

Q & A with Professor Brian Tomlinson at the 3rd ELTRIA Conference: Humanising ELT materials

Brian Tomlinson

University of Liverpool (UK) and Anaheim University (USA)

Jessica Mackay

EIM, University of Barcelona (Spain)

1. Introduction

The ELT Research in Action (ELTRIA) conference usually takes place bi-annually in Barcelona (Spain). The last edition (22-23 April, 2022), on the theme of 'Working together towards shared goals', was held online for the first time (see Thomas Wogan's conference report further down in this publication). To open the conference, and to celebrate the publication of his recent book (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2021), Prof. Brian Tomlinson was invited to take part in a live Q & A session. The conference organizer, Jessica Mackay (J), and conference participants asked Brian (B) a series of questions. The following is a selection of some of the highlights.

2. A career in ELT

J: To start off Brian, I thought you could give us a little introduction to yourself and how you came to be working in the field of ELT.

B: Greetings from sunny Southport, which nobody seems to have heard of! It's a very small seaside resort, 15 miles north of the greatest city in the world, which is, of course, Liverpool. Liverpool is my team. Barcelona is my other team, and Barcelona is my other favourite city in the world, so when you talk about connecting, I connect Liverpool and Barcelona as very similar cities, with very similar great football teams. So, greetings from Southport!

Right, as Jessica mentioned I've had a very, very long career, so I'll just mention the beginning and one other thing: how I got into materials development. It began in 1962, when I left Liverpool University and I had no idea what to do. I applied for a few jobs, didn't fancy them and I became a volunteer: VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas). You are sent overseas, where you usually teach, or you can do other things, get a very small amount of money, have a great time and then come back and start your life, or your career.

They asked me where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do, and I said, *Anywhere except Africa and anything except teaching*. So they sent me to Nigeria as a teacher trainer! My very first job, at the age of 21, was a teacher trainer at the Advanced Teacher Training College in Owerri, Eastern Nigeria. That's where I first became a materials developer! I was teaching a Teacher Improvement course. On my very first lesson, they gave me a course book and said *Do page 22!* Page 22 was a unit on how Eskimos make their igloos. Now, this was in Nigeria, where the lowest-ever recorded temperature is about 85 degrees, and where no one has ever heard of snow. Totally and utterly irrelevant! And it was only as I entered the classroom, I thought *I can't do this, it's ridiculous!* so in a flash, it came to me. I started the lesson by saying:

I noticed on my way here from the airport, everyone seems to live in villages. The whole road is just village after village. Do you live in towns or villages?'

And they all said *In villages*.

And I said *How do you make your houses?*

Oh, it's easy. We just go into the jungle, and we cut down trees, we cut down branches. Very easy, very quick. We all get together and we make a house.

How long does it last?

Oh not very long. A few years.

What happens then?

Oh well, we just rebuild it. We go into the jungle again and rebuild.

Oh right. So, we're going to read about people way up in the Arctic Circle, where there are no trees. Just snow. How do you think they make their houses?

And I got a few responses and guesses.

OK, as you read the text, try and think about how you make houses and what the similarities and differences are.

And they did, and we had a discussion afterwards about what they did and about what these people (in the book) did to make and to renew their homes, and it turned out to be a very interesting session. That was the first time, without me knowing what this was, that I localized and humanized a text, and I've been doing the same for about 50, 55 years since then.

3. Material Design

J: Well, Brian, you won't be surprised to know that quite a few of the questions that I have are related to materials, materials development and particularly to course books, so shall I go ahead with the first question?

B: Yes.

J: This is a question from Diane, at the University of Lancaster, I believe that she's here. Diane, would you like to turn on your camera and ask your question to Brian directly?

D: Hello Brian! You know, well, of David Barton and others who work with notions of literacy practices. I think one of the interesting things that comes up in discussions of materials is this understanding of where materials fit into our design of practice. I was looking to give you space to comment on that.

B: Right. Typically, materials dominate practice. Materials drive practice. I've actually observed more than a thousand lessons around the world in many, many different countries. Each country claiming to be unique, but each country actually being exactly the same, in that the course book dominates the classroom. There is a syllabus and there is a course book. The course book becomes the syllabus. The teacher, in most cases, slavishly follows the course book. I'm talking here about African countries, European countries, and Asian countries. With some exceptions, of course, there doesn't seem to be much difference to me. The book dominates practice and tells the teacher what to do. Typically what it does is to say: right, you teach one structure at a time; one group of vocabulary at a time. This is how people learn: you reduce, you simplify. And in this unit, the reading texts, the listening texts all focus on this particular structure. And that's what teachers do. In my experience, although I know I'm overgeneralizing here, learners get bored to tears with it. They might learn a little bit in the short term for their test or exam, but they acquire very little.

It's this dominance of the teaching, and therefore this dominance of the learning which I've been trying to do something about for 55 years. It's got to be the other way round. We've got to ask: not *How should we teach?* but *How can learners learn? What are the optimal ways?* Obviously they differ from learner to learner and sometimes from culture to culture, but we've got to start with the learners. But we don't. The process typically is: somebody in the ministry or a group of people in the ministry draws up a curriculum, which is always massively too big, and puts a tremendous strain on the teachers to cover it. Somebody writes a course book, which is always too big and puts a massive strain on the teachers to cover it, and then the poor old learners sit in the classroom while this huge curriculum and this huge course book is dumped on them, and all they aim to do is to cover the syllabus, to cover the course book.

It's the wrong way round. How can the learners learn? How can they be engaged? How can they acquire language so that they can communicate? What role does the course book play, if it plays any role at all? That's got to be the question. And no one ever asks that. Publishers never ask that. You can't blame them because such a course book wouldn't sell. I've tried. I've sent proposals to publishers and they come back *Oh, this is very interesting but it doesn't quite fit our marketing plan. I think this is a bit too radical for our teachers.* So, we're left with this paradigm. It's not changed in 55 years. The words on the cover, the blurbs change. The buzz words change. You know, you get words like 'natural', 'authentic', even 'humanistic', but in fact, if you look inside the cover, nothing has changed. PPP dominates. Dividing the language up into discrete blocks dominates and the teacher dominates, the course book dominates, the syllabus dominates, the exam dominates, and the poor old learner, in most cases, is left with no choice, except to follow. So, at the moment, the course book dictates practice and I'm saying it should be the other way round: that optimal practice should dictate the course book and should dictate the materials.

4. Materials driven by optimal practice

J: Can I ask you Brian, how would you recommend that teachers go about putting that into practice, if they're given a syllabus and they're given a course book to cover? How do they subvert that?

B: There are various ways. The ideal way, which I've managed to use in one college in England, but it was a very privileged, well-resourced college (Bell College in Saffron Walden), was that, instead of having multiple copies of the same course book, we had one class set of many different course books, so the teachers and the class didn't use one course book, they used many course books and they selected the units from them most appropriate to what they were doing with the class. In some cases, what they were doing with the class was determined by the learners. They had made the choice themselves. I used to let them sample the various course books; to pick out from them the units they wanted to do. Because one of the great fallacies of language teaching is that there is a progression from simple to complex. You know, you've got to go from this tense to that tense. You've got to follow this myth of the order of language acquisition. You don't, right? Language learning basically requires engaged exposure to language in use, opportunities to use, and feedback when necessary. What I call responsive teaching. The teacher responding to need, rather than dictating need. So that is basically my approach. Now, that's the ideal. There are many schools that can't do that.

When I worked in Japan, you had to decide on one course book and the students bought it, so you couldn't have multiple books. What we did in Japan was to make use of the course book when it fitted into what we wanted to do. 'We' meaning teacher and students. In some lessons there was no use of the course book at all. Although, in the university I taught in, you had to use the course book in every lesson because the students had bought it. One teacher, on one of my teacher training courses, used to go into class and say *Open the course book at page 16. You've got two minutes to find all the words beginning with 's'. Now, close your course books.* Then she would move on. But, again, this is privilege. You can't do that in most countries and most classrooms, so in the end it comes down to one key thing, which is not given enough attention on teacher training courses, which is adaptation. You can take any course book, no matter how irrelevant it seems, hence my example about the Eskimos, and you can humanise it.

I recently examined a PhD in the University of Auckland, from a Vietnamese student who had humanised a Vietnamese course book. The book they were using was an American text book, and the students found it totally irrelevant to their lives. There was a unit on films, where all the films were Hollywood films they'd never seen. There was a unit on food: all the foods were fast foods, which they'd never eaten. And what he did was to change the units, to use the same activities, but the films were Vietnamese films, the foods were Vietnamese foods, and this had dramatic effects on the students' performance. There have been empirical studies on this. A number of such studies are going on at the moment in universities around the world. However, they're not getting into the journals. I recently worked in Shanghai and I observed lessons in which the teacher localised and humanised the coursebook. She took some of the photos out, of America and England and

substituted photos of Shanghai, and the people, instead of being smiling, healthy, young Europeans, became teachers and students from the school. Just simple things like that had this dramatic impact and made the book more relevant.

J: That's fantastic Brian. Thank you.

Reference

Tomlinson, B. & Masuhara, H. (2021) *SLA Applied: Connecting theory and practice*.
Cambridge University Press



Brian Tomlinson is Founder and President of MATSDA (the International Materials Development Association), a Visiting Professor at the University of Liverpool and a TESOL Professor at Anaheim University. He has over one hundred publications and has recently co-authored with Hitomi Masuhara *The Complete guide to the theory and practice of materials development for language learning* (Wiley, 2018) and *SLA applied: Connecting theory and practice* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).