Insights into Commercial Language Textbook Publishing

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ABSTRACT

Many language teachers develop and use their own materials within the classroom, with great success. These teachers often express a desire to have their ideas published as textbooks, but find that the publishing industry is difficult to access or that the selection process for new textbooks by publishing houses is somewhat vague and unknown. Using as a basis his own experience in having a textbook published, the author details the process of approaching a publishing company, having a proposal accepted and the work that follows until and after publication. Furthermore, the author offers thoughts on how to have more chance of success when approaching various publishing houses, based on personal reflection and comments made by those working within the publishing industry. The aim is that this may serve as a useful account for any teachers keen to have their work commercially published, and thereby increase the amount of quality language teaching materials available in the commercial market.

Introduction

Having co-authored a task-based language learning textbook published in 2008, and currently writing another due for publication soon, I am often asked many questions about the publishing process and ways of publishing a textbook. There are many educators who have long been writing and using their own materials. Given their basis in actual teaching environments, these materials often prove very reliable and effective as teaching and learning tools, arguably more so than purpose-written textbooks by academic writers who have long since stopped teaching in classrooms. These educators should absolutely be encouraged to get their valuable ideas and materials published in order to keep positively developing the field of language teaching. For this reason, it may be interesting and, hopefully, beneficial to write here an account of my experiences in getting ideas into print. The intention is to approach this in two ways: firstly, to document my own experience of the process and, secondly, to offer suggestions to any would-be authors who are considering contacting publishing houses. It should be noted that this is by no means designed to be a definitive account of publishing, more an insight into the publishing system based on reflections of somebody who has been through that same system. It is of course highly possible that others have had differing experiences, but this should not remove from the validity of my own account. Further, it is important to remark that the textbook in question was a commercial publication. This is not mentioned in order to undermine the integrity of the publishing house or the book itself, but rather to highlight the fact that the experiences documented are somewhat different from academic publishing. Finally, I understand that just having one textbook published hardly qualifies me to write as an authority on these matters, but I do believe that my experience and the wisdom imparted to me by people within the industry does allow me to share some degree of knowledge which others will hopefully find useful.

The process

Rather than explicitly decide to pen a new task-based textbook, the book took shape over several months of developing our own materials. This

development started as a response to what we perceived as inadequate materials commercially available at that time and the difficulties we were having in creating and maintaining student motivation in our oral communication classes. As our developing lesson plans gained cohesion and direction, we decided to begin contacting publishing houses to try to attract interest in the idea.

After researching the different publishing houses, we put together an extensive proposal, which took approximately three months. The importance of this proposal is paramount and will be talked about in greater depth later. After sending it to the research editor of our publishing house of choice, we received confirmation of receipt and then heard nothing for several months afterwards. We eventually heard back from the research editor, who informed us that it had been passed to the publisher[1]. After several phone calls and meetings wherein we were required to justify our idea and give very precise specifications about the proposed textbook, such as number of pages, accompanying DVDs and so forth, we were given official notice that the proposal had been accepted and the book was to be published. This happened in November.

The publishing house, as a general rule, only produces new textbooks once within a one year time-frame, and the next slot for this was ten months later in September of the following year. This meant that we had to write a full first draft manuscript of the textbook in three months, by the following February. Following extensive meetings with our editor and publisher we then had two more months to incorporate all changes discussed and agreed upon in those meetings. After the final manuscript was submitted and approved, the process moved out of our hands, to a large extent. Although we were consulted at certain stages, the design process was done almost entirely in-house and there was little input from us, the authors.

After the design went through five stages of proofs, each stage carefully reviewed and changes suggested and agreed upon by the authors, the editorial team and the design team, the book finally moved forward for publication. 'Stock-in', the time when the actual finished textbooks arrive at the company warehouse, took place in September. This was less than one year after the whole process had begun with the publishing house, but nearly three years after the authors had first envisaged the concept. As a general rule, this is a very fast turnaround, especially for a larger company. The time frame will often be longer for development of books, but our case shows how important companies view timing, and getting books into the market at the correct moment.

Considerations when approaching publishers

The majority of language textbooks published these days are commissioned. That is to say, the publishing house makes a decision on what kind of book they would like written next and they approach potential authors, often authors who already have a good reputation or who have a history of working with that company. The only other option, besides self-publishing, is to send an unsolicited proposal to the publishing house. Research editors, especially those at the larger publishing houses, receive many unsolicited manuscripts each month. Only a selected few of these are passed on to the publisher in the head office, and then again only a small handful of these short listed manuscripts will make it forward to publication. The bottom line is that the chances of an unsolicited proposal making it all the way are slim. It requires, besides the good idea in the first place, a good deal of luck and being in the right place at the right time. However, that is

not to say that it is impossible, and there are undoubtedly steps you can take to give yourself the best chance possible.

In this section I would like to offer advice, based on my own experiences, to anybody who feels that they have materials or an idea and may be interested in submitting to a publishing house. I would certainly not be so proud as to call myself an expert or an authority on this matter. However, I have over the last two years learned many valuable insights, these insights coming both from my own impressions and from the advice and encouragement of people who work within the publishing industry. I have also been fortunate enough to meet and have conversations with many other authors who have offered very enlightening words of wisdom. As mentioned before, this is not meant to be a definitive or exhaustive list, but hopefully it will prove in some way helpful.

1. Carefully consider the publishing house

This is not a decision to be taken lightly. There are many publishing houses available and each will offer a different experience and will come with positives and negatives. Many people will first be keen to approach the larger international companies. Undoubtedly, these offer great advantages. They often have strong pedagogical backgrounds and their name carries a certain gravitas within the educational world, rather like an assurance of quality. They have large marketing departments which will, at least in theory, enable your book to have wide exposure and they also have large budgets for the book itself - if it is important to you that your book is glossy and beautiful-looking then the larger companies certainly offer that advantage. Also, after acceptance of the proposal, as your book enters the development stage, you are assigned a dedicated editor who will work extremely closely with you

in order to ensure that the book is of the highest possible quality. The larger companies are naturally very concerned about their reputation as well as making money and you can therefore expect a lot of input in the writing process.

On the other hand, the larger publishing houses are not without their cons. They tend to have a certain idea of what kind of book they would like published and it can be frustrating when your ideas are not completely in-line with theirs. For those writers who feel very precious about their work and that it should be published largely unchanged, it is unlikely that you will feel completely satisfied with these larger companies. The dedicated editor, mentioned as a positive above, can sometimes be intrusive and keen to write rather than edit. Also, these companies will almost always err on the side of caution in order to protect their reputation, so anything even mildly 'radical' may well be rejected out of hand. This can lead to frustration, especially if the writer is keen to move away from the *status quo*.

Also, due to the number of manuscripts they receive and because of the larger number of commissioned works, it is more difficult to get an unsolicited proposal accepted by a large company. Of course, this should not preclude trying but if the time-frame is important to you this should be carefully considered. Since you should not generally submit to more than one company at a time, and official rejection of a proposal can often take some time, it could be the case that submitting your proposal to several larger companies could delay your progress by many months, even years. This may not be an issue to some, but if you feel you should 'strike while the iron is hot', this should be a consideration.

Smaller companies that operate on local and

national levels rather than internationally are also a possibility. Although they don't have such large budgets or produce such visually-pleasing books they are, generally speaking, more prolific in their publishing and therefore more open to unsolicited proposals. Furthermore, the markets for these textbooks are more clearly defined and often specific to one country or region which will make tailoring the textbook to a specific audience much simpler, including some language support in the local language if necessary. The editing process also may be less rigorous which, although it may have an overall effect on the quality, does mean that the book ought to be completed and ready for sale in a quicker timeframe, and also will most likely be very close to the author's original conception.

The principal drawbacks to these smaller, more local publishing houses are that the potential market is so much smaller and the marketing budget less, meaning that it might be difficult to get wide exposure of the book to the market. They also may not have the solid reputation that the larger companies enjoy and therefore some teachers may avoid textbooks produced by those publishing houses.

Once you have made the decision regarding the scale of the company you would like to send your proposal to, you then of course must choose the company itself. The main factor here is to look carefully at the books that each company already offers. If your proposal would be in direct competition with a book they already have on the market, it is unlikely they will accept your idea. However, if you perceive a gap in their range that could be filled, or if you think your idea builds on what they already have then this might be the most suitable company. You can exploit this research in the proposal you write. You should also look carefully at the type

of textbooks the company has a history of producing, as this will give you a sense of whether they might take an interest in your idea. These points will be covered in more detail in the following section.

2. Write a proposal

The proposal is the single most important part of the process in trying to get your textbook published. Given the large numbers of proposals that research editors must sift through, yours needs to stand out if it is to have any chance of progressing. One research editor expressed his sheer amazement at the shoddy nature of some proposals received, including required elements lacking, spelling mistakes, poor grammar and so forth. As mentioned earlier, our proposal took three months to complete and a great amount of research and work.

Furthermore, it is very important that you look at the precise guidelines for proposal submissions, which are available on the major publishing houses' websites. They are very specific and each company asks the proposal to be submitted in a certain format with certain details. Failure to follow the guidelines could lead to your proposal being rejected before it is even closely looked at.

The following is a list of some of the key points you should consider when writing the proposal.

i. Research the competition

Think carefully about exactly what type of book it is that you are proposing and then find approximately three books[2] that are similar in methodology or target audience to yours. These books should be from rival companies to the one you are submitting your proposal to. The publishing houses are very keen to see what position you envisage your book taking in the market,

and how your book will be pitched against rivals. For each book you should give an overview and show how your proposal relates to it, specifically saying in what ways your proposed book is superior or builds on the textbook in question. It was commented to me that statements such as "This book is genuinely unique and therefore doesn't have any competitors" are relatively common in proposals, and rarely produce a positive effect. The impression this gives is that the proposal writer has not taken the time to look carefully at what the competitors will be. *All* books will have some competition.

ii. Carefully consider your target market
Again, the publishing house will be very interested in where you predict the textbook will be popular in order that they have an idea of its potential location within the market. Think carefully about the appropriate student level for the book and what age range the ideal students would be. The more specific and clear you are, showing that you have thought through exactly who you are writing the textbook for, the more the research editor will feel confident moving the proposal forward and suggesting to the publisher a potential gap in the market in which the book can be sold.

iii. Research your methodology, and be aware of current trends
The methodology behind the book is a fundamental point, and you need to show that you understand your subject well. The researchers, editors, publishers and sales representatives who work for publishing houses are generally very well-versed in educational theory and will quickly be able to detect any proposals trying to bluff or cover over a lack of knowledge. Should the book be made the author will be expected to regularly speak and make presentations about the book and the educational principles behind it. In those

situations a sound knowledge of the methodology is essential, and the proposal is a good chance for you to display that knowledge.

iv. Have a clear scope and sequence
The vast majority of proposals that are sent are outlines of unfinished work. This is fine but it is very important for the research editor to have a clear idea of the proposed direction of the finished product. Therefore, the more detail you can give in your scope and sequence the better. A scope and sequence is a detailed breakdown of each proposed section of the book (cf. Appendix 1 for an example of one unit of our scope and sequence). Each unit should be described in terms of what the rationale behind the unit is, what the instructional objectives are and, where appropriate, what the communicative focus is. Each activity or task within each unit should be outlined and means of assessment should also be detailed.

v. Create clear sample units that tie in with the scope and sequence
Although, once again, it varies slightly from publishing house to publishing house, most will want to see some fully developed units. As a general rule, for a typical twelve unit book they would like to see a minimum of three fully developed units. These should be as detailed as possible, ideally representing how you envisage the final product will be. Although it may seem like a minor point, it also helps greatly if these sample units are visually attractive; it would not take much time or effort to format the pages nicely, including illustrations where relevant to add some colour. Bearing in mind how many of these the research editor must see, it is a huge advantage to have something that is immediately clear, comprehensible and eye-catching.

Furthermore, the sample units should tie in very clearly with the scope and sequence. It is very

beneficial for the research editor and publisher to be able to read the relevant section of the scope and sequence and then look across at the sample units and see how they match together. The clearer this is the more they will have confidence that this is a coherent and cohesive proposal, and therefore a sound idea for a textbook.

vi. Make it attractive

This was alluded to earlier, but a proposal that is pleasing on the eye makes a much better impression than one that appears to have been hastily put together. This quite possibly sounds like stating the obvious, but research editors have commented on how ugly or ill-prepared some proposals look, and how this does mean that they have a much slimmer chance of getting the green light. Think of the proposal as being like a CV or resume for your textbook; given how many CVs employers usually have to look through, it is important to ensure yours looks good and stands out. The same is true for your proposal.

3. Network

Although your proposal will still be classified as 'unsolicited', it is an extremely good idea to speak to relevant people within the publishing industry before submitting your proposal. The most effective way to do this is to visit the publishing booths at language conferences around the country where many of the publishing houses, both large and small, are represented. This has key benefits. Firstly, it allows you to hear directly from the publishing house what they may be looking for in the immediate future, and whether your proposed idea fits in with this. This means that you can either tailor your idea to better suit what they are seeking or you can make the decision to not approach that publishing house at that time. Secondly, you can receive advice from the company representatives

regarding how best to make your proposal. Finally, it gives you a point of contact within the company and it means your name may be recognized. The significance of this is that when your proposal does eventually arrive with the research editor, it may be anticipated and not entirely unexpected. This gives the proposal an immediate advantage.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was not to suggest that there is only one way of getting published, nor to suggest that the author, having published one book only, is an expert on the publishing process. Rather, it is an account of one individual's experience of the industry together with the knowledge garnered from personal observations and comments made by many people within the industry itself. It is hoped that it will prove to be an interesting and helpful account to some who read it.

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[1] For the purposes of clarity, I will make a distinction throughout this article between 'publishing house' and 'publisher'. The publishing house is the company itself, whereas the publisher is, in a sense, the chief editor, responsible for decisions related to which proposals will go forward for publication and whether manuscripts are in a fit state for publication.

[2] This number may vary depending on the specific guidelines of the company, so always check these carefully.

Appendix 1 - Example of scope and sequence for a single unit

Unit &Title	1: Welcome Aboard
Story	"Welcome to Widgets!" The students have just been hired to work at the company's local division, and are attending their employee orientation. The teacher will stand in as their supervisor, who is facilitating the various orientation tasks. They learn about the company and meet the president and board of directors (through video and info gap activities). They also meet and get to know each other and, finally, are placed in their work teams.
Rationale	Unit 1 can be considered a "pre-task phase" (see endnotes). Its primary purpose is to ease students (and teachers) into an environment conducive of communicative tasks. The focus here is on introductions, but it is important to remember that the real objective of this unit is to help students get to know each other and the Widgets concept, rather than to just practice shaking hands or even to explicitly review particular language structures.
Instructional Objectives / Communic. Focus	In some ways, Widgets is a 'build-it-yourself' course; for example, many of its tasks are easily adaptable to be more form-focused, according to the methodology of the individual teacher. However, we suggest that linguistic forms be dealt with as the need for them naturally arises, rather than be presented pre-task by the teacher. For this reason, the course's instructional objectives focus on tasks and functions rather than on specific linguistic objectives. For example, Unit 1 builds on students' prior ability to speak and listen with some basic fluency; it creates a context through which standard greetings, small-talk conventions, asking and answering questions, can all be elicited and explored. However, note that it is the creation of the context, rather than the use of these skills, which is the primary objective here. In this context, they will: ● Take part in short, routine conversations (albeit perhaps with some difficulty and with assistance from the teacher and classmates) ● Communicate basic needs, and ask and respond to simple familiar questions (eg: "How are you?" or "Where do you come from?") ● Summarize and describe basic, concrete information about things and people (eg: a product description, or a short written bio) ● Tell simple, linear stories (eg: "What I did on the weekend") ● Establish an awareness of situational conventions, such as professionalism and politeness ● Listen for information such as simple instructions of a concrete, immediate nature
Task(s)	Unit 1 does not contain a primary unifying task as do each of the following units. Rather, it includes several small, discrete tasks which serve the general aim of creating a sense of situational awareness: who, what, where, why? This awareness will build motivation and community, and prepare students for the increasingly complex nature of the tasks in the upcoming units. Unit 1 tasks break down as follows: 1. Learn about the company, its products and directors (watch various videos, answer questions, check/discuss answers in pairs and in whole-class) 2. Introduce self/ meet others/ make small-talk (shake hands, share business cards, read/write name tags, ask/answer basic and follow-up questions) 3. Participate in conversations in various contexts (answer survey, consider prior knowledge, teacher-fronted discussion, video skits, water cooler chat)

	4. Summarize factual information and answer questions based on summarized information (info gaps: reading, pair discussion) 5. Fill out a request form based on personal information (likes and dislikes, work and school experience, personality)
Assessment	● Teacher-assessed: handshake, business card, name tag, personnel form, participationl ● Peer-assessed: self-introduction, questions asked/answered, info gap descriptionsl ● Self-assessed: video listening questions, participation

外国語教科書出版の推進と方法

クリストファー・ヴァルヴォーナ

要 旨

　独自の教材を作成し、教室現場で活用している先生方は多いと思います。しかしその先生方のには自分の工夫したアイディアを教科書として活かしたいと思う反面、なかなか出版社に近づきにくかったり、出版社内の新教科書出版の経過が不透明で分かりにくいと思われるのも多いでしょう。本著は教科書出版を通して著者の経験、出版社とのコンタクトのとり方、企画書としての教科書が出版社より受理され、出版されるまでとその後の作業などを記したものである。加えて著者自身の体験と出版編集者などから得たアドバイスを基に、様々な出版社との接触に成功する秘訣を提供している。本著の主な目的は、教科書の著書を考えている現場の先生方に利益のある情報を提供し、それにより外国語教授に関する教科書教材の質の向上を促すことにある。