
Publish or Perish: The Secret Life of a Textbook Writer

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The modest observations offered here are intended for those who dream to see their names on the covers of books — or on publishers' royalty checks. I fear that an increasing number of such people are beginning to emerge from the closets. Tell-tale signs abound; graduate assistants with word processors; assistant professors who can barely suppress a craving for answering services and secretaries; full professors who are afraid to accept invitations to cocktail parties in case there might be someone there who has never heard of them. We live in dangerous times. So much for my research hypothesis and the review of the literature.

If we look at the vast international industry of English language teaching, with its millions of learners enrolled in programs of all shapes and sizes, the astute observer will conclude that ESL learners, no matter who or where they are, have one thing in common. Each of them is required to buy one or more books for every course they take. The magnitude of this phenomenon has not escaped the attention of the moneyed classes. The publishing and marketing of ESL/EFL textbooks is a lucrative multi-national industry. Teachers get a glimpse of it, with the daily arrival of glossy brochures and fliers, urging them to try a new book on American idioms or yet another college composition text. Most teachers simply see themselves as consumers. Someone out there was responsible for producing this year's batch of new titles. The teacher's job is to look over the current crop and select those that could be used in his or her classroom. Recommendations are made, adoptions agreed on, and the cash registers ring up at the bookstore. Waiting discreetly in the wings however are another less conspicuous group of participants in this process of demand and supply — the authors and publishers of the books you use. Many of these authors are also classroom teachers, a select few who have managed to take a piece of the action. How does one make the transition from consumer to developer of ESL textbooks? What are the perils and the rewards?

Let us first look at the publishing marketplace, since as with any commercial venture it is the conditions of the marketplace that determine how the publishing industry operates. The more we understand this process, the easier it will be to gain entry to it.

Publishers don't publish for a worldwide audience. The buyers of ESL textbooks are a set of specific subpopulations, each with their own particular requirements. Domestically in the US for example, we can distinguish between:

- school-based groups, such as SLEP students being prepared for entry into the US elementary or high school system;

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- college-based groups, such as students in community colleges being prepared to enter the job market or studying for college courses;
 - university-based groups, such as foreign students studying at US universities;
 - other groups, such as those at private language schools, who may be studying conversational English, business English, TOEFL Prep courses, or those studying survival English in programs for immigrants and refugees.

These diverse groups create a huge market for different kinds of ESL texts. There will be basal series and other kinds of children's materials for the elementary school group; there will be books designed to prepare SLEP students for the content subjects at high school; there will be materials for TESL programs and survival English programs; there will be the study-skills books in grammar, reading, composition, and listening used in English language centres at Universities; there will be conversation books and basic level books in listening, reading, writing and grammar for students in private language schools, as well ESP and business texts for specialised groups of learners.

Internationally there is quite a different market for American ESL materials. Outside of the United States, the demand for books in American English is rather localized, with limited demand in Europe but a heavy demand in central and southern America and Japan. These books will sell to:

- elementary schools and high schools in countries where foreign textbooks can be used in the public or private school system;
- foreign universities, where students may be required to take courses in English or may need to read textbooks written in English;
- private language schools, teaching courses to business people and anyone who can afford to take a language course;
- business and industry, where courses may be offered to company employees.

These are the potential customers for ESL materials. Today there are distinct markets for different kinds of ESL books. Each market has its own particular needs. This is a somewhat different picture from what the market was like fifteen years ago. Remember when there were all those basic series, designed to be used anywhere and everywhere? Unfortunately for both publishers and authors, the days of instant best sellers like *English 900*, are largely over. Both publishers and authors have to work much harder now, developing books for distinct and often localized markets. In an increasingly competitive industry, publishers now have to be prepared to invest in developing a diversified line of products to suit a highly specialized and fluctuating market. How do publishers respond to this demand and how can you get in on the act?

Well, first the publishers do their homework. They gather information on the numbers of students involved at different levels in each kind of program, the kinds of materials and texts needed, the profitability of each market, and then establish a publishing program which identifies priorities, sets targets and draws up plans to attain them. Publishing companies differ in the way they handle ESL publishing. In some companies, ESL may be part of the college division, a highly profitable and well organized branch of publishing in many US publishing houses which publishes for the regular school and college market. The college division will have a huge budget for their regular college publishing program. They will have an army of marketing and sales representatives, who know the needs of the United States and foreign markets thoroughly, state by state, country by country. If ESL is part of the college division, it will by no means be the most profitable section however, and is often tagged on as an afterthought. Editors and salespeople involved in ESL projects will not always be trained in ESL or familiar with the content and approach of ESL materials. The advantage however is that the ESL division or section can draw on huge back up resources. There is no cash-flow problem. ESL authors can be paid their royalty checks on time, drawing on the general resources of the division. Publishing may be more speculative, with the publishing company taking on a large number of new ESL projects every year.

In other cases, ESL may be treated as an autonomous division which has to survive on its own. There may be a much less limited budget available. Every new project must pay for itself and editors will scrutinize every new project carefully to ensure that they are not landed with a dud.

In either case, the ESL division operates within a specific budget with definite goals in mind. How can this budget be invested in new books to gain the maximum return for the investment? The resources of the division are limited. The amount of manpower that can be committed to new books at any given time, as well as the amount of capital that can be committed, are both limited. Editorial time will have to be budgeted for, as well as the time and capital needed for design and production. Decisions must therefore be made as to what to publish and what not to publish. These decisions are crucial for both publishers and authors. Neither publisher nor author want to end up with a book that nobody wants to buy. How does the publisher arrive at decisions about what to publish?

This is where market research is essential. Editors attend conferences and talk to teachers. Sales people visit schools and colleges and gather information. Perhaps they can obtain sales reports from some of their competitors or sales estimates of currently successful titles. They look for answers to the following kinds of questions:

What are the characteristics of each of the major markets?

What kinds of books are currently being used in these different markets? What do ESL professionals and academics say about trends and issues in each market?

What are the current best sellers? Why are they popular? What do teachers like about them?

What are the current gaps in the market? Are there any markets for which good books are not available?

Is there likely to be a change in the market needs? Are teachers' preferences changing?

What do we already have for that market? How adequate is our current list?

How can we reach that market?

The ESL division, armed with this kind of information, can then sit down and assess the strengths and weaknesses of their current list. They may discover that there is a good market for a basic ESL series that gives more emphasis to grammar than most of the currently available texts. They may learn that there is a need for low-level reading and writing texts for the college market. They may find out that many schools in both the US and overseas are now offering separate courses in listening comprehension, creating a need for a low level listening series that would sell both in the US and abroad. Having arrived at a list of priorities and identified the kinds of books they need to be planning for, for each proposed book they ask;

How long would it take us to find a writer who could write such a book?

How long would it take to publish it?

How much would it cost?

How many copies might it sell?

This is what can be called a market-driven approach to publishing. Identify the market and produce the kinds of books the market wants. Publishers and editors listen attentively to presentations at conferences to locate potential authors for the kinds of books they are looking for. Now let us consider the process from a different point of view, that of an ESL teacher who is hoping to become an author. We will consider two such teachers and how they attempted to break into publishing. One we shall refer to as George, and the other as Dorothy. There may well be a George or a Dorothy in all of us.

George has been an assistant professor for some years and occasionally lectures to grade school teachers. A person of considerable intellectual resources who has published in both *Language Learning* and *TESOL Quarterly*, he has always been very critical of published textbook materials and has often expressed his interest in writing a textbook of his own. It would be far superior to anything around, since George is a trained researcher and knows just what is needed to produce a book that would incorporate the findings of current research. George's first attempt was an application of his interest in developmental psycholinguistics. His study of the literature on child development led him to advocate the use

of materials in which only structures produced by infants in the course of language development should be used in children's readers. He labored for four years to produce a reading series based on this approach. He has also been attracted to schema theory, and currently advocates the use of pictograms in the teaching of reading. These are abstract pictorial representations of the schemata underlying a text, and George will soon have produced his first set of readers based on this approach. Recently George approached a publisher.

But when George sat down with the publisher's representative, she confronted him with some sobering facts. From information available to the publisher, teachers would be reluctant to use George's materials. Teachers were looking for materials that would help students pass recently instituted competency exams. The examination specifications suggested a very different approach from that George was advocating. Perhaps he would be interested in developing something that more closely corresponded to what the teachers were asking for? Of course, not. George isn't one to compromise. He is not willing to throw his standards out of the window for the sake of a few stupid teachers. George is a manifestation of the "product-driven" approach to publishing. "I have a good product. It is based on good research and a sound theory. Therefore there should be a market for it." George is still looking for a publisher. George subscribes to *Applied Psycholinguistics*, wears sandals with socks, belongs to the Sierra club and lives in a trailer home in Idaho.

Dorothy, on the other hand, recalls having a recurring nightmare as a teenager about finding herself at age forty, driving an eight-year old Japanese import and living in an 800 square foot rented apartment fitted with industrial carpeting. She is a person of average talent but with enough drive to enable her to cross the United States in three days without an automobile. Early on in her college teaching career, Dorothy observed that the kinds of textbooks she was teaching from and that her students were paying up to \$12 to buy, were not the creations of literary geniuses. Surely she could write books that were at least as good as those she was teaching from. While most people who use textbooks reach a similar conclusion. Dorothy decided to go one step further by trying her hand at writing her own materials. To her surprise, she found that she both enjoyed developing materials and had a modest talent for it. She came to accept that the chief drawback of the writer's craft is the unpleasant fact that one is frequently called upon to actually sit down and write.

But instead of rushing out and acquiring a word processor and a literary agent, she first decided to find out as much as she could about ESL publishing. She talked to other teachers to confirm her own impressions of what kinds of books were needed in the teaching situations she was familiar with. She looked through publishers' catalogues to see who was selling what and what gaps there appeared to be in their lists. She talked to sales representatives who visited her college and asked them what the hottest kinds of manuscripts might be. One sales representative said his

company was desperate for a low level grammar series. Another mentioned the need for an ESP text in business English. A visiting editor she met said her company was looking for an academic listening text. This was interesting. Everybody was looking for books. It dawned on Dorothy that all those titles in publishers' catalogues were produced amateurs by like herself, working late at night and through the weekends. Few of the books in the publishers' catalogues had been written by fulltime professional writers. No wonder the publishers' representatives were interested in listening to her.

Dorothy was now convinced that finding an interested publisher wouldn't really be a problem. The question was, what sort of book should she attempt? Since she had by this time already acquired a taste for Perrier, Kiwi fruit, and art deco etchings she decided not to attempt an academic listening text. That would be difficult to write, and in any case there could hardly be a huge market. The rewards for her efforts would be limited. Another publisher was very interested in vocabulary workbooks for college students, but she decided that wouldn't take her very far either. How many ESL programs require students to do a vocabulary course? Such books would probably only be used as supplementary material in reading courses, and hence, no matter how well done, would never find a very large market.

After confirming her hunches with a few publishers she decided on a low level grammar series. Almost every college ESL program she knew of had several grammar classes. Although she knew there were dozens of such grammar books already on the market, she was not discouraged. There is always room for one more, she thought, particularly if I can make it a little different from some of the others. She decided to aim such a book at students in US high schools and colleges. She knew that teachers she had spoken to wanted a series that didn't look just like a grammar book. They wanted material that was "communicative", that included conversation work, and which also brought in subject matter from the content areas. So Dorothy sat down and began to plan what such a series might look like, how many books it could contain, how many units there would be in each book, at what level it might begin, and what kinds of content and exercises it might contain. She wanted to make sure her proposed series would suit the kinds of teachers whom she thought might adopt it. It had to have enough material for a typical college course, but not too much material, otherwise teachers would simply photocopy the exercises they needed from it. What she came up with was a 35 page document describing her proposed series, specifying the kinds of institutions where such a series would be used, a description and analysis of existing books available for this market and their strengths and weaknesses, and a clear description of how her book would differ from available texts and why it would be an attractive alternative for many teachers. She proposed a series of three books each of about 110 pages and containing between 16 and 20 units, with material for between 30 and 45 hours of class time. She drafted a rough table of contents for

each of the three books, then wrote two sample units for each book. Then she sent the whole document to an ESL editor whom she had met on the conference circuit.

On receiving Dorothy's proposal, the editor first read it through carefully. She was favourably impressed, and discussed it with other people in the division. The sales representatives confirmed that there might be a market for this kind of book, and certainly the company had nothing on their list in this area. The editor then wrote to Dorothy, informing her that the company were interested in it as a publishing proposal, and asked for two months in order to review the proposal more carefully. During this time they asked Dorothy to give them first rights to the proposal, that is, she would agree not to send the proposal to other publishers for consideration. This was necessary, they explained, because they would be investing money in having the proposal reviewed and they wanted assurance that this money would not be wasted. Dorothy agreed. The editor then sent a copy of Dorothy's proposal to six outside reviewers. These were program directors and senior teachers in the kinds of programs that might use Dorothy's books. Each reviewer was asked to look through the proposal, assess its strengths and weakness, compare the kind of book Dorothy was proposing with other books they knew of, and indicate if it was the kind of book they would adopt.

By and large, the reviewers (who each received US\$75 dollars for their comments) were favourably impressed, though each suggested specific improvements or changes. When the editor had all the reviews in, she called a meeting of some key people in her division — ESL editorial staff as well as sales and marketing staff. The editor put forward a case for the company taking on Dorothy's proposal. Although Dorothy was an unknown author, the editor had been impressed with her knowledge of the market she wanted to write for. The editor felt sure Dorothy would be able to deliver the kind of manuscript she promised. The sales and marketing representatives gave their specifications for the kind of book they felt would sell. They set a page limit for each book and the price that the book would have to sell for to be competitive with similar books on the market. They suggested a suitable publication date, early in the year, to enable the book to be printed and available in book shops in time for course adoptions for the following spring — a major buying period for college books. A decision was made to offer a contract to Dorothy for the series she wanted to write.

The editor wrote back to Dorothy with the good news. She enclosed the reviewers' comments as well as suggestions of her own, and offered Dorothy a contract for the series. This was based on a figure of 10% of the publisher's net receipts on the first 20,000 copies sold, rising to 12% of receipts on sales beyond that figure. The editor and Dorothy met soon thereafter to discuss the reviewers' suggestions and to establish a schedule for writing, piloting, reviewing and revising the manuscript. Dorothy agreed to get the first draft of Book 1 in by November, Book 2 by January and Book 3 by March. The editor would get reviewers' comments back

on each book a month later, and Dorothy's revisions for all three books would be completed by June. Teachers' books would be prepared for each book and would be ready by August. The Design department would begin work on the manuscript in July and the whole manuscript would go into production in September. Publication date was set for December enabling the book to be ready for spring adoptions. It was a tight schedule and one which allowed for little leeway. Dorothy cancelled her plans to attend a summer school on Portuguese vegetarian cooking, and started writing. She found she had to work nights three times a week and at least six hours a day on weekends to enable her to meet her deadlines. There were many times when she wondered why she bothered. Finally, however, the manuscripts were delivered and the grammar series was published. Sales were slow at first. But then it looked as if they had judged the market accurately. Adoptions came in from colleges and language schools in the US. Puerto Rico turned out to be unexpectedly enthusiastic for the series. The absence of references to pig-sticking led to orders from the Middle East, and the fact that there were no coloured pictures in the book prompted interest from the South African office. First year sales of all three books totalled over 75,000 copies. Both publisher and author were very pleased. Dorothy's first royalty check was for US\$14,000. Since then she has written four more books, moved to Southern California, reduced her teaching load to 50%, and bought a 3000 square foot condominium to house her expanding collection of Lalique vases, Papuan jewellery, and Tibetan rugs.

Now you may not want to be a Dorothy, but surely you can do better than sandals and socks. Having seen the way Dorothy operates, I think I can safely draw some conclusions from which all of us who want to try our hands at writing an ESL text can learn.

1. Know your market. Do what the publishers do. Find out what is needed for specific kinds of situations. Check the strengths and limitations of existing texts. Identify gaps and weaknesses.
2. Know your publishers. Talk to their representatives. Find out what they are looking for. They are not all looking for the same kinds of books. They each have their own specific list of publishing priorities. Perhaps you have an idea that will interest them.
3. Talk to other authors. You can readily locate authors at book exhibits at conferences such as the TESOL convention and some of them will be happy to share their experience with you. Ask them for advice. What publishers would they recommend? Can they give you a person to contact? What problems should you avoid?
4. Get started. Prepare a rationale and sample materials for the kind of book you would like to write. Show it around. Don't waste time trying to write the perfect book, and then look for a publisher for it.
5. Be flexible. Don't take yourself too seriously. Be prepared to make changes. You may think you know best, but you probably don't.

Listen to your editor's advice. Let him or her help you develop and improve your writing skills.

6. Deliver the goods. If you agree to produce a manuscript by a given date, make sure you do. Publishing is a very serious business. Your publisher will take your book very seriously. So must you. It will make big demands on your time and energy. Don't even think about it if you'd rather be sailing down the Amazon. The rewards can be attractive, but nobody gets anything for nothing.
7. Be cautious. Publishing is not a charity. Shop around and get the best deal that you can. Find out if your publisher has a good track record. What kinds of sales figures can they quote for some of the books on their list?
8. Be patient. You may not get your first royalty check for three years. But if you can produce a decent book, it should have a life span of five to seven years, and longer if you are lucky.

Any successful author will attest that writing is a time-consuming process that requires not only moments of creativity and inspiration, but large amounts of patience, persistence and effort. Most authors will also confirm that despite the moments of tedium and frustration that accompany any writing assignment, the rewards far outweigh the pain.