

2 Paradox 2018: diversification of learners, contexts, and modes of delivery necessitates application of universal learning principles

Hitomi Masuhara¹

Abstract

The current challenges for languages in higher education may be summarised as: global and local socio-political changes; diversity of learners with different life-long and life-wide needs and wants; demands for effectiveness, accountability, and employability of our language provision; different modes of delivery at different times and forms; and digital and non-digital delivery and quality assurance. Depending on the individual learners, learning and teaching contexts and modes of delivery, teaching materials and approaches will be different. When we conduct a systematic evaluation of available commercial materials, regardless of their trendy disguises, they tend to be reincarnated clones of popular coursebooks based on traditional syllabuses that assume face-to-face classroom delivery. These materials may come with additional digital materials but they seem to focus on the mechanical aspects of language (e.g. quizzes of discrete item knowledge). How can we ensure the quality and effectiveness of our provision as well as satisfy the diverse learner needs and wants when using different modes of delivery? Whatever approaches we decide to take, the answer paradoxically emerges from our wisdom and efforts in the adaptation and development of materials based on fundamental and universal learning principles that reflect current understanding in second language acquisition.

Keywords: challenges, trends, materials, learning principles.

1. University of Liverpool, Liverpool, England; hitomi@liverpool.ac.uk; <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9625-8206>

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1. Introduction

In higher education, departments of modern languages as well as of English seem to be facing four main challenges that could trigger new trends in language teaching and learning. The InnoConf 2018 proceedings provide examples of how tutors are trying to ensure quality and innovation in language provision. I believe that the learning principles set out in this paper could work as a compass for navigating forward in a rough higher education language sea.

2. Challenges

2.1. Challenge 1: from 'Inner Circle' English to Global Englishes

Since the 1980's, English has attracted much attention as the most likely lingua franca across the world. 'Inner circle countries' (Kachru, 1985) in which English is used as the native language benefited as places to learn, and where research in English language learning takes place and where materials are produced. Based on thorough analyses of global and local trends in demography, economy, technology, and education, however, Graddol (2006) predicts 'Global Englishes' will take over as the basic medium of international communication. Note here that Global Englishes place priority on intelligible and effective communication among interlocutors with various cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds in contrast with the traditional 'inner circle' English. The so called 'native-speaker norm' is merely one of many varieties. The problem is that existing materials and assessment are based on the old paradigm of native-speaker norms and may no longer be meeting the needs/wants of users of Global Englishes.

2.2. Challenge 2: multilingualism

Graddol (2006) also predicted that there would be growing demands for education 'beyond English' in order to maintain the advantage in international, economic, technological, and cultural competition. Studies such as Bel Habib (2011) show how language skills in the workforce could determine gain or

loss in business opportunities which are by no means always in English. The dominance of English on the Internet is gradually declining and the cyberspace is shared with lesser-taught languages such as Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, Russian, and Japanese, as well as less widely taught modern languages such as Spanish (Young, 2015; Zuckerman, 2013). The report *Languages for the Future - Which languages the UK needs most and why* by the British Council (Tinsley & Board, 2013) identifies top ten languages, such as Spanish, Arabic, French, Chinese, and German. EU countries have been making concerted efforts for multilingual education as seen in the works by the European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe².

The UK government's multilingual policy has not been consistent, but recent series of UK government publications and research funding made available (e.g. AHRC Open World Initiative Fund) seem to encourage multilingual education and community language learning. The increasing demand and Brexit may add to the existing challenge of finding teaching staff who have expertise in teaching/learning/assessing as well as language competence in modern languages, including lesser-taught languages.

2.3. Challenge 3: learners

The increasing marketisation of higher education in the UK seems to be fuelling demands for more accountability, employability, and effectiveness in our provision and our delivery modes. Learners from different stages of life-long learning come with their diverse personal, social, and professional needs and/or wants and expect high-quality, relevant, and meaningful content, and highly effective teaching approaches and results (e.g. better career prospects).

The learners also seem to welcome choices of different kinds of learning modes and time requirements, which may sometimes be described as 'life-wide' learning. It may mean synchronous or combined/blended engagement in any kind of learning activities, including formal education in universities or colleges,

2. <https://www.ecml.at/Home/ProfessionalNetworkForum/tabid/137/Default.aspx>

work-based professional development, community adult education, like-minded communities of people sharing voluntary learning and self-directed learning. The level of access to digital learning adds to the diversification.

2.4. Challenge 4: digital and non-digital materials and quality assurance

With the growth of multilingual Internet communication, digital translation seems to be attracting much attention. We see not only small translator hardware or phone apps for audio/script translation, but also smart multilingual earphones. With the advancement of technology, there may be a day when every day transactions will not require investment of time and effort in learning foreign languages. The necessity, however, would remain for a small number of professionals with high level competence in translation/interpretation/cultural awareness with whatever extra skills required (e.g. diplomacy, business, research).

In the ‘Challenge 3: learners’ section above, I discussed different delivery methods that may be in demand, such as traditional face-to-face, blended learning, and Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) type autonomous learning with or without certificates. [Castaño Muñoz, Redecker, Vuorikari, and Punie \(2013\)³](#), and [Redecker \(2014\)⁴](#) describe how EU countries are preparing for a future open learning environment 2030 that will ensure quality in any possible provisions. The plan involves various service providers including higher education institutions and community-based learning environments. It also envisages purely digital autonomous learning with or without guidance.

3. New trends

The undercurrent of the four challenges I have discussed so far may be summarised as diversification of learners, learning and teaching contexts, and

3. See also <https://blogs.ec.europa.eu/openeducation2030/> and <http://www.lifewideeducation.uk/lifewide-learning.html>

4. Also http://www.learninglives.co.uk/uploads/1/0/8/4/10842717/future_of_learning.pdf and <http://www.lifewideeducation.uk/>

modes of delivery. The crucial question is how we might ensure quality and validity in whatever provisions we offer to specific learners in whatever modes of delivery. Digital materials, for example, are abundant but validity and quality are not guaranteed.

According to various evaluation studies in English language teaching (Masuhara, Mishan, & Tomlinson, 2017; Tomlinson, 2008; Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013), the most prevalent curricula, materials, and assessments seem to be based on traditional linguistic syllabus, methodology (e.g. Presentation, Practice, and Production, or PPP), and assessment of knowledge and some skills. The materials may claim that they follow the Common European Framework of Reference specifications, but multi-strand course maps reveal that the syllabus is in fact grammar-based with some additional skills and communication related sections.

The answer to the diversification, paradoxically, might emerge from our wisdom and efforts in the adaptation and development of materials based on fundamental and universal learning principles that reflect current understanding in second language acquisition.

Tomlinson (2013a) articulates principles based on his literature survey of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies and his own experience (see also Ellis, 2005). Tomlinson (2010) maps out the connections between principles of SLA, teaching, and materials development. Tomlinson (2013a, pp.12-15) lists the following principles:

- a rich and meaningful exposure to language in use;
- an effective and cognitive engagement;
- being allowed to focus on meaning;
- making use of those mental resources typically used in communication in the L1;

- noticing how the L2 is used;
- being given opportunities for contextualised and purposeful communication in the L2; and
- being encouraged to interact.

These principles can be turned into evaluation criteria (e.g. to what extent do the materials provide rich exposure to language in use) and be used to evaluate and adapt existing materials or to develop new materials with approaches such as Task Based (e.g. Masuhara, 2015; Van Den Branden, 2006), Text-Driven (Tomlinson, 2013b), Self-Access (e.g. Cooker, 2008), or Mobile Learning (Reinders & Pegrum, 2016).

SLA researchers seem to agree that language acquisition requires a good amount of implicit learning (i.e. naturalistic, incidental exposure to language in use while focused on meaning), but also some explicit learning (i.e. learners pay motivated attention to linguistic elements in a meaning-focussed context in order to achieve refinement in accurate and appropriate use of language, e.g. Ellis, 2016). Implicit learning may be achieved through, for example, extensive listening (e.g. Renandya & Farrell, 2011), extensive reading (e.g. Maley, 2008), or shared reading (e.g. Ghosn, 2013).

Explicit learning could take place when the learners have focussed on meaningful output (e.g. a draft of a presentation or of communicative writing) and are ready to discover features of language and its use with or without facilitating interventions (e.g. feedback).

Note here that explicit learning is different from explicit teaching that often features in commercially available coursebooks. Coursebooks seem to be mostly concerned with linguistic knowledge and coverage of a syllabus. Their methodology tends to be PPP that provides ‘Focus on Forms’ (i.e. explicitly teaching linguistic items in an isolated decontextualised manner). SLA researchers differentiate Focus on Form (i.e. learner paying conscious attention

to language in use in a meaning focussed context) and Focus on Forms, and recommend the former.

4. Conclusion

I would like to end on a philosophical note. Syllabi, curriculums, materials, and assessments seem to be currently dominated by utilitarian approaches to language teaching in which language is treated as a mere object to be taught, practised, and assessed. In order for language provisions to be relevant and inspiring for the learners, should we not remember why we learn languages in the first place? As the novelist Elena Ferrante (2018) puts it:

“A language is a compendium of the history, geography, material and spiritual life, the vices and virtues, not only of those who speak it, but also of those who have spoken it through the centuries. The words, the grammar, the syntax are a chisel that shapes our thought” (para. 2).

In this sense, we may like to ensure the quality of input and methodology for the sake of self-actualisation through genuine communication of our thoughts and feelings in language provisions.

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