

Two Perspectives on Writing Children’s EFL Textbooks

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This article presents two perspectives on writing children’s EFL textbooks based on interviews with authors of these books. The first author wrote these books for a book packaging company and the second author wrote for a major publisher.

1. Writing for a Book Packaging Company

1.1 About the Author

Sarah Mulvey is a Canadian teacher and materials writer living in Japan. She started writing EFL materials for young learners when she was working for a large Japanese children’s EFL school with branches all over Japan. The school was developing in-house learning materials for the students, and Sarah became part of that team for several years.

1.2 The Writing Project

Recently Sarah was involved for six months in a type of work that may be of interest to many material writers. For a series of children’s books, she was asked to write 60 stories which were to be used as the primary text in each unit of a multi-level series. The work was commissioned by what is sometimes called a “book packaging company,” a company that specializes in putting together learning materials for a publishing company. The book packaging company often outsources all of the work and hires writers, editors, illustrators, and any other required personnel for that particular project, and then “packages” it all together in an appropriate form for the

client (the publishing company) who publishes it under their own brand name. The packaging company sometimes even arranges the printing and delivers the completed product to the publisher. Packaging companies are not a recent phenomenon and have been responsible for well-known series such as the children's detective series, *Nancy Drew*.

Hiring a book packaging company makes a lot of sense for book publishers who perceive strong demand for a particular kind of book but do not have the resources to produce the book themselves. In other cases, the publisher represents a celebrity whose name is likely to sell books, and the packaging company offers a convenient way of providing ghostwriters.

As with Sarah's case, book packaging can also provide interesting opportunities for freelance work. Jenny Glatzer (www.jennaglatzer.com) has written several books with advice for writers on how to turn their words into money and says that book packaging "remains an unsaturated market for ambitious freelance writers." While Glatzer is not talking directly about EFL materials, for EFL materials writers who are looking for steady work, book packaging companies can be less competitive to enter than traditional publishers and Glatzer notes that packagers often work with the same writers over and over, too, so there's "plenty of possibility for regular assignments." The work is generally offered as a work-for-hire. In other words, the writer receives a fixed sum for producing the materials and does not receive royalties regardless of the number of copies ultimately sold. In Sarah's case, her name was featured along with the two other writers on the front cover of the textbooks, but in many cases the writer may remain anonymous and receive no mention at all in the book.

1.3 Not Kids' Play!

Although texts for kids learning English have to be simple, this does not mean that the writing of those texts is simple. On the contrary, Sarah was faced with very strict conditions for each text which made it very challenging to write the stories. Some of these conditions included:

1. Each story had to be based on a true incident that had occurred and that had been reported in at least two different sources on the Internet.
2. The themes of the story had to be interesting with a fun twist, or a good moral which could act as a suitable lesson for young children. One story was about a cat who worked as a ticket seller in a small Japanese railway station. Another story was about an octopus who didn't like to sleep with the lights on, so he used to spray water at the electrical circuits in order to turn them off. Animal stories like these are obvious favourites for kids, but the themes of the stories had to be varied and there was a quota on the number of animal stories. Other themes included an eating contest and a three-year-old child who wandered far away from home one night.
3. The story had to be under 90 words for the lower levels of the series and under 160 words for the higher levels. These words had to appear on a very controlled vocabulary list and special words outside that list had to receive special approval.
4. The story had to be written in the simple present tense.
5. Each story had to include art briefs for nine pictures that would accompany the story in the textbook.

An example of a story is shown below:

Erden loves nature. He wants to visit beautiful places around the world. "How can I travel without using gas?," Erden wonders. Using gas hurts nature. Ships and airplanes use gas. Cars and buses use gas. Can Erden travel without gas? "I know!," Erden shouts. I can use my own power. I can walk up and down mountains. I can ride a bike along the roads. I can row a boat across the ocean. Erden rows a boat from America to Australia. It takes a long time. Erden climbs and rides and rows around the world for many months. Erden feels tired sometimes, but he doesn't stop. He says, "I can do it." In the end, Erden sees the world and keeps it beautiful, too.

An art brief for the sentence “It takes a long time” might read:

In the middle of the picture is a globe. On the top of the globe, Erden is hiking. He has a pole in his hands and a backpack on his pack. He wears hiking boots and a wool hat.

As can be imagined, writing under these constraints was quite challenging. Sarah says that the most difficult aspects were trying to confine a full interesting true story to the limited amount of words allowed and keeping the story in the simple present tense at all times. Preparing the art briefs was also challenging, and she adds, “I was never sure how much or how little the illustrator would need.” As the project proceeded, it became increasingly difficult to find interesting and simple stories that could be fit into the tight writing parameters. In addition, another of the main writers was also based in Japan, and they often found that they had inadvertently chosen the same story and one of them had to start from scratch again. However, the editor of the project was very supportive and available for advice and feedback at all times. Despite the challenges, Sarah found that writing for a packaging company was very interesting work of a type that she had never done before or even considered. She felt that it was a great opportunity and learning experience and would certainly do similar work again if the opportunity arose.

1.4 Interested?

A lot of writers are interested in steady work and packaging companies certainly offer some interesting opportunities. Sarah gives the practical advice to “be careful not to get a backlog of work... keep a set routine everyday.” If you are interested in learning more about the opportunities to write for book packaging companies, Glatzer’s informative article can be found at: www.underdown.org/packaging.htm. But how do you get started and where do you find these companies? A simple Google search doesn’t reveal all that much because book packaging companies tend to stay out of the limelight, just like the ghostwriters that they employ. Sarah’s case seems to be quite typical. The work was offered to her through a personal

contact.

Keep writing, showing your materials, and talking to publishers, and the right opportunity may arise. When it does, Glatzer says that most book packaging companies like “to see a cover letter detailing your interest and availability, a resume, and relevant clips or writing samples.”

2. Writing for a Major Publisher

2.1 About the Author

Patrick Jackson is an Irish materials writer who lived in Japan for many years and is currently based in Dublin, Ireland. His experience shows us a very different perspective of publishing in the children’s EFL market. Patrick Jackson is best known for his work in materials for EFL textbooks for kids including the *Potato Pals* series and the recently released Oxford University Press series, *Everybody Up*. Patrick started making learning materials as soon as he began his teaching career at a kids’ conversation school—starting out with simple worksheets. He was lucky to be paired up with a classroom assistant who happened to be a talented illustrator. He used to pass her his rough sketches and she would “make them pretty.” Eventually, they made a lot of materials for the school including workbooks, a colouring calendar, and readers, as well as the school newsletter with comic strips. Like many material writers, he began to find out just how fun and satisfying it can be to see learners having fun with the stuff they were creating.

What distinguishes Patrick’s experience from the many other teachers who produce materials for their own students is his lucky break in attracting the attention of a major publisher. He sent a bunch of black and white readers off in the post to three big publishers, and says “I didn’t know anyone in the world of ELT so I suppose they must have landed on the right desk on the right day.” Later he began to understand the unlikely nature of his success and reports, “I’ve since heard this was something of a miracle to get my foot in the door like that. It turns out that they had a gap in their

publishing schedule and somebody had been prepared to take a chance.” After a huge amount of planning, writing, and editing, the Potato Pals series was published within 18 months, complete with readers, teacher book, songs, flashcards, and workbooks. It is now used in kids’ EFL classrooms in many countries around the world. Eventually, this led to Patrick being invited to be one of the authors of a 7 level primary course called *Everybody Up*.

2.2 The Writing Project

Getting involved in such a major project opened up the formidable resources of a major publisher, and the project took him far beyond the scissors and paste tools of his first work. Writing a large series naturally involves a large number of people and a lot of feedback and discussion at every stage of the project. He started working with experienced co-authors and editors based in Japan, Brazil, and New York, but thanks to technologies such as Skype and email, geographical distance was no longer a problem, and screen sharing meant that his team could work together as if they were all in the same room.

Large projects also obviously require large amounts of time, and from the first meeting to the completion of the series took three years of full-time work on the project. Before the actual writing even started, he and the other writers drew on a bank of publisher’s research to develop initial ideas and to establish a good idea as to what teachers were looking for. They followed this up by examining existing textbooks to identify what each course was doing well. The first year was primarily spent throwing ideas around and trying out different unit structures, and it was only after a year that manuscript writing started for real.

While working with a major publisher offers many resources, there are also naturally many compromises and the larger the audience, the more compromise is necessary. For example, local publishers are able to fill a niche market but major international publishers need to sell their books all over the world in very different markets, and the writers need to be

constantly aware of gender, racial, and ageist stereotypes in each potential market. Another frustration that Patrick and the other authors discovered was that they sometimes wanted to make changes to a manuscript but the publishing timeline dictated that change could not be made after key deadlines were passed. There may eventually be a new edition to implement these desired changes, but that could be years down the road.

2.3 Some Practical Advice from the Frontline

Patrick offered some very practical advice for material writers who want to reach a much wider audience:

If your aim is to get on the ladder and eventually become a published author all the usual advice about piloting and reviewing publishers' materials makes sense. Make yourself known to the field editors. Be available. Offer to present. Build a name for yourself through blogging or whatever else you think will get your message across. Being well-known and part of a network of teachers can make publishers notice you and these connections make it more likely you'll be invited to be on an author team. Be flexible. It might be that your first job is to write something you're not that interested in. If you do a good job though and meet your deadlines you'll build up a reputation and have stuff on your resume. You will be expected to present at conferences so be prepared to do so. If you're already doing so then you're ticking a box that publishers will be keen to check. In any dealings with publishers emphasize your flexibility. Publishers need writers but you wouldn't get far if you were stubborn or difficult to work with.

Having given this excellent advice, Patrick confesses that he did none of these things himself until after he was published for the first time, although doing them later enabled him to be published again, and he adds, "I know that for sure. They told me."

Even if you don't land a contract with a major publisher, we all know that writing materials is still an enriching process and Patrick leaves us with

the following advice:

It's one of the most rewarding parts of the job and I can't imagine teaching without launching all those little paper boats. Some float and some sink, but it's an adventure and one of the best parts of your communication with your students. You're giving them something unique and that's worth a great deal. Wherever possible get feedback though and never think something you've done is perfect. It's probably not.