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30

Trends in ELT

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Why I wrote this book

Language teaching trends and teacher development

The desire of teachers to keep up to date with new developments in English language learning and teaching is reflected in the number of conferences, teacher development events and articles with titles like *Current Trends in ELT*, *Innovate ELT*, or, to use a currently fashionable word, *Reimagining ELT Practices*. Innovation is celebrated in the titles of coursebooks like *Cutting Edge* and *Innovations*, and rewarded in the annual British Council ELTons Innovation Awards. Both inside and outside the world of ELT, it seems that everyone wants to be associated with 'innovation' (Winner, 2018).

Besides the possibility that innovations may offer something of lasting value, the promise of the 'new' is a driving force in teacher development: it '… enhances teachers' careers and prevents "burn-out"' (Hamilton, 1996). When I began teaching, in the 1980s, it was the latest trends that enthused and energised me. These included the use of corpora to study language and the development of new dictionaries like Cobuild, ongoing debates about communicative teaching and the emergence of task-based language learning, the inclusion of skills development in learning materials, self-access centres and reflective practice.

I have no doubt that my interest in areas such as these had a profound influence on my teaching, although none of them quite provided the answers to the questions I was asking. But perhaps teacher development is more about asking questions than finding answers, more about being sceptical than accepting ready-made solutions. I hope that the trends that I consider in this book will help you to formulate valuable questions about your own work, to encourage you to try something new and to continue along your own path of development.

Old current trends

However natural and important this interest in educational current trends may now seem to us, it may come as a surprise to learn that current trends have not always attracted the same attention as they do now. In the US, things really took off during the Cold War in the 1960s, when the

country was spooked by Soviet technological success with Sputnik and launching Yuri Gagarin into space. Education took on a new importance as a way of boosting the skills of the workforce, of building the economy and of strengthening national security. The greatest interest was in technological advances in education – television and computers – and huge research resources were poured into these areas.

A concern with innovations in language learning and teaching lagged behind innovations in scientific and technological education, but accelerated in the late 1980s. The focus of interest, however, found its inspiration in new insights coming from the rapidly developing field of applied linguistics. Articles by authors like Diane Larsen-Freeman (1987) and Louis Alexander (1990), the most successful coursebook author of the day, were concerned with curricular questions (e.g. the relative importance of grammar and vocabulary) and new methodologies (e.g. the Communicative Approach, the Silent Way and Suggestopedia). Technology, in the form of language laboratories, was only a side-show. Thirty years later, these areas continue to feature in ELT development courses.

Since that time, interest in current trends in ELT has grown and grown. For this book, I have identified thirty trends by looking at ELT discourse from recent years that is intended for *teachers* (as opposed to researchers): ELT conference programmes, magazines for teachers (e.g. *EFL Magazine*, *English Teaching Forum*), newsletters for teachers (e.g. *IATEFL Voices*, *TESOL Connections*) and blogs (especially publishers' blogs).

The selection of trends for inclusion is, inevitably, a subjective choice. Differentiating a current trend from a dated or a largely abandoned one depends on specific ELT contexts. I have omitted a number of areas that might still be considered 'current' in some contexts because (1) they have been widely discussed and critiqued elsewhere, and (2) I feel that I have nothing of interest to add. These include things like task-based learning (TBL), the Lexical Approach, Dogme, the use of corpora, learning styles and Multiple Intelligences Theory.

Comparing old and new

A lot can still be learnt from close attention to past areas of interest, even those that might now be described as 'fringe methodologies'

(Alexander, 1990). Significant traces remain in everyday current practices. A more detailed discussion can be found in *Scott Thornbury's 30 Language Teaching Methods* (Thornbury, 2017). It is also instructive to make comparisons between the set of trends that are outlined in this book and those of the past, because this can reveal much about the (usually) unspoken assumptions and values that underpin contemporary approaches to language teaching.

The first of these, as mentioned above, concerns trends themselves. *Trends* and *innovations* are often used interchangeably, but the connotations are rather different. Since about 1945, the word *innovations* has most commonly been used to refer to technology and the value of technology in promoting economic growth. It became especially popular from the 1960s onwards. *Trends* was always a more general term. At the start of the 21st century, *innovations* overtook *trends* in terms of its frequency of use, reflecting the fact that new trends were mostly technological in nature. As we will see, current trends in ELT are now overwhelmingly oriented to technological developments.

Secondly, innovations are now commonly taken to be better than what came before, simply because they are new. In language teaching, this is rather different from the situation thirty or more years ago. Then, new ways of talking about language and teaching were more often offered as potential avenues of exploration (the term 'exploratory practice', associated with the work of Allwright (2003), started to become widely used at the end of the 20th century). Now, in contrast, trends/innovations tend to be reported much more enthusiastically, presented as things to be implemented, as opposed to explored. This is despite the fact that many, if not most, of the trends described here lack precise or generally agreed definitions.

It is also noteworthy that the ELT trends of the day thirty years ago were mostly inspired by developments in applied linguistics. This is far less the case today where inspiration is more often drawn from ideas in general education. They are explored in the teaching of other subjects before they are exported into language teaching.

Uptake of new trends also now takes place more rapidly and on a more global scale than was the case in the past. Adrian Holliday (1994)

argued that approaches to language teaching that evolved in language schools and universities in Britain, Australasia and North America were promoted in state-sponsored education in countries around the world. It would appear that this trend has now been reversed to some extent.

Adoption of new ideas takes place, in part, because of their intrinsic appeal: they seem to make good sense. But adoption is also accelerated with strong financial backing. The initial funding of many contemporary educational innovations came from Silicon Valley investments, including those of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. This is true not only of technological developments, such as platforms, learning analytics and adaptive learning. It is also the case for areas like 21st century skills and social-emotional learning (such as wellbeing and mindfulness). International organisations, like the OECD and the World Bank, whose primary concern is the development of human capital and who devote large portions of their budgets to education, were not slow to promote these ideas enthusiastically. With very few exceptions, national governments now also subscribe, and national education plans reflect these trends.

My interest in current trends in ELT, then, goes beyond the individual trends themselves. It is also an attempt to sketch the world of language teaching more broadly, an attempt to understand better so many of the things that we take for granted.

How to read this book

The thirty trends that I outline have been divided into three main categories: language, learning and teaching. There is a great deal of overlap between these categories, especially between learning and teaching. There is also considerable overlap between the topics of individual chapters. Whilst you could read this book in sequence, there is no need to do so. Feel free to start anywhere and roam around. In many chapters, you will find links to others, so you may wish to follow those as a route.

In discussing each trend, I provide suggestions for further reading. These include sources of practical ideas, as well as a small number of references to research evidence. The growing interest in research-based

evidence is also a relatively new direction for language teaching, but, in some ways, it is no less problematic than any of the other trends. The last chapter of the book is devoted to 'evidence', but you may find that it's as good a place to start as it is to end!

Alexander, L. (1990). Fads and fashions in English language teaching. *English Today*, 6(1): pp. 35–56.

Allwright, D. (2003). Exploratory Practice: rethinking practitioner research in language teaching. *Language Teaching Research*, 7(2): pp. 113–141.

Hamilton, J. (1996). *Inspiring Innovations in Language Teaching*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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Winner, L. (2018). The Cult of Innovation: Its Myths and Rituals. In: Subrahmanian E., Odumosu, T. and Tsao, J. (Eds.) *Engineering a Better Future*: pp. 61–73. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91134-2_8

A: Rethinking language

This first section looks at new ways of thinking about language in educational settings. This includes the kinds of language skills and the kinds of English that are important for contemporary learners, the relationship between English and other languages, and the integration of English into the curriculum.

1 Plurilingualism

Plurilingualism, sometimes referred to as multilingualism, holds out the promise of a more inclusive (see 6) approach to language learning, and challenges many accepted attitudes and practices.

What and why?

We live in an increasingly multilingual and multicultural world. About 40 percent of the people in my own home city, for example, have what is called *a migration background*. Serbian and Turkish are commonly heard, as is English in areas with business, diplomatic, tourist, cultural or refugee centres. Strictly monolingual speakers of German, the language of the state, are in a minority. To communicate in this multilingual and multicultural city, people often need to draw on a range of plurilingual skills: they switch from one language to another and they help others who do not have the same plurilingual skills.

Recognising the linguistic and cultural reality of much of Europe, many European countries have officially adopted a plurilingual approach to education (Council of Europe, 2018) in the belief that such an approach can promote participation in democratic and social processes. It is also hoped that it can mitigate negative responses to encounters with the unknown (e.g. racism) and encourage participation in other cultures. Countries elsewhere have followed suit.

In a plurilingual approach to English language learning, an imagined 'native speaker' standard of English is no longer seen as the goal to be striven towards. Instead, the goal is a broader range of linguistic and intercultural skills which all require some knowledge of English. The focus has moved towards a concern with what we *do* with language in our real-life multicultural worlds. These social functions often involve at least two languages.

The learner may be learning English as a third, fourth or fifth language and all these linguistic resources are seen to be of rich potential for

further learning. The taboo on using L1 in the English classroom is broken, and a range of normal behaviours (which were previously frowned upon) can be added to classroom practice. These include:

- switching between English and other languages
- spoken or written translation
- translanguaging – the use of *all* one's linguistic resources to communicate.

Translanguaging is a feature of most English classrooms. Institutions try to ban it, but have mixed success in class, and none outside. When handled sensitively and proactively, however, it may help learners' autonomy, engagement and self-esteem. It can also be a very inclusive practice (see **6**).

Learning activities which involve mediation (see **3**) between two or more languages (e.g. a text in one language and a summary in another) are considered an important part of the learning diet.

Taking a plurilingual approach further, imagine a classroom in Australia: it's full of newly-arrived students from all over the world. For some of them, schooling was severely disrupted and the possibility of future advanced study may seem very remote. Together these EAL learners explore, through texts, aspects of each other's backgrounds and of Australia, using all their plurilingual resources to do so.

In practice

It's one thing to sign up to an international policy initiative. It's quite another to enact it with enthusiasm. In national language policies and the organisation of school curricula, in formal assessment criteria of language skills, and the privileges given to 'native speakers', we see little that is really plurilingual in orientation. More commonly, we see the other languages and English treated as discrete entities that should not mix.

There are many ways of assessing someone's English language skills, but in schools, universities and high-stake exams, evaluating plurilingual skills (along with English) is relatively rare. More often, students are evaluated with reference to a set of monolingual norms, and they are not best advised to start switching from one language to another during their exams.

There are, however, contexts where plurilingual practices are more likely to be the norm. In some forms of both bilingual education and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (see **4**), plurilingualism may be very visible. But in general English classes (in high school, for example), plurilingualism is up against the exam system. Ways of measuring plurilingual skills exist, but there is strong resistance to the idea and they are not easily standardised internationally. Compartmentalising English as entirely separate from other languages is what most people are used to. Attitudes die hard.

Attitudes have, however, softened in recent years in some places. There is a growing acceptance of the important role of the L1 in learning English, although this is far from universal. Translation exercises are no longer the preserve of a few old-fashioned teachers. They have become a core feature of many online language learning tools. The findings of English as a Lingua Franca researchers (see **2**) are also beginning to be reflected in the design of materials with language models of more diverse kinds. This is particularly the case with listening and pronunciation materials, less so with models of written language. Finally, the official importance accorded to interlingual mediation (see **3**) means that it is increasingly hard to keep the English language classroom free of the 'other' language(s).

Takeaways

Since I have written a book of practical ideas for incorporating own-language activities in the English classroom (Kerr, 2014), it'll come as no surprise to find out that I don't think that English is always best learnt in an English-only environment. But using the L1 (and other languages) from time to time to aid the acquisition of English is not really the same thing as pursuing a plurilingual approach.

I first taught English in a Moroccan lycée, where French, Arabic and Šəlḥa were all used and heard. It would have been an ideal setting for a plurilingual approach, but the students I taught were mostly pretty good at translanguaging already – even though the term hadn't been coined yet. What they needed was a level of written standardised Arabic, French and English to get through their baccalauréat. Keeping English separate from home languages, and employing native-speaker teachers

like me, were thought to be good ways of achieving the goals set by the ministry, whose thinking had not been influenced by the 'Multilingual Turn' in applied linguistics. This only came in the second decade of the 21st century, some 25 years later.

The plurilingual/multilingual practices and attitudes that have been experimented with in recent years are certainly more inclusive than what came before, and it may be that there are other advantages – increases in learner motivation, agency and metacognition (see **28**), for example. But we also know that plurilingual competence develops by itself. Plurilingual instruction may help it along.

Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*. New York: Routledge.

Kerr, P. (2014). *Translation and Own-Language Activities*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

May, S. (Ed.) (2014). *The Multilingual Turn*. New York: Routledge.

Narcy-Combes, M. F., Narcy-Combes, J. P., McAllister, J., Leclère, M. and Miras, G. (2019). *Language Learning and Teaching in a Multicultural World*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

2 English as a Lingua Franca (ELF)

You have to keep your eye on the ball with ELF because definitions keep changing. In its latest embodiment, ELF is all about plurilingualism (see 1).

What and why?

Looking at the way that English is used as a lingua franca makes intuitive good sense since its users far outnumber its native-speakers. There is no reason to idealise 'native speakers' of a language. There is no good reason to get hung up about American, British or Australian norms. There are many reasons to be more inclusive (see **6**) and an ELF-informed approach may be more tolerant and empowering for both learners and their teachers. The idea of ELF also supports those who campaign against discrimination against 'non-native' teachers of English, illegal in some countries, accepted as the norm in others.

But English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), is a slippery beast. It refers to three rather different things. In its first iteration, ELF.1, the main focus appeared to be on the language forms, especially aspects of pronunciation and lexico-grammar, that mattered for intercultural intelligibility. This soon morphed into ELF.2, where the focus shifted to *how* people of different language backgrounds used English to communicate in particular situations. And ELF.2 was, in turn, supplemented by ELF.3, which brings us to a perspective that identifies with plurilingualism/multilingualism (see **1**). ELF has now been reconceptualised as 'English as a multilingual franca', and ELF scenarios may include situations where English is available to the speakers, and they may draw on their knowledge of English, but they don't actually choose to use it.

In the early years of this century, there was an explosive leap in the number of books, journals and articles about ELF. There was lively debate about ELF.1 and ELF.2, not least about the practical classroom, teacher training and assessment implications. However, twenty years

after ELF became widely used as a term, ELF researchers lament the absence of any sizable changes in classroom practices.

A number of reasons for this lack of uptake may be speculated on. Two come immediately to my mind. First, native-speakerism (i.e. a bias towards native-speakers and their speech varieties) is embedded in so many systems that it's hard to know where to begin. Secondly, support from large numbers of teachers has been less enthusiastic than had been hoped for. Many, myself included, aspire to 'native-speaker' norms in languages that are not our own.

In practice

A lot of English language teaching and assessment is concerned with getting students to reproduce accurate language forms – grammatical, lexical and phonological. But without a norm against which we can measure this accuracy, teachers and test makers (especially makers of online, automatically marked tests) are left with something of a problem. Omitting a third person singular 's', for example, is highly unlikely to impede communication in an ELF (or any) setting, and it may not even be noticed. In many ways, it really doesn't matter. So, should teachers give feedback on it? Many teachers think yes, and many learners, perhaps especially adults, agree with them. The debate, going back at least six hundred years, is unlikely to be resolved any time soon.

It's fairly natural for teachers to have an interest in grammatical accuracy: getting through an accuracy-based test or two is something most have experienced on the way to becoming a teacher. Many are less interested in pronunciation: it's an open secret that pronunciation activities in coursebooks are often skipped. The first and most tangible product of ELF is the Lingua Franca Core, which includes a short list of sounds or sound pairings that are problematic in ELF settings when ELF users mix them up. It tells us, for example, that we should worry more about long and short vowels, and less about pronouncing *th*. It's a handy list, and it's beginning to be reflected in more recent coursebooks.

The Lingua Franca Core for pronunciation was a product of ELF.1. Attempts to produce similar 'cores' for grammar and vocabulary did not come to fruition, as attention shifted in ELF.2 to the pragmatic moves that users of ELF typically make. Here, again, ELF scholars have