Reflections on more than four decades of observation and involvement in the continuing development of English teaching and learning.

Anthony Robins

1. Introduction

As elsewhere in this collection of papers indicates, my career in English language teaching has been long and somewhat varied. Although the majority of my experience has been in tertiary education, I have also had experience with younger learners, especially in Greece, and with adult learners, other than those in a university environment, both in the U.K. and Japan. In this paper, by way of reflection, I would like to attempt to consider and encompass developments in four particular areas, which I have addressed at various times in past papers: approaches and materials, technology, the rise of English as a lingua franca, and the time for children to commence second language learning.

2. Approaches and Materials

I start this paper by considering developments in teaching and learning materials over the period I have been a practitioner. Communicative approaches may have been more belatedly embraced in Japan compared with many other countries, in particular due to teachers' concerns with such factors as lack of training, class sizes and a disconnect with entrance examinations, as reported by writers including Sakui (2004) and Nishino (2008). However, there has more recently been a greater acceptance which can be seen to be related to changes in English courses at junior and senior high school levels and increasing provision of English classes at elementary school level, which I return to later. Such communicative

approaches have been underpinning my teaching throughout, based on my training, both at universities and elsewhere. In contrast, my own foreign language learning in my schooldays had very much involved a classic 'grammar-translation' approach with Latin, while with French and German, it had been a combination of that and a later development, which I will come to.

As for my own teaching, functional/notional approaches dominated syllabi in my early days, endorsing the description from Scrivener (1994) that, "in the late 1970s and 1980s many courses and coursebooks used a functional syllabus, grouping language by the purpose for which it could be used (e.g., the language of greeting or requesting or apologizing), in contrast to previous grammar based syllabi" (p.21). However, I have also always seen a major role for topics in organizing syllabi, as they provide cohesiveness and synergy. Such a focus on topics helps enable content to play the key role which I believe it deserves, particularly but not only at tertiary level. I come back to roles for content later.

The development of English language teaching during my career has seen a kind of continuous overlay of various methods and approaches, without previous ones being totally dispensed with. That overlay is reflected in how coursebooks have developed during this period. They have also been transformed in many ways, both positive and less positive. Material has been progressively presented in more sophisticated ways, with more 'inviting' visual content and with audio and visual input shifting from CD-ROMs through DVDs to streamed and other online content. There has been the possibility of greater preciseness in selecting examples of language to be focused on through access to corpus data, which has also underpinned EFL dictionaries, with such corpus sources enabled by enhanced technology.

However, there has also been a rise in rather clone-like 'identikit' coursebooks, increasingly available in digital formats, featuring standard

numbers of units, which are not always conducive to offering the choices required for varying lengths and types of courses. This is partly due to the consolidation of publishers into a small number of 'big players'. In addition, in their desire or need to steer clear of challenging various sensibilities around the world, publishers have avoided controversial topics which, as I have often found, can actually lead to more profound student engagement. Instead, such coursebooks have become more impersonal to a certain degree, partly through a decline in coursebooks featuring strong storylines with characters, popular in my earlier teaching days. While at lower proficiency levels, useful but rather anodyne topics such as food and festivals endure, ecological and technological topics have proliferated at higher proficiency levels.   In fact, perhaps they have become over-represented. I have that view in spite of my own desire to encourage 'green' approaches to living and admiration of exciting and innovative new technology.

3. Embracing technology
  Referring to technology brings me to my own use, even embrace, of it in my teaching. As with others, my access to technology as a tool in teaching English has been transformed in many ways. As a student, I had actually personally experienced much earlier developments. At secondary school, the then 'state of the art' language laboratory contributed to our study of French once a week.   Useful for pattern practice drills, based on the behaviourist influenced audiolingual method, but ultimately rather inflexible and tainted elsewhere by marketing of such expensive equipment to developing countries with inadequate training or maintenance, it has long been superseded as subsequent technological developments have allowed both greater flexibility and autonomy.
  Reflecting on technology available to use in my teaching in Greece, prior to coming to Japan, that was basically limited to the all-important

cassette player for coursebook related material, such as dialogues. As for my own access to the rest of the world outside the classroom, it was still the era of the short-wave radio! It was during my period teaching a variety of courses, both general and business-oriented, in Tokyo that the future beckoned. It offered me my first exposure to C.A.L.L. (Computer Assisted Language Learning). While it was 'a taste of the future', negative features were already apparent, with technical challenges and lack of support to deal with those, as well as the relatively unsophisticated programs at that time rejecting many 'right answers', to the frustration of students. Autonomy and flexibility for them were still far off.

I have just referred to short-wave radio as a previous link to the outside world. My earlier days in Japan saw greater access to video input, but more importantly, to satellite broadcasting (BS) for wider content and then to live videoconferencing platforms such as i-Sight (Apple) and Skype. I welcomed those as an opportunity for students to interact with students and teachers at other universities and attitudes to them were explored in Robins (2007). I wrote then that, "it is desired to develop it (video conferencing) from the present rather 'ad hoc' use, albeit with close connections to curriculum content, to become a more integrated part of courses" (p.62). That wish was to come true, but it arrived with the unexpected and challenging Covid-19 era which began in 2020 and which I discussed in Robins (2021). In contrast, just recently, in this online era, university students in a class showed no recognition of familiarity with the once mighty language laboratory (LL), referred to above. They are now the 'digital natives' who have experienced the developments of the last decade that have provided technology which has truly provided 'tools' for the student. These tools allow flexibility and more importantly, enhanced autonomy, not least through the omnipresent device, the smartphone. Terms such as 'digital learning' and 'mobile learning' are now certainly more appropriate than C.A.L.L., as I have indicated (Robins, 2021, p.16).

The challenges of selecting from a surfeit of opportunities for a wide range of input rather than a shortage is now an issue.

However, there is still the risk of such potential autonomy being overridden by excessively top-down approaches. This is often exemplified by one technological development, the IWB (Interactive Whiteboard), which I have used occasionally. While it provides for sophisticated delivery of content, as Carrier (2017) writes, apart from the "learning curve" challenges which have to be faced, "For many teachers, it felt like the imposition of an old-fashioned teacher frontal lockstep kind of methodology that they were trying to move away from" (p.4). Avoiding this scenario means giving access to opportunities to use such equipment to all in a learning community, whether teachers or students.

More widely, there is a need for acceptance of an educational environment where the teacher's role and the traditional classroom is increasingly under unprecedent pressure. As Hockley and Dudeney (2017) indicate, "In the teaching profession, the rise of MOOCs (massive open online courses), learning analytics and big data, digital assessment, and the wealth of learning content that is now freely available have led to an erosion of the traditional role of the teacher as the only possible source of knowledge" (p.236-237). Chik and Briedbach (2014) indicate that teachers need to be prepared for this, when they write, "the awareness of technology-mediated learner autonomy needs to be integrated in language teacher education to better situate second language education in the 21st century" (p.100). To return to my earlier reference to the era of increasing acceptance of communicative language teaching, this was often interlinked with the view of the teacher as facilitator, particularly with task-based teaching (e.g., Willis and Willis (2007)). Such a role, which I hope I have played, as facilitator in a positive way, can continue to remain a valuable one to enable teachers to adapt their roles to match the transformative technology continuing to be developed.

4. The rise of English as a or the lingua franca

The wider access to content referred to above, whether through satellite broadcasting or more recently utilizing streaming via smartphones, has made a further contribution to the diffusion of English. It was once 'exported' through its roots in colonialism, described by Ferguson (2004) as, "perhaps the most important single export of the last 300 years" (p.366), and continued its rise with the influence of American hegemony. However, it has undoubtedly gone beyond being an 'export' to become 'self-sustaining'. Thus, it can be seen as no longer relying on or even dominated by the original 'sources' of the language. While critics, such as Pennycook (1994), would still consider that it is far from such a state of being neutral or unencumbered by historical baggage, as Bragg (2003) has written, "Other Englishes are being formed all the time" (p.307). Those 'other Englishes' have had greater and greater recognition as unique 'varieties'. As Crystal (2005) foresaw, "the English of England is today a tiny minority dialect of 'World English' (as he then termed it), and getting tinier by the decade" (p.13). Furthermore, twenty-five years ago, Culpeper (1997), opined that, "With the international spread of English it is perhaps more appropriate now to speak of WORLD ENGLISHES (his capitals)" (p.76), although the term had already been in academic use for some time. Nevertheless, even if the place of varieties of English and their diversity is now more greatly recognized, that can still be at the expense of other languages. Therefore, it is necessary to continue to strive to recognize, as Griffiths (2021) does, the dangers of loss of linguistic diversity. As he reminds us, 'Languages are deeply enmeshed with culture, they link people to their ancestors and help maintain traditions, oral histories and ways of thinking about the world" (p.5).

For the teacher of English, recognition of diversity across Englishes has most greatly been exemplified by changes in attitudes to the 'native speaker' as teacher and the rise in academic study disciplines around

'World Englishes' and ELF (English as a Lingua Franca). I may be unable to cast off my image as 'native speaker', but I feel that I have tried to reflect these changes by consciously and frequently using content, particularly video clips, featuring speakers from a wide range of geographical and other backgrounds using English, and integrating international students into my classes. The latter have long been 'in person', but more recently online, notably through Indonesian students joining my classes by 'Zoom'. In addition, I have supported 'non-native' speakers in their desire to gain language teaching opportunities, which give them the chance to present themselves as role-models, having often themselves displayed excellent language learning capabilities.

However, a love of one's 'mother tongue' can lead to a degree of defensiveness about 'ownership' of English, in addition to some concern for the future of English on the lines indicated by Jennifer Jenkins in Elmes (2001). Jenkins is described as seeing, "the old native varieties as the foundations of a great house, rising higher and higher as more floors are added. She considers these new and non-standard varieties will help shore up the old creaking structure" (p.110). This echoes McArthur (1987) more than thirty years ago, as he referred to, "the anxiety among many that the great historical monolith of the English language has begun to crack" (p.9). He went on to discuss parallels with the fate of Latin, although ultimately delineating limits to those parallels.

Another key issue relating to its potential as a true 'lingua franca' is the disparity in access to opportunities to study English, or indeed other second languages, based on income, whether in developed or developing countries. This creates a kind of 'language learning access divide', akin to the well-known 'digital divide' and it has even led recently to restrictions on home tutoring and 'cram schools' in China, with the rationale that such provision is putting too much financial pressure on middle-income families. In a wider geographic sphere, there are criticisms of the power wielded by

international English testing organizations, as in Pearson (2020). He criticizes the costs for students, use of such tests in areas of life that they were not intended for, and in connection with the issue being discussed in this section, whether the varieties of English in use globally are reflected in these tests.

How about specifically in Japan? 'Diversity' has increasingly been seen in school coursebooks and also with the rise of the ALT (Assistant Language Teacher), first offering 'native speaker' diversity and more recently, 'non-native speaker' diversity. That is not without its challenges, including defining their roles in the classroom, as addressed by Mahoney (2020). However, more generally, English teaching still has a need to adapt further to reflect the changes in the nature and role of English which I have discussed above. As Yamada (2015) indicates, there remains, "attachment to English (which) is strongly linked to the postwar foreign language curriculum with English as the dominant/powerful language and American culture as a desirable culture to be learned" (p.31). As research (e.g., Matsuda (2002), Takahashi (2020)) shows, this focus can then influence students to see this as the ideal. Furthermore, in Japan it is also necessary to continue to consider whether its 'foreign language curriculum' should equate so closely with English, rather than offering the wider range of foreign language learning opportunities which the name implies.

5. Early Learning

Finally, I consider the debate which has continued for much of my time teaching in Japan, the role of English teaching at elementary school level, as to whether its inclusion is positive and at what age it should start. I addressed it more than fifteen years ago (Robins, 2005) and found in research based on a survey of elementary school teachers then that there was support for the idea that it could be 'subtractive', taking limited time in a busy curriculum away from other subjects, notably Japanese, rather

than offering extra opportunities to students through being 'additive'. Such attitudes were markedly different from my earlier teaching environment in Greece where, even then, there was greater acceptance of the perceived benefits of studying English at a young age. In viewing such benefits, I can actually return to my own foreign language experience when young. Apart from my time studying French at secondary school level, which I referred to earlier, I also studied French at elementary school level. My schooldays at that level coincided with a period when such study was being promoted in the U.K. I regard it as having been an experience which was 'additive' rather than 'subtractive' and feel that I benefited from the more global outlook which that opportunity began to offer me. However, that was before the 'Primary French in the Balance' report, subsequently described by Burstall (1975), led to the government withdrawing support for such initiatives, essentially based on a poor cost-benefit analysis.

A greater consideration in Japan has been a continuing perception of a lack of specialized teachers and a crowded curriculum at elementary school level. One solution which I support to deal with this issue is the use of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), where time spent learning another subject can be utilized to make use of English. As I indicated when writing in 2020, elementary school level would appear to be a potentially optimum period, as the educational culture at elementary school seems to provide more flexibility than at subsequent age levels. While the teacher at elementary school is still seldom a second language teaching specialist, at this level he or she is a homeroom teacher who is knowledgeable about covering a range of subjects which can allow the kind of synergy which can make CLIL work. In addition, the progressive increase in the number of years where English is offered at elementary school seems to necessitate a wider and deeper provision of both input and output compared with in the past when English at this level had a purely

introductory role. CLIL can offer such depth, while also providing a place for both the mother tongue and the target second language to be used. However, I also indicated the challenges CLIL brings, with the amount of preparation involved, the need to gain acceptance of a CLIL program and, perhaps the greatest challenge, the relatively high-level language skills required by teachers involved in such programs (Robins, 2020, p.212 & p.217). That challenge reinforces the need for continuing development of training opportunities. While the example I discussed involved mathematics, other subjects can lend themselves to providing positive CLIL environments, with Cenoz (2015) referring to social science and Ryan (2020) considering both mathematics and physical education.

6. Conclusion

Addressing such wide-ranging but interconnected issues in a paper of this length is inevitably going to leave many points unaddressed. However, it has provided me with an opportunity to reflect on some of the key issues which have had impacts on my teaching in various direct and indirect ways. That teaching is not totally over yet, so I look forward to being involved in developments in these and other areas for at least somewhat longer and to observing with interest the continuing debate on them as they provide further challenges and opportunities for both learners and teachers.

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