Mediating Innovation through Language Teacher Education

1 Mediating Innovation through Language Teacher Education

In their introduction to an edited volume that documented the implementation of innovations in English Language Teaching in a range of contexts across the globe, Hyland and Wong (2013) wrote, ‘[c]hange seems to be a constant in our professional lives as teachers’ (p. 1). They hereby underscored two important realities with regard to innovating pedagogical practice: there is no avoiding change; and change management resides primarily in the hands of classroom practitioners.

Implementing pedagogical innovation can be an exciting enterprise. Griffiths (2021) noted, ‘with the exception only of the learners themselves, teachers are by far the largest contributors to variance in achievement’ (p. 1). Also, teachers do generally want to be effective and to create powerful quality learning experiences that will make a positive difference for their students (see, e.g., Van den Branden, 2009a, and Burns, 2010, with regard to language teachers and Bergmark et al., 2018, and Perryman & Calvert, 2020, more widely). Taking these perspectives into account, many teachers may be open to innovation and willing to try out new ideas with a view to potentially enhancing students’ learning outcomes.

Implementing pedagogical innovation can also be a tricky business. As innovations begin to be implemented, there are other forces, including elements of tradition, that, for a variety of reasons, can exert strong influence. In some cases, teachers may be openly resistant to innovation because, as Hyland and Wong (2013) put it, ‘[n]ot all teachers are ready for change’ (p. 2). More experienced teachers in particular may present arguments against change in words such as ‘we’ve always done it like this’ (see, e.g., Snyder, 2017).

Writing with regard to the complex interplay that seems to persist between innovation and tradition in a broad range of educational contexts, Tocci et al. (2019) wrote:

chalkboards gave way to whiteboards that are giving way to smartboards, on which teachers broadcast information to students sitting in tablet desks that supplanted wooden desks once bolted to the floor. And at the end of a series of such lessons, students will likely show that they have learned this information by answering multiple-choice questions, no longer on a quiz or scantron form but on a laptop accessing a Web-based proprietary learning management system. (p. viii)

Tocci et al. (2019) concluded, ‘[e]very innovative practice is implemented within the constraints and opportunities of our educational histories’ (p. viii). Or, in words attributed to Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr back in 1849, plus ça
change, plus c’est la même chose – the more things change, the more they stay the same. There remains a persistent struggle between innovation and tradition.

From a theoretical/methodological standpoint, the teaching and learning of additional languages (L2) has been the subject of innovation over several decades. Under the banner of so-called Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), pedagogical practice has, theoretically, moved on from the widely established but strongly teacher-led grammar and accuracy-focused methods represented primarily by grammar-translation and audio-lingualism. In their place has come what Brown (2014) referred to a ‘turn-of-the-century wave of interest’ in more learner-centred pedagogies that, in his view, has brought about three key shifts:

1. language has come to be seen as ‘interactive communication among individuals, each with a sociocultural identity’
2. teachers are now perceived to be ‘treating the language classroom as a locus of meaningful, authentic exchanges among users of language’
3. L2 learning is constructed as ‘the creation of meaning through interpersonal negotiation among learners’ (p. 206).

As will be made clear later in this Element, the momentum towards change in L2 pedagogy actually predates Brown’s (2014) turn-of-the-century claim. Even so, Brown has captured the essence of learner-centred innovation. Gone, it would seem, are the days of ‘chalk and talk’ and ‘drill and kill’ in the L2 classroom. Nonetheless, writing in the specific context of the innovations in L2 pedagogy that appear to have been inspired by Brown’s shifts in emphasis, Van den Branden (2009a) made a critical point. He argued that, despite moves towards innovation, teachers are (literally or metaphorically) ‘still standing in front of a group of students with a piece of chalk in their hand’ (p. 659). Notwithstanding strong advocacy over several decades for more learner-centred and experiential approaches, teachers’ practices in L2 classrooms may continue to be very teacher-led and expository.

The past few years provide a particularly unique example of attempts to innovate and the tendency to push back. From very early in 2020, and as a consequence of COVID-19, education as we know it was substantially overturned on an unprecedented scale. Across the globe, a great deal of teaching and learning was suddenly pivoted from face-to-face to online, and many teachers found themselves compelled to revolutionise their practices. Using technology to enhance L2 teaching and learning is not in itself innovative (see, e.g., Blake, 2011), and enrolments into dedicated online L2 courses is growing. Nevertheless, prior to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, most L2 learning was still facilitated face to face in classrooms, and the sudden move to online,
often made at speed and with limited support and resources, was perceived by many as an abrupt (and not necessarily welcome) response to an emergency situation (see, e.g., Strickler, 2022). In the words of Moser et al. (2020), emergency remote teaching ‘is not, and cannot be, the same as planned online teaching’ (p. 2).

Although it is too early to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the extent to which innovations precipitated by the pandemic were successful and will be sustained longer term, Moser et al. (2020) went on to suggest that, especially in such unexpected and often insufficiently supported circumstances, L2 teachers may return to practices that, from a learner-centred perspective, undermine a communicative and interactive approach to L2 learning – that is, they may ‘revert to low-quality drills, reduce learners’ exposure to and use of the target language, and rely on easy-to-find activities devoid of meaning’ (p. 12).

Is innovation always doomed to resistance, painstakingly slow progress, and a return to the status quo? Not necessarily. Teachers may well be, as Griffiths (2021) identified, the principal contributors to variance in students’ success. Teachers also represent ‘the major source of controllable variance’ (Hattie, 2012, p. 149, my emphasis). This assertion would suggest that innovating teachers’ practices can potentially be achieved with suitable mediation. This is arguably where teacher education comes in.

The purpose of this Element is to consider language teacher education (LTE) as a crucial mediating component in helping language teachers to embrace innovative practices in L2 classrooms. It arises from my own many years of experience working (and talking) with teachers of languages, principally at the pre-service (beginning teacher) level. More particularly, in this Element I consider what I have learned about facilitating innovation as I have reflected on my experiences in and of LTE, in particular with beginning teachers.

The context in which I have mediated innovative practice is with teachers in New Zealand, and with specific regard to the introduction of a revised national curriculum for schools – the New Zealand Curriculum or NZC – mandated from 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2007). Across all subject areas, this revised curriculum reflected and carried forward a momentum to encourage a shift from a traditional top-down teacher-led pedagogical approach to a more innovative bottom-up learner-centred teaching and learning model. In turn, teacher educators have had to consider their models of teacher preparation and support in light of curricular drivers.

The phenomenon through which I have mediated innovative practice with teachers of L2 is so-called task-based language teaching (hereafter, TBLT), a learner-centred and experiential approach to L2 pedagogy that stands in contrast to more established and outmoded teacher-fronted grammar-based
approaches. In the context of *Learning Languages*, a new curriculum area within the NZC, the reform has initiated strong encouragement, at the level of New Zealand’s Ministry of Education, for teachers to consider TBLT as one means of fulfilling curricular expectations. Nonetheless, and despite a history of development dating back to the 1980s, TBLT is perceived by many across the world as ‘still a relatively recent innovation’ (Long, 2016, p. 28). Shifting teachers’ practices towards a more task-based approach is not necessarily straightforward.

A few caveats to present at the start. This Element is about:

1. innovation in L2 teaching through the example of TBLT, but not principally about TBLT itself (see Jackson, 2022, for this)
2. my work as a language teacher educator, but not purely about language teacher educators, who they are and what they do (see Barkhuizen, 2019, for an exploration of language teacher educator identity)
3. my reflections on pedagogical effective practice at the levels of the L2 classroom and the LTE space, but not primarily about teacher reflective practice (see Farrell, 2021, in that regard).

This Element therefore builds on aspects of others that have been published in this series, but takes their arguments in a new direction. Barkhuizen (2019), for example, noted a paucity of focus on the *teacher educators themselves* in the scholarship around LTE. He cited Peercy et al. (2019) who argued, ‘[w]e currently know relatively little about teacher educators as *learners* and as *reflective scholars* open to examining their own practice and research’ (p. 2, my emphases). This Element provides the space and opportunity for me to step back from what I did over a decade of work in school-level LTE, and to take a self-reflective look back at that work. I thereby consider and evaluate what seemed to work and what seemed less successful and draw some conclusions about practice as ‘a *learner* of LTE’ (Peercy & Sharkey, 2020, p. 106, my emphasis). What I present here may therefore be framed as a *self-study of teacher education practices* or S-STEP – a study approach that focuses on the self as the central player in the effectiveness of teacher education.¹

It should be acknowledged at the outset that, just as innovations in teaching practice may often be hindered by the influence of traditional thinking and practices, S-STEP as a methodology stands as innovative in comparison with more established research approaches. S-STEP is not yet considered a mainstream or widespread methodological paradigm, at least not in the field

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¹ The acronym S-STTEP is increasingly found in the literature. It denotes the addition of *teaching* alongside teacher education. Following Peercy and Sharkey (2020), I use S-STEP in this Element, but I could equally have used S-STTEP.
of LTE. As Rose (2019) put it, it is a kind of research that ‘has yet to make a major impact in language teaching research’ (p. 901). This Element takes some steps to address and to close that gap, but is, in itself, an experiment in innovation and a somewhat risky enterprise. Nevertheless, I see this enterprise as appropriate for what I would like to achieve in an Element whose focus is on mediating innovation through LTE. My overarching goal in this contribution to the series is to address the complex issue of facilitating pedagogical innovation among beginning teachers via initial teacher education (ITE), through my own retrospective reflections on my own work as a pre-service language teacher educator.

1.1 The Aim and Organisation of This Element

This Element has five main sections:

1. In this first section, I introduce the topic of innovation in language teaching and the focus of this Element on myself and my own practices as a language teacher educator. I go on to present the essential tension in practice that underpins innovation in classrooms – teacher-led contrasted with learner-centred – and consider what this tension means for developments to L2 pedagogical practice. Using TBLT as an example of innovation, the section concludes with an overview of four contexts across the globe where attempts have been made to innovate practice through TBLT, as well as the challenges that have emerged.

2. The focus of the second section is on LTE and a consideration of two key elements that I argue must be taken into consideration for LTE programmes to be successful – teacher cognition and reflective practice. I go on to relate these two key elements to S-STEP as a means of enabling me as a teacher educator to take account of my own beliefs about effective pedagogy and effective LTE alongside critical reflection on my own practices as a teacher educator.

3. Section 3 introduces the New Zealand context which is the focus of the LTE work that is presented in this Element. The section takes a look at what I did as a language teacher educator working with pre-service teachers of languages by presenting background information on the case in question. I briefly describe my initial two years in ITE (2008–2009) and the core aspects of my work at that time. I include an overview of the qualification within which I worked as a teacher educator and the LTE course that was a key component of this qualification. I incorporate a brief description of a preliminary in-depth investigation (2010–2011) that gave impetus to initial amendments that I made to the course (2012). I introduce these amendments,
including the teaching as inquiry model that underpinned the reflective practices of the course participants and the coursework that was aligned to the teaching as inquiry approach.

4. Section 4 provides brief accounts of four different studies that I undertook in the course of a six-year period (2012–2017), alongside several changes that I made to my own practices during that time as a consequence of reflecting on the cumulative evidence I was collecting. A crucial component of this descriptive overview and outline of changes to practice is the presentation of four short vignettes, one from each study. Each vignette is designed to provide illustrative dimensions of the data that I collected during the six-year period and that formed the essential sources for my reflection on my own work as a teacher educator and how that work might need to change.

5. The final section, Section 5, discusses the findings of the longitudinal research, summarises my developing practices as a language teacher educator during this time, and relates these to S-STEP. I use this discussion to consider the implications for future LTE. A concluding section summarises my own developments as a language teacher educator and LTE researcher.

1.2 Innovating the Classroom – from Teacher-Led to Learner-Centred

Griffiths (2021) argued that there was a time in history when the teacher was seen as ‘the unquestioned fount of all knowledge . . . and source of authority’. She continued, ‘it could probably be said that for centuries, if not millennia, teacher-centred was the educational norm’ (p. 1, my emphasis). Griffiths named the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius as one representative of the top-down, teacher-led pedagogical model. In light of its considerable historical precedence, this approach where the teacher is seen as the sage on the stage is very entrenched in teachers’ thinking and practices. It is arguably often perceived as the way to manage effective teaching and learning in classrooms.

A contrasting learner-centred educational model can also be traced back many centuries. The so-called Socratic method, which utilises collaborative argument and dialogue through posing and answering questions to encourage critical thinking and comprehension, owes its name (if not its genesis) to the Greek philosopher Socrates. In a more learner-centred approach, the teacher becomes the guide on the side, drawing out from learners their own thinking and understanding.

It seems, then, that two contrasting philosophical approaches to effective teaching and learning have been around for an exceptionally long time. In recent times, the teacher-led approach has been informed by a behaviourist theory of
learning, a psychological theoretical perspective that was particularly influential in the 1940s and 1950s, principally in the United States. From a behaviourist perspective, the teacher represents the expert who stands at the front of the class and delivers knowledge to students. The students’ role is passively to receive the knowledge the teacher imparts. This knowledge will subsequently be tested in summative ways.

Beginning in the 1960s, however, debates about effective teaching and learning began to shift educationalists’ thinking away from a behaviourist stance to a standpoint informed by social and experiential theories of learning. Very early significant contributors in the development of a learner-centred approach had been the American psychologist John Dewey (1859–1952), the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896–1980), and the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934). The challenge to behaviourism emerging in the 1960s was further influenced by the theorising of Jerome Bruner (1915–2016) who was highly influential in the development of learner-centred and ‘discovery learning’ focused curricula (e.g., Bruner, 1960, 1966, 1973).

From a social/experiential or constructivist perspective, the teacher moves into the role of facilitator, working with individuals and groups of learners whose own role is actively to seek out knowledge and understanding for themselves through their own inquiries, and as they engage in interaction with others. Group work and collaborative learning may be central components, and assessments may be more embedded into the teaching and learning process.

It would seem that both pedagogical approaches (top-down and bottom-up) have considerable historical precedent. That said, a student-focused pedagogical approach may be perceived by many as a newer or improved way to manage effective teaching and learning in comparison with a teacher-centric model (e.g., Schweisfurth, 2013). Weimer’s (2013) summary of a range of studies led her to conclude that, when compared with findings from teacher-led classrooms, there existed ‘a convincing commendation of learner-centered approaches … [which] promote a different, deeper, and better kind of learning’ (p. 33).

The move to learner-centredness is all very well in theory. Several major problems have arisen in practice. One crucial problem is that the shift to learner-centredness has been contested by some theorists and researchers. Kirschner et al. (2006), for example, concluded from an analysis of a range of studies that research supporting a learner-focused approach was lacking. They argued that, on the contrary, evidence from controlled studies ‘almost uniformly supports direct, strong instructional guidance rather than constructivist-based minimal guidance’ (p. 83). Citing Kirschner et al., Coe et al. (2014) argued that a social/experiential approach ‘is not supported by research evidence, which...
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broadly favours direct instruction’. Coe et al. went on to assert, ‘if teachers want them [learners] to learn new ideas, knowledge or methods they need to teach them directly’ (p. 23).

It should be noted that the arguments put forward by Kirschner et al. were disputed (see, e.g., Hmelo-Silver et al., 2007; and Schmidt et al., 2007). It should also be noted that the constructivist classroom is not a ‘a teacher-free zone’ where group work and discovery learning ‘work their effect without any need for mediation’ (East, 2012, p. 82). The teacher remains vital to the classroom endeavour. Indeed, Griffiths (2021) argued that, despite an apprehension that learner-centred pedagogies may have made teachers effectively redundant, ‘here we still are!’ (p. 1).

The ongoing importance of teachers in the educational endeavour raises the second critical problem of a shift to learner-centredness – that it has been resisted by teachers in many contexts. That is, from a pedagogical perspective a struggle persists between constructivist learner-centred ideas and a traditional behaviourist-informed perspective on teaching and learning that has dominated classroom practices for many years. In this sense, therefore, constructivism in education, and all that this means for educational practice, remains innovative.

The clash between innovation and tradition, at the levels of both theory and practice, creates a highly complex situation in which teachers might try to put pedagogical innovation into practice. In what follows, I consider what all this has meant for the L2 classroom.

1.3 Innovating the Language Classroom – Communicative Approaches

Rose (2019) identified the communicative movement of the 1970s that gave rise to CLT as the most recent major attempt at innovation in L2 classrooms. In my own writings, I have often drawn on Benson and Voller’s (1997) description of the advent of CLT because I regard it as a succinct and to-the-point portrayal of what was happening at the time of its emergence. They wrote:

From time to time, a new concept enters the field of language education as an alternative method or approach, but rapidly grows in significance to the point where it comes fundamentally to condition thinking throughout the field. Such was the case with Communicative Language Teaching . . . which began life in the late 1960s as an alternative to ‘structural’ and ‘grammar-translation’ models of teaching, but rapidly became an axiom of language teaching methodology. The question ceased to be, ‘Should we be teaching languages communicatively?’, and became, ‘How do we teach languages communicatively?’ As part of this paradigm shift, other concepts
Benson and Voller’s (1997) positive portrayal of the advent of CLT belies significant tensions in practice. Citing Medgyes (1986), Rose (2019) noted that CLT was met at the time with strong resistance among teachers. Medgyes had argued that what seemed to be needed in the communicative classroom was ‘a teacher of extraordinary abilities’ who ‘above all . . . must be learner-centred’. Medgyes went on to refer to learner-centredness in what can be construed as somewhat scathing terms—it was, in his words, ‘the great gimmick of today’ and ‘tagged on to every single language-teaching approach, method, methodology, procedure, and technique, communicative and non-communicative alike’ (p. 107).

As Rose (2019) revisited Medgyes’ (1986) arguments, he drew the conclusion that it seemed that the attempt at innovation heralded by CLT was being imposed in a top-down way on the basis of researchers’ claims about what was effective pedagogically, without attempts to engage teachers in the discussion. As a consequence, Rose noted that uptake of CLT was relatively slow. Furthermore, a teacher-led version of CLT, which became known as the ‘weak’ model, has persisted over many years. By the 1980s, weak CLT had become ‘more or less standard practice’ (Howatt, 1984, p. 279). It is, furthermore, a practice that continues to find expression in contemporary L2 classrooms.

One example of practice that has persisted into the present is the very familiar classroom sequence of Presentation/Practice/Production, or PPP. Put simply, in the PPP sequence, the teacher (as expert) first explains a grammatical principle to the class in a direct, teacher-led way. Then, the students practise the targeted rule through different kinds of grammar practice exercise (such as fill in the gap with the correct grammatical form; match parts of sentences together; transform a series of sentences from one grammatical form to another – e.g., active to passive, present to past). Finally, the students utilise the rule in some kind of communicative activity (e.g., a role-play to practise buying food and drink in a café). In the traditional PPP classroom, there is limited (if any) focus on creative use of language, and limited (or no) opportunity to use language beyond the confines of the practised rule.

PPP remains quite entrenched in the teaching and learning of languages in many contexts, arguably because it represents a straightforward, and tried and tested, instructional sequence. It has, for example, been central to LTE programmes such as the Cambridge Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA). However, a stronger emphasis on more
constructivist pedagogies has witnessed several changes to practice in the L2 classroom and has precipitated what many would regard as exciting and powerful opportunities for effective learning to occur (e.g., the three changes to practice I cited earlier from Brown, 2014). At a minimum, a shift from teacher-led to learner-centred has given rise to more open and creative communicative activities in the Production stage of a PPP lesson.

More particularly, a shift towards more learner-centred approaches has given rise to language teaching and learning approaches such as TBLT. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of TBLT as a communicative approach that has continued the push towards learner-centredness, in particular as a contrast to the teacher-dominated practices of weak CLT or PPP. That is, TBLT is built on an educational philosophy that sees ‘important roles for holism, experiential learning, and learner-centered pedagogy’ and on constructivist theories of learning that encourage ‘the interactive roles of the social and linguistic environment in providing learning opportunities, and scaffolding learners into them’ (Norris et al., 2009, p. 15). The central construct of TBLT is the task itself as something that language learners carry out for themselves (see, e.g., Jackson, 2022).

Despite the potential of TBLT to realise a communicative agenda in learner-centred and experiential ways, TBLT remains not part of the mainstream. As Ellis (2018) expressed it, TBLT (at least in its most experiential forms) ‘can conflict with teachers’ and learners’ beliefs about language, leading at best to doubts and at worst to rejection of TBLT’ (p. 274). Bygate (2020) put it in this way: TBLT has yet to live up to its aspiration and potential as ‘a free-standing approach to second language education’, endorsed by all those who have a stake in the language teaching and learning endeavour. There remains, therefore, ‘a fundamental challenge in translating the TBLT project from research and theory to the widespread practice that its proponents claim for it’ (p. 276). Taking into account that, forty years after its emergence, TBLT remains ‘a contested endeavour’ (East, 2017b), this makes TBLT a useful example of the tensions that emerge between innovation and tradition, paving the way for a consideration of where LTE comes in.

1.4 Contexts Where TBLT Has Been Introduced – to Greater or Lesser Effect

In East (2021a), I considered, for illustrative purposes, five contexts across the globe where, in one way or another, innovation with regard to TBLT has found some traction but has also met with resistance from tradition. These illustrate attempts to implement TBLT ideas at the school level, alongside outcomes of