. The countless threats and variables involved mean that they are by definition high-risk. But the projects we have been involved in are also high-impact, have the potential to earn income to offset at least some of the 'upfront' investment, and they have staying power. For the Council, bringing UK know-how together with local professionals to form a partnership and meet a national need must be about as close as it gets to fulfilling their mission.

As was hinted at earlier in this paper, there has been impact beyond national boundaries too. Our own college has established a niche reputation in the design and delivery of partnership-based textbook projects. Our experience in India was the basis of our successful bid for the Romanian project, and this in turn led to our involvement in projects not only in Russia and Belarus but also in Uzbekistan, China and Bangladesh. My own fellow consultant on the Romanian project, Sue Mohamed,

subsequently became involved in a national textbook project in Mongolia, and Ruxandra Popovici, the British Council Project Manager in Romania has cemented her reputation internationally through involvement in a number of other projects and initiatives, most notably in Azerbaijan and through the European Centre for modern Languages in Graz. We have also teamed up to co-direct International Seminars in Textbook Projects and ELT Project Management for the British Council.

Conclusion

Textbook projects are not an easy option for anyone involved. They demand commitment, compromise, sacrifice, long hours, attention to detail and a willingness to work through draft after draft before any kind of end-product is realised. The authors in these projects have worked their way through frustration, conflict, self-doubt and innumerable setbacks caused by officialdom, by funding problems, by opposition and by misunderstandings. As consultants from the partner institution we have been on this journey too, sometimes hand in hand and sometimes vicariously, at a distance, as we have learned of successes and problems by phone or e-mail. But every time a new book has appeared, it has been a 'hurrah' moment, a triumph, sometimes over adversity, to share with the authors, the publishers and everyone in the project team. What has kept us going, more than anything else, has been a realisation that we are involved in an enterprise which will have a positive impact on generations of learners and teachers, and that we can feel proud of having contributed to.

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