Instructive or Destructive:
Written Instructions Produced by ESL Teacher Trainees in Hong Kong

Bruce K C Ma, City University of Hong Kong
Jasmine C M Luk, Hong Kong Institute of Education

Background

This paper presents the results of a study which looks into the potential negative effects of improperly written instructions on ESL learners. We will discuss the problems which these instructions may cause with an analysis of the forms and functions of these instructions.

By written instructions, we refer to the rubrics written to give directions to ESL learners for the completion of tasks in

1. classroom learning materials,
2. self-access learning materials, and
3. test/examination papers.

In this paper, we will use the terms "written instructions" and "rubrics" interchangeably.

Written rubrics or instructions undoubtedly serve vital communicative functions for users of ESL learning materials. These users include teachers and learners. Teachers other than the material writer or developer get from the rubrics information about the approach, design and procedure of the tasks which is often essential to their effective implementation. Learners, on the other hand, depend at least theoretically on written instructions for guidance and directions on how the tasks can and should be completed. In self-access learning situations when learners are expected to work without the presence of a teacher, written instructions play an even more important role. Sheerin (1991) points out the need for "utmost clarity" and "control" over the level of language in written instructions (Sheerin, 1991: 23). Similarly, in distance learning situations, the typical functions carried out by the teacher must all be performed by the materials and these cover an even wider spectrum of functions than those in conventional teacher-fronted settings, including functions like motivating, expounding, provoking, and appraising learner's progress (Rowntree, 1990: 11).

There are several reasons why this study on written instructions was launched. First, we believe that the writing of clear and user-friendly instructions constitutes an essential element in ESL materials development and task design, which are today typical everyday tasks for an ESL teacher. Although there is the bulk of commercially available teaching materials around, which the teacher can resort to, competence in materials development and task design is still a valuable asset to any ESL teacher. This is particularly true as the recent trend for teacher development is to encourage a more "self-directed" approach on the part of the teacher. According to Nunan (1989), for

example, the teacher should act as "an active creator of his or her own materials, classroom activities and so on" (Nunan, 1989:133). This is especially crucial when the ready-made materials may not be that suitable to the needs and interests of a particular group of students. Even if the teacher decides to use some of these materials, there is often the need for extensive adaptation, entailing writing or rewriting of rubrics. Thus we believe that both pre- and in-service ESL teacher trainees should aim to sharpen their skills in writing clear and effective rubrics.

The second thing that has prompted our study is the scanty literature and references on ESL rubrics writing. Even in books and articles that deal with materials development and task design, little reference is made to the functions of rubrics and how they should be written. Most discussion on materials or instructional design seems to centre around principles of development rather than on the language of the written instructions per se (e.g., Nunan, 1988, 1989). Even when the writing of rubrics does get mentioned (e.g., Wright, 1987; Sheerin, 1991; Richards, 1993), nothing much is said about the functions written rubrics perform, let alone how clarity and effectiveness can be achieved. Wright (1987) attempts to raise teachers' awareness of the functions of rubrics in providing guidance and information on task administration, but skills in making rubrics perform are not discussed.

When we look at teacher education in Hong Kong, the need to develop ESL teachers' ability in writing task instructions effectively has obviously been overlooked. In the two teacher education programmes we are involved in teaching, one pre-service, at Hong Kong Institute of Education and the other in-service, at Hong Kong Baptist University, nothing about written instructions is taught. In other teacher education programmes we know of, such as the Post-graduate Diploma in TESL and Master of Arts in TESL at City University of Hong Kong, rubrics writing receives no attention either.

In view of the practical need for ESL teachers to write effective instructions and the present inadequacy of work done in this area, both in the literature and in teacher education programmes, we believe we have to look at rubrics writing more closely than we did in the past. The present study represents an initial attempt to look into how teacher trainees in Hong Kong generally perform with regard to rubrics writing. It is our hope that the study will shed some light on what we should do in teacher education programmes to better prepare our teacher trainees to meet the challenges of their job.

Method

In this study, an assignment containing a materials development task was set for 27 pre-service and in-service teacher trainees. Of these, 15 were final year students of the Teacher's Certificate Programme at Hong Kong Institute of Education while the others were doing a part-time Post-graduate Diploma in Education at Hong Kong Baptist University.

In the assignment, there was a reading text (Fassman and Tabares, 1989) of about secondary two level and the trainees were asked to design learning tasks for a class of local secondary two students based on the reading text. We set the materials design task on classroom learning materials, rather than on self-access or testing materials, as we believe this is typically what these teacher trainees have to or will have to do on their job. The assignment sheet is shown in Appendix A.

After the assignments were collected, all the written rubrics were highlighted and their language examined with respect to formal accuracy and effectiveness of functions performed. All 27 assignments were found to demonstrate problems in one or both areas.

Problems

We will discuss typical examples of the problem instructions, with both form and function in mind, and attempt to classify them into different categories. We will also discuss their potential "destructive" effects on the learners. It should be noted that because of the diversity and complexity of the problems, very often, one instruction being classified under one category may also demonstrate problems of another.

1. Function

The focus of this analysis is the effectiveness of the communicative functions performed by the written instructions in giving guidance and directions to the learners. It is found that the instructions which fail to perform this function properly demonstrate problems in terms of either practicality, completeness or appropriacy.

Practicality

Some instructions, as shown in Table 1, are found to be impractical because in one way or another they simply cannot be carried out. This may result in two negative effects:
1. Learners have to make wild guesses about what they are actually required to do and that wastes time; and
2. Learners may be misled to do something other than desired.

Table 1: Instructions showing problems in practicality

Instructions	Problems
Try to <u>answer the following table</u> while you are reading paragraph 1-4.	In the table, there are two totally different tasks. In one of them, learners are asked to cross out inappropriate information. In the other, they are asked to arrange the order of some sentences. There is a total mismatch between the instructions and the tasks to be done in the table. The teacher trainee probably intends to mean "to complete" the table.
You are required to <u>complete</u> the chart about the job of the chocolate tasters. Please put a tick to <u>the correct boxes.</u>	The word "complete" gives the impression that learners have to fill in the gaps in the chart by writing something down. In fact the chart contains complete sentences about the text, which are either true or false. What the learners have to do is to tick in the empty box provided next to each statement. The second part of the instruction does not make sense when it makes reference to *the* correct boxes because the boxes themselves do not show the quality of being correct or incorrect. It is impossible to find *the correct boxes*.
True and False Say why the statements are false.	"True and False" implies that there are true statements and false statements. However, the second part, "say why the statements are false" seems to imply that all the statements are false and what the students need to do is to explain why they are false. However, when the five statements that follow the instructions are examined, it is found that two of them are true. It is impossible to say why they are false. As a result, the learners are left to guess what they are actually required to do in this task.

Look up in the dictionary the following words and note how they are used by giving an example.	There are two problems. The first one is a result of the collocational incompatibility between "note" and "by doing something". The teacher trainee probably meant to say "note how they are used and then give an example". The second problem lies in the lexical ambiguity of the phrase "giving an example". To fulfill this action, there can be three possibilities: 1. Learners make up their own examples. 2. Learners copy the sentences in which the words concerned appear from the dictionary. 3. Learners copy the sentences in which the words concerned appear from the original text. However, only the teacher trainee knows which is the intended action and the learners' guesses are as good as ours.
Try to find the top-sentence for each paragraph.	This is impractical because there is no such thing as "top-sentence" in a paragraph. This teacher trainee probably intends to say "topic sentence".

Completeness

Some instructions, as shown in Table 2, are problematic because they do not contain sufficient information for the tasks to be fulfilled. These instructions are incomplete. As a result, learners are left to guess what they are required to do.

Table 2: Instructions showing problems in completeness

Instructions	Problems
Word Bingo --- Teacher prepares some cards with ten words on it and gives one for each pair of students. --- Teacher reads out the definition of the words. If the students know the answers, they can raise their hands.	The teacher trainee who wrote these instructions has obviously confused learning task design with lesson planning because these instructions are more suitable for teachers than students. However, even for the teachers, the instructions do not contain sufficient information for completing the task. Although the ten words for the word bingo are provided, the "definition" of the words are in fact not given. Besides, it is unclear what "the answers" refer to. What's more, if it is a word bingo, should students only raise their hands? Clearer directions on what students have to do on or after raising their hands should obviously be included.
Read this dialogue, between a student and a chocolate taster, in pairs:	Information is insufficient as to whether the students should read the dialogue silently or read it aloud. Although in typical situations where instructions for reading tasks are given, to read something usually means to read it silently. However, to ask students to read a dialogue in pairs silently doesn't seem to make good sense here. But if we take it as a reading-aloud task, no information is given about whether the pair of students should take roles, or they should read both parts together.
The following is a survey about the jobs students want to do.	Below this instruction is a table with two columns: "name of jobs" and "number of students". We guess the teacher trainee wants the learners to do a survey on what jobs students want to do. But the instruction, being a descriptive phrase, fails to make this clear.

Work in PAIRS. Read the words given below and guess what the text is about.	First, the task itself doesn't need to be fulfilled in pairs and no information is given on whether it is necessary for learners to discuss with their partners. Second, it is unclear whether students should read the words aloud or silently. Third, this is in fact the first task on the first page, and no information is given about what "text" the instruction refers to.

Appropriacy

Some instructions, as shown in Table 3, are found to be inappropriate because information contained in the instructions does not match what the task actually requires the learners to do.

Table 3: Instructions showing problems in appropriacy

Instructions	*Problems*
Text-Attack Skills Exercises: Task: - In the text, the words underlined in red refer to something or somebody mentioned before in the text. Read the passage carefully and complete the table underneath.	"Text-attack" is a kind of jargon used by reading skills specialists. Learners will find this word strange and difficult to understand. In fact, since more detailed instructions are given on how the task should be done, there is no need to have "Text-attack skills" in this set of learner-oriented materials.
Pre-reading activity While-reading activity Post-reading activity	The majority of teacher trainees have put their rubrics and task instructions under these three headings. These terms present no problem for teachers but they are meaningless and bewildering to the students. Bearing in mind that the materials are designed for learners in the classroom, these terms should be done away with.
Underlining Read the following sentences and underline the subject and the verb of each of them.	The objective of the task is to see which subject goes with which verb in complex sentences. "Underlining" as the heading of the rubric fails to bring out the objective and focus of the task. It should be done away with or replaced with a more descriptive, language learning-oriented heading.

Vocabulary in context A) True or False	The task actually contains five statements about the text. It is thus a true or false exercise and has nothing to do with vocabulary in context. Therefore, having "Vocabulary in context" as a heading is not only redundant but misleading to the learners.
Choose the most suitable answers to complete the following sentences. Circle the letter.	This is an instruction for a multiple-choice exercise. However, four out of six "sentences" in the task contain complete questions. There is no completion task for the learners. What they need to do is only to choose an option. Therefore the instructions have given inappropriate information.
Discuss these questions with your partner, and see if the rest of the class agree with you.	Firstly, it is not mentioned in the instruction who should be the learners' partner, or whether they really need a partner. Secondly it is not clear how the rest of the class can know what a particular pair of students have discussed.

2. Form

This analysis of form examines the grammatical accuracy of the instructions. In Table 4, problematic instructions are shown and noted for their potential adverse effects on the learners. In the least, they invariably contain incorrect language input.

Table 4 Instructions with grammatical inaccuracy

Instructions	*Problems*
Decide whether these sentences are true or false. <u>Write down</u> <u>on the end</u> of <u>each sentences.</u>	• missing object after "write down" • incorrect preposition • disagreement between determiner and noun
Form <u>the group of four</u> and discuss the following questions:	• unnecessary specific reference article "the" • lack of plural marker for "group"
Here are the <u>flavourite</u> snacks most people like.	• incorrect spelling
Try to find out <u>what do the following</u> pronouns refer to:	• incorrect subject-verb order in indirect question
What do these words in the text mean? Choose <u>a</u> correct answer.	• incorrect article

After you have answered the above 8 questions, you can count your marks by <u>referring the table</u> below.	• missing preposition "to"
Read the passage carefully and <u>completing</u> the table underneath.	• incorrect verb form
Work in Pairs. One of you is a <u>journalist, one </u>of you is a food taster. The journalist needs to have an interview with the food <u>taster, after that </u>the journalist needs to write a short report.	• run-on sentences
Think <u>of</u> the following questions:	• incorrect preposition (What the teacher trainee actually meant to say is to "think about", meaning to consider.)
Now <u>reading</u> the passage:	• incorrect verb form
Here is <u>the passage</u> about an occupation. <u>Scan</u> the article as quickly as you can and answer these questions:	• Incorrect article • Inconsistent terminology: "passage" and "article" • Use of jargon: "Scan"

It is certainly legitimate to ask how we can be sure that these instructions, though apparently problematic, will have at all any "destructive" effects on the learners. In most situations, learners may eventually make out what they are required to do in the tasks even though the instructions are not as clear as they can be. For example, learner could still be able to complete the table even when the instructions say that they have to "answer the table". However it definitely takes time for the learners to make out what the instruction really means. In classroom situations, this may result in additional explanations to be given by the teacher and a possible disruption to the original lesson plan and classroom procedures. Learner motivation, participation and attitudes could all be adversely affected. In test and examination situations, learner performance is affected as they have to spend time unduly on guessing what they are expected to do. This could also create unnecessary frustration and damage their overall performance in the test or examination concerned. Besides, learners actually run the risk of making the wrong guesses, the consequence of which could be even more devastating. In self-access or distance learning situations where the teacher's guidance is not available, the same negative effects could result. After all, it is our duty as materials writers or developers to produce clear and followable instructions for learners. We cannot simply expect learners to find their own way out with unclear, incomplete, or ambiguous instructions.

Conclusion

We believe that we have demonstrated with this study the multitude and complexity of the problems in the written instruction produced by our teacher trainees and their potential "destructive" effects on ESL learners. We also believe that the results of our study have sounded an alarm regarding the present language proficiency of the pre-service and in-service ESL teachers in Hong Kong. We are convinced that more work has to be done in teacher education programmes about the writing of rubrics. The following are some suggestions:

1. The awareness of teacher trainees of the importance of written instructions in materials and of their communicative functions should be enhanced. This can be achieved with tasks requiring teacher trainees to examine and critically analyse improperly written rubrics and to suggest ways of improvement.

2. Specific guidelines should be set and taught in teacher education programmes about the writing of clear and effective instructions. We feel that insights can be drawn from the formal and functional analysis of rubrics we have discussed in this paper. This certainly includes the following dos and don'ts.

   - Do make sure that instructions are detailed enough for implementation.
   - Do check for grammatical accuracy.
   - Do check for collocational compatibility.
   - Do beware of lexical ambiguity.
   - Do check for mismatch between instructions and tasks.
   - Do check for mismatch between headings and their corresponding paragraph.
   - Don't use jargon in learner-oriented materials.

3. Practice and experimentation in the writing of rubrics are necessary for a good mastery of the skills. In teacher education programmes, practice and experimentation should be done not as a discrete unit, but integrated with other parts of the teacher education programme, such as materials development activities, so that the work will be more meaningful.

4. Teacher trainees should also be encouraged to be consistently self-reflective about the writing of rubrics. That means that when they are writing, they should always reflect on their writing and think in the position of the end users, taking into consideration things like the level and background knowledge of the students.

5. Peer evaluation on rubrics writing should be practised in teacher education programmes so that teacher trainees will have more opportunity to look at their peers' work and learn from each other.

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