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INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR BRIAN TOMLINSON: HUMANIZING LEARNING MATERIALS

BIODATA

Dr. Brian Tomlinson is considered to be one of the world's leading experts on materials development for language learning. Throughout his career, he has worked as a teacher, teacher trainer, curriculum developer and university lecturer in Japan, Indonesia, Nigeria, Singapore, the UK, Vanuatu, and Zambia. He is also founder and president of the Materials Development Association (MATSDA) a non-profit making international association that brings together researchers, publishers, writers, and teachers to work together towards the development of high-quality materials for the learning of languages.

He has written and published many articles and books including *Materials Development in Language Teaching*. He launched the journal *Folio* and ran (with Hitomi Masuhara) a number of materials writing workshops in the UK and in Botswana, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, the Seychelles, Singapore, Turkey, and Vietnam. He has also organized and presented the opening plenary at thirty international MATSDA conferences. He is currently a Visiting Professor at Liverpool University and an Adviser for the British Council English Language Advisory Group.

The first question concerns how to define learning materials. Has there been an evolution in the way learning materials are defined? Can there be a consensus among scholars, or do you see this as a disputed issue?

I think we used to talk about materials meaning coursebooks, and I think these days it's generally accepted that materials can be anything that the learner makes use of to help him or her to acquire the language. So, it can be a coursebook. It can be a video course. It can be the Internet. It can be an extensive reader. It could be a newspaper. It could be an advert. It could be anything which can facilitate the acquisition of language. And I think that acceptance has opened up language learning. So, it's not narrowly focused on a prescriptive coursebook, which basically tells you how to learn and what to learn. And I think there's a lot more encouragement now for learners to go out of the classroom and find the target language for themselves. From the Internet, from speakers of that language, um, from newspapers, from readers. Uh, because I think it's generally accepted now that no language course in an educational institution can provide enough time and that you need more time and more exposure than can be provided in the classroom and certainly more than can be provided by the coursebook.

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In a way that liberates the coursebook. Because one of the big problems with coursebooks is that it is often assumed that is the only source of material and therefore they have to cram everything into it. So, every coursebook I know has got too much in it and every unit has got reading, listening, speaking, writing. It's all crammed in there and there's no space for the learner. It's too crowded, too hectic, too much. And as a result, very often the learners cover the coursebook, but they don't learn very much from it. So, I think it's a new way of looking now at how to learn a language, which is the coursebook as a resource for the teacher and the students to select from and make use of. However, there are lots of other ways of making use of what we now call language learning materials, which have not been written to teach the language, but are available to help the learner to acquire the language. I'm not saying everyone agrees with that, but I think there's generally a consensus now.

You have said on some occasions that learning materials, more specifically the coursebook, needs bringing to life. What do you mean by this?

What I mean is that particularly the coursebook consists of pages with writing on the pages. So, as it is, it's not alive. It's dead. It's a dead document, and it needs to be brought to life. It needs to be humanized; it needs to connect with the individual learner. Because particularly the coursebook is, for very good commercial reasons, written to achieve the maximum sale. So, it's not written for any specific group of learners or any individual learner.

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What we need to do, I think, as teachers, is to humanize the coursebook, to localize it, to personalize it, and to inject energy. I'm a great believer that energy is vital for teaching and learning. The teacher needs to be energetic. The learners need to be energetic. And in particular, the brain needs to be energetic. We need to energize the brain to get the brain working. Very often at the moment you've got a coursebook or some other sort of course, where all the learners are doing is filling in blanks or matching words, and they're not activities which stimulate the brain or stimulate emotion. So, I'm arguing that it's vital for language acquisition to achieve learner engagement with the materials, affective engagement involving emotions and cognitive engagement involving thinking, stimulate the brain to think. I think it was Lozanov who said that in the average classroom exercises, the learners only using about 6% of the brain. And the more of the brain you use, the more likely this is to achieve impact and the more likely it is to facilitate acquisition. So that's what I mean by bringing it to life, injecting energy, making it more relevant more connected to the learner, stimulating engagement from the learner. Now, a coursebook by itself can't do that, so it all depends how it's used. The teacher can help the

learners to do it for themselves, and in various publications I've argued particularly for performing the coursebook to bring it to life and for opening it up.

Most coursebooks consist of closed questions where there's only one right answer. And this isn't achieving the sort of engagement I'm talking about. So, I'm talking about opening it up so there aren't any right answers. There are things to debate, to discuss, to argue about. And it sounds a bit weird, but the most productive language classroom is one in which the learners are arguing in the target language. I often give the example when I was working in a university in Oman, where I use children's literature with adults or young adults and university students. And I used a poem called *Not Now Bernard*, which is a children's poem. And which is about a kid who comes home and says to his mum, "Hello, Mum". And the mother says, "Not now, Bernard". "Hello, Dad." "Not now, Bernard" and his parents ignore him; and he sees a monster in the garden. And he says to his parents: "Mum, there's a monster in the garden. He's going to eat me". "Not, now, Bernard". And he goes in the garden and the monster eats him. And then the monster comes into the house and the parents think that the monster is Bernard and continue ignoring him. And the monster growls and screams and they continue to ignore him and eventually they tell the monster to go to bed. And the monster goes to bed, and he shouts, "But I'm a monster", but the parents just say, "Not now, Bernard". What I asked the students was who was responsible for Bernard's death? One question, completely open. And a male student immediately said: "Oh, the mother. The father was busy, and the mother should have paid attention to the son". And then a brave young lady said (this is in a Muslim classroom where the males are on one side and the females on the other, and they normally they never interact), and the young female said: "No, it's the father's fault. The mother was cooking the dinner", and this fantastic argument ensued. Then someone said: "It's the teacher's fault". "It's society's fault". And that one question they discussed for one hour. The whole lesson was reading the poem, and one question. And it's the most useful lesson I've ever had, because in that one hour, everybody took part, a massive exposure to English, massive opportunity to communicate, to interact. And that came from an open-ended question, not from the sort of closed activity you typically get in the coursebook.

Then, the coursebooks have closed activities for one reason: teachers can use them to set tests. So, you know, you'll see there's always ten questions. And ten questions have only one answer each. So, it's a quick and easy test for the teachers. Set it easy, Mark it easy. They've done their job. But it hasn't stimulated learners to come to life and be engaged.

Can you explain what you understand by principled materials development?

I would say principled materials development is when you are designing, developing, using materials in ways in which we know it is likely to facilitate acquisition. And these ways come from SLA research, but also from observation, from classroom research, and from experience. And the best people to develop principled materials, in my experience, are teachers. Teachers who have had experience in the classroom. Teachers who have thought about how learners learn. Teachers who have read some research and ideally have done some research themselves. In Namibia, we wrote a new national coursebook with a large group of 30 teachers. We met for one week in the capital, Windhoek; and in one week we produced a new national coursebook, which was then used in all the schools.

We deliberately chose some new young teachers, some very experienced teachers, male and female people with specialisms in drama or music or art or testing, and we shared this

experience and energy. By doing it in one large room together in groups, they put that energy into a coursebook, in ways which would help teachers to use it to stimulate energy from the learners. The first day we outlined our principles. And I suppose I could pick out maybe 4 or 5 very quickly.

The first one is to acquire a language you need massive exposure to the language in use. That's an absolute prerequisite, it's vital. And unfortunately, coursebooks typically don't provide this massive exposure, they are very short texts, even at advanced level. Because they've got to get everything into the unit. So, there's not that much exposure to the language being used. And very often way up until you get to advanced level, the listening text, the reading texts are not authentic. They are specially developed to focus on a particular grammar point or vocabulary point. So, learners are starved of exposure to the language in use. So that's the first principle. Maximize exposure to language in use.

The second principle is focus on achieving engagement, which I've already mentioned, affective and cognitive, so that when the learners are exposed to the language and when they're using the language, they're doing so in an engaged manner. They're focused, they're investing time, attention and energy into the activity. So, it's massive exposure to rich and recycled language. You can't do what the Coursebook does, where they say: Unit 11 past perfect. I did this with a coursebook. I looked at it. Unit 11 was past perfect; in unit 1 to 10. No past perfect at all in unit 11, 60 past perfects; in unit 12 to 20, no past perfect. It's impossible to acquire the past perfect like that. You need long, varied, motivating, engaged exposure in order to acquire it. So, massive, rich, and recycled, engaged exposure. Multiple opportunities to use the language for communication, not for practice, not for display, but for communication. And there's a lot of evidence now saying that learners interacting with each other is a much more productive than learners listening to a teacher or native speaker.

That it is the interaction which is vital to develop communicative competence. Particularly, I'm referring to a book by Sato and Ballinger (2016), in which they found that if groups were what they called socially cohesive (they got on very well together) and they were collaborating in a joint activity or project they acquired a lot of language and developed a lot of ability from this interaction, but that is missing from most coursebooks. There's a lot of practice and there's sort of get into groups and answer these questions, but they're not actually interacting, they're not communicating. They're just answering close questions.

Plus, so far, I haven't mentioned anything about actual focusing on the language. But I'm a great believer in what I call a text driven approach, where you start with a potentially engaging text that could be written, spoken, video or audio, and that drives the activities. Their first response of students to it is personal. It's how do they feel about it, how do they think about it, what's their opinion, what's their view. No right answer. And then eventually they will actually produce language either written or spoken in response to this text. But then they will go back and focus on a particular feature of the text, which could be a linguistic feature. It could be the past perfect as it's used in the text. Why is it used? How is it being used? What's the effect it has? How would it be different if the writer had used the simple past and not past perfect?

So, what I'm saying is that I don't pre-teach grammar. I don't teach grammar in isolation or in a vacuum. I get learners to focus themselves on making discoveries about how, why, and when grammar is used, by going back to an engaging text they've already responded to. And then revising their own production. So, it could be that if we go back to that story about Bernard,

what I did in Oman, the next lesson was ask them to change the story, so it took place in Oman, and happened to a girl instead of a boy. Then they went back to the original text and examined the text and focused on a particular feature which was "Not now, Bernard". And this expression, "not now" (it's a very common expression in English actually) has multiple functions. And they focused on it and for homework, they did research on it. They looked for other examples. And then the next day they rewrote their own story using what they'd discovered from their research. Then, effectively and cognitively engaged, they have multiple opportunities to communicate and they are asked to make discoveries, to develop language awareness about particular features. The example I gave was Past Perfect, a grammar feature, but it could be a pragmatic feature "How did she persuade her boyfriend to do what she wanted?" Looking at the tactics, the strategies employed. So, it could be any feature of the text, but it's not pre-taught. It's only gone back to once they've encountered it. So, it's a completely different approach to language. In fact, it's not language teaching at all. We shouldn't be teaching; you can't teach a language. You can only help learners to acquire it.

What role do you think the Coursebooks play in language teaching, and will they be dispensable If teachers had the time and the training to develop their own materials? And is there a difference in that role of the coursebook when the teacher is not a native speaker?

Interesting question. Personally, although I've just attacked the typical coursebook, I think it does play an essential role in most institutions when it's used as a resource rather than a script. It's used to select from, it's the servant of the teacher rather than a dictator to the teacher. And because ultimately teachers, no matter how well trained or how expert they are in developing materials, don't really have the time to develop materials for every lesson.

In many countries where I've worked, we have used the coursebook, but supplemented it with many teachers produced materials. In Indonesia, for example, every Monday afternoon throughout the region there was no English teaching, and the English teachers met in somebody's house for coffee. And they wrote materials for the coming week in groups together as a team, and each week they would reflect upon how the materials were used and how effective they were and then develop more materials. So, in the end they were actually almost replacing the coursebook. But that's a very privileged situation. We were fortunate in that the Ministry gave them that opportunity. It's not easy to do that.

In Vanuatu, which is very small country, we completely changed the teaching and examinations in primary school. So, it was no longer a grammar translation but communicative tasks. Dramatic change. But then there were no materials. So, at the weekends, we ran workshops for teachers in all the different islands, and we produced a bank of communicative tasks, some of which were then used in the classroom and some of which were used for assessment. There was no difference between the materials for the classroom and the materials for assessment, and nobody knew which was which. So that in a way, became a coursebook developed by the teachers. But these are fairly extreme examples.

Another example was in Indonesia. Where a teacher said to her students, "Do you like the coursebook?" And they said, "Oh, yes, madam", because in Indonesia you always try to be polite. You agree with the teacher. "Are you sure? Come on, it's okay. You can tell me". And eventually they said, "No, we don't". And she asked "Why?", and the students replied "Well, it's so boring. The reading passages are so boring". "Okay", she said, "All right. I will tell you what I'm going to

do". And she divided the class into ten groups. There were ten weeks in the semester, and she said, "Group one. Right. Your task this week is find something interesting to read in English and bring it to me on Friday". So, they had to go out and actually find something. And some of them got the telephone directory for Jakarta and they looked for English sounding names and they went to the houses and knocked on the door. "Excuse me, do you have anything interesting to read in English?" And they learnt a lot of English, even swear words, but they did get these interesting texts and then they gave the teacher one on the Friday. And then instead of the text in the coursebook she used the text they had given her but with similar activities to those in the coursebook. And each week a different group brought the material and she gradually started to extend the repertoire of activities. So, they were more open ended, more interesting. Then the next semester she said, "What should we do now? Should we go back to the coursebook?" "Oh no, no", the students said "Okay, this time you find a text and you develop a lesson plan. Bring it to me on Friday and I'll help you to revise it. And then on Monday, you teach the lesson". So, the reading lesson was taught by students who had found their own material and developed their own activities using similar activities to those in the coursebook and to those she'd introduced them to. And this had a tremendous impact on student motivation and engagement.

So that was a rather extreme example of replacing part of the coursebook or almost replacing the coursebook. However, the reality is, in most classrooms, what I've managed to get teachers to do is use the coursebook but take out those elements of it they don't think are useful. Put in things which are more open ended, more humanistic, more personalized, more locally relevant, and bring it to life. And that's what they've done in many countries. And also, a very simple idea in Japan where I was working. They actually chose the coursebook from three options. I gave them three coursebooks to look at and they chose one, and then everyone had that coursebook. And then they chose which unit to start with. Because it's a myth that you have to start with Unit One and work through. So, they might start on unit 12 and they would have a list of the sequence of units they wanted to go through. We didn't actually use all the units. So, and the teacher also brought extra material and the students developed extra materials themselves. And in fact, in Japan, in one area, students in year two wrote materials for year one. Students in year three wrote materials for year two. And that was very successful as well. So, a very simple short answer to your question is that the ideal would be teacher produced materials because teachers know the students, but it's not realistic. The reality is you need a coursebook, but you do need to supplement it to humanize it.

Let's talk about the concepts of material analysis and material evaluation. For many teachers, they may seem to be synonymous terms, but are they really the same thing?

No, not at all. Very different, and it's not really that you do one or the other. Ideally, you do both. In materials analysis you're simply asking questions to find out what the materials contain, what the materials do, what the materials ask the learners to do. So, in a way, it is objective. Analysis is often done using "Yes / No" questions, which could be "Are there any practice tests in the coursebook, yes or no?" Or it could be "The coursebook deals with spelling, yes, or no?". But it's not totally objective because it's subjective as to which questions you ask. So, if you ask a question, for example. "Does the course book contain short and easy to understand texts?". That's an assumption that it should do. So, there's a hidden agenda there. But you're not asking about the quality of the materials. You're asking about the contents of the materials and what they contain and what they ask learners to do.

Whereas in evaluation, you are attempting to measure or predict the effectiveness of the materials. Therefore, it is context-dependent, and evaluation is only of any value if it's connected to the learners who are going to use the materials. So, you are asking questions to find out how effective these materials are likely to be with these learners. And this is where you do need to have a principled evaluation. What I advise teachers to do, is brainstorm their beliefs in what materials should do, just in any order. Then come together and agree on these beliefs and turn them into principles and then turn them into questions. So, if you go back to the principles I mentioned earlier, you could end up with a question like "to what extent are the materials likely to stimulate affective engagement?", for example. And now that's a prediction and therefore it's highly subjective. So ideally, an evaluation shouldn't be done by one person. It should be done by 2 or 3 or 4 using agreed principles, agreed criteria. But then discussing their answers and coming to a group decision, as to the value.

So, analysis is simply finding out, you know, it could be that you're teaching a class who really need to develop their ability to read in English; could be scientists who need to read scientific documents in English. And therefore, you're asking a question like "does the coursebook contain a lot of reading?" If it doesn't, then it's not going to be suitable. And you've decided on the basis of an analysis that this coursebook is not suitable for these students. But it could be that a coursebook does have a lot reading, so let's do an evaluation and look at the potential effectiveness of those reading materials. And that's the evaluation stage, which is a prediction.

There are three types of evaluation. There's pre-use. So, you're predicting. There's whilst-use. So, you're observing the learners actually using the material. And most useful of all is post-use. How effective were the materials with these particular students. So that will help you make decisions in the future or help you to revise your materials.

What would be the core competencies required for a teacher to analyse, evaluate, implement, adapt and or create learning materials and how these competencies can be acquired?

I'll start with the last big question. They can only be acquired through experience. I've spent most of my life traveling the world giving materials development workshops, and often been restricted to one week or two weeks. It's not long enough. But some remarkable progress even in one week or two weeks. Most teachers say, "Oh, I'm a teacher, I can't develop materials. I haven't got the training". But very quickly I've found that they can. They've already got the ability, but they don't realise it. And it comes down to this question of giving them the confidence, the opportunity, and the positive constructive feedback on what they're doing.

I used to run an MA in materials development at the University of Luton and at a university in Leeds where the whole MA focused on materials development. And we started the MA the first week by getting students to develop materials. No training at all. And then we got them to sit down from that experience of developing the materials to write questions which they wanted answered about learning and teaching and materials development. And then we looked at other aspects of applied linguistics like research, psycholinguistics, or sociolinguistics, to try and answer some of those questions. And then the course ended with them writing materials from the experience they had gained throughout the course. And instead of a dissertation, they produced a course of materials for specific learners with a theoretical rationale. And that was in lieu of a dissertation. And they also had to do two conference presentations on the materials. One was internal in the university, the other was external. We used to run a British university

students materials development conference once a year, and all our students had to present their materials at the conference, and they were graded on them. So, and now I can think of two who have become famous coursebook writers and two or three others who now run materials development courses themselves in universities. But that was an ideal situation, a whole year.

There's a university in South Korea called IGSE, and they, with our permission, have cloned the course. And they run that course in Seoul. But you don't normally get that opportunity. Most of my experience has been one-week courses where you're opening teachers minds, you're giving them confidence and you're giving an opportunity to develop skills. Always they would work in groups and always there would be monitor groups, so they would work with another group. And when they'd written a draft, they showed it to their monitor group and they shared feedback and always with a teacher, trainer, facilitators who would be moving around, not judging, not evaluating, but available as a resource for advice, for help, for support.

It's not something you can lecture on. It's not something you can read about. It's something you have to do and learn from that experience. Before I mentioned about developing principles, and it is remarkable that teachers don't realize it, but they've already got these principles in their mind from their experience, even from their first year as a teacher. My very first teaching job was in Nigeria as a teacher trainer. I had no experience of teaching and I learned from experience. For my first lesson, I was given a coursebook and I had to start at page 73. And when I looked at it, page 73 was about Eskimos, making igloos in the in the Arctic. And this was in Nigeria where nobody had ever heard of snow. Totally, utterly irrelevant. So very quickly, almost on the way to the classroom, I thought, "I can't do this. This is my first lesson. They're going to think I'm really stupid and boring". So, I quickly worked out a way of dealing with it. And I'd only been there one week, and I'd noticed all the way from the airport to the town where I was living there were villages, and everyone seemed to live in a village. So, I started the lesson by saying "I'd like you to help me. I'd like to learn more about Nigeria. How do you build your houses? Do you build your own houses?". And they started to talk about how they constructed the houses in the village. And basically, they were self-built. They would go into the forest and chop down branches and chop down trees and use mud and build a house from the environment. And then I asked how long they last, and they answered not very long, that they just replace them. And then I said, "Okay, you're going to read about people in a different country where there are no trees but a lot of snow. What they also do, what you do, they use what is around them. What do you think they do?" And then they were predicting and finally I said, "now read this article and see if you're right and see how similar it is to what you do".

So, I discovered this almost accidentally. You've got to localize. You've got to connect with the learner's experience. And that didn't come from any training. It just came from a desperation to not be considered a useless, boring teacher. So, it is crucial. The experience is crucial. And I've been to many teacher training courses where an academic stands at the front and lectures the learners on how to write materials and they acquire nothing. You can't do that.

In both English and Spanish are languages with great linguistic and cultural variety. So, the question here is more or less obvious global materials, which is the most profitable option for any publisher, I suppose, or local materials with the problems that that entails.

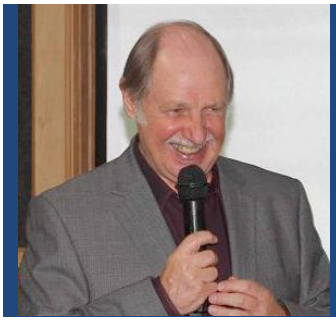
It's ideally local materials anytime. Or if you can't manage that, then localized materials. Certainly, the biggest problem is the global coursebook. You try and satisfy everyone, and you end up by

catering for nobody. And that's what's happened all over the world. I mean, you know, people have become very, very rich writing coursebooks. Global coursebooks. And if you can write a global coursebook that is used in China, for example, you quickly become a millionaire because of this massive demand. But now I've been to China, and I've seen these coursebooks used. I've worked in China, and they are just not relevant to the learners. And I've done a lot of work in China, in Thailand, in Indonesia and Vietnam on humanizing these global coursebooks and localizing them. I'll give you an example. I examined a PhD in Auckland from a Vietnamese teacher. And he took an American coursebook, which was used in schools in Vietnam; and there was a unit on films and all the films which were discussed were American films, which meant nothing to the students. So, he used the unit, the same activities, but Vietnamese films instead of American, and the same with a unit on food. Instead of American fast food. It was Vietnamese street food. And he compared the control group who used the original with the experimental group who used his humanized localized materials. Massive difference in results.

So, the global coursebook cannot just be used as it is. It has to be localized, personalized. In China, very interestingly, I saw a teacher who digitalized the coursebook, so she projected it on a screen. What she'd done was to remove all the photographs of America and England and replace them with photographs of Shanghai and photographs of the buildings near the school and photographs of the teachers and photographs of the students. So, there was an instant recognition and an instant connection with that. And this book we produced in Namibia, this was for Namibian students, but we followed a basic principle in every unit. It started in Namibia, and it expanded into the rest of Africa. And then it went into the world. So, started local, and then expanded. I mean, if you just restrict it to what is local, then you're doing the students a disservice. You're narrowing their experience of the world.

Let's talk briefly about methods and approaches. After the rise of some authors such as Kumaravadivelu (1994, 2003), who speaks of Post Method Pedagogy, or Bax (2003) who talks about context centred teaching. The Council of Europe (2001, 2020) talks about an action-oriented approach. What do you think about this transition from the communicative attitudes in the past in the 80s? Do you think there has been a paradigm shift, a real change in approach in the last 20 years? And if so, how has this affected the design of materials?

I think there's a very simple answer to this one, and the answer is no. Unfortunately, there's a lot of talk about content and language integrated approaches, a lot of talk about task-based teaching. There's a lot of talk about these exciting, more open ended, more communicative approaches. But the reality is, when I go into classrooms all over the world, I don't see them in action. What I see are the same lessons I saw 50 years ago. I've been doing this and I'm still watching the same lesson. Well, there are a number of obvious reasons for this. One is the teachers. They developed or they think they developed their ability to speak the language, whichever it is through that sort of approach. Because they used coursebooks which did that and they succeeded. But in almost every case, when you investigate, they haven't learnt English or Spanish from the coursebook. They've learned it from exposure, by traveling, by listening to the radio, by listening to music, by reading books. And they've been stimulated maybe by a good coursebook. I mean, that's what a good coursebook does. It stimulates you to go out and find more. And many of them have done that, but they think they learnt it from the coursebook and from these old approaches; and then I always ask them "how many students were in your class?" "About 40". "How many can speak English?" "Maybe 4 or 5". "There you are then. Right. You succeeded. The others didn't. Why not? Well, you know what is wrong: the others just didn't have any exposure. Didn't have any motivation".



"the reality is it's not changed, partly because teachers are using the same approach they had as students. Partly because we've now got a stereotypical coursebook, which hasn't changed for 40 years. [...] when you look at the coursebook, it's just the same."

So, what I'm getting at here is that the reality is it's not changed, partly because teachers are using the same approach they had as students. Partly because we've now got a stereotypical coursebook, which hasn't changed for 40 years. The blurb has changed. We now talk about authenticity and humanizing and "the global this, the global that". But when you look at the coursebook, it's just the same. Every unit is dominated by a grammar point; even now you'll see the unit is devoted to present perfect and that dominates everything, and the approach is PPP. Presentation, Practice, Production. That hasn't changed for 40 years. Even though the research demonstrates to me conclusively that you can't acquire a language like that, you can't isolate, segment, focus, and then forget and move on to another one. It's not progressive like that. You don't learn one structure and then another, then another. You develop the competence gradually from this massive rich exposure, as I said earlier. But that's what's still happening in the classroom because that's what publishers still produce, and they do it for a very good reason: they are scared of experimenting because it costs so much money these days to develop a coursebook. They risk losing millions if it fails and they risk losing their jobs if it fails. So, publishers are understandably very cautious, very conservative. And the coursebook has an authority, particularly if it's written by native speakers, which is a huge mistake, but it has this authority and people have this reverence towards it. Oh, they're native speakers. They must know what they're doing, which is complete nonsense.

The best-selling coursebook of all time in English is *Headway*. And what other publishers do is try and clone *Headway*. I've actually been engaged by publishers to find out why a coursebook is so successful so they can use those features. So, nothing is changing there. And the other thing is examinations. Examinations dictate to publishers and dictate to teachers and dictate to institutions. And it is much easier to achieve reliability and validity with closed questions. Nothing has really changed, although the testing community are recommending more open-ended approaches to assessment.

I'm actually organizing a conference in Italy in June, which is looking at what we call testing for learning. I'll be saying that any test, whether it's an informal classroom test or a formal exam, should provide learning opportunities. It's not just about grading students and putting them on a list. It's about helping them to learn. But unfortunately, the big examinations have to achieve validity and reliability, and that's their main concern. And to do that, you ask closed questions, filling in the blanks, multiple choice, sentence completion. The questions which don't, in my view, help learners to learn and don't really assess communicative ability.

I have got A-level French. A-level in England is the highest level you can get. I can't speak French, I go to France, and I can't communicate, but I've got A-level French, and there's something wrong. So, it's exams, it's coursebooks, it's teachers own experience, it's teacher trainers own experience, which is perpetuating the way we taught language in the 60s, even.

There's very little difference in those 60 years. Yet in the literature, in books about methodology, it sounds very exciting all these new approaches, but with some exceptions, they're not really being used in school, particularly in government schools. It's just too big a risk. And in government schools, you have inspectors, and you have experts who almost by definition are very experienced and therefore quite old and therefore often not in touch with recent developments. And I remember writing a coursebook in Singapore and it was a new syllabus, very exciting new syllabus. It was very open ended, very humanistic. We wrote a coursebook with this new syllabus in mind. But then the inspectors had to approve it and the inspectors didn't really know the new syllabus. But they knew the old syllabus and they rejected many of our activities as being what they called touchy feely and American and quirky. And they wanted the old traditional approach. And that's what happens all over the world.

It is not uncommon for teachers to prepare learning materials to their own classes with which they often share on the Internet. However, it's not unusual as well for these materials to develop content that do not fully adjust to the curricular regulations or to the professional evaluation system. For instance, secondary school in public government schools? How is it possible to solve this problem that confronts the creativity of the teachers, the possible disparity between students and the official regulations or is not possible at all?

It is possible. And we did it in Indonesia. I was the leader of a World Bank project in Indonesia where in year one of secondary school, we had a massive experiment in each school, in the whole country. Indonesia is a massive country. There was one class which was experimental, and we got permission to use our own approaches. So, these are basically beginners. It's the first year of junior high. So, 11-year-old, or 12-year-old. And instead of following the coursebook, we used initially what we call TPR Plus, Total Physical Response Plus. Where they didn't speak any English for six, six weeks. What they did was listen and respond physically. So, for example, the teacher would tell a story and the students would mime the story as it was being told. The teacher would give a recipe for cooking something and the students would cook it. The teacher would give instructions for painting a mural on the school wall and they painted it. So, they didn't speak. They listened. Understood, shared their responses, spoke together in their first language. And then responded. And the teacher would help if there's a misunderstanding. But the teacher didn't demonstrate. And we started the first six weeks like that. We and we covered almost by accident the entire curriculum in six weeks. Receptively, not productively, after those six weeks.

The approach is based on the silent period approach to language acquisition where young children can go to a new country, not speak a word of the language, and very quickly acquire it, not from speaking it, from listening to it and reacting to it. So, after six weeks, we introduced reading. We took the national language in Indonesia, Bahasa Indonesia, and we looked for all the good friends, all the words in Bahasa which were similar to English. So, things like "TV", and "taxi", or “school” that was "sekolah", so it is very similar. And we wrote stories as teachers and teacher trainers in which 50% of the content words were good friends. So, they recognized 50% of the content words and 50% of the words, as always, were structure words which weren't vital to the meaning. So, we introduced reading not in a very short text, but in a 3 or 4 page story, and they responded in the first language. And then we repeated some of the stories from the TPR Plus phase but expanded them. And then, in groups, they had to continue them and develop the story and eventually write an ending to it. So, we gradually brought in writing. And gradually they started to speak some English themselves without being told to or without being

asked to. And then we started to have communication activities. We used an approach called the scenario approach, in which they were given scenarios to act out.

So, very, very radically different from what was happening in the other classes. At the end of the year, they had to take the same exam as kids in all other classes, who had been taught according to a strict curricular approach, using the textbook that followed the curriculum. And one of our teachers did his PhD on the exam and he found that the students in the experimental classes outperformed all the other students massively on the end of year exam. At the end of year exam was based on the curriculum. That was very much an old-fashioned traditional exam. So, we demonstrated that the exam follows the curriculum, but the teaching and learning doesn't have to. And we got permission to do this, but in many countries, you wouldn't get permission to do it. And in fact, I was at a public meeting, and I was accused of not following the official syllabus. But in fact, the syllabus did say it did not "have to be followed in this sequence". It was written there. But the authority of the syllabus is so great that most people think you've got to follow it. You've got to cover all of it, and you've got to follow it in that order. And that is what restricts the coursebook, it restricts the exam, it restricts the teacher. Whereas in Namibia, where I mentioned we wrote a coursebook, there was a very, very open-ended new syllabus, which didn't list structures to learn, vocabulary to learn. It was quite revolutionary because this was in 1994, I think it was. And it followed very much a competence-based approach before the term competence-based was invented. So, it gave us a lot of a lot of leeway in developing the materials in ways that didn't have to follow a linguistic syllabus.

The explicit teaching of language as a formal object, as a subject of knowledge, is still a matter of debate. What is your opinion on this, bearing in mind that some languages have a structurally more complex morphology than English, for example Spanish, as far as the verbal system is concerned? Can the teaching of language as a content be integrated in a communicative language teaching?

Yes, it can, but as I mentioned earlier, I'd only do it responsively. But by responsive, I mean you are responding to need. I'm convinced after 50 years that simply selecting a feature or an item to teach and then teaching it explicitly is of very little value because it's not connected to learner need or a learner want. It's not perceived as relevant by the learner, even the most conscientious learner; the brain doesn't perceive this as significant because it's not connected to anything. So, it's got to be connected to what they've already done or are doing. So, if, for example, the students are engaged on a task and they're working together on it, I think that as a teacher that my job is to be a resource. So, if the students are struggling with something and they don't know how to express it, that is the time to teach it. So, I would go to that group in response to their request for help. And I might do a little bit of formal, explicit teaching to help them to satisfy that actual need, that actual want at that time. And that's when I think that explicit teaching has the most impact. Or it could be that you've noticed all the groups are having a similar problem. So that would be a good time to have a lesson or part of a lesson devoted to that particular language feature.

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An obvious thing is something like reported speech and direct speech. There's no point in teaching that in isolation when there's no need for it. But if they're writing a story in which they have to report speech, then suddenly there's a need for it. And if they're struggling to do it, then this is the time for the teacher to say, "okay, I noticed yesterday you're having a bit of a problem in writing down what people say in your story. Let's have a look at how we do this". And then you might actually have an explicit lesson on reported speech and direct speech. But the key thing would be when to use reported speech and when to use direct speech. They're not interchangeable, and this is something missing from the coursebook. The coursebook says "you can use direct speech or reported speech". No, you can't. You use the one which is appropriate and most effective in the context, and you do so for a reason. But I would start by getting students to look at examples of reported speech and direct speech and to make discoveries for themselves.

I'll give you a very good example of this. One of my students did this in in Japan, and he said to his class "I want you to draw two pictures. I want you to, first of all, draw *a* wall". So, the students drew a wall. And he said "Okay, and the other piece of paper, draw *the* wall". And very interestingly, the students' "a wall" were sort of very vague and maybe in the distance and not distinctive in any way. But "*the* wall" was prominent at the front of the page, and it was very distinctive and stood out. And he used that as a starting point to teach the difference between the definite and indefinite article. So, he started with giving them an experience and then followed that up with explicit teaching. And this is my approach, so I'm not I'm not denying the value of explicit teaching, but I'm saying it's only of value in assistance in response to a need. So, if you look at the strong version of task-based learning, it actually follows this approach where the students do a task, first of all, without any pre-teaching. And then there is a follow up stage where the teacher might focus on a linguistic or pragmatic problem and then do some teaching. So, it's not either or.

Certainly, in my experience of traveling the world (I think I've observed over a thousand lessons in eight different countries) I don't see any difference between the countries. What I've observed is too much teaching, too much explicit teaching and not enough learning. And it's because the explicit teaching is without a valid objective. You've got to ask, "Why are you doing this? Why are you teaching that now?" "Because it's in the curriculum" or "Because it's the next unit in the coursebook". But that's not a good reason. Do the students need it now? Is it going to be of any value to them now? And nobody's asking those questions. So that's why I don't believe in, as I said earlier, in following the sequence of a coursebook, you use the coursebook in response to what the students need.

What do you think of the commercial MALL apps that have appeared in the last decade, with hundreds of millions of users worldwide, and do you think there are adequate evaluation tools for teachers and educational institutions to evaluate these new materials?

I think my answer is very similar to the one I've been giving all the way through. Which is. These digital approaches particularly with MALL can be extremely useful because they have all sorts of affordances. While they are portable, students and teachers can carry them around to anywhere and they can lend themselves to personalization. So, a teacher could be assessing different learners in different ways. They could be responsive to a need. I saw a course for taxi drivers in Turkey, which was conducted partly in the classroom, but partly through the smartphone. So, the taxi drivers, when they were actually driving their taxis in between passengers, they would receive activities from the teacher on their smartphone, and they would be advised about the next interaction with passengers, what to do. And it was based to a large extent on the teacher listening to recordings of the taxi driver and passenger (with the passenger's consent). And then responsive teaching, responding to what that taxi driver needed in his interaction with passengers. So, they've got these wonderful affordances, but the problem is most but not all the materials I've seen are simply taking what we typically do in the coursebook and putting it in digital form. So, they're ignoring the affordances offered by the medium, and it's disturbing. That can do a lot of damage, in my view. So, you've got to apply the same strict criteria in evaluating digital materials and evaluating materials for the computer or for the smartphone. And the question always has got to be, to what extent is this likely to help the learner, to acquire the language, to acquire communicative competence.

You founded the MATSDA association. Can you tell us a little about the work concept of this association?

Sure. I developed MATSDA in 1993. It was called MATSDA, which means Materials Development Association. Long time since anyone asked me that question. Right. But it was particularly MATSDA because I was trying to get sponsorship from the Japanese car company Mazda. Normally pronounced /masda/, but in Japan it's actually pronounced /matsda/. But unfortunately, they said there wasn't sufficient connection between their product and our association. Anyway, the idea was I was disturbed as I still am, by this disconnection between researchers, publishers, examiners, teachers, and learners. And this was reinforced by some of my experiences in Indonesia, for example, where the examination unit and the curriculum development unit and the teacher development unit were totally separate. There was hardly any connection, hardly any liaison. And I've found that in most of the countries I've worked in. So, the idea was to bring together these different groups of people. And to have conferences and a journal and workshops. Which these supposedly different people would come together to cooperate, to liaise, to work together, to improve the quality of materials for language learning. And that's how we started out and that's what we've been trying to do ever since. And so, we do have an annual conference.

I think I mentioned earlier, we've got one in in Tuscany in June, which is actually on materials for testing. So, there's a different theme each year. And we have a journal called *Folio*, which comes out usually once a year, sometimes twice. And we also run materials workshops for teachers usually three days over a weekend. And what we do is the first day the facilitators, usually myself and somebody else, we actually demonstrate an approach to materials. It could be for listening or for reading or for speaking or for communication. And we demonstrate examples, and we discuss them. Then on the second day in groups, they actually develop materials and monitor other groups with the facilitators acting as a resource. Then on the third day, they present their materials and then they take them back to their institution and disseminate them. They usually hold a meeting with other teachers and present their materials.

We've done that in many different countries around the world. And that, I think, is the most useful thing we do, these three-day workshops. Because of COVID we haven't had one for a couple of years, so that's the idea really, which is to bring together researchers, materials writers, and teachers. It's very important because you get this separation and researchers are often considered totally irrelevant by materials writers and teachers. And the reasons for that are very often because they write very obscure articles which only researchers can understand, and teachers often feel unappreciated. They have tremendous experience, which researchers often don't have. So, it's a question of bringing people together. And it's particularly important these days because if you go back to the 60s and 70s when I started writing materials, all the leading people in materials development were teachers.

If you think back to people like Stevick, Brumfit, Alan Maley, they are people who started off as teachers and then later became materials writers and then became academics. And that's the same with me. I started as a teacher, teacher trainer, taught primary, taught secondary, taught tertiary and only became an academic in later years. So, you know, we people like that have got that experience of teaching, of research, of writing. But a lot of people these days who are researchers, they go straight from undergrad to post grad, they do a BA, do an MA, they do a PhD, they do post PhD, they become a lecturer, they become a senior lecturer, they become a professor. And they just don't have that experience of the classroom which people used to have. It's very important that we bring these groups together. So that's our mission statement, if you like, and I think we've been successful in small ways. We're still a fairly small association and it's very much a voluntary association. And I think we've developed a reputation, for quality and for being stimulating. But unfortunately, we've lost contact with the publishers in the 90s and early years of this century.

We used to get a lot of publishers in our conferences and that was really useful. So, people like Longman, Heinemann and Macmillan used to send publishers to our conferences and they used to do presentations and we used to have debates and arguments, constructive arguments. Nowadays there's so much pressure on publishers for deadlines and to produce and to make money that they don't come anymore. We haven't had publishers for a long time.

Actually, at the conference in Tuscany, we have got a publisher from Yale University Press Oxford University Press who will be presenting, and someone from the British Council. So that's our mission. And we have a website which is simply www.matsda.org, which gives more detail about this and advertises our conference and our journal. And the Journal has been going since 1993. So, there's a rich library of articles on materials development which are available to anyone who joins. You can get past copies.

And I should say it's not devoted to the teaching of English, it's the teaching of any language. So, we get quite a lot of articles on the teaching of Spanish, French, German, etcetera. And some of our conferences have led to books. So, there's a book called *Applied Linguistics and Materials Development*, which came out of a conference we had at the University of Limerick in Ireland, and we've probably produced 4 or 5 books from our conferences on specific themes. Specific topics. So, I'd certainly encourage anyone to join. We have dedicated followers who come to every conference. A lady comes from South Africa, a lady from Pakistan, a guy from Oman, a guy from Japan. They come to every conference because our conference is fairly small and very informal. And we insist that the plenary speakers don't just sort of fly in and give a talk and fly away again. The plenary speakers sit in all the sessions and sit in the groups and join in.

So, it's an opportunity to meet the experts and get to know them and exchange ideas and experience. So, it's a very distinctive format, different from the big conferences, which are very impersonal. So, encourage your colleagues to join MATSDA. Probably, the master conference in 2024. It's likely to be in Barcelona, the University of Barcelona. It'd be a joint conference with an association called ELTRIA. It's not finalized yet, but it's something we're working on. So, you might get some of your teachers to come along.

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