

Teaching EFL in 2020

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Abstract

This paper is a slightly revised version of a keynote address given at the 2015 National Quemoy University English Conference, Reimagining the Teaching of Language, Literature, and Culture, in Kinmen, Taiwan, on 5 June 2015.

The author contends that teaching English as a Foreign Language is changing rapidly, and successful teachers and scholars need to be prepared for the future. He presents six predictions about teaching and researching in the EFL discipline in the year 2020 and beyond, that there will be: (1) A growth of outcome-based instructional engineering, (2) A growth of affordance-based planning, (3) A growth of task-based instructional design, (4) A growth of affordance-based research (5) Pressure for more curriculum integration of research findings, and (6) Increased scrutiny of peer review, including an expectation that raw data used in studies must be made available for public scrutiny.

Keywords

Curriculum, instructional design, engineering, technology, EFL, CALL, task, TBLT, affordance, peer review, outcomes, goals

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This paper is a revised version of a keynote address given at the 2015 National Quemoy University English Conference, Reimagining the Teaching of Language, Literature, and Culture, in Kinmen, Taiwan, on 5 June 2015.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is changing, particularly here in Asia. It is different from what it was like five years ago, and it is sure to be different five or ten years from now. Meanwhile, EFL teaching across Asia ranges from traditional to innovative and from very effective to not so effective. Successful teachers and scholars need to be prepared for the future. Therefore, today I will offer you some educated predictions about what will change between now and the year 2020.

I chose the exact wording of my topic because it is a pun, a play on words. Two an eye doctor, “20-20” means good vision. In English, we use “20-20” as an idiom meaning good, clear understanding. So today, I am trying to predict what teaching EFL in the year 2020 will be like, with a good, clear 20-20 understanding. My challenge in preparing to speak to you has been to try to understand the trends. But I am not simply predicting things we can be sure will change. I am considering what SHOULD be different about teaching EFL in 2020 and beyond.

Background

You may ask, “why me?” I began my doctoral program in 2003 after working in the first part of my career in journalism, broadcasting, public relations, and fund raising. My school, Wayne State College, is not a research university.¹ But the nice thing about scholarly academic work is that merit is not determined by where you are from, but rather by how you teach,

¹ Wayne State College is in Wayne, Nebraska, USA, and is part of the Nebraska State College System. It is often confused with Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, but the two schools are not affiliated with each other.

research, and analyze. My experience consists of my doctoral coursework in Education, my work with EFL students at several universities in China and Taiwan, and I think that my journalism background also helps because it has given me strong English writing skills and good critical thinking ability.

Today's EFL Teaching Environment

It is clear that there is a changing understanding today of the mission of teaching EFL. Once it was about being able to communicate with native speakers, but no more. Because English is the most common international language, our graduating EFL students may need to interact in English with people who speak many native languages, and who share English as a first, second, or foreign language. I know former EFL students from China and Taiwan who have traveled to the United States and Germany for trade shows, and who work by phone and Internet with customers from all over the world using English. One is an airline flight attendant who could end up using English to help speakers of ANY native language.

There is another important factor in the EFL teaching environment today, what I call a tension between research and practice. EFL teachers need to publish in scholarly journals in order to get promoted, or get a better teaching job. So they often do relatively short-term studies, one after another. They don't make long-term use of the positive finding from previous studies because they need to try something different in the next semester, so they can write another paper.

Key Questions

This means there is not much curriculum integration. Students participating in a study may benefit, but how does the research benefit the curriculum long term? Are our research findings incorporated into our curriculum? We teach to benefit students, so how do we teach in ways that produce beneficial outcomes? The research we do is supposed to show us how to teach better, but how do we ensure that research findings become part of practice?

These are the kind of questions I pondered as I prepared to talk with you today. They led me to six predictions about teaching English and conducting EFL research in 2020 and beyond.

Prediction 1. Growth of Outcome-based Instructional Engineering

Engineering means designing something to produce specific required results. We most often hear “engineering” used in terms of hardware and technology, like structural engineering or software engineering, but the term fits perfectly with how we should be designing the education that we provide to students.

Figure 1 shows the Instructional Engineering process. The required results are the outcomes our students need to achieve in order to be successful. If we want to use an engineering approach to designing our curriculum, we need to start with student outcomes and work backwards (Dörnyei, 2014). We need, therefore, to research the marketplace requirements for our graduates, such as the skills and abilities needed by prospective employers. From these requirements, we can determine outcome goals for our students. Then we identify the instructional strategies that will allow students to achieve those goals, select the specific instructional methods and tools that best implement these strategies, and finally develop the daily lesson plan for the individual class. Sometimes the methods, tools, and lesson plans relate only

to one course, but sometimes these methods and tools can be designed to cross several course and semesters (Kennedy & Levy, 2009).



Figure 1. Instructional Engineering, inspired by Dörnyei (2014).

The problem is that academic programs often want to preserve teacher authority, or maybe all this planning seems like too much work. So they simply list classes a student needs to take in order to graduate, without doing the kind of detailed analysis needed to ensure that students make progress toward their required outcomes.

Figure 2 shows an example of outcome goals from the syllabus of a course I teach. It is a media criticism course, so it functions like a literature course, but uses movies and television programs as the “texts.” You see that the goals for the semester are clearly expressed. They serve as starting places for designing the specific class-by-class lesson plan for the course.

There are many complications in using Instructional Engineering, of course. What happens when different teachers teach the course in different semesters or different years? In my academic department, we have a General Education speech class that is often taught by five or more teachers in a single semester because there are so many students who need to take it. The engineering approach to curriculum design means that students in all semesters and all sections

should have similar experiences, so that they can all make the same progress toward the outcome goals.

Students who successfully complete this course will be able to:

- Compare stories, themes, and messages for commonalities and differences
- Identify the role played by special effects, costuming, sets, and other elements in effective visual storytelling
- Improve and develop writing and presentation skills
- Employ semiology
- Analyze character development and story arcs
- Employ critical thinking in analysis of texts
- Evaluate the use of archetypes and mythic storytelling
- Examine the texts from multiple academic perspectives
- Draw parallels between texts and real world situations
- Interpret messages about today's society addressed by metaphors in texts

Figure 2. Syllabus goals.

Another challenge we have is how to evaluate and demonstrate how well we are achieving outcome goals, in individual classes and overall. I am not a fan of standardized tests, although they are common ways for students to demonstrate their English proficiency. Such tests do a poor job of measuring oral fluency, appreciation of cultural differences, and overall ease and comfort in using English. I think that we need to develop our own internal measurements of student outcomes, as companions to the standardized tests, so that we are evaluating success in multiple ways.

Prediction 2. Growth of Affordance-based planning

EFL scholars who have not heard about *affordances* will soon. “Affordance” means “the qualities or properties of an object that define its possible uses or make clear how it can or should

be used” (Merriam-Webster, N.D.). In teaching English, an affordance is the benefit or capability provided by a teaching method or tool.

It is important that teachers design their curricula and individual courses knowing the capabilities of the instructional methods and tools they select, and it is better to know from quality research, not just guesswork. But often, teacher/researchers select a tool first, such as a technology application, and then figure out how they can use it. Dörnyei (2014) says this is backwards, and I agree. First, we should be asking “what learning methods and tasks best fit our required instructional outcomes?” Then we can determine what tool can best accomplish those tasks.

For example, even in an innovative learning instructional design, there will likely be some need for some drill and repetition. How is it best done in ways that students find acceptable and have been shown to produce good results? Many scholars have found that the answer is to turn drill and repetition into games, a process called “Gamification” of learning (Hamari, Koivisto, & Sarsa, 2014). The affordance is that students have fun playing the game, which motivates them to play more. In playing, they repeat a cycle of learning. “Winning the game” or moving to the next higher level equates with mastery of the particular learning task.

In this example, we choose Gamification as the learning method. Next, we must decide what computer program or smart phone APP will provide the needed affordances. Maybe we can find an existing game platform to use. Maybe we need to create our own online game.

I think that across the curriculum, and in most individual courses, we should expect to have a blend of instructional methods, including classroom activities, textbook-related activities, conventional homework, technology-related activities, and even some lecture (although college students have been shown to stop paying attention to lecture after 15-20 minutes). These

activities should all be part of the lesson plan, with none of them being perceived by students as being “extra” or “outside the regular course.”

3. Growth of Task-based Instructional Design

My third 2020 prediction is that task-based instructional design will be more common. In a way, this is similar to affordance based planning, except that it functions at the level of designing the individual learning activities and assignments that students will use to reach their outcome goals.

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) is based on Communicative Language Theory (Ellis, 2009) and uses planned, meaningful language tasks that come as close to “real world” communication as possible (Geng & Ferguson, 2013). The Ministry of Education in China has recently developed a curriculum based on TBLT which, as a result, is expected to become a major foreign language teacher mode in China (Zhang & Li, 2014).

TBLT should also make strong use of scaffolding (Van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). This is a technique in which initially, the teacher gives a high level of support as students perform specific learning tasks. This makes the tasks clear to the students and, because deadlines are close, the student is not able to procrastinate. Later, as the students gain ability, the teacher provides less guidance to encourage the students to be independent learners as they perform bigger tasks with longer deadlines.

The best tasks are enjoyable and fun for the students. They provide meaningful language use because they feel like “real world” communication, and require thought, not just factual answers. Finally, TBLT tasks must produce measurable results that can be evaluated objectively, not subjectively.

My first three 2020 predictions have been about the way we design our courses and our overall curricula. The remaining three predictions have to do with how we conduct and use research about EFL teaching.

4. Growth of Affordance-based research

I have already predicted the growing use of *affordances* when designing EFL courses and curricula. The corollary to that previous prediction is that we need more research that sheds light of the *affordances* of learning method and tools.

The field of teaching EFL needs peer-reviewed data on affordances, so we can make the best choices for our students. Having dependable data on affordances also reveals the best practices in using such instructional methods and tools.

That means that teachers/scholars should be doing research into the affordances of teaching methods, tools, and technology. This is in contrast to the old experimental research method that was focused on determining *differences* resulting from whether a method/tool was or was not used (Colpaert, 2012). Research focusing on differences often does not reveal affordances and best practices. In spite of meticulous statistical analysis, there are many confounding variables which are outside the ability of the teacher to control. Because of these variables, an instructional technique shown by research to be successful at one school may not succeed at another school (Marek & Wu, 2014a).

The conclusion is that even when EFL research addresses *differences*, it must also address *affordances*. This means that affordances must be an important focus of each of our personal research agendas.

Prediction 5. Pressure for more curriculum integration of our research findings

In my background section, I mentioned that there is a tension between research and practice. The main point of research is *supposed* to be helping help teachers help students to learn more and better, but many teachers who are also researchers have utilitarian motivations concerning their research. They perceive that they are doing research in order to get promoted, or to find a better job. The result is that they often jump from researching one method/tool to another method/tool every semester. Kennedy and Levy (2009) disparaged these “one-off” studies.

On the other hand, I have seen slow but consistent growth in emphasis on long term educational benefits on the part of peer reviewers for prestigious academic journals. I have done peer review four times already this year (2015), four times in 2014, and nine in 2013. The result is that I often get to see the comments of other reviewers, as well as seeing comments about my own papers and those of colleagues I advise. More and more often, they are criticizing studies which are too short or do not demonstrate long-term retention of learning. I see this as the beginning of pressure on individual researchers, and on academic programs, for more integration of research findings and conclusions.

Short term tests that are outside the academic curriculum do not reveal much about long-term use of the tools inside the curriculum. Researchers need to study long-term use of methods and tools in the classroom context, so that the research findings can actually benefit teaching and learning.

But how often do our research findings become part of the curriculum? Rarely.

My colleague Gloria Chwo presented evidence at 2014 AsiaCALL (Chwo, Marek, & Wu, 2014) reporting the findings from a survey of 70 corresponding authors of Mobile Assisted

Language Learning (MALL) studies. Nearly 80% indicated that no integration at all resulted from their study, or integration only at the level of a single meeting of their class. Sixty-three percent (63%) said there was never even an intention to integrate the MALL technology, beyond the level of their individual class meeting. I do not have data from non-MALL EFL research, but I suspect that the results would be similar.

What is the alternative? We need to plan much more carefully and proactively, thinking in terms of long-term studies of our methods and tools, spanning several semesters. Although this will mean fewer “quick” studies, longer-term studies have several advantages. For example, by aggregating data over multiple semesters, they provide larger numbers of participants, making statistics more valid and generalizable. Long-term study and use will also benefit students by providing a sustainable, consistent instructional design, so that all students have the same experience over multiple semesters (Marek & Wu, 2014b).

For many researchers, this will mean a change in strategies. It will no longer be possible to say “how can I get a paper out of this tool or method I tried last semester?” It will require much more careful strategic instructional engineering and strategic research design to devise an instructional design that also provides a strong long-term research venue. Researchers will need to plan for multiple papers based on different focuses growing out of the same instructional design. We need to know the research questions BEFORE the study/class begins, use tools and methods that can be justified from the academic literature (even when we are researching new affordances), and plan our data collection and analysis before we actually begin the study or semester.

This may sound like a lot of work. Remember, however, that even when we have utilitarian goals for our research, like getting promoted, our research must also be about helping students to learn.

Prediction 6. Increased scrutiny of peer review

The entire academic peer review process is being questioned today, across many disciplines. Too often we have heard about dishonest authors using false journal website IDs to “review” their own work. This is aggravated by the fact that even reputable journals have allowed authors to suggest other scholars who are qualified to review their papers. In addition, we have seen an explosive growth of for-profit journals that are “predatory” and will publish any paper sent to them in exchange for large author fees, even though they pretend to employ blind peer review (Beall, 2015).

As a result, I predict that the scrutiny of peer-review will continue. This will lead to more strict practices.

Part of this expectation is that by the year 2020, reputable scholarly journals will “clean up their act.” This is already beginning. In the past, journal publishers like Elsevier used to require an author to have a separate log-in for each journal they publish. Elsevier is consolidating log-ins so that now, authors use only one, across their system. I also predict that we will see an increased scrutiny of author identities to ensure that people *are* who they *say they are* and do not claim credit for the work of others.

The second part of this prediction may be shocking to some researchers – I predict that by the year 2020, there will be an expectation that EFL authors will make their raw data available. This is the result of scandals across many disciplines in which authors have been found to falsify

their research, or at least to adjust their data to appear more positive. Making raw data available means that anyone will be able to examine the data from your study and analyze it independently.

This prediction means new challenges for researchers. It means that our analysis and conclusions must be unquestionable because others will be able to test our findings. There will be less opportunity to “fudge” our data, and we will have to function with more rigor. It means even less potential for “networking” to influence peer review. It also means that it may be harder for editors to find qualified reviewers, and harder for authors to actually get published. But on the other hand, it also means that blind peer reviewed publications will be even more prestigious. These changes are necessary in order to endure the integrity of the blind peer review process.

Conclusion

So, those are my six predictions about teaching EFL in the year 2020. I hope that have provided them to you with 20-20 insights.

Best wishes for the rest of the conference, and particularly to those of you who are presenting papers today. Congratulations to all of you for your commitment to improving English research, teaching, and learning.

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