



The Future for ELT Materials in Asia

Brian Tomlinson

(B.Tomlinson@leedsmet.ac.uk)

Leeds Metropolitan University, UK

Abstract

In this paper I raise a number of controversial issues which are currently being debated in relation to the development of materials for language learning. For each issue I summarise recent literature relevant to the issue, I relate the issue to the current situation as regards language learning materials in Asia, I state my own position in relation to the issue and I make recommendations for developments in Asia.

The first issue I raise relates to the debate about whether learners of English in Asia should be helped to learn International English rather than be taught a standard native-speaker variety of English. Corpora of successful users of international English are referred to and the position is put forward that for most learners of English in Asia Standard British English and General American English are neither necessary nor attainable models. Another major issue considered is the debate concerning the benefits of implicit and explicit teaching and the connected discussion of the optimum ways of helping learners to gain from explicit learning. The current literature on the issue is referred to and recommendations are made that English teaching materials in Asia should both include many more opportunities for implicit learning from engaged exposure to language in use as well as opportunities to make explicit discoveries for themselves about how English is used to achieve effect. Other recommendations made are that content approaches should be made more use of in English materials for Asia, that materials for young children should focus much more on enjoyment, fun and creativity and that Asia should not be reluctant to make use of culturally novel approaches providing they are sensitively introduced rather than imposed.

1 Introduction

There are many issues which will affect the development of ELT Materials in Asia in the near future. Many of them are controversial and require decision making by governments, as well as by educationalists and applied linguists. As someone with experience of working in curriculum and materials development in China, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Vietnam, I feel qualified to offer some personal perspectives on these issues but obviously would want to leave the decision making to relevant experts in Asia. Put simply my position is that there are many excellent ELT materials in Asia but that Asian learners would benefit even more if some of the recent developments in ELT were applied more widely to materials development in Asia.

2 International English

One question which is beginning to be asked in Asia is, "Should ELT materials in Asia focus primarily on preparing learners to be able to communicate fluently, accurately, appropriately and effectively with other non-native speakers of English?" This question reflects the reality of current use of English in Asia and stresses the point that most learners of English in Asia are unlikely to need to communicate with native speakers of English but are likely to need to communicate in English with other non-native speakers. You only need to go to Bangkok, Guangzhou, Hanoi,

Kuala Lumpur, Osaka and Jakarta (or to almost any other large Asian city) to hear, for example, Japanese communicating in English with Thais, Chinese communicating in English with Indonesians and Malaysians communicating in English with Germans. Why then, the argument goes, should Asian countries still insist that their learners of English should model themselves on native speakers of British Standard English or American General English. Most applied linguists, for example, Jenkins (2000), Kirkpatrick (2002), Pennycook (1994), Seidlhofer (2001a, 2001b) and Tomlinson (2005), argue that standard native-speaker varieties of English can no longer be considered to be the only correct varieties and should no longer be held up as models for learners to emulate. Governments, publishers, examining bodies, teachers and students (Timmis, 2002), however, still insist on the teaching of standard native-speaker varieties in order to protect themselves from loss of correctness and prestige, and governments refuse to sanction the effective use of local varieties of English as a target for their learners to aim at. Unfortunately though this attitude does not protect learners from their almost inevitable failure to get even close to a standard that is neither necessary for international communication nor attainable without sustained exposure to it.

One answer to this dilemma is to accept that over 65% of interactions in English are between non-native speakers (Graddol, 1996) and that, as a result, an international variety of English is already being evolved by the millions of non-native users of English who communicate with each other in English every day. This variety could be described and then used as an appropriate target variety of English for learners in Asia needing English for international communication. At the very least coursebooks in Asia could start to include texts written and spoken in effective International English, as well as those produced by native speakers, and examinations could start rewarding effective communication and stop penalising non-standard pronunciation and grammar which in no way impedes communication. In fact, this process has already begun and corpora of International English are being constructed in, for example, the University of Vienna, The University of Nottingham, Curtin University, Perth, Leeds Metropolitan University and King's College, London. What these corpora are revealing is that International English (i.e. as used for communication between proficient non-native speakers) is distinct from standard native-speaker varieties but is no less effective.

A suggestion for a rich but restricted form of International English has been made recently by Jenkins (2000), who advocates the use of a phonological core, the *Lingua Franca Core*, in pronunciation teaching, and stresses the importance of helping learners to achieve "phonological accommodation (convergence) ... in interlanguage talk" (p. 195). She acknowledges the influence of Jenner (1997), who believes "that there is, at some level, a single underlying phonological system governing all the many varieties of English used around the world" (p. 127) and that this system (once it has been represented by a substantial corpus) should be used for pedagogic purposes. Seidlhofer (2001a, 2001b), Cook, (2002) and Prodromou (2003) have recently made a case for making use of corpora of International English. Cook's main points are that L2 users have a right to use language differently from monolinguals and that "students should aim at being proficient L2 users" (p. 335). Prodromou (2003) has collected data from samples of "natural, spontaneous speech produced by *proficient* non-native users of English as a foreign language" (p. 11) and he has found that they have a virtually flawless command of grammar and vocabulary and even seem to have a wider range of lexis than native speakers. However, proficient non-native users of English use less ellipsis and fewer idioms and rarely make use of 'creative idiomaticity'. Prodromou advocates using his corpus as a model for teachers, learners, syllabus designers and materials writers to make use of, and I am convinced that the availability of such a corpus could eventually help coursebook writers in Asia to at least include texts from users of International English in their books.

In my view EFL and ESL materials in Asia should focus on preparing learners to use English both with other non-native speakers as a *lingua franca* and with native speakers too. They should do so not by teaching a particular model but by exposing learners to language in use in many different types of interactions and by providing them with opportunities to interact with different types of speakers and texts. I also think that International English, as used by effective communicators, should be described as quickly as possible, not so it can become a model to imitate but so

that it can inform language planners, materials developers and examiners. Most importantly of all though we need to recognise that EIL is essentially a process rather than a product and that we should help EIL learners to develop such skills as accommodation, negotiation and sensitive response to contextual variation. At the same time, rather than lamenting about the speakers' errors, we should rejoice that communication between speakers of International English and also between speakers of different varieties of English is typically characterised by mutual understanding, cooperation and success.

Interesting Asian perspectives on this issue can be gained by reading Canagarajah (1999, 2005), Kachru (2005), and Rubdy and Saraceni (2006).

3 Implicit v explicit learning

My experience of ELT materials in Asia is that they have typically asserted the centrality of grammar (even when claiming to be following a communicative approach), that they favour knowledge transmission modes of delivery and that they view explicit teaching as being more valuable than implicit learning. This seems to have resulted in many learners possessing declarative knowledge which they can make use of in examinations and in planned discourse but which is of little value to them in unplanned discourse in the classroom and outside the course. It has also meant that the majority of learners who are experiential rather than analytical (Oxford, 2001) have been penalised because they are not given sufficient opportunities to benefit from experiencing language in use rather than from receiving knowledge about it.

Much of the recent literature on materials development for language learning has recommended that coursebooks provide learners with more opportunities to acquire language features from frequent encounters with them during motivated exposure to language in use (Cunico, 2005; Islam, 2001; Maley, 2003, Tomlinson, 2003a; Tomlinson, Dat, Masuhara & Rubdy, 2001). There is much theoretical support for this position from, for example, experiential learning theory which says that learners gain most from apprehending from experience before comprehending from analysis (Kolb, 1984), from deep processing theory which claims that meaningful encounters are necessary to achieve the deep processing needed for durable learning (Craik & Lockhart, 1972) and from comprehensible input theory which states that acquisition is facilitated by meaningful and motivated exposure to language in use (Krashen, 1989, 2004). There is also support for this position from Asian applied linguists (e.g. Masuhara, 2000, 2003; Mukundan, 2005a, 2005b; Renandya, 2005) who argue for a reduction in the number of textbook activities involving explicit teaching of language and an increase in opportunities for implicit learning. In my view the most effective way of acquiring language implicitly from motivated exposure is through extensive reading. I have experienced the power of extensive reading in Indonesia and Singapore in enabling those learners who read what and when they want to acquire large vocabularies and develop effective communication skills. There have been many successful extensive reading projects and reports of some of them can be read in Day and Bamford (1998), Elley (2000) and Krashen (2004).

Another relevant claim is that the most effective means of explicit learning seems to be helping learners to make discoveries about language use for themselves at a time when what is being discovered is interesting and useful to them. One way of doing this is to develop language awareness activities which get the learners to focus on language features of a text they have just experienced (Bolitho & Tomlinson, 1995; Bolitho et al., 2003; Tomlinson, 1994b). Another way is to get the learners involved in a task or project and then get them to make discoveries which will help them accomplish the task effectively (e.g. discoveries about interrogatives when designing a questionnaire for a local issues project). Other ways include:

- the teacher being available to provide responsive teaching to individuals and groups who request help during a task

- the teacher monitoring learners' written work and then setting a discovery task which will help them improve their work before it is returned for marking (e.g. making discoveries about reported speech before improving a story)
- paying attention to aspects of language features which occur incidentally during meaningful interaction

The third way on the list above is commonly referred to as formS focused instruction and many second language acquisition researchers agree that helping learners to pay attention to the form of a linguistic feature which has been salient in a recent language experience contributes more to durable language acquisition than teaching language forms in a predetermined and decontextualised sequence (e.g. Basturkmen, Loewen & Ellis, 2004; Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, 2005; Ellis, 2001, 2005; Long, in press; Long & Robinson, 1998; Tomlinson, 1994b, 2003b; Williams, 2005). Some researchers, though, do still argue for the explicit teaching of predetermined linguistic forms one by one (see, for example, Sheen & O'Neil, 2005). I certainly favour approaches which focus on helping learners to make discoveries about aspects of language features which occur incidentally during meaningful interaction. This provides far greater exposure to language in use and makes effective use of the brain's pattern detecting capability. In putting such an approach into practice on the PKG English Programme in Indonesia we found that learners gained awareness, self-esteem and motivation but many teachers found it more difficult than the explicit teaching of predetermined forms (Tomlinson, 1990).

4 Content approaches

More and more countries and institutions are developing curricula and materials which are based on content approaches which teach learners content subjects and skills in English instead of just teaching them English. I have recently seen or heard of examples of such approaches in Austria, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, Italy and Turkey. I introduced English Through Pottery, English Through Art and English Through Cookery into a college curriculum, I got learners in Vanuatu to write novels in English instead of learning English and I am currently working as a Consultant on a content approach in Malaysia and as an Editor on an English Through Football course for Asian teenagers and young adults. Such content approaches can provide learners with a rich exposure to language in use in ways which are educationally valuable and which facilitate language acquisition through motivated and meaningful interaction. This is particularly true of sheltered content approaches in which the materials focus on content but help to make the language of the materials comprehensible through redundancy, repetition, rephrasing, exemplification, reflection and language awareness activities.

As Snow (2005) makes clear there are many different definitions and types of content approaches but they all share the principle that it is content which drives the curriculum and which is the starting point for decisions about what is taught. According to Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003) there are three main types of content-based approaches:

- theme-based approaches in which language skills are taught around selected topics or themes
- sheltered approaches in which the "instructor (usually a content specialist) teaches a content area course (e.g. social studies, science) using special strategies aimed at making subject matter more comprehensible" (Snow, 2005, p. 695)
- adjunct-based approaches in which a content course and a language course are linked together as part of the same programme

The most famous experiment in exploiting content-based approaches was the sheltered approach referred to as the Canadian Immersion Project in which English-speaking learners studied their school subjects in French and French-speaking learners studied their school subjects in Eng-

lish. The project has frequently been evaluated and most evaluators have agreed that the learners gained considerable communicative ability in the second language whilst at the same time mastering the subject content (see, for example, Swain, 2001; Swain & Lapkin, 1982, 1998; Wesche, 2001). There have been many other experiments and projects in, for example, Australia, Holland and the USA and a survey of them can be found in Snow (2005). So far Asia seems to have been rather cautious about adopting content-based approaches but there is currently a very interesting example of a sheltered content-based approach being developed in Malaysia, where Maths and Science are now being taught in English from Primary 1 upwards.

5 Teaching English to young children

In Asia children are being taught English earlier and earlier and in China, Japan, Singapore and South Korea even pre-school children are going to English classes. What does not seem to be changing though is the way children are taught grammar analytically as though they were cognitively mature adults. I have recently looked at new primary school English coursebooks for China, for Japan, for Singapore and for South Korea and what struck me is how similar they all seem with their grammar-driven approach and their reliance on Presentation, Practice and Production, on listen and repeat activities, on dialogue memorisation and on very simple, low level decoding and encoding exercises. It surprises me that all over the world we can see examples of young children who have successfully acquired a foreign language from being allowed to experience and enjoy it and yet so many countries have failed to help young learners to become communicatively competent in a foreign language because they have made them suffer from excessive formal teaching of language items. It is even more surprising when almost every article and book on teaching English to young learners stresses that young learners should be given a lot of varied experience of the language in use through stories, songs, games and play activities and that the emphasis should be on implicit learning from enjoyable activities rather than on the gaining of explicit knowledge. A look through some of the books and articles on teaching English to young children in the last twenty years (e.g. Celce-Murcia, 1985; Gu, Hu & Zhang, 2005; Halliwell, 1992; Ghosn, 2003; Moon, 2005) will reveal a consensus that materials for young children should:

- make use of young children's love of stories to expose them to language in use
- make use of young children's love of songs, poems and rhymes to expose them to language in use
- provide a lot of language linked kinaesthetic activity through drama, games and TPR (Tomlinson, 1994a)
- encourage young learners to be creative
- make use of young children's talent for playing with language
- set achievable challenges
- focus more on meaning than form
- focus more on informal implicit learning than formal explicit teaching

I wonder how long it will be before a publisher or Ministry in Asia has the conviction and courage to develop materials which will encourage young learners to really enjoy the learning of English

6 Matching materials to the context of learning

Some experts in Asia would argue that my championing of enjoyable materials for young learners in Asia is an imperialistic imposition of western concepts on Asian cultures and that ELT materials for Asia should focus on those pedagogic approaches which are familiar to learners in the region and which match the norms of their school and societal cultures. My reply would be that I have witnessed young children acquire language enjoyably all over the world and that there is a

body of research evidence now which demonstrates that Asian learners are just as adept as learners in any other region at adapting to innovative methodologies providing that they are introduced in locally sensitive ways rather than imposed and that they promise to be valuable and enjoyable. For example, Dat (2002) describes how in Vietnam a conservative, traditional practitioner teaching an extremely reticent class managed to encourage them to speak in English by moving from a habitually authoritative role toward a more flexible innovative approach. Dat also describes experiments in Vietnam in which normally reticent students proved the prophecies of their teachers wrong by expressing themselves in English during cooperative activities (2002, p. 256). The experiments Dat conducted stretched the culture of the learners and he claims they benefited from it. But Dat says many learners are denied this chance because, “by refusing to believe in learners’ potential to express themselves in English and their willingness to participate in English, many practitioners form self-fulfilling beliefs about their students’ incompetence that leads to habits of accepting the status quo and preventing change from happening.” Fu (1995) says that, “What and how teachers do and say things greatly affects the atmosphere of the class community. Teachers’ sharing of their own stories is an important way to set an intimate tone for their classes and is a good model for a learning community of equal partners.” (p. 199) Fu argues that teachers should not be frightened of using culturally novel activities as every culture can improve and every nation progresses by borrowing and adopting. This position is supported by Lewis and McCook (2002), whose study of 14 high school teachers’ journals on an in-service training course in Vietnam revealed that the teachers were making use of both communicative and traditional principles. Many other researchers have found that students and teachers are happy to accommodate change if the new approaches mirror features in their social culture which have not previously been exploited in their educational culture. For example, Cheung (2001) claims that the teacher-centred, accuracy-focused approaches typical of the Hong Kong classroom do not help students to apply what they have learned to real life situations and proposes a learner-centred approach which uses Hong Kong popular culture to help students to learn English. Group activities, in particular, have been found to be particularly suitable for EFL learners in many collectivist cultures where a sense of belonging to the group is important (Rodgers, 1988, p. 7; Fu, 1995, p. 199; Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 79). Yet another example is from Tennant (2001), who reports a course on Japanese art that was taught to a group of second year students at a Japanese university using English as the medium of instruction. The project approach combined a universal approach with local content and was unusual in Japanese cultural terms in that it set challenging tasks and required initiative and independent research but it seemed to have been very successful. Such an approach constitutes an increasingly common way of breaking the norm by combining culturally familiar features with features which are so culturally divergent that they might otherwise be resisted.

A number of other projects in Asia have stretched the participants’ culture without any apparent problem. For example, Beretta and Davis (1985) evaluated the Bangalore/Madras Communicational Teaching Project positively without any reference to problems encountered because of the cultural unfamiliarity of the approach. And Parish and Brown (1988) describe a teacher training programme for teachers of English in Sri Lanka (PRINSETT) without once mentioning cultural unfamiliarity as a problem. Instead they assert that:

Participants are engaged in language tasks and methodological analysis that they have never been exposed to. The active-participatory approach is non-traditional and completely novel in their experience. The work is demanding but the response is extremely positive. (p. 27)

Tomlinson (1990) reports that, “The PKG English Programme (in Indonesia) has been successful in getting the teachers on its courses to question their standard practice and to develop new approaches to teaching English. This has been achieved by first of all helping them to develop their own confidence and skills as users of English, and by inviting them to compare the methodology which helped them with the methodology which they use with their students.” (p. 32)

For further investigation of the issue of cultural appropriacy see Byram and Feng (2005), Ca-nagarajah (2005), Coleman (1996), Liu (1998), Susanti (2004) and Tomlinson (2005). Projects are

described which successfully introduced apparently inappropriate methodologies and which indicate that it is not cultural appropriacy which is the main factor in determining effective methodology but apparent value. Interestingly though, innovative methodology is still extremely rare in published ELT materials in Asia.

7 Conclusion

I have raised some contentious issues above and provided my strong views. I would be very happy for these issues to be taken up now by Asian applied linguists and materials developers with a view to recommendations being made which could improve the effectiveness of ELT materials in Asia in the near future.

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