

Using learner-generated materials to support writing skills development in the primary English classroom

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Introduction

In this article, we will describe our experiences of using *learner-generated materials* (LGM) to support writing skills development in a group of young *English as a foreign language* (EFL) learners in Norway. The project, implemented as part of the *Decentralized Competence Development Initiative* (DEKOMP) in a medium-sized, semi-rural primary school, involved a class

of eighteen learners with a wide range of individual learning needs and proficiencies, who started in grade 3 and are currently in grade 5.

Writing in a foreign language is an essential skill: it increases overall competence, supports reading and speaking, and increases linguistic knowledge (Cummings, 1990). For young learners, writing in a

foreign language is both a means and an end: they need to master the mechanics of writing in order to use it for their learning. However, it is often perceived by learners as difficult and as a hurdle to language learning.

We could see exactly that during classroom observations of the third graders doing textbook-based writing tasks.

The learners would complain about the tasks and how difficult they were. Also, they very clearly expressed their lack of motivation for writing by saying things like 'Do we have to?', 'I don't have any ideas.', 'This is boring!', 'How do I write this?'. This resulted in the teacher starting to wonder whether the writing tasks were in fact too difficult, even though they were suggested by textbooks and materials aimed at this level.

In subsequent meetings with the English teachers, numerous ideas were discussed, and through a collaborative process we came to a decision to implement a longer project where learners would take ownership of their writing, using their own ideas and texts as the main resource. We hoped this would boost their previously low engagement and interest by directly incorporating their own ideas into the lesson.

What are learner-generated materials?

LGM are any materials that learners create (individually or collaboratively) for peer instruction or self-study. Lambert et al. (2017) discuss several reasons why LGM can be beneficial for learning, highlighting that they give learners an opportunity to include their own interests and life experiences in their schoolwork. This personal investment is important, as it has a positive and concrete effect on learners' behavior while performing the task (Lambert et al., 2017). Creating materials (be those questions, prompts, or a game),

with or for one's classmates provides learners with a *real* audience, instantly transforming assignments into more purposeful and meaningful activities. Additionally, such tasks make learners active and critical thinkers, because they need to reflect on what they are creating and consider whether the materials will be relevant and interesting for their classmates.

Research has shown positive results from using LGM (e.g., Ribosa & Duran, 2022). However, existing studies have not focused on young learners or on using LGM extensively to support writing skills development. Therefore, we explored whether this approach could help encourage our learners to become more self-reliant and motivated when faced with writing tasks in the EFL classroom. This study is particularly relevant for the Norwegian educational context, as it aligns with the LK20 curriculum, which emphasizes inquiry-based learning.

LK20, engagement and writing skills in EFL

Learners can plan, write and edit texts for real purposes and audiences following an inquiry-based approach as highlighted in the English curriculum (MER, 2024). For the third and fourth grades, this is further specified as writing simple texts that convey the writer's thoughts and real-life experiences (LK20). Moreover, the teacher is expected to provide opportunities for learners to share their ideas in the classroom and to stimulate their motivation

to learn English by using a variety of strategies and resources that support the development of their language skills.

Implementing learner-generated materials in the EFL classroom

The writing process is slow, as it requires not only knowledge of spelling, grammar and vocabulary, but also the ability to think ahead about how to organize one's thoughts. The emergent writing skills and literacy development of younger EFL learners are still under-researched, although they are an important support for language learning. Therefore, in order to examine how LGM can be used in this setting and whether they will give any positive results, we devised a research project. We used the classroom action research framework (McNiff, 2013) that allowed regular teaching to continue while being supported by the ongoing research.

Starting when the learners were in the third grade, we incorporated tasks where learners needed to create materials for in-class use. These writing activities were planned so that they complement other activities in the English class and the topics that had already been planned by the teacher. Over two years (autumn 2023–spring 2025), we surveyed and interviewed learners and collected samples of their writing. The learners created many different types of materials, and in this article we focus on some of these.

Setting off

We started with very simple activities, with one example being learners creating bingo cards for each other using the high frequency words they were currently working with. These included prepositions, pronouns, auxiliary and modal verbs, and demonstrative pronouns such as *up*, *about*, *was*, *am*, *will*, *those*, *their*, *that*, etc. as shown in Figure 1. Once they had created the cards, they exchanged them with their peers and then played bingo.

Where x	Was x	Will x
for x	their x	up x
that x	out x	and x

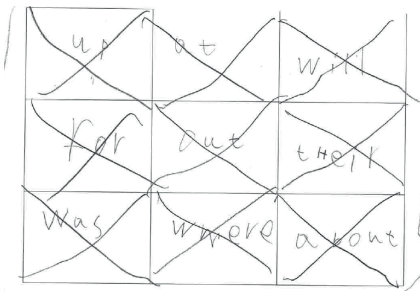


Figure 1: Examples of bingo cards



Figure 2: Learners' flashcards

Flashcards

After observing initial evidence of learners' interest in these types of easy writing development tasks, we continued with flashcards which were put on the wall, as shown in Figure 2. These cards were used as support during lessons where the theme was London and included tasks such as giving directions, vocabulary revision and running dictations.

During focus group interviews, the learners said they liked that they could draw these themselves and confirmed they felt pride when they saw their work on display. As the project continued, we introduced other tasks, such as writing notes to each other, working collaboratively on paragraph writing, and creating

story-prompts for each other. In all these activities, we had two main aims. First, to have a concrete audience for the learners' texts, so that writing became meaningful and purposeful. Second, we wanted the learners to start writing without worrying about perfect spelling or grammar.

Picture books

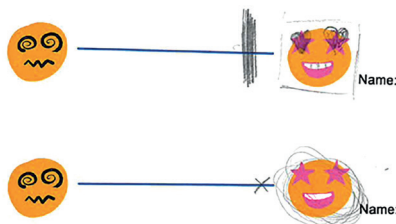
As the final task in fourth grade, midway through the project, the learners created 8-page picture books. The learners were free to choose the topic and illustrate it however they wished, so they would have intrinsic motivation to finish. In an effort to keep them engaged, their real-life audience was the first graders – their 'fadder buddies'. In this way, they had a concrete

product to create for a specific audience. The learners could choose and play with the language they were comfortable with, which might have increased their engagement. An important element of the writing exercise was that the learners had to keep in mind that their audience was younger and therefore potentially less proficient in English. This was particularly important for slightly lower-performing learners, as they could still use the language they had acquired up to that point.

After working on drafts (Figure 3) over two weeks and making the final story, the first graders were organized into groups, and then the fourth graders rotated between groups, reading their stories and showing their picture books multiple times. The learners reported being a bit anxious before doing the reading, but also added that it was fun, which the first graders agreed with.

Feedback

An important part of the project was learner engagement. To complement the classroom observations during tasks, we also wanted to hear from the learners what they thought about each of the activities they had done. Therefore, we



What you think	😊	😐	😞		😞
	very good	good	OK	bad	very bad
Circle the number	5	4	3	2	1

Figure 4: Examples of feedback forms

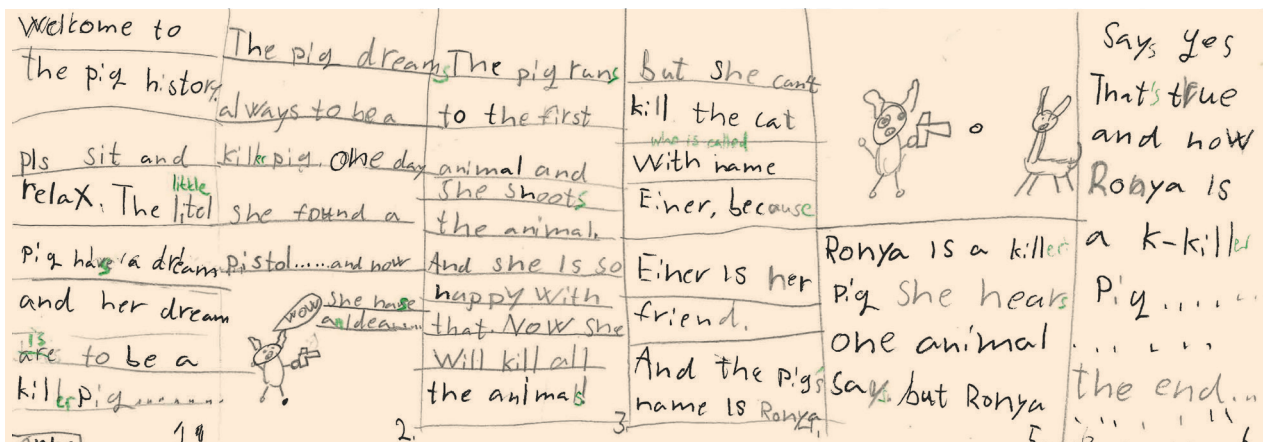


Figure 3: Picture book draft

asked them to 'evaluate' activities using various tools: a sliding scale, numerical scales, or using die faces, etc., as can be seen in Figure 4. We used different formats to make the task novel and to avoid receiving automatic feedback, where learners do not think about the task, for example always giving the same number or choosing the same emoticon.

After each new activity and set of feedback, our project team would hold a reflection session, where we would go over the learners' engagement, work, and outcomes, as well as plan future activities. It was encouraging to see learners' overall positive feedback, as none of the learners ever ranked an activity involving LGM as uninteresting. The same was true of feedback on the picture books, as can be seen in Figure 5.

Teaching with learner-generated materials in an EFL classroom

What we observed over this period was that using LGM significantly enhanced students' motivation for writing. When learners created exercises and activities for their peers, they saw writing as a meaningful and purposeful task rather than just an academic requirement. This approach encouraged engagement, as students took greater ownership of their learning process. Additionally, working in pairs fostered collaboration, making the writing process more interactive and enjoyable. We saw that many students who previously felt hesitant about writing found that creating materials together with and for their classmates reduced their fear and reluctance: now the task felt less intimidating and more rewarding.

Another key benefit of using LGM was the opportunity for students giving peer feedback and feedback to their English teacher. This gave learners a chance to express their opinions on whether the exercises were fun and

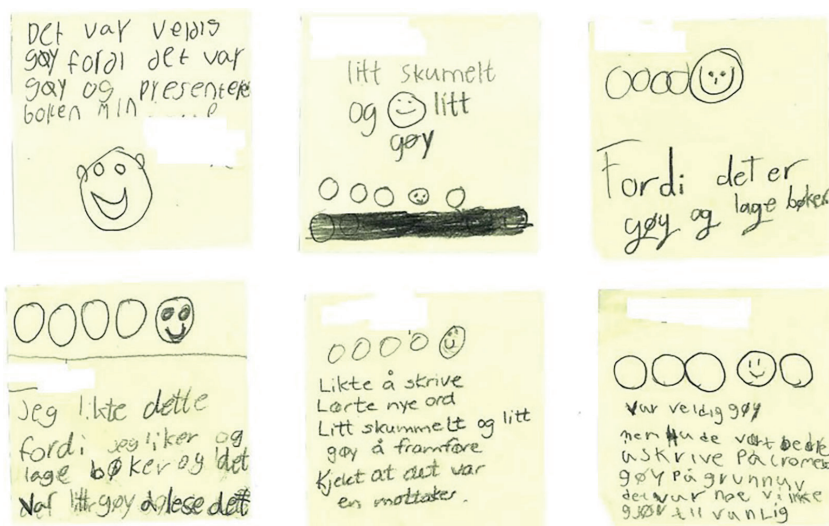


Figure 5: Feedback on the picture book activity

educational. Discussing what made an activity engaging and useful not only helped improve the quality of the materials but also reinforced critical thinking and self-assessment skills.

There was some initial nervousness on the part of the English teacher when asked to step away from the textbook and their familiar, structured methodology. There was also some anxiousness about how these students would perform in the National test in their fifth grade. Fortunately, the results were quite positive. The area where the learners scored lowest was grammar, which was not surprising since they had not worked with traditional tasks. However, rather than returning to those, the class created various grammar games to practice and reinforce their

understanding in a more engaging way.

For the teacher, watching the students take an active role in their learning has been inspiring, and has created a positive basis for further exploration of ways to integrate learner-generated materials into lessons.

Conclusion and lessons learnt

When learners incorporate personal experiences and interests into creating their own materials, they make language more relevant and meaningful for themselves (Swain, 2013). Relying on their interests, our learners not only managed to write more and be invested in their writing but were also happy to share their work with others.

Allowing learners to collaborate on brain-

storming and idea generation was an important element of all of the LGM tasks. We found these sessions particularly important for the whole writing process. Asking learners to think about the audience and elements in a text helped them start thinking about their own learning, thereby promoting the development of metacognition.

However, the use of LGM does not come without some challenges: it requires substantial scaffolding and should be a step-by-step process. Also, it is considerably more time-consuming than using ready-made activities and it should be alternated with other types of writing so that learners do not get overwhelmed. It is essential that LGM be used once they have been created, and that learners get a response or see how the materials were used by others.

At the time of writing, the project is ongoing, and the learners have continued working with longer pieces of text that they have written individually. The preliminary findings are very positive. We have found that learners respond better and are able to sustain their engagement longer. We are happy to report that we very rarely hear complaints and rather see a 'Let's get to it!' attitude when there is writing to be done!

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