

# Approaches to Material Writing

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Recently we had the opportunity to speak to an old friend, wonderful materials writer, and long-term resident of Nagoya—Tom Kenny. Tom is probably best known for his book, *Nice Talking*



## Writer's Point

*with You* which continues to be a popular choice to get students engaged in oral communication many years after it was originally published. When we asked Tom about his roots in material development, he told us; “I didn’t study it... never took a course in it. It’s just something that happened for me. It comes out of the desire to create. When we’re new to teaching, we always teach with some book that’s chosen *for* us, not *by* us. We learn pretty fast what works for us as teachers and what’s not our cup of tea.”

Tom appears to have a very organic approach to materials development and this has proven successful for him, although he has had to become flexible in his approach when he works with larger publishing companies. When he began teaching, he used several famous four-skill textbooks, cut out the sections that he couldn’t use in class, and then supplemented the textbooks with activities that appealed to him. This is an approach that many material writers in Japan will probably relate to. Certainly in our experience, the motivation for many teachers writing

textbooks in Japan tends to spring from a desire to improve a local learning situation with perceived problems rather than a desire to create a textbook that will reach a wide market, and many teachers will also have had Tom’s experience that; “After a while, you start to make supplements yourself, with your own voice.”

In more formal terms, Tom divides material writing into two approaches; the “scope and sequence” modular approach which is top-down, and the “supplement” approach, which is bottom up.

“In the former, you lay out a grand plan with topics, grammar points, or whatever, in a table form and then fill the modules with activities. That’s how Cengage Learning worked up the *Listening Advantage* series I did with them.” This approach tends to be common among large commercial publishers since it suits the needs of the editorial staff and helps the book to have systematic coverage of language points for a larger market.

In the other writing approach, Tom suggests that “you start with one element, like topic questions, test them out with students and refine them, work them up into supplements. From the supplements, you expand on the topics with scripts that turn into listening activities, with words you know students will need, which you turn into vocab sections, and so on. That’s how I developed *Nice Talking with You*.”

## Global Voices

Tom used to be a DJ on a local radio station in Nagoya and is still well known for his great sense of humour. When we asked him to tell us about a recent project, he replied, "I just finished recording an album at EMI studios. It's called *Revolver*. I hope the fans will like it." Seriously, however, the latest project that Tom has been working on is called *Global Voices*. When he was working with Cambridge on the new editions of *Nice Talking with You 1 & 2*, he really wanted to include some language from non-native English speakers. He explains this by saying; "I'm a big believer in the idea that no one "owns" English, which probably surprises people, being that I'm American! So I worked with a small group of international students at my university. I asked them a question and let them answer it however they wanted. They didn't know the questions ahead of time, so all of it was improvised." You can hear these international students speaking at the page Tom has created at: <http://www.nicetalkingwithyou.com/global-voices-text1/>"

Global Voices was interesting in several ways. First, Tom points out that the audio from the students sounds so colorful—an array of different accents from Africa, Europe, Latin America, and Southeast Asia float over a nice music bed for students to enjoy while they're listening. The combination of unscripted, international English with a bit of music added in is pretty unusual from a traditional publishing perspective. Another interesting aspect of the project was the way that Tom packaged the material for use. For teachers and students everywhere, this material is totally free and includes twenty-four audio clips with

a downloadable listening activity for each. For teachers, he also created a video slideshow they can play in class to see and hear rather than just listening to the audio. Always willing to go the extra mile to really support teachers, Tom also made additional videos with a scrolling transcript of what they're saying: "Everything else these days is freemium-premium; why not ESL materials?"

## Difficulties

In Global Voices, Tom found that the actual activities (the task students are supposed to do) were very hard to construct. "When you write scripted dialogues, you have to write with the task in mind, and then there's a lot of fine-tuning as you bounce back and forth between task and script. But when you're dealing with unscripted language, the tasks are much harder to create."

## Write from the Heart

In closing, we would like to share a great tip that Tom offered for other materials writers. He had a terrific teacher in graduate school who had published several textbooks in linguistics. "They weren't easy reads, but they were incredibly lucid: beautifully organized, with no wasted language." Tom asked him once, over a beer at a party, how he learned to write like that and the teacher replied; "I explain it only how I can understand it." Tom never forgot that and recommends to other material writers to lay things out how you understand them, and how you would use them in class. "Write for you, not for a teacher in a McDonaldized English program. If you're writing from the heart, teachers will spot it."