MALAY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS' CONCEPTIONS

OF ELT MATERIALS FOR LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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# INTRODUCTION

Research in the area ofteacher cognition has shown a steady growth in the past ten years. In recent years though, these studies do not aim to identify the characteristics of effective teachers but seek to gain insights and understanding of the teaching process, teachers' assumptions about teaching and learning, their beliefs and attitudes in teaching, their role as decision-makers and their pedagogical content knowledge (Halkes and Olsen, 1 990; Woods, 1 996; Gatbonton, 2000; Mullock, 2006). Studies in the respective area have also shown that teachers' beliefs, assumptions and decision-making differ according to the subject matter they taught, curricular factors, pre-service teacher education, teachers' subculture and experience (Yaakobi and Sharan, 1985; Hashweh, 1996; Woods, 1996; Almarza, 1 996; Golombek, 1 998; Borg, 2003).

The recent developments in theorizing teacher cognition provide a useful framework for gaining insights into the cognitive processes influencing teachers' decision making particularly in terms of pedagogical decisions and instructional materials to use in class.

# TEACHER COGNITION IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

The area of teacher cognition has gained considerable interest from scholars in general education since 1970s (Clarks & Peterson, 1986; Kagan, 1992; Freeman, 2002; Borg, 2010). Scholars' interest in the area has been inspired by the desire to develop a fuller understanding of the teaching process through investigating teachers' decision-making related to teaching and learning and their pedagogical knowledge or constructs.

The notion of "teachers' construct' is defined as teachers' knowledge about the teaching act that influenced teachers' classroom behaviour and practice (Shulman, 1986). The predominant assumption made by researchers of teacher cognition is that what teachers do in class is accompanied by some cognitive forms (Freeman, 2002; Calderhead, 1 987; Clark and Peterson, 1986). These cognitive forms are shaped by attitudes, beliefs, values, knowledge and they accumulated throughout their experience as a student, during pre-service and in-service training (Borg, 2003; Gatbonton, 2000; Calderhead, 1 987; Clark and Peterson, 1986; Shulman, 1987).

Early studies on teacher cognition focused on a process-product model that observed teaching in relation to learning outcomes. The paradigm then shifted to more hermeneutic methods with qualitative results of how teachers' acts were results of their way of thinking. However, the 80s and the 90s brought about the most fundamental shift in studies of teacher cognition when the findings demonstrated profound insights into the functions and nature of teachers' cognitive lives. These studies develop understanding of concepts such as teachers' decision-making, perceptions, behaviour and beliefs, and pedagogical knowledge. For instance, Shulman's (1987) concept of pedagogical knowledge has influenced theoretical discussion ofteaching and learning. Shulman argued that experienced teachers have different forms of knowledge. Experienced teachers showed distinct characteristics than novice teachers in "content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, curriculum knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values" (Mullockl 2006: 2). Further literature was generated in the area of teacher cognition to better understand teachers' pedagogical knowledge, beliefs and assumptions that influenced their planning and classroom decision-making.

Following the lead of researchers in general education teachers' cognition, a number of studies in language teacher cognition have been conducted to investigate ESL teachers' knowledge, beliefs and assumptions (Breen, 1991; Borg, 2003; Freeman and Richards; 1 996; Johnson, 1 996; Richards, 1998; Woods, 1 996; Richards and Nunan, 1990). However, the term cognition has been defined differently in the language teaching context such as "teachers' beliefs" (Burns, 1996), "conceptions of teaching" (Freeman & Richards, 1 993), "beliefs, assumptions and knowledge" (Woods, 1996), "teachers' pedagogical systems" (Borg, 1 999) and "teacher knowledge" (Freeman, 2002).

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In fact, Borg (2003) reported that sixteen such terms representing the notion of teacher cognition have been generated in the related literature. Despite the various terms, the focus of research has always been on the content and basis of ESL teachers' notion of teaching that relate to the question of what teachers know, how they gain the knowledge, and how they draw it form their knowledge (Freeman & Richards, 1 996: Woods, 1996: James, 2001: Freeman, 2001: Borg, 2003). Similar focus applies in this particular research.

A number of studies reported that teachers' prior language learning experience leaves powerful imprints on teachers' way of thinking in language teaching (Lortie, 1975; Almarza, 1996; Bailey et.al, 1996; Golombek, 1998; Numrich, 1 996; Peacock, 2001). However, scholars in language teacher education have argued against the notion that teachers' experience can be described exclusively in personal terms. Such studies require identification of which teachers' experiences have shaped teachers' professional knowledge, beliefs and practices (Freeman, 1992; Almarza, 1996; BinnieSmith, 1996; Golombek, 1998; Freeman, 2002). The work of Wallace (1991) is a useful reference in this argument. Wallace (1991) divides teachers' experiences into two categories; "received knowledge" that derives from traditional academic foundations and "experiential knowledge" that describes teachers' classroom experience gathered through their personal teaching experience. Hence, the two categories demonstrate specific understanding of the sources ofteachers' knowledge. However, very few studies indicated that some L2 teachers reflect on their L2 learning experience in planning their teaching acts (Almarza, 1 996, Bailey et al. 1996).

In the field of teacher education, despite some debates that there are variations on the impact across studies and participants in the studies, several empirical studies suggest that it has a significant influence on teachers' cognition (Almarza 1 996; Dunkin, 1 996; Richards. et. al, 1996; Senden and Roberts, 1998). Nonetheless, Borg (2003) pointed out that cognitive modification due to teacher education does not confirm behavioural transformation and vice versa.

Besides that, researchers in the area of teacher cognition have looked at ESL teachers' classroom decision making. Binnie-Smith (1996) carried out a study with 9 experienced ESL teachers to find out the nature of the teachers' classroom decision making. She uncovered that the teachers' choice depended heavily on their L2, beliefs and assumptions about language learning. The findings were supported by Woods (1996) who examined the classroom decisions of eight experienced ESL teachers. Burns (1 996), however, argued that even though teachers were highly influenced by their language learning principles, yet contextual factors such as the learners personality, background knowledge and proficiency level are major influences as well.

Further studies by Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, and Thwaite (2001 ) strengthened Burns's notion that teachers' decisions were heavily influenced by the learners' characteristics. However, they also identified that curricular factors are influential factors as well. A study of classroom practice conducted by Breen (1991) with 106 experienced ESL teachers generated the reasons why they applied certain techniques in teaching. The findings showed that the subjects' pedagogical concerns are based on three factors: the learners, subject-matter and pedagogical goals. Nevertheless, the learner-focused matters are the main reason cited. Besides that, teachers were also concerned with matters like, how to maximize the teaching and learning outcome and their functions as teachers.

Studies also focused on experienced teachers' cognition. Berliner (1994) concluded that experienced teachers possess different forms of knowledge construction, considerably flexible, effortless assessment and confident in teaching. Further studies by Grimmet & MacKinnon (1992) generated similar findings.

A study by Gatbonton (2000) also focused on ESL teachers' pedagogical knowledge but it differs from other studies that tried to connect teachers' knowledge with teachers' behavior. Her study focused on examining the domains of pedagogical knowledge that were activated when experienced teachers taught and whether the patterns were consistent among the teachers observed. In this study, she used stimulated recall to gather the teachers' pedagogical thought. She reported that the teachers generated about three to four instructional thoughts per minute showing that they made decisions frequently throughout their teaching. She also related that the most frequent category of pedagogical thoughts among the teachers is language management, which is unsurprising as they are language teachers. Other dominant categories of pedagogical thoughts were knowledge of students, procedure check, progress review, beliefs, note student reaction and behavior and decisions. Thus it can be concluded that the experienced teachers in the study share the same preoccupation with specific attention to language and considerable focus on specific language elements.

Gatbonton (2000) also concluded that the pedagogical knowledge generated from the teachers demonstrated the pedagogical items emphasized in teacher education. Nonetheless, she pointed out that the findings do not necessarily reflect that teachers' pedagogical knowledge came from teacher education. This is because the literature on education (Calderhead, 1991) and language teaching (Almarza, 1996) has presented evidence of other elements than teacher education that have shaped teachers' belief and pedagogical knowledge base.

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A partially replicated study of Gatbonton's was conducted by Mullock (2006) using a wider data base. Unlike Gatbonton whose subjects were only experienced teachers, Mullock's subjects consist of a mixture of experienced and less experienced teachers. Other than that, she used intact classes and not classes formed for the purpose of the study. Teachers involved in the study are also from different teaching programs: general English, business English and exam preparation class. Her findings showed that despite the differences in terms of experience and programs taught, the teachers shared some degree of similar patterns of pedagogical knowledge base. Her study can be related to Wood's (1996) notion that language teachers share some forms of subculture in concepts related to the language and the shared knowledge is reflected in "the way they use the language to represent what they are doing and how they communicate it to others" (Woods, 1996:49).

A study by Intan Safinas (201 1) that explored experienced teachers' conceptions about the teaching of content-based instruction subjects also generated results that support the notion that teachers have formed a set of beliefs and understanding about the subject they teach that informs their classroom decision-making.

Based on the literature, it can be concluded that various factors shaped language teachers' cognition such as teachers' previous language learning and teaching experiences, professional training, contextual reasons and aspects of classroom implementation. The works of Intan Safinas (201 1), Gatbonton (2000), Mullock (2006) and Woods (1996) though, have inspired me to look at pre-service language teachers' experiences in learning and teaching as the basis to understand the Malay pre-service teachers' beliefs, assumptions and knowledge in classroom decision-making in relation to instructional materials in language classes.

# TEACHERS' BELIEFS

Teachers' beliefs is a key core concept that underlie teachers' cognition about teaching and learning. Pajares (1992) made a significant contribution to theoretical understanding of the concept of teachers' beliefs. In his review of the literature on teachers' beliefs he argued that research has shown that beliefs underlie teachers' perceptions, judgments as well as classroom behaviours. A similar view was put forward by Shavelson and Stern (1981) . However, Pajares stated that defining teachers' beliefs is complex because the term itself is too broad. He proposed that teachers' beliefs be defined as "an individual's judgment that can only be inferred from a collective understanding of what human beings say, intend, and do" (Borg, 2006: 23).

Several studies on teachers' beliefs in the field of teacher cognition, however have focused on distinguishing the complex difference between knowledge and beliefs. Shavelson and Stern (1 981 ) for instance, argued that teachers resorted to the beliefs they held about teaching and learning when making decisions if they have no knowledge about a particular topic. While Nisbett and Ross (1980) and Clarks and Peterson (1986) described knowledge as referring to 'schematic cognitive structure' and beliefs as 'propositions of the characteristics of the objects'.

Despite the distinction given between knowledge and beliefs, many researchers in the field of teacher cognition have focused on the blurred distinction between both phenomenons. One of the clearest ways of showing the complexity in distinguishing beliefs and knowledge is the usage of various terms that have been introduced in the field of teacher cognition to represent the two concepts. Among the terms used are 'conceptions' (Freeman and Richards, 1996) and 'preconceptions' (Wubbels, 1992). Leinhardt (1988) presented the concept of 'situated knowledge' and 'context-free knowledge'. Calderhead (1987) used the terms 'practical knowledge' and 'academic subject matter' or formal theoretical knowledge'. Clandinin and Connelly (1987) on the other hand, used the term 'images' to refer to teachers' firmly held beliefs about the 'right' ways to teach. Based on the plethora of terms used and the subtle differences presented between knowledge and beliefs, many researchers argued that the distinction between the two concepts is blurry.

Finally, a key researcher on teacher beliefs in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching Devon Woods argued that the concept of teacher beliefs, knowledge and assumptions about teaching and learning is an integrated concept. He described how an analysis of the teachers' comments about their instructional decision-making made him see that the distinction between a teacher's belief system and background knowledge structure can be blurred as they may overlap with one another. Hence, he proposed the concept called BAK (beliefs, assumptions and knowledge) network that represents the concept of beliefs, assumptions and knowledge as areas that are intertwined with one another and may not appear as distinct phenomena but refer to a concept that emerges from a spectrum whereby at one end there is 'knowledge' and the other end 'beliefs'.

# MATERIALS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Materials development in the area of ELT despite its major role in relation to teaching and learning has received little attention as compared to attention given to learner variables and needs, techniques and methods, approaches and materials (Kasper, 2000; Tomlinson, 2003).

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Tomlinson (2003) mentioned that the lack of exploration related to materials development in the literature on second language teaching and learning requires some attention as materials is one of the crucial components in enhancing teaching and learning. As related by Tomlinson (1 998), "materials development refers to anything which is done by writers, teachers or learners to provide sources of language input and to exploit those sources in ways which maximise the likelihood of intake: in other words the supplying of information about and/or experience of the language in ways designed to promote learning" (p. 2).

As educators, teachers must be equipped with the knowledge on materials development as they would have to produce their own materials for classroom use. Despite the diverse number of commercial teaching materials available, not all materials are suitable for particular target students. Hence, teachers would have to use their knowledge on developing, producing and adapting materials to cater for their students' needs. As mentioned by Howard and Major (201 1), many teachers spend a considerable amount of their time designing, evaluating and adapting materials to be used in enhancing their teaching.

Related research in the area of materials development has highlighted several reasons why teachers decide to produce their own materials. One of the key reasons is contextualisation. A number of commercially produced ELT materials are foreign to students as they were not designed for any specific group of students. Hence, the content may not be meaningful to particular students and they may find it difficult to relate to these materials (Altan, 1995).

Apart from that, many teachers find commercially produced resources costly hence; they resort to designing their own materials. Furthermore, when designing their own materials, teachers are able to incorporate elements that are close to the learners' culture and interest and match their language proficiency level (Thomas and Collier, 1997). This addresses the area whereby materials should try to meet learners' individual needs. Block (1 991 ) argued that teachers who produced their own materials are able to tap on learners' areas of interest and their learning styles making their materials more stimulating and engaging to the students. Podromou (2002) supports Block's view that when teachers develop their own materials they made room for more creativity and spontaneity in materials development for teaching.

Despite the advantages of teacher-designed materials related literature has highlighted some disadvantages of materials designed by teachers. Among the issues brought up is the quality of the materials. Teacher developed materials may not meet the principles in materials development whereby the materials produced are illegible, poorly organized and contain errors (Harmer, 2001).

Howard and Major (201 1) further argued that inexperienced teachers may produce materials that are poorly organized and lack coherence. Or they may choose texts that are inappropriate or unsuitable for the students. Hence, these teachers need to be guided on designing and choosing materials to use in their classrooms.

Clearly, producing their own teaching materials should be encouraged among future teachers as teaching materials is one of the key elements that control teaching and learning (Allwright, 1990). However, these teachers must be equipped with the knowledge of materials development, adaptation and evaluation for them to be able to produce effective teaching materials.

# OPERATIONAL DEFINITION

There are several key terms used in the context of this study, and these key terms are given the following operational definitions.

Teacher cognition

In this study, teacher cognition refers to teachers' actions and decisions about their teaching and learning materials that are informed by their underlying beliefs, knowledge, assumptions, experience and views that are reflected in the materials they developed to meet their interpreted teaching aims and objectives.

ELT materials

For the purpose of this study, ELT materials refer to the materials the pre-service teachers produced to enhance the teaching of a particular lesson based on the English Language syllabus for Form 1 students.

# PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study explores twelve pre-service teachers' experience in implementing the materials they have developed in their Materials Development for the Language classroom course. The focus is on getting the students to reflect on their classroom experience when they tested the materials they have developed and identify the weaknesses and the strengths of the self-developed materials utilized. They were also required to relate what they have learnt in their materials development course with the real life classroom teaching experience.

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# RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1 . What is the pre-service teachers' cognition about ELTmaterials and its implementation in real classroom context?

2. Did the teaching experience alter the pre-service teachers' conceptions about the ELT materials they developed?

# METHODOLOGY

All twelve Malay pre-service teachers who were taking a course in Materials for ESL teachers participated in this study. One of the requirements of the course is to get the students to develop a lesson plan and some materials to be used when conducting the lesson. The student teachers were asked to work in groups and each group consists of four students. Each group was asked to produce three types of teaching materials to be used to teach a particular topic based on the syllabus for a Form 1 class in a secondary school in Malaysia. The participants were asked to prepare a double-period lesson plan for a Form one class and they were asked to utilize all the materials they have developed in a real classroom situation.

The double-period lessons were then carried out and the lessons were video-taped. This is to enable the participants to view the recording during the stimulated recall procedure after the lesson has been conducted. The recording also will enable the participants to view their actual teaching and learning process when they write their reflection paper.

After the participants have completed their lessons, a stimulated recall interview session was conducted in getting the pre-service teachers to provide retrospective comments on their experience while utilizing their self-developed materials. The reason why the stimulated recall interview is conducted is to get the students to explain what they were thinking during particular parts of the lesson when they utilized their selfdeveloped materials.

# DATA COLLECTION

This study adopted a qualitative study approach to explore the pre-service teachers' reflection on the implementation oftheir developed materials in real classroom situations (Yin, 2003; Sarantakos, 2005). The data was collected by getting the students to reflect on the lesson and comment on the utilization of the materials that they used in class. This is to gather information on any aspects related to the materials that they think were significant and need to be highlighted.

As the students were asked to work in groups, hence; the stimulated recall interviews were conducted with each group immediately after they have completed their lesson. This is to ensure that the research participants are able to recall better what happened during the teaching and learning process as suggested by Mackey and Gass (2000).

# DATA ANALYSIS

The interview data was transcribed. Then, the data was reduced, organized, displayed. The data was analyzed qualitatively by categorizing the subjects' retrospective comments into categories and finally conclusions were made.

# FINDINGS

1. Perceptions of learners' reaction

All three groups reported that they have pre-conceived ideas that the students would react positively to the materials used. However, all the groups reported that the students did not respond well towards all the materials. Group A for instance reported that not all the students react positively towards their 'snake and ladder' game because only a few students were allowed to get actively involved in the game while the others watched. The same goes with group B when they utilized their 'wheel of fortune' as only several students got the opportunity to spin the wheel due to the time constraint. Hence, the others who did not get to spin the wheel and answer related questions became passive learners during the activity. As for group C, they thought that students would love the video show they have developed. However, they were surprised when the students did not react positively to the video show because there were too many unfamiliar words used in the video.

1. Presentation of materials

After utilizing their self-developed materials, the pre-service teachers realized that some materials need to be improvised. Group A reported that the colour of the material they choose to make their 'snake and ladder' is too dull and unattractive. Besides that, they related that the question cards they used for the 'snake and ladder' game were too small, hence students who were asked to answer the question written on each question card in groups of five to six struggled to see the writings on the cards. This makes it difficult for the students to participate actively. For group B, they found the lyrics of the song they used contained a number of unfamiliar words,

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hence students found it hard to follow the song and enjoy it. Group C highlighted that they felt the 'wheel of fortune' they constructed was not strong enough and the material was also unstable. Hence, they felt that the materials used to build the 'wheel of fortune' need to be substituted with more durable materials. Clearly from the reflection, the students realized the importance of size, colour and durability of materials as the main factors in designing materials to enhance the process of teaching and learning,

1. Learners' participation

All three groups related that there was a significant relationship between the materials and the learners' motivation to participate in the activity. For instance, group A mentioned that when they played the alphabet game, whereby each group was given a box of alphabets made from mounting boards, the students were so interested to participate. They reflected that the game stimulates the learners' interest mainly because the cards are of an appropriate size for every student in the group to see and hold. Besides that, the pre-service teachers believed that as each student in the group was given the opportunity to play the game unlike the 'snake and ladder' game, they were more motivated to participate in the game. As for group B, they reported that the pictures they used which were authentic and colourful clearly attracted the students to listen to their explanations and arouse the learners' interest. Group C also related that the presentation of a song in the form of a video clip clearly managed to stimulate learners' interest and got them to sing along joyfully.

1. Classroom management

The pre-service teachers also reported that they were able to see the importance of classroom management in using each material they developed. For instance, for group A, they realized that they need to be careful in managing the usage of a giant 'snake and ladder' as they need to make sure there is a big space to place the board game in the classroom. For group B, the gallery walk they planned whereby students walk in groups to several stations that were placed with mounting boards posed as a problem for one teacher to manage as the class would have to be organized accordingly to ensure that students can walk from one station to another.

1. Learners' language proficiency

All of the groups highlighted the significant relationship between materials for teaching and the students' language proficiency. They realized that some materials have to be designed according to learners' proficiency. For example, group A found that students were not able to describe the road signs they showed as their level of proficiency was low intermediate. The group members reflected that they should have produced road signs with labels to provide the students with related vocabulary. As for group B, they found that some adjectives they presented in the form of cards in class were unfamiliar to the students, hence they were unable to answer the questions given to them. And for group C, the lyrics of the song they used contained some unfamiliar words to the students. So, they were not able to clearly understand the content of the song.

# DISCUSSION OF KEY FINDINGS

From the findings, clearly the pre-service teachers gained some invaluable experience, knowledge and understanding in relation to materials development for language teaching. The evaluation of their self-developed materials; after reflecting on the implementation ofthe materials, also gave them some insights on how they can improvise the materials.

Firstly, all the students became more critical in their view about the presentation and production of their materials. They realized the importance of adhering to the principles in designing effective visual materials like the size, colour and legibility of texts. They were also able to relate to the significant relationship of the presentation of the materials and learners' motivation to learn as one of the primary roles of utilizing materials in teaching. Hence, these future ESL teachers developed their critical evaluation of their own materials from their experience using the materials and they made decisions on how to modify and adapt the materials in relation to the principles related to visual presentation and how they would attract learners' attention.

Secondly, the pre-service teachers were able to see the close connection between materials and the contextual factors. Clearly, the learners' proficiency level, their interest and learning styles were crucial factors to consider when designing materials to teach. As future teachers, the experience has opened their eyes to the fact that materials not only should meet particular principles to make them effective, they also have to meet learners' ability and interest as they would be useless if students were not able to relate

the teaching and the materials used to support it. They also learned that it is crucial to develop materials that could initiate participation from all the students as the students would feel more motivated to learn.

Besides that, the pre-service teachers also were able to see that one of the important factors they need to consider when developing materials is the management of the materials. They need to take into consideration how they would be able to implement the materials on their own and control the class at the same time because they have to work alone when teaching and not in groups. Hence, they have to be practical in designing and producing their materials to teach.

# CONCLUSION

The findings show that the pre-service teachers conceptualized their ELT materials based on their beliefs and assumptions about instructional materials. They made the assumptions that for Form one students, they would prefer games and colourful materials making learning English a fun lesson. However, their teaching experience made them realize that the students' vary in their interest and learning styles.

The experience also strengthened their beliefs and assumptions about the fact that materials enhance teaching and made English language lessons more stimulating to the learners. They also highlighted that they were able to see how easier teaching becomes when materials are used. However, they also realized that poorly developed materials would not enhance teaching.

The materials developed also carry characteristics that reflect evidence that they applied the knowledge they gained in the course on Materials for ESL teaching. However, their retrospective comments after utilizing the materials clearly show that they have formed a set of beliefs on ELT materials particularly on the types of materials they would like to develop and the presentation of the materials. Significantly, after using the materials in a real classroom situation, they come to realize that contextual factors of the classroom play a crucial role when developing materials like the students' level of proficiency, students' preferred learning strategies, students' interest and their involvement in the activities. I believe this is a good outcome of the reflection on the implementation of their self-developed materials because they were able to see clearly the close relationship between instructional materials and the target learners. The findings thus suggest that the experience altered their conceptions about ELT materials and its implementation in the classroom.

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Besides that, getting the students to implement their self-developed materials has clearly benefited the students in terms of their views and understanding about the authenticity of materials to promote meaningful learning. Based on the students' response, they were able to identify the authenticity of materials means their target learners are able to relate to the content of the materials they used.

The pre-service teachers also developed their knowledge about material evaluation when they evaluate their own materials based on the students' response. They were also able to see how they can adapt the materials they produced to meet the learners' needs. Clearly, the knowledge and experience have given them a more comprehensive view on materials development, materials evaluation, materials adaptation and second language teaching and learning.

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