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“INNOVATIONS” IN ESOL

This article is an overview of some of the current directions of “innovation” in the teaching of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL). After a brief introduction of historical background, there is a discussion of changing perspectives, contexts, and needs in the field that have resulted in the development of many different “innovative” directions. Three areas for innovation are covered briefly: a) teaching context, b) skill areas, and c) professional development. *Teaching context* refers to K-12, higher education, and English for special purposes, *skill areas* to grammar, vocabulary, and oral skills. The article concludes by focusing on teacher and student autonomy as an innovative area of particular interest.

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Traditionally, when we thought about “innovations” in language teaching, we usually meant, “What new methods or approaches are currently being advocated?”

Background

When I started teaching in the 1960s, behaviorism was still in vogue, which in the field of TESL/TEFL meant the Audio Lingual Method (ALM). When I went into the United States Peace Corps, we were all trained to use ALM. By the time I went to graduate school, two and a half years later, ALM and behaviorist theories of language learning were under attack by followers of Noam Chomsky, who theorized that the brain was not a blank sheet on which language was written, but was “wired” for speech from birth. Learning a first language, or L₁, was a matter of activating the aspects of this wiring needed for a specific language. This “new” way of thinking about how a first language is learned, and its subsequent influence on thinking about how second languages are learned, was the main focus of TESL teacher education at the time.

There followed several decades during which linguistic research turned to language teaching and learning, creating a new, large body of information on second language acquisition and teaching. New teaching methods and approaches were proposed, e. g., cognitive-code, the “designer” methods² and the group of approaches that resulted from the work on notional/functional syllabuses done by the Council of Europe in the 1970s. This last work led to Communicative

¹ Unless otherwise designated, “ESOL” in this paper is being used as a generic term for “*English to speakers of other languages*”, which includes both traditional ESL (English as a second language taught in a target language country) and EFL (English as a foreign language taught in a situation where English is not a primary language of communication).

² Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, Total Physical Response, and Natural Approach to name some of the best known of these methods.

Language Teaching/ Learning (CLT/CLL), which is now considered to be an umbrella term for variations of a “communicative” approach.¹

However, since the mid-1990s, the field has become ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and has entered what has been labeled the “post-method era” (Kumaravadivelu 1994). Brown (2007) interprets this to mean that we now need to teach according to a set of Principles, most of which are derived from a humanistic, communicative approach to language teaching. Current thinking is that language teachers need to consider using these principles while tailoring their classes to fit their specific situations and learner audiences.

“Innovations”, then, no longer refer to just new methods or approaches. In fact, the meaning of such words as “approaches”, “methods”, and “techniques” has become blurred over the last few decades. The words are often used interchangeably and mean different things to different people. Currently, “innovations” can be anything from a content-specific focus in the classroom, to a socio-political focus (Penycook, 1989), or to the latest use of Computer-Assisted language learning (CALL). ESOL “innovations” are specific to location, to academic learning situation, and to different areas of the field. Practitioners at universities, in business and the professions, in adult education, and in public schools, are specializing in many areas of language teaching, which result in innovations for specific purposes and specific audiences.

Another factor in this change is the large migrations of people around the world. These have led to changes in public school teaching as a response to language needs of new populations. At my home institution, the University of Oregon, the School of Education is requiring all those intending to become public school teachers to complete ESOL / bilingual training before receiving their teaching credentials. This is a system-wide change in credential requirements determined by specific needs.

¹ Task-based, Interactive learning, Cooperative learning, Whole language education, Learning-centered classrooms, the Comprehension approach, the Lexical approach, and Content-based curriculums and instruction.

And finally, in meeting changing needs, one particularly revolutionary influence has been the rapidly growing role of technology and the internet, referred to as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL).

In brief, these are exciting times in our expanding field, times in which innovation and change have become the norm, spearheaded by educators and professionals around the world.

Role of Context

As mentioned earlier, the direction of innovations in the field often depends on context. Is the the learning occurring in K-12, higher education, adult education, or job-related contexts? What is the country of instruction, the specific unit and its access to technology? These are some of the more obvious contexts. Some examples can demonstrate this point. Although these examples are from the United States (USA), I am sure language educators from many other countries can create a similar list.

K-12 For the last decade, K-12 ESL contexts in the USA have moved toward project and content-based instruction in an attempt to create more motivated learners and to be more effective at teaching needed school subject English to large immigrant populations. The purpose is to help learners become mainstreamed more quickly with better preparation for academic success. Content is delivered using techniques and processes that take advantage of what we have learned about young learners and principles of language teaching. Materials for these courses are typically based on academic topics used in school curricula and integrate learning strategies. These materials also focus on grammar and pronunciation points, phonics (in the earlier grades), process approaches to reading and writing, and learning strategies. Some include the ideas of Multiple Intelligences. One example of such integrated material is *Shining Star*, a textbook series developed for middle school English language learners (ELL).

K-12 classrooms also utilize the internet for interactive language use with such techniques as tandem learning, in which a school classroom in Italy, for example, may work with one in the USA, usually on a specific project. Another example is digital storytelling

(nwp.org/cs/public/print/resource/2321), used to help young inner city children improve their writing.

One public elementary school in my city has developed a reading/phonics program around the use of iPods. Students who don't have access to a personal iPod, may borrow one overnight from their school, along with a laptop if needed. The iPod may contain phonics lessons or stories read by native speakers, often the teacher, which the student can work on at home. This same school utilizes Smart Boards in classrooms. Smart Boards are "large white boards using touch technology that functions like a mouse or keyboard. A projector is used to display a computer's video output onto the [special] whiteboard, which then acts as a huge touch screen." (www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_Board_interactive_whiteboard). There are many more examples like these in schools around the country.

Higher Education

ESOL in higher education, at least in the USA, still tends to be skills-based, with an English for Academic Purposes focus. At the same time here, too, there is a growing use of technology in the classroom. Like the school above, many universities are installing Smart Boards. Other examples are the use of iPods, Blogs, Wikis, and institution-wide systems like Blackboard, used for everything from distribution of class information to interactive discussion boards to podcasting to grading. In my own classes, I use Blackboard primarily to post information from lectures, handouts, and criteria for classroom assignments. I also use the class email function extensively.

One art professor at the university taught his class on Italian art via a personal blog from Italy. He kept a blog that was accessed on a daily basis by his students as he toured the various museums in the country! Language teachers have had students use iPods to record out-of-class conversations, such as asking people on the street for directions. One teacher used Google maps for a class project, in which students created an online class map of all their nations and towns or cities. Students then talked about their homes using Google maps' satellite photography to focus in on their exact neighborhoods in places like Seoul, Moscow, and Mexico City.

Distance education (DE) is an area of growth and innovation in higher and adult education in general, not just for language learning and teaching. For example, various U. S. universities are providing teacher training in many subjects, including English, for Iraqi teachers through distance education. They are sponsored by U. S. State Department grants. Others offer all or part of some degree programs online.

Effective distance education brings into play another area of innovation, the empowerment of the learner, or development of learner autonomy. DE often employs group work in place of a traditional on-site classroom, challenging learners to be responsible for their own learning, as well as for the learning of others in their virtual or actual group. For more interactive learning, students in a DE course are often asked to enroll with a partner.

Skill areas

Another innovative focus is in the teaching of specific language skill areas, such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. For example, after several decades of second language acquisition research, what do we know about grammar and how it might be taught and learned most effectively?

Grammar

We know that:

1. Grammar is serious for learners. They are usually unhappy in a course without some focus on grammar.
2. Grammar has three aspects: Form; Meaning; and Pragmatics / Function. Learning grammar requires a balance among the three in a principled approach to language teaching.
3. Grammar is an active process, more an "enabling system" for communication than an actual skill.
4. Mastery of grammar requires practice, both mechanical and cognitive; good practice includes both at the same time.
5. There are advantages in using play, i. e. active grammar activities and games in learning grammar.

- Learners take individual responsibility for correct use of grammar in context.
- The teacher can observe what an individual student knows, without either teacher or student being the center of attention.
- Serious work happens within the context of the game.
- Everybody is working and practicing simultaneously – sometimes with intense involvement.

In other words, grammar needs to be taught actively within context, but with sufficient attention to the detail of form. These ideas are now universally applied in new textbooks.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary, too, needs to be taught in context. A growing area for this purpose is the use of computer-based corpus databases. Such databases can be used in various ways to analyze and figure out how to use specific vocabulary in appropriate contexts.

For example, students can be asked the difference between *affect* and *effect*. They can figure it out themselves by accessing a provided database (<http://www.lextutor.ca/concordancers>), showing each word in context.

Example: What is the difference between “affect” and “effect”? The database might instruct learners to analyze the following:

1. ... *their operations would begin to affect stock prices, and thus throw the...*
2. ... *but their decisions did not affect the choice of the Judge...*
3. ... *says Dr. Keys, do not materially affect the amount of cholesterol in the body...*
4. *This creates an amusing effect because its position in a sentence...*
5. ... *could be costly and have a serious effect both at home and abroad.*
6. ... *governed by the laws of cause and effect, bound in chains of determinism that...*

Students then inductively figure out the differences for themselves. If necessary, the teacher provides guiding questions to help with the analysis, e. g. what part of speech is each word?

Cambridge's new *Touchstone* series claims to base its units on the *Cambridge International Corpus* of North American English – a large database of conversations that show how native speakers in a North American context actually use English (McCarthy, McCarten, & Sandiford 2008).

General examples

To enhance oral skills, use can be made of iPods and Google websites as described above, along with podcasting of such materials as free academic lectures online. Additionally, more and more integrated skills textbooks include internet activities, online video clips, online resources to access multimedia for interactive, self-scoring activities, and software options for such things as Whiteboard use, the formation of tests, and so on. An example is the *Interchange* series.

Regarding CALL, it is difficult for a classroom teacher to keep up with this rapidly changing and developing field. However, Brown (2007) recommends that teachers consider using at least some CALL applications when possible in their classrooms. At the same time, he warns that teachers should not let themselves be deluded into thinking that computers will suddenly turn all students into motivated, successful learners. Effective use of new innovations in this area, like all others, requires careful, thoughtful planning and integration.

Professional development

A final area of innovation is teacher development. More attention is now paid to the in-service professional development of teachers and other professionals in the field. This development may be a personal career path, requiring new skills and credentials. It may be in the area of curriculum development, including learning new uses of technology. Or it may be development for one's own personal satisfaction through reading or focusing on an area of professional interest to become a more knowledgeable, reflective teacher.

Reflective teachers use such tools as teacher journals and classroom observation, peer observation and coaching to evaluate their own teaching, and classroom-based action research. Reflective teachers question their own values and assumptions, pay attention to the con-

text of their teaching, and take part in change efforts at their institutions.

And finally, reflective teachers take responsibility for their own professional development. Most teachers have limitations imposed by their teaching situations, but the reflective teacher considers what opportunities exist or can be developed. The aim of this new focus on professional development is to help practitioners in the field develop themselves into more active, motivated professionals in the field, professionals who can find their own answers to the dilemmas of classroom practice in a rapidly changing field.

Conclusion

In summary, innovations are occurring throughout the field of ESOL, and in the field of education as a whole. There is even room for new “designer” methods of teaching, for example “Power Teaching”, referred to as “whole brain teaching”. For an entertaining look at this new designer teaching method see (www.youtube.com/watch?v=eBeWEgvGm2Y). This method is not specific to language teaching, but might, like the methods and approaches in the past, have potential for specific purposes or contain some stimulating ideas for language teachers.

Considering all the above, perhaps the most potentially interesting innovation or trend relates to the empowerment of both teachers and learners. Questions to consider: Does the teacher really control the classroom? How many people and voices influence or even dictate what happens in one classroom? How can teachers become more responsible for their own classrooms and personal development? How can students become more responsible for their own learning? One statement often expressed in this regard is that teacher autonomy is necessary for learner autonomy. Perhaps the increasing role of technology can facilitate this move towards teacher and learner autonomy. It will be very interesting to both watch and participate in these developments in our field over the next decade.

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