Edited by
Brian Tomlinson

English Language
Learning Materials

A Critical Review

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Contents

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Preface

Brian Tomlinson

This book provides a critical review of English language teaching (ELT) materials currently in use throughout the world. It does so through objective analyses, through subjective but systematic evaluations and through presenting the informed views of its authors. Its intentions are to inform, to stimulate and to provide suggestions for future development.

A personal introduction by the editor is followed by a section in which experienced developers and users of ELT materials review the materials currently used for different types of target learners (i.e. young learners (YL), learners of General English (GE), learners of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). It also reviews materials for extensive reading, materials for self-access learning and multi-media materials. In this section, the reviewers describe and exemplify materials typical of those currently used in their sub-genre, they make generalizations about the distinctive characteristics of currently used materials, they subject a sample of materials to systematic, criterion-referenced evaluation and they present their personal views of developments they would like to see take place in the future.

In the second section, materials development experts review ELT materials currently in use in the geographical area they are most familiar with. Some of them focus on the country they know best and then make reference to other countries in the region, whilst others review materials used across a wide but connected area. In this way ELT materials are reviewed for the UK, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, Australia and New Zealand, East Asia, South-East Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Central and South America and North America. In each chapter the authors describe and exemplify the distinctive characteristics of the materials currently in use, they say how these materials are typically used, they evaluate a sample of typical materials and they specify the improvements they would like to see in the development and use of ELT materials in their area.

This book does not attempt to provide an objective overview of the development and use of every type of EFL material in every area of the world. Instead

it provides an informed impression of what is happening in the ELT material world and in doing so hopes to stimulate teachers, researchers, materials developers and publishers to think of ways in which they can contribute to improvements in the development and use of ELT materials. This is the declared aim of MATSDA (the Materials Development Association) and many of the contributors to this book have played an important role in the development of MATSDA since it was founded by Brian Tomlinson in 1993 (e.g. Brian Tomlinson (President), Hitomi Masuhara (Secretary) and such frequent contributors to MATSDA events and publications as Rod Bolitho, Irma-Kaarina Ghosn, Alan Maley, Freda Mishen, Jayakaran Mukundan and Luke Prodromou). For more information about MATSDA, refer to www.matsda.org.

We hope you enjoy this book and that you might follow up your reading of it by contributing an article to the MATSDA journal *Folio* and/or a presentation at one of our MATDSA conferences or workshops.

Part 1
INTRODUCTION

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Chapter 1

Language Acquisition and Language Learning Materials

Brian Tomlinson

Intention

In this rather unusual Introduction to a book which reviews ELT materials around the world I'd like to present my personal views about:

- what facilitates language learning
- what language learning materials are currently doing which helps learners to acquire and develop English
- what language learning materials are currently not doing to help learners of English
- what language learning materials are currently doing to prevent language acquisition and development.

Notice that I'm deliberately using the term 'language learning materials' instead of the usual 'language teaching materials' in order to stress that one of my views is that many ELT materials are designed for teaching English rather than for learning it. Note also that I'm making a distinction between language acquisition and language development. For me language acquisition is 'the initial stage of gaining basic communicative competence in a language', whilst language development is 'the subsequent stage of gaining the ability to use the language successfully in a wide variety of media and genre for a wide variety of purposes' (Tomlinson 2007a: 2). One of my arguments is that many ELT materials (especially global coursebooks) currently make a significant contribution to the failure of many learners of English as a second, foreign or other language to even acquire basic competence in English and to the failure of most of them to develop the ability to use it successfully. They do so by focusing on the teaching of linguistic items rather than on the provision of opportunities for acquisition and development. And they do this because that's what teachers are expected and required to do by administrators, by parents, by publishers, and by learners too. This is a rather provocative opening to a book which much of the time tries to be as objective as possible and I'm sure it will be resented by most publishers and textbook writers. I don't think many teachers will disagree with me though – especially those who responded to my worldwide enquiry

about why a particular global coursebook was so popular by saying they used it because it meant they didn't have to spend time preparing their lessons but that they felt sorry for their students because it was so boring. For other perspectives on the global coursebook see Gray (2002).

My Knowledge of Language Acquisition

There is still much debate about how learners can best acquire a second or foreign language but 'this should not stop us from applying what we do know about second and foreign language learning to the development of materials designed to facilitate that process' (Tomlinson 1998a: 6).

I know that a pre-requisite for language acquisition is a rich experience of language in use. We also know that for such experience to facilitate language acquisition:

- the language experience needs to be contextualized and comprehensible (Krashen 1985, 1993, 1999)
- the learner needs to be motivated, relaxed, positive and engaged (Arnold 1999; Tomlinson 1998b, 1998d, 2003d)
- the language and discourse features available for potential acquisition need to be salient, meaningful and frequently encountered (Maley 1994, 1998; Tomlinson 1998b)
- the learner needs to achieve deep and multi-dimensional processing of the language. (Tomlinson 2000c, 2001b)

This means that materials for learners at all levels must provide exposure to authentic use of English through spoken and written texts with the potential to engage the learners cognitively and affectively. If they don't provide such texts and they don't stimulate the learners to think and feel whilst experiencing them there is very little chance of the materials facilitating any durable language acquisition at all. There is massive evidence that one of the easiest and most effective ways of providing such exposure is through extensive listening and extensive reading (Elley 2000; Krashen 1993) in which the learners listen to or read what they want to without any requirement to complete any tasks during or after their experience of the texts.

It is my belief that helping learners to notice features of the authentic language they are exposed to can facilitate and accelerate language acquisition. It can do so by drawing the learners' attention to language and discourse features which might otherwise have gone unnoticed (Schmidt and Frota 1986) and it increases the likelihood of noticing similar features in subsequent input and of therefore increasing readiness for acquisition (Pienemann 1985). This is particularly true if the learners are stimulated and guided to make discoveries for themselves (Bolitho *et al.* 2003; Tomlinson 1994) and to thus increase their awareness of how the target language is used to achieve fluency, accuracy, appropriacy and effect.

This means that not only should materials provide a rich exposure to language in authentic use but that they should also include activities which help learners to notice for themselves salient features of the texts. Ideally the materials should follow the principles of the experiential approach in which apprehension is followed by comprehension (Kolb 1984), and therefore the analytical noticing activities should follow engaging experiential activities in which the emphasis is on personal response to the meaning of the text.

It is also my belief that helping learners to participate in meaningful communication in which they are using language to achieve intended outcomes is essential for the development of communicative competence. This is of vital importance in helping the brain to monitor and modify hypotheses about language use and to involve the learner in the sort of negotiation of meaning which increases opportunities for language acquisition and development (Swain 2005). Practice activities which have been designed to give the learner frequent opportunities to get something right make very little contribution to language acquisition because they don't add anything new and they make no contribution at all to language development because they focus on accurate outputs rather than successful outcomes. What the materials need to do is to provide lots of opportunities for the learners to actually use language to achieve intentions and lots of opportunities for them to gain feedback on the effectiveness of their attempts at communication.

My Thoughts about Language Acquisition

In my experience of 42 years of English language teaching, I have arrived at the following conjectures:

- The majority of language learners gain very little from being given information about a language and how it is used.
- The majority of language learners gain very little from analytical activities which require them to apply what they have been told about a language to their attempts to use it.
- The majority of language learners gain very little from practice activities which help them to get most things right by controlling and simplifying the context in which they are asked to produce language.
- Many of the minority of language learners who succeed in acquiring a language analytically become language teachers, materials writers and examiners, they set up a false paradigm of the good language learner as a hard-working, analytical learner and they cause many experiential learners to fail.
- Language acquisition is facilitated and accelerated if the learner is positive about their learning environment, achieves self-esteem and is emotionally engaged in the learning activities (Tomlinson 1998d).
- Achievable challenges help learners to think and feel and to achieve valuable self-esteem.

- Learners gain from sometimes being allowed to hide and from not always being put under a spotlight.
- Those learners who participate mentally in group activities often gain more than those who participate vocally.
- Encouraging learners to make use of mental imaging whilst responding to and prior to producing language facilitates comprehension and communication and promotes language acquisition and development (Tomlinson 1996, 1998c; Tomlinson and Avila 2007a, 2007b).
- Encouraging learners to use L2 inner speech can have positive effects on communicative competence and can facilitate and accelerate acquisition and development (Tomlinson 2000b, 2001a, 2003a; Tomlinson and Avila 2007a, 2007b).
- L2 learners can use high level skills (e.g. connecting, predicting, interpreting, evaluating) from the very beginning of their language learning experience. Doing so facilitates language acquisition and is essential for language development (Tomlinson 2007b).
- L2 beginners' courses should follow the learner syllabus and should focus on meaning rather than form (Sato 1990; Tomlinson 1998b).
- Reading should be delayed in the L2 until the learners have a sufficiently large vocabulary to be able to read experientially rather than studially and then extensive reading should be introduced before intensive reading (Masuhara 2007; Tomlinson 2001c).
- Learners should be encouraged and helped to represent language multi-dimensionally (Masuhara 2007; Tomlinson 2000a, 2000c, 2001b).

What ELT Materials Do to Facilitate Language Acquisition and Development

Below I have listed some of the things which I think some ELT materials are currently doing which are likely to promote language acquisition and development:

- Some of them are providing a rich experience of different genres and text types.
- Some of them are providing an aesthetically positive experience through the use of attractive illustration, design and illustration.
- Some of them are making use of multimedia resources to provide a rich and varied experience of language learning.
- Some of them are helping the learners to make some discoveries for themselves.
- Some of them are helping the learners to become independent learners of the language.
- Some of them are providing supplementary materials which provide the learners with experience of extensive listening and/or extensive reading.
- Some of them are helping the learners to personalize and localize their language learning experience.

What ELT Materials Do to Inhibit Language Acquisition and Development

My assumption is that ELT materials should be driven by principles of language acquisition and that ideally all units of material should be principled, relevant and coherent. The reality seems to be rather different, with commercial materials being driven by considerations of what the buyers (i.e. administrators and teachers) are likely to want rather than of what the learners are likely to benefit from, and with most materials developers driven by intuitions about what is likely to 'work' rather than by their beliefs about what facilitates language acquisition (Tomlinson 2003e; in press).

In a still confidential research project which I conducted for a major publisher I found from a survey of twelve countries throughout the world that about 85 per cent of ELT textbooks were selected by administrators, 15 per cent by teachers and 0 per cent by learners. The results of this situation are obvious to see, with colourful photographs placed in the top right-hand corner of the right-hand page to attract potential buyers flicking through a new book, with as many words as possible crammed on to a page to achieve optimal coverage at an acceptable price, with each unit being the same length and following a uniform format to make timetabling, teacher allocation and teacher preparation easier and with most tasks replicating conventional test types so as to facilitate examination preparation. None of these characteristics are likely to add pedagogic value to a textbook but all are likely to promote sales. This is not, of course, an attack on commercial publishers. Many of them try to add as much educational value to their products as possible but for all of them the main objective is to make money. If only teachers were able to put the learners first when selecting coursebooks and not have to do as many teachers around the world reported doing in another confidential survey I carried out for a major publisher in which they said they selected a best-selling coursebook because it was designed to minimize their lesson preparation (even though many of them said they felt guilty because their students found it so boring). What this situation means for writers of commercial ELT materials is that they can at best try to achieve a compromise between their principles and the requirements of the publisher. See Bell and Gower (1998), Mukundan (2006a, 2006b), Richards (2001) and Wala (2003a) for discussions of ways of resolving this dilemma.

Johnson (2003: 28–29) gave a group of experienced and expert materials developers a task to design, involving the development of a unit of materials giving learners 'a 'communicative' activity to practise 'describing people'. He elicited from them observations about their design process so as to be able to compare their efforts with those of a group of novice materials developers. He found that the experts used such strategies as simulating input and output, practising 'consequence identification' (131), designing in an opportunistic way, spending time exploring and 'using repertoire a lot' (136). What he doesn't report is any overt consideration of principles of language acquisition. This concern for what they can get learners to do rather than how they can get them to learn is a characteristic of other reports of expert developers at work. See Byrd (1995), Fenner and

Newby (2000), Graves (1996), Hidalgo *et al.* (1995), Jolly and Bolitho (1998), Lyons (2003), McGrath (2002), Maley (2003), Mares (2003), Mishan (2005), Prowse (1998), Renandya (2003), Richards (2001), Tomlinson and Masuhara (2004) and Wala (2003b) for discussions of the process of developing ELT materials and, in particular, Bell and Gower (1998), Flores (1995) and Tomlinson (1998b, 2003b, 2003c, 2003d, 2003e, 2003f, in press) for discussion of principle-driven materials writing. See *Search 10* (Fenner and Nordal-Peedesen 1999) for an example of a commercially published local coursebook which is designed primarily for the learner and which is driven by principles of language acquisition.

I have listed below, in a rather lengthy list, some of the things which many ELT materials are currently doing which are likely to inhibit language acquisition and development. Obviously there are exceptions to these generalizations and there are some materials which are actually and commendably doing the opposite.

- They are underestimating learners both in terms of language level and cognitive ability.
- In particular they are treating linguistically low level learners as intellectually low level learners.
- They are impoverishing the learning experience in a misguided attempt to make learning easier by simplifying their presentation of language.
- They are creating an illusion of language learning by using a Presentation/Practice/Production approach which simplifies language use and results in shallow processing.
- They are also creating an illusion of language learning by ensuring that most activities are easily accomplished as a result of involving little more than memorization, repetition of a script or simple substitution or transformation.
- They are confusing language learning and skills development by trying to teach language features during listening and reading activities.
- They are preventing learners from achieving affective engagement by presenting them with bland, safe, harmonious texts (Wajnryb 1996) and requiring them to participate in activities which don't stimulate them to think and feel.
- They are providing learners with far too much de-contextualized experience of language exemplification and not nearly enough experience of language in fully contextualized use.
- They are focusing on activities which require efferent listening or reading for detailed and literal comprehension and are providing very little opportunity for the sort of aesthetic listening and reading which stimulates the total engagement so useful for promoting both enjoyment of the language and acquisition of it (Rosenblatt 1978).
- They are failing to help the learners to make full use of the language experience available to them outside the classroom.
- They are focusing on uni-dimensional processing of language through activities requiring only the decoding and/or encoding of language rather than on multi-dimensional representation of language through

activities involving the use of the full resources of the brain (Arnold 1999; Masuhara 2007; Tomlinson 2000c, 2001b).

Conclusion

The hope, of course, lies with local, non-commercial materials which are not driven by the profit imperative and which are driven rather by considerations of the needs and wants of their target learners and by principles of language acquisition. I have recently enjoyed being involved as a consultant in a number of projects contributing to the development of such materials. One example of such a project has been *On Target* (1995), a coursebook published by Gamsberg Macmillan for the Ministry of Education in Namibia. The first draft of this book was written by a team of 30 teachers in five days in response to the student articulation of their needs and wants and with the help of a principled, text-driven, flexible framework (Tomlinson 2003e). Another example is a textbook currently being developed by a team of 17 teachers at Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat. In a radical departure from the norm, the starting point has been the articulation of the writers' beliefs about what facilitates language acquisition (i.e. universal criteria) and what is needed and wanted by their target learners (i.e. local criteria). These beliefs have been supplemented by consideration of the findings of language acquisition research and by the results of triangulated needs and wants analyses, and they have been developed into criteria which will be used both to drive the writing of the book and to evaluate it during and after development. Before starting to write the book the writers are developing a library of spoken and written texts with the potential for affective and cognitive engagement, they are developing a principled, text-driven, flexible framework and they are writing sample communicative tests and examinations to ensure eventual positive washback on classroom use of the book. Soon they will start to write the book in small teams and each unit will be monitored by another group, revised and then trialled. Eventually a small team of editors will match the learning points in the units to a 'secret' syllabus they have developed, develop final versions of the units and then fit the final versions of the units together into a structure which will ensure principled cohesion as well as maximizing student and teacher choice.

Perhaps this type of principled approach to materials development can be used as a blueprint for commercial production of L2 materials – with due consideration being given, of course, to the face validity and conformity to market expectation which is necessary to ensure profitability.

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