

Self-Publishing as Practice-Based Inquiry in Japanese University EFL

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This paper reports a narrative inquiry into the process of writing, self-publishing, and revising a textbook for first-year Japanese university students studying English as a Foreign Language. Developed in response to dissatisfaction with commercially produced materials, the textbook adopted an approach based on extended collaborative tasks intended to increase student engagement and support authentic communication. Drawing on reflective memos, classroom observations, textbook annotations, and informal feedback from students and colleagues, the study traces the project across stages of design, classroom implementation, and revision. The findings illustrate how self-publishing functioned as a site of teacher agency, iterative reflective practice, and professional learning, while also revealing the often overlooked practical and emotional labour involved in materials production. The paper argues that, despite its challenges, self-publishing represents a viable and contextually responsive alternative to commercial textbooks in university EFL settings.

本研究は、日本の大学における初年次英語学習者向け教材の執筆、自費出版、および改訂の過程をナラティブ・インクワイアリーにより検討したものである。市販教材への不満から開発された本教材は、学習者の参加促進と真正なコミュニケーション支援を目的とした協働的な長期タスクを中心に構成された。省察メモ、授業観察、教材注記、学生および同僚からの非公式なフィードバックを分析した結果、自費出版は教師のエージェンシー、省察的実践、専門的成長の場として機能する一方、教材作成に伴う実務的・感情的負担も明らかとなった。以上より、自費出版は課題を伴うものの、大学EFL教育における文脈に即した市販教材の有力な代替手段となり得ることが示唆された。

Teacher-authored resources are widely used in language education contexts, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where commercially produced textbooks fail to align with local needs or institutional constraints (Graves, 2000; McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson, 2011). While teacher-generated materials (TGM) have received sustained attention, full textbook self-publication by teachers remains comparatively under-examined. This paper presents a narrative inquiry into the development, classroom use, and revision of a self-published textbook created for students enrolled in a compulsory English Communication course. Developed in response to dissatisfaction with commercially available materials, the textbook adopted an approach based on a small number of extended collaborative tasks intended to support engagement and authentic communication. Drawing on reflective memos, field notes, textbook annotations, and informal feedback collected throughout the project, the paper traces the development of a self-published textbook across stages of design, implementation, and revision. Rather than offering a prescriptive model, it presents self-publishing as practice-based inquiry.

Literature Review

TGM are widely used in EFL contexts, particularly where published materials fail to align with local learner needs or institutional goals (Graves, 2000; McGrath, 2013; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2018). Teachers frequently adapt, supplement, or replace textbooks to improve pedagogical fit, engagement, and relevance (Masuhara, 2022; Mishan & Timmis, 2015). In Japanese university settings, such mismatches have prompted teachers to develop their own materials (Hino, 2018). While TGM are often associated with worksheets or slides, they may also extend to larger curricular artefacts designed for specific learners and contexts (Kemm, 2025). A teacher-authored textbook can be understood as a scaled-up form of TGM.

Recent developments in print-on-demand (POD) publishing and digital design tools have made independent textbook production increasingly accessible (Engeness & Gamlem, 2025). At the same time, self-publishing expands materials development beyond pedagogy alone, requiring engagement with distribution, copyright, pricing, and revision. Although these demands may make smaller-scale TGM more practical, self-published textbooks may provide greater curricular cohesion and consistency across classes or instructors. Materials development is commonly viewed as an iterative process shaped by planning, classroom use, feedback, and revision (Graves, 2016; Tomlinson, 2013, 2023). In self-published textbooks, this process extends beyond lesson-level adaptation to include broader considerations of usability, coherence, and independent use. The textbook described in this study was organised around extended, collaborative tasks culminating in tangible products or performances. Such approaches have been associated with increased learner engagement, collaboration, authentic communication, and integrated skills use (Beckett, 2023). By working towards shared outcomes over multiple lessons, learners are encouraged to engage with language in more purposeful ways.

Methodology

This study adopts a narrative inquiry approach to examine the process of writing, self-publishing, and revising a textbook for use in a Japanese university EFL context. As teacher-researcher, I draw on teaching practice, materials, and reflections to reconstruct the trajectory of the project and examine its pedagogical implications. Narrative inquiry foregrounds temporality, context, and lived experience as central to understanding professional practice (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The study was supplemented by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing patterns to be identified across the dataset while preserving narrative coherence.

Research Context

The textbook was developed for first-year undergraduates enrolled in a compulsory English Communication course at a public university in Japan. Students were generally within the CEFR A2–B1 range, based on institutional placement procedures using Eiken IBA testing. The course emphasised communicative language use. In 2023, initial materials were piloted across five classes, comprising approximately 200 students and taught by three instructors including the author. Materials consisted of worksheets, multimedia resources, and links to authentic digital content. Although the course was

team-taught, the materials themselves were authored independently by the author. As the only full-time instructor involved in the course, it was possible to devote sustained time to curriculum and materials development in ways that would have been difficult to expect from part-time colleagues working across multiple institutions. Feedback from the other instructors nevertheless played an important role in shaping subsequent revisions. Following one semester of use, the materials were revised into a publishable format and released via Amazon KDP (Amazon, n.d.) in mid-2024. The textbook was designed to function both as instructional material and a repository for student work.

The course followed a design based on extended collaborative tasks, with students completing three major projects over the semester in the first edition, later expanded to four projects in the second edition. Table 1 provides a snapshot of the syllabi used in both editions, illustrating how the overall structure of the course evolved over time. The revisions shown in Table 1 reflect an iterative design process rather than a wholesale curricular redesign. While the core pedagogical approach remained stable, changes were made in response to classroom use, instructor feedback, and institutional considerations. These syllabus-level adjustments formed part of the dataset for the present study and informed the narrative and thematic analyses described in the following sections.

Table 1
First and Second Edition Syllabi

Project	First edition	Second edition
1	Create an academic poster and present it in a poster session.	Create an academic poster and present it in a poster session.
2	Make an original board game, including the game, ruleset, and an explanation video.	Make an original board game, including the game, ruleset, and an explanation video.
3	Deliver a 5-minute academic presentation, using slides, about a topic of your choice.	Design a survey study and write a one-page research report about your findings.
4	-	Deliver a lightning (short format) presentation, on a topic of your choice.

Student comments included in the study were voluntary, anonymised and used only in aggregated or paraphrased form. Students were informed through the feedback form that their comments might be used for research purposes and that participation was voluntary. Colleagues who contributed feedback were informed of the research purpose and consented to the inclusion of their perspectives.

Data Sources and Analysis

The dataset consisted of materials generated during the writing, publishing, and classroom use of the textbook over a two-year period. These included reflective memos, field notes, textbook annotations, post-lesson reflections, informal conversations with colleagues, and student feedback regarding textbook use and task design. Documentation related to self-publishing, including formatting decisions, image licensing, digital integration, and pricing considerations, was also included. Analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Initial coding focused on moments of challenge, transition, and decision-making, which were later organised into broader themes including contextual responsiveness, revision through classroom use, technical challenges in self-publishing, and professional identity. Throughout the analysis, narrative coherence was maintained to preserve the situated nature of the experience under investigation.

As a practitioner study, the research was shaped by my dual role as teacher and researcher. Rather than minimising this positionality, the study was approached reflexively through memo writing, peer dialogue, and repeated rereading of the dataset. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation across data sources and feedback from colleagues who also used the textbook.

Narrative Account

This section presents a chronological narrative of my experience writing, self-publishing, and revising a textbook for first-year EFL students at a Japanese university. The account traces the project from its initial conception through classroom implementation and into the development of a second edition following one year of use. Rather than offering a comprehensive history of every decision, the narrative foregrounds key moments that shaped the direction of the project. These episodes illustrate how materials development unfolded as a situated, iterative process embedded within everyday teaching practice.

Recognising the Need

The idea for the textbook emerged from growing dissatisfaction with how existing commercial materials functioned within the English Communication course. Although the textbook satisfied institutional requirements and provided a clear structural framework, students frequently appeared disengaged and approached classroom activities as procedural rather than meaningful. Three issues became apparent: low motivation to communicate in English, a perception of interaction as artificial or forced, and a broader view of the course as a box-ticking exercise. These patterns persisted despite variations in teaching style, suggesting that the issue extended beyond individual classroom practice alone. While these problems were not necessarily caused by the textbook, I increasingly felt that the materials did little to support authentic communication, sustained collaboration, or meaningful student investment in classroom tasks. In response, I became increasingly interested in approaches that emphasised authentic communication, collaboration, and meaningful task completion (Beckett, 2023). However, when searching for materials suitable for the course context, I found very few textbooks that aligned with these goals for Japanese university EFL learners. This led me to begin experimenting with alternative materials organised around longer, goal-oriented tasks. During this process, three major projects were developed for completion within a 30-class semester, intended to encourage collaboration and promote student ownership of learning.

At this stage, the materials existed as various Google Slides files, worksheets, and short instructional videos. While this format allowed flexibility, it also introduced practical challenges related to organisation and submission management. These challenges became particularly visible during assessment, when student submissions were inconsistent and difficult to manage. In a moment of frustration, I wrote to a colleague that the situation had become chaotic:

“Students are submitting work through Google Classroom, Teams, email attachments, shared drives, and on paper, sometimes all for the same assignment. They are unclear about where materials are or which version of the instructions they should follow. The projects themselves are working nicely, but the submissions are messy, and I’m struggling to find anything.”

This highlighted that the issue was not only pedagogical, but organisational. Consolidating materials, instructions, examples, and submission spaces within a single resource began to appear less like a formatting decision and more like a necessary structural change to the course.

From Materials to Manuscript

I initially assumed that converting existing materials into a textbook would be a largely technical task. Having already taught the course, I believed the structure was settled and that the primary challenge would be formatting and visual presentation. This assumption quickly proved incorrect. Unlike slides or worksheets, a textbook needed to function independently, without the teacher present to clarify instructions, adjust pacing, or respond to confusion. Every task, example, and transition therefore required careful explanation and pedagogical justification. A design memo written during the drafting stage reflected this shift in perspective:

“When teaching from slides, I can normally pause, rephrase instructions, or demonstrate an activity if students seem confused. The textbook cannot rely on that. Every page has to anticipate uncertainty before it happens. Even small things like spacing, examples, or sequencing suddenly matter much more because students may interpret the page very differently from how I intend.”

This shifted my view of the textbook from a collection of activities to a self-contained instructional system. As I began outlining lessons and sketching page layouts, it became clear that the process demanded a level of precision exceeding my earlier materials design work. Decisions that had previously been resolved through in-class explanation now had to be embedded explicitly within the text itself.

To manage this complexity, I developed a flexible page template and began writing the book out of sequence, starting with the second project rather than the first. This approach allowed me to familiarise myself with the format before returning to earlier sections, reducing inconsistencies. Each lesson was designed to integrate not only language practice but also academic and digital skills such as collaboration, referencing, visual design, and the use of QR codes. I used Apple Pages (Apple, 2024) for layout and formatting, selecting this free software to minimise costs and retain control over design decisions. Although I lacked formal training in publishing, I drew on prior experience with visual design to guide choices related to spacing, typography, and clarity. I sourced royalty-free images and documented attribution carefully. Additional resources were embedded via QR codes, but integrating these materials raised unexpected challenges around permissions and usage conditions, requiring negotiation and occasional redesign. This stage revealed the extent of the hidden writing that surrounds a textbook, including front matter, appendices, reference pages, and digital support content, all of which contributed to the coherence of the final product. An example of the drafting and revision process for a single page spread is provided in the appendix.

The Self-Publishing Journey

I chose Amazon KDP because of its accessibility for students in Japan, the availability of domestic POD services, and the control it offered over pricing, layout, and revision. These features made it possible to distribute the textbook affordably while retaining editorial control. The publishing process was more time-consuming than anticipated. Preparing files to meet platform specifications required repeated adjustments to formatting and cover design. Field notes from this stage frequently documented frustration with technical constraints:

“One of the most frustrating things about the whole project is the KDP submission portal. After making the entire textbook in A4 format, I now realise that I needed to use a slightly bigger size that could then be trimmed down to A4. Now I need to reformat all 100 pages to be slightly bigger than A4. I underestimated how much of this process would involve annoying troubleshooting.”

These experiences highlighted the extent to which self-publishing required forms of technical and organisational labour not typically associated with classroom materials development. This stage showed that self-publishing was a process of negotiation between pedagogical intentions and technical constraints.

Pricing decisions proved particularly complex. My priority was to keep costs low for students, leading me to set the price just above the platform minimum. However, colleagues expressed concern that a low price might reduce students’ perceptions of the book’s legitimacy or value. While empirical research on this issue remains limited (Patton et al., 2022), these discussions revealed a tension between accessibility and perceived authority when teachers act as both instructor and author. The self-publishing process exposed the extent of labour that remains largely invisible in accounts of materials development, including managing metadata, ensuring visual consistency, navigating platform requirements, and anticipating how production choices might shape classroom use. Engaging directly with these practical realities reframed my understanding of materials development as a multidimensional process that extends beyond pedagogical design alone.

Teaching With the Textbook

Using the textbook in class was revealing. Seeing students engage with a book I had authored heightened my awareness of flaws, ambiguities, and awkward phrasing. Unlike commercial materials, which carry a degree of editorial distance, this textbook made my instructional decisions fully visible to students. Moments of confusion prompted close

reflection on assumptions about task clarity, pacing, and prior knowledge. Throughout the semester, I kept detailed notes on points that required clarification, activities that overran, and examples that failed to resonate. These observations showed that teaching with the textbook functioned as real-time evaluation rather than confirmation of the original design.

Conversations with colleagues also using the textbook further shaped my understanding of how the materials operated in practice. Different instructors emphasised different aspects of the same tasks, including oral performance, visual design, referencing, or group dynamics, which revealed the interpretive flexibility of the materials. At the same time, recurring issues emerged across classes, particularly instructions that assumed too much prior knowledge, insufficient task modelling, and issues in sequencing choices. During an informal post-class discussion, one instructor noted that students often understand the task once they see a model or an example, but written instructions alone may assume familiarity with presentation or design conventions or skills they do not yet have.

This observation prompted revisions to task modelling, scaffolding, and example materials throughout the textbook. Student feedback added another layer of insight. While many valued the QR-linked resources, some found the number of links overwhelming or uneven in relevance. Other students noted that some linked materials were overly long or difficult. Similar comments appeared across several classes and contributed to the decision to reduce the number of QR-linked resources in the second edition. Students also responded positively to the inclusion of printable worksheets, which improved accessibility and supported continuity for students who were absent from class.

Revising for the Second Edition

The second edition of the textbook emerged from sustained classroom use, instructor feedback, and informal student input collected during the first year of use. Revisions were guided by recurring patterns that became visible across classes and instructors. Reflective notes repeatedly referenced students requesting clarification during transitions between activities, uneven engagement with spoken reflection tasks, and confusion surrounding some digitally linked materials. These patterns informed second-edition revisions. Table 2 summarises the major changes implemented in the second edition and the rationale for each decision.

Table 2
Selected Second Edition Revisions

Change implemented	Rationale
*Reworked Project 3 (now 4) into a short-format presentation	To avoid duplication with a compulsory second-year course on academic presentations. This adjustment reflects contextual considerations.
*Added a new project (Project 3) involving a survey study and written report	In response to teacher feedback. This change aimed to better balance spoken and written language output and simultaneously address concerns that overly generous time allowances led to student complacency.
Rewrote several task instructions for clarity	Based on classroom observations. Student confusion often stemmed from unclear instructions. Revisions focused on improving comprehension.
Changed reflections from spoken-only to a combined spoken and written format	Teacher feedback indicated low student participation in spoken reflections. The revised format uses spoken reflection as preparation for written submissions.
Reduced the number of QR codes	Based on student feedback. Some linked materials were too difficult, irrelevant, or time-consuming. Only the most useful QR codes were retained.
Removed or replaced certain activities	Teacher feedback highlighted activities that were frequently omitted, confusing, or time inefficient. These were either eliminated or replaced.
Made visual design adjustments	Based on classroom use and reflective notes. Changes enhanced clarity, reduced visual clutter, and corrected layout issues.

Note. Changes marked with an asterisk (*) represent major, one-time syllabus-level revisions.

The revisions outlined in Table 2 reflect an iterative approach to materials development rather than a linear process of improvement. While some changes involved one-time, syllabus-level decisions, most were incremental adjustments applied consistently throughout the textbook. Cross-class final assessments, such as poster sessions and board-game showcases further revealed how instructors prioritised different aspects of the same tasks, reinforcing the need for materials that could accommodate

variation in teaching style. Rather than attempting to standardise implementation, the second edition was redesigned to support flexibility through optional rubrics, editable handouts, and multiple instructional pathways. This phase reinforced that no textbook can function as a universal solution. Instead, the goal became to produce a resource that was stable enough to provide structure, yet adaptable enough to respond to diverse classroom practices. The revision process reframed the textbook as a living document, shaped through use, and responsive to classroom use and revision.

Discussion

This section interprets the narrative account through four interconnected themes: teacher agency and contextual responsiveness, iterative design as reflective practice, the practical realities of self-publishing, and questions of identity and legitimacy. Together, these themes illustrate how self-publishing functioned as both a response to local pedagogical needs and as a form of ongoing professional inquiry.

Teacher Agency and Contextual Responsiveness

This project was initiated in response to pedagogical needs: commercially produced textbooks failed to engage students or align with the communicative aims of the English Communication course. The decision to design and self-publish a textbook therefore represented an exercise of teacher agency, grounded in knowledge of learners and classroom realities. Rather than adapting materials within the limits of an existing textbook, self-publishing allowed the curriculum itself to be reshaped in response to contextual demands. This responsiveness extended to task structure, pacing, assessment formats, and digital resources, all of which were adjusted through classroom use.

At the same time, the project demonstrated how self-published textbooks can blur the boundaries between localised TGM and more formal published materials. Although the textbook was developed primarily for use within my own teaching context rather than for commercial distribution, the process of producing a complete textbook required attention to issues of cohesion, usability, visual consistency, and independent use that are less prominent in smaller-scale classroom materials. The act of self-publishing intensified the visibility and durability of pedagogical decisions, embedding them in a resource that could be shared and revised. Teacher agency emerged through authorship and sustained engagement with how the textbook functioned across multiple classrooms and instructors.

Iterative Design as Reflective Practice

The development of the textbook demonstrated how iterative materials design can function as reflective practice. Classroom use repeatedly exposed mismatches between authorial assumptions and student understanding, particularly in relation to instructions and scaffolding. These moments prompted targeted revisions, transforming classroom experience into concrete design decisions. Over time, revision extended beyond lesson-level adjustment to broader issues of curricular coherence and usability. Feedback from students and colleagues informed changes to modelling, digital resources, and the balance between spoken and written output. The textbook emerged as an evolving pedagogical artefact shaped through classroom use.

The Practical Realities of Self-Publishing

While self-publishing offered considerable pedagogical flexibility, it also introduced a range of practical challenges rarely foregrounded in discussions of materials development. Beyond writing instructional content, the process required sustained engagement with layout design, file formatting, platform specifications, metadata management, copyright compliance, and pricing decisions. These tasks demanded time and skill development that extended well beyond conventional teaching responsibilities and were largely unsupported institutionally. As the narrative account demonstrated, self-publishing involved substantial technical and organisational labour alongside pedagogical work.

At the same time, developments in POD publishing and digital design tools have lowered the barriers to textbook production considerably. Platforms such as Amazon KDP made it possible to produce a professionally printed textbook with relatively limited financial risk or specialist publishing knowledge. This accessibility blurs distinctions between commercial publishing and classroom materials development, enabling teachers to create durable, professionally presented resources for highly localised contexts. However, the experience also revealed that ease of access does not eliminate the labour involved. Technical troubleshooting, formatting constraints, and production decisions remained significant aspects of the process, requiring ongoing adaptation during publication and revision.

Identity, Visibility, and Legitimacy

Engaging in textbook self-publishing had a significant impact on my professional identity, shifting my self-concept from classroom instructor to materials writer and

curriculum designer. Publishing a textbook that was used by colleagues introduced a heightened level of visibility, rendering pedagogical decisions public and open to scrutiny by students and peers alike. This visibility intensified feelings of vulnerability and self-doubt, but it also created powerful opportunities for learning, as feedback became directly connected to a shared instructional artefact rather than to isolated classroom practice.

Unlike commercially produced textbooks, which benefit from editorial distance and institutional authority, teacher-authored materials require the author to negotiate legitimacy in situ, balancing accessibility, professional credibility, and pedagogical intent. Questions surrounding pricing, design quality, and classroom usability highlighted how perceptions of legitimacy are shaped not only by pedagogical effectiveness, but also by material presentation and production choices. At the same time, the process of revising the textbook in response to classroom use reframed authorship as a dialogic and collaborative practice shaped through interaction with students, colleagues, and institutional realities. Self-publishing therefore functioned not simply as an act of independent production, but as a form of professional inquiry that made pedagogical assumptions visible and open to revision.

Conclusion

This paper examined the experience of writing, self-publishing, and revising a textbook for first-year Japanese university EFL students. What began as a response to dissatisfaction with commercial materials developed into a process of curriculum design and revision. The study highlighted how self-publishing foregrounded teacher agency, reflective practice, and the practical labour involved in producing viable teaching materials. The findings suggest that self-publishing can function as a viable extension of TGM where teachers seek greater curricular coherence, contextual responsiveness, or flexibility across multiple classes. At the same time, the study demonstrated that self-publishing requires substantial technical and organisational labour extending beyond conventional classroom materials development. The project positioned materials writing as a form of professional inquiry in which pedagogical assumptions are externalised, tested, and refined through classroom use. Rather than functioning as fixed products, self-published textbooks may be better understood as evolving artefacts shaped through continued engagement with learners, colleagues, and local teaching contexts. Advances in POD publishing and digital design tools now make it increasingly possible for teachers to circumvent traditional commercial publishing structures when existing materials are perceived as insufficiently engaging, contextually appropriate, or pedagogically aligned with local classroom needs.

Bio Data

Roy Kemm is an Assistant Professor at Meio University in Okinawa, Japan. He is currently pursuing a PhD at the University of Leicester, UK. His research interests centre on language teaching materials development, teacher education, and pedagogical practices in low academic performance contexts. He is particularly committed to advancing the role of teachers as materials developers and to supporting teacher-led self-publishing initiatives.

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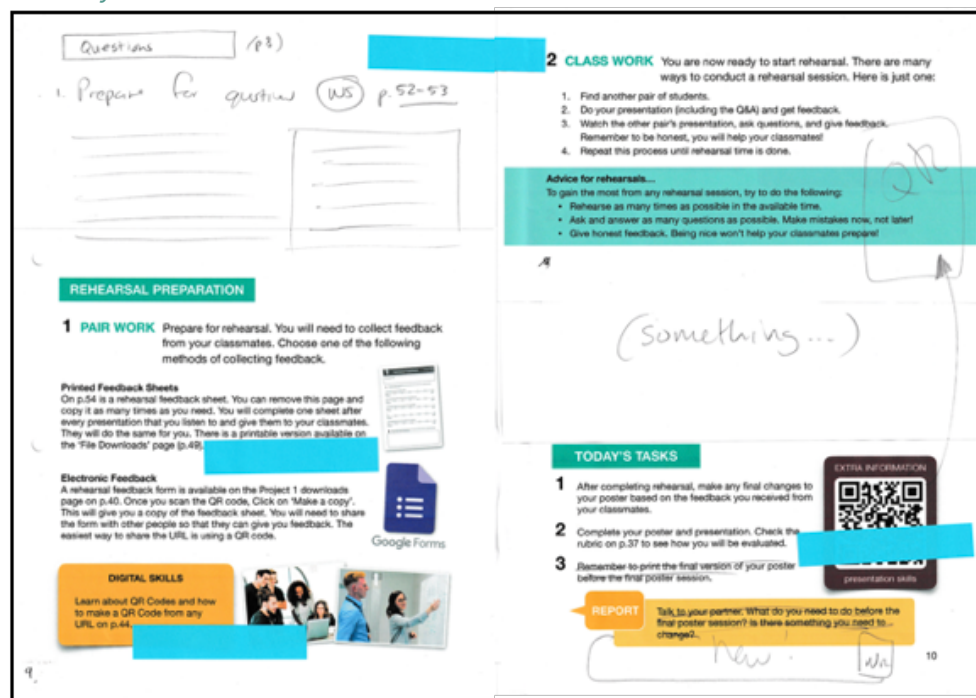
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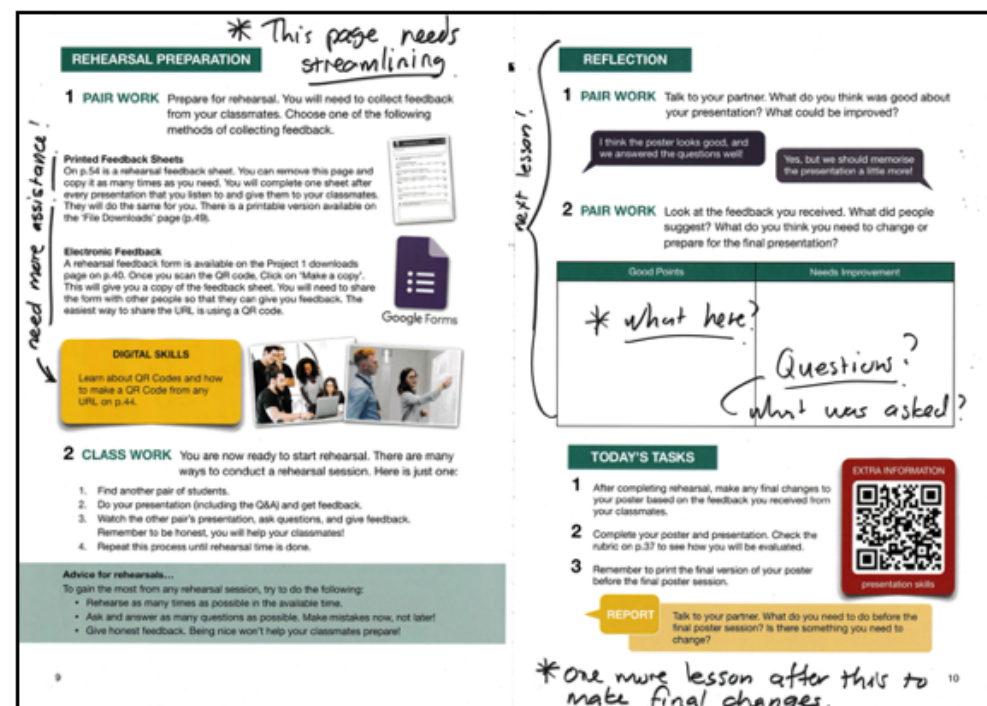
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Appendix

Iterations of a Layout Initial Layout Phase



First Edition



Second Edition

REHEARSAL

1 PAIR WORK Prepare for rehearsal. You will need to collect feedback from your classmates. Make a QR code to get feedback from your classmates.

Electronic Feedback
A rehearsal feedback form is available on the Project 1 downloads page on p.55. After scanning the QR code, click on 'Make a copy'. This will give you a copy of the feedback sheet. Save this in a place you can remember, and share it with your partner. You will need to share the form with other people so that they can give you feedback. The easiest way to share the URL is with a QR code.

 Google Forms

DIGITAL SKILLS
Learn about QR Codes and how to make your own QR Code from any URL, on p.60.



2 CLASS WORK You are now ready to start rehearsal. There are many ways to conduct a rehearsal session. Here is one:

1. Find another pair of students.
2. Do your presentation (including the Q&A session). Use an A4 printed version of your poster or display it on screen.
3. Make sure to get feedback. (If you cannot use the electronic feedback form, use the form on p.70.)
4. Watch the other pair's presentation, ask questions, and give feedback.
5. Repeat this process until rehearsal time is done.



Advice for rehearsal...
To gain the most from any rehearsal session, try to do the following:

- Rehearse your poster presentation as many times as possible in the available time.
- Watch your classmates' presentations carefully.
- Ask/answer as many questions as possible. Make mistakes now, not later!
- Give honest feedback. Being nice won't help your classmates prepare!

REFLECTION

1 After finishing rehearsal, think about the following questions, and make a few notes.

Which poster was designed the best? What was good about this poster?

Which presentation was the best? Why was this the best presentation?

2 PAIR WORK Talk to your partner. Compare your answers to the reflection activity above.

TODAY'S TASKS

- 1 Rehearse your presentation and Q&A section. Remember to provide a way for your classmates to give you feedback.
- 2 Continue working on your presentations, including the poster, presentation, and the Q&A sections.

REPORT Talk to someone other than your partner, and then write about...

What poster presentations did you see today? Which did you enjoy?