iatefl ADVANCE PUBLICATION – ELT RESEARCH 37, 2022, ReSIG

Innovation and change in English language teaching: Richard Smith interviewed by Ana Inés Salvi

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This is the edited transcript of an interview Ana Inés Salvi carried out via Microsoft Teams with Richard Smith of the University of Warwick in March, 2021. The interview was video-recorded for the benefit of MA TESOL students taking Ana's module on 'Innovation and Change in Second Language Education' at the University of East Anglia. The interview ranged over a number of Richard's research interests – the history of English language teaching, learner autonomy, teacher-research, and mentoring teacher-research, among others.

Ana Inés Salvi (A): Welcome, Richard. I'd like to start by asking what *innovation* and *change* mean for you – and what significance do you think they have in our field?

Richard Smith (R): Well, I think in ELT innovation is a really key concept, something we do need to reflect about critically, because there's been such a tradition of *wanting* to innovate, of promoting new ideas, techniques, technology and so on. There are always new ideas coming through, whether from universities or freelance methodologists or from publishers or other commercial concerns, and this may create a kind of pressure on teachers to always believe that they should be doing something new, and perhaps that they aren't already doing the right thing. And I think this is problematic.

There's a second aspect to problematizing innovation, too, in the sense that an innovation may be *advertised* as new but might not always actually be as new as it seems. And then there's another dimension, which concerns looking *forward* versus looking *back* – or, intention versus reality. In retrospect, we can maybe see that something intended to bring about change didn't actually bring about change. For example, communicative language teaching has been spread around the world, in theory, and brought in as an innovation, but in reality in many contexts it just has not really changed the way of teaching very much and so can't be called an innovation in retrospect. So, new ideas, research findings and so on that seem to have a lot of *influence* on language teaching discourse don't necessarily have a lot of *impact* in changing many teachers' practices in many parts of the world – again, CLT is a good case in point, but it's true of so many ideas or practices that are proposed and debated in journals, at conferences and so on. So, for all these reasons we can be a little bit sceptical of, critical sometimes about, innovation I think, though of course *change* – not for the sake of it but for the benefit of our students and ourselves – can certainly be important. We only need to think of how we've all adapted our teaching during the pandemic to know that's the case.

A: Thank you, Richard. I think you've shown there's a lot of complexity in this notion of innovation that we sometimes take for granted. My next question is about top–down innovations. Have you managed or been part of any such initiatives? How can they be efficient? What has your experience been like?

R: Well, if we mean top-down in relation to teachers, we could take the example of a teacher of English experiencing messages coming from above, from the headteacher or elsewhere in the hierarchy, saying 'we've got to do something new – we've got to bring about some change to what we're doing at the moment'. I know many teachers around the world feel this sort of pressure from above, politically, or within their workplace. Some teachers are excited to innovate accordingly; others are not so excited and experience this as something stressful, to be resisted or avoided. So that's a basic problem with top-down innovations, that they often create stress due to power imbalance and get resisted, so the intended change often fails to come about.

On the other hand, it's pretty clear that the more teachers feel that they are themselves involved and invested in – ideally, even the creators of – an innovation, the more likely it is to work. I think we really need to

look more at this kind of grass-roots involvement as a basis for change, but that doesn't happen much. I'm more interested really in this possibility than in how to make top-down or outside-in innovation more efficient.

In fact, I was involved in an attempted top-down innovation, at the beginning of my career, when I went to Japan to teach in schools, and the British Council at that time was very much promoting communicative language teaching and suggesting that, as a young teacher, I should teach communicatively in Japanese secondary schools. The idea I was inducted into was that Japanese teachers were teaching in a very old-fashioned way – and the Japanese Ministry of Education was also supporting this idea, saying that we were there to try to bring about change by coming in from the outside as native assistant English teachers promoting oral skills. And after three or four years I could see it was just not appropriate and it wasn't working, apart from reflecting an arrogant attitude and not being fair to Japanese teachers. That's when I started to change my view to adopt a more bottom-up approach, I think, focusing more on learners' and, later, teachers' existing capacities or 'autonomy', and I've been trying to work that through in my thinking and teaching ever since.

A: Thank you, Richard. That's very insightful. You were talking about history and I know that's been a very important area of research for you – so, what more would you say we can learn from history about innovation and change?

R: Well, I've come to think that many of us involved in ELT tend to live in a kind of matrix of thinking which views the latest ideas as better than those that have gone before just because they're newer – it's a kind of progressivist attitude, the idea that things can only get better, that new ideas supersede the old. We're always looking to the future, not back. But actually, because we're looking forward, we don't know very much about what happened before and we can dismiss too much what we see as 'old-fashioned'. So in Japan, the longer I stayed and the more I got involved with Japanese schoolteachers' own attempts to reform teaching from within, I started to think that if we look into what's gone before, we can learn from mistakes and we can learn lessons from the achievements of figures from the past. And this relates back to innovation, as it's very difficult to know what is really new – or what might work – if we don't look back into what's gone before; it's an aspect of exploring the realities we're facing in order to build on them. That's very much what some of the Japanese teachers and teacher educators I got to know were doing. They were actually looking back, building on what had gone before in the kinds of reforms that had been attempted and learning lessons from those.

So, I think history can't tell you how to teach on Monday morning, but it can give you a perspective, and that's helpful for teachers, I think. We need a critical perspective about all of these new ideas that come to us. We need to have more of that kind of historical sense in the field of ELT generally, in order to not just be victims of the latest commercial or academic fashion. So that's why I've been researching history of ELT and trying to build it into my teacher education work, as a way of promoting a kind of autonomy that teachers can have in relation to top-down impositions, to help them find their own way based on what's gone before.

A: Thank you. I like this idea of being constructively critical and able to find our own path. Now, I know you've been doing considerable work on supporting bottom–up approaches to teacher and learner development, such as teacher-research, or practitioner research. Would you say that they contribute to or constitute innovation? And if so, how?

R: I think that teachers want to bring about positive change for their students and for themselves, and that may or may not be something that's never been done before. So, maybe that's what we should be thinking about, not necessarily 'innovation' but 'change for the better'. That can be some new action, or some new product, or some new material, but it can also be something that's been tried and tested by other teachers, or indeed simply understanding a situation better, and in fact I think improved understanding is the best starting point for productive change.

In my own career, I've found that, when I had different professional problems, stepping back, trying to understand the situation better, trying something different, but also very carefully seeing what was happening were very useful in my own development of something more appropriate methodologically. In Japan I started engaging in this kind of process and then I realized it's called practitioner research or action research. I started to use that label but I think it's something that many teachers do anyway, for example if they're collecting some kind of information from students or parents, or asking colleagues to observe them, and reflecting on it.

So, teacher-research is the bottom-up approach to teacher development that I engage in and that I encourage teachers that I work with to engage in – in order to better understand our problems, explore our situations, and, on that basis, decide if we want to change something. And if we do, then to gather more data as we're attempting that change. It can bring about local change in teachers' classrooms, and change in their mindsets, a greater sense of empowerment. Though the change involved here doesn't necessarily bring with it broad or widespread change – but that's another issue.

A: Yes, that's an interesting question - whether broad change is necessary and for whom.

R: Well, it's probably important for governments, for agencies which have a contract to bring about change on a large scale. If so, then I think that they could think about supporting investment in schemes where teachers are being encouraged to engage in reflective practice and teacher-research, and there are some examples of projects like that, but unfortunately most funding goes into relatively top-down innovation.

A: Thank you. I was just going to ask you about the mentoring teacher-research schemes you have been developing with colleagues and teachers; can you tell us a bit more about them, and would you say they constitute an innovation, and if so, how and why?

R: Okay, well, about ten years ago I started getting very involved in supporting teachers in what we call difficult circumstances, which is actually the majority of teachers around the world teaching in developing countries, in the global South we may say, in quite large classes generally, without much technology or sometimes even textbooks. For that reason, and also because I was getting better known for promoting teacher-research, I was invited to Chile by the British Council to support teachers to do action research.

There were about 80 secondary school teachers in that first Champion Teachers workshop in Chile in 2013; busy teachers who often had to teach in two or three different schools to make ends meet – you probably know this from Argentina, a similar situation -– and classes of 40 students. They were volunteering to take part, and the Ministry of Education was supporting the programme. In that sense, it was quite a perfect kind of bottom-up environment for change, with top-down financing and encouragement but bottom-up engagement from committed teachers. Of course, I was coming 'from the outside in', it's true, but not in the spirit of imposing something – instead, in developing a kind of teacher-friendly approach to teacher-initiated inquiry, which I later started to call exploratory action research.

There were some initial problems, of course, but in collaboration with these great teachers, we developed something quite organically, a kind of feasible approach that was expanding quite well in Latin America via mentoring till the pandemic came. It's become popular in other parts of the world, too, including in India and Nepal. I'm surprised but happy about that – I think it's partly because we've developed these books of very down-to-earth stories of what teachers have done which show how empowered teachers can feel after this. Now, I don't want to make it sound like it's *the* recipe, the magic solution, for all teaching problems because that would be just to do the same thing I was criticizing earlier. For the same reason, I'm not going to claim the approach or the kind of mentoring we engaged in was completely new – it wasn't. But I do think it's been showing a new way forward for English language teachers in difficult circumstances to explore and understand their situations and address their problems for themselves. In that sense, I guess you could call it an innovation, and it has been bringing about some positive change, which I'm quite proud of.

A: Great. Thank you. Just to finish off, is there anything else you would like to say to MA TESOL/ELT students who are interested in knowing more about innovation and change in the field?

R: Okay, well, if you've decided to do a Masters, then that shows that you've got a commitment to self-development in this field of TESOL, and, if I think of my MA students, I also think that maybe they get something from the MA that they didn't expect. I mean, what they expected may have been that they would learn how to be a better teacher or hear about the best way to teach. In fact, I ended up, during my MA, being more confused really about what is the best way to teach. But that is what an MA is. It's about learning to look at teaching and learning problems or issues from different perspectives and to see really that there isn't just one single, simple solution. Things are more complicated than you expected at the beginning and that may be confusing as you go through the process; it may be frustrating as well, but I think it will help you eventually, though maybe not immediately, to teach better and to engage in change that's appropriate for you and your students.

A: Very interesting, indeed, Richard. I am sure that my students - and interested readers in the field - will really appreciate your insights into innovation and change in ELT. Thank you again for this inspiring conversation, as always.

Biodata

Richard Smith, formerly coordinator of IATEFL Research SIG (2011–2015), is a Profesor of ELT & Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. He is known for his work in the fields of history of language learning and teaching, learner and teacher autonomy, teaching in difficult circumstances, teacher development including teacher-research and mentoring teacher-research, and ELT research capacity-building. Further information: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/people/smith/.

Ana Inés Salvi, a former coordinator of IATEFL Research SIG (2017–2021), is a Lecturer in Education at the University of East Anglia. She completed her PhD in ELT and Applied Linguistics at the University of Warwick. Before working in teacher education, she taught English in the UK, China and Argentina. She is interested in critical, creative and autonomous perspectives on teaching, learning and research.