

# Innovation in Language Teaching and Learning

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The study of innovation in language education began to generate particular interest only from the 1980s onwards, with important early contributions including Kennedy (1988) from a UK perspective and Henrichsen (1989) from a US one. The former was significant in establishing the management of educational change as an emerging subdiscipline of applied linguistics. Before that time, the complexities and challenges of introducing educational change were often underestimated or insufficiently problematized. In recent decades, interest in the topic of innovation has grown substantially, particularly in general education in the work of scholars such as Michael Fullan (e.g., Fullan, 2001) and Andy Hargreaves (e.g., Hargreaves, 2003), and also in language education, as evidenced by recent books: Murray (2008), Alderson (2009), and Wedell (2009).

For the purposes of this entry, I define innovation as an attempt to bring about educational improvement by doing something which is perceived by implementers as new or different. I use it interchangeably with the term "change." Examples of innovation in language education over the past few decades include new pedagogic approaches, such as task-based language teaching; changes to teaching materials; technological developments, such as computer-assisted language learning; and alternative assessment methods, such as the use of portfolios. A further major strand of innovation concerns the expansion of language education in various EFL contexts; for example, English in the school sector starting increasingly early at elementary school level.

The management of innovation is a critically important field because the development of education rests in its hands. The litany of failures of educational reforms indicates that an enhanced understanding and implementation of the principles and practice of the management of educational change would make a major contribution to the discipline. The wider field of applied linguistics needs to pay greater heed to the insights that innovation theory and practice can contribute (Waters, 2009).

The main rationales for change are indicative of the centrality and ubiquity of innovations. Governments, school managers, teachers, or all of these want to make education more effective for students. Innovations may help schools to keep up-to-date with the latest developments or research findings, and can also be a force to encourage educational equity and fairer opportunities for diverse sections of society. Educational change may also contribute to the development of economic competitiveness. There are less idealistic reasons for innovation too. Governments and policy makers sometimes want to create a facade of being up-to-date or to create an aura of activity. Changes may also be made so as to strengthen accountability systems or for short-term political advantage (Wedell, 2009). In the globalized world, governments also sometimes feel encouraged or impelled to indulge in policy borrowing, the adoption of innovations which other industrialized countries have been implementing.

Innovation is extremely difficult to engineer successfully, and the classic work by Rogers (2003) outlines five oft-cited factors which influence end users' responses: relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability. Reforms which are perceived

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by individuals as having greater relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, and observability and less complexity are likely to be adopted more rapidly and efficiently than other innovations. Much of the applied linguistics literature documents failed (or relatively unsuccessful) attempts at innovation. While on the one hand this is probably a realistic appraisal, it is not always clear precisely how success or failure is judged or perceived. Most reforms have positive, negative, and unanticipated impacts. Innovations which do not achieve all their (overambitious?) objectives should not necessarily be classified as failures. The success of innovations should be gauged by the extent to which students are making more learning progress than before the innovation was implemented (Van den Branden, 2009).

The main barriers facing innovation can be broadly grouped into three categories:

- *Teacher-related*: lack of teacher ownership or understanding of the innovation; change not congruent with existing teacher values and beliefs; negative attitudes, often engendered by the additional workload entailed; teachers are often emotionally bound up in existing practices; and change can be personally threatening.
- *System-related*: poor communication and lack of mutual trust between change agents and frontline implementers; putting too much emphasis on the intricacies of the innovation itself and not enough on consideration of how it could be implemented; lack of appropriate resources to support the innovation; insufficient professional development and support for teachers; failure to bridge the gap between rhetoric and reality; cynicism engendered by previous failed attempts at innovation; failure to align a pedagogic innovation with the requirements of high-stakes examinations.
- *School-related*: lack of supportive culture for change; conservative forces within a school; lack of support or understanding from senior management; inadequate school-based resources; student difficulties in adapting to teacher change, particularly if the rationale has not been persuasively articulated.

Markee (1997) makes the useful distinction between primary innovations (changes to teaching materials or pedagogy) and secondary innovations (organizational changes which provide enabling support for the primary innovation). One of the reasons for lack of success in implementing change is failure to promote secondary innovations.

While much of the above applies to most educational changes regardless of the specific discipline, particular issues in language education are contextual and cross-cultural considerations. Reforms in language education, for example, often involve exporting innovations originating in the Anglophone world to developing countries in which English is a second or foreign language. It is sometimes the case that pedagogic values, such as learner-centered, communicative, or process-oriented approaches, clash with different, though equally valid, philosophies which may put greater emphasis on whole-class direct instruction, examination preparation, or more product-oriented teaching. A classic work exploring some of these dilemmas, using data from Egyptian classrooms, is Adrian Holliday's (1994) book. More recently, Wedell (2009) has argued that we need to put people and contexts at the core of the innovation process, and similarly Carless (2011) puts forward the case for "contextually grounded approaches" to pedagogic innovation. A key theme in all three of these works is that innovations need to be designed in ways which are receptive to and respectful of both local classroom realities and wider national cultures.

In view of the multiple challenges facing the implementation of innovations, it is worth considering under what circumstances there are prospects for success. The following conditions act as facilitating factors:

- The innovation is not overly ambitious and has support from sufficient relevant secondary innovations.
- It has appropriate time frames and seeks to facilitate early, small-scale success which generates momentum and positive sentiments.
- Teachers are brought on board at an early stage, and feel belonging and ownership that is of more than a token nature. These teachers may act as brokers, “champions,” or opinion leaders.
- Effective institutional-based professional development and support are built into the project.
- The innovation is contextually and culturally appropriate, and does not promote values which are incongruent with those of implementers.
- Problem-solving strategies are built into the project and there are change-management strategies to tackle challenges arising.

Conditions such as the above are probably rarely present in the complex arena of educational change. Following from this, a potential way forward for innovation in applied linguistics would be the dissemination of more exemplars of good practice. We have learned much from past failures and may learn even more from further stories of success. A valuable contribution comes from documented accounts of successful medium- or large-scale innovations in the school sector. A useful example is a discussion of the implementation of task-based teaching of Dutch as a second language (Van den Branden, 2006) in schools in Flanders. In this case, strategies to promote the innovation included teacher education which itself incorporated experiential task-based principles and coaching based in the classrooms of teacher participants. The latter is especially valuable in view of its emphasis on supporting classroom implementation of the innovation.

By way of conclusion, I briefly suggest some avenues of further research and ways forward for innovation in applied linguistics. There is a need for more longitudinal studies of innovation, and particularly useful would be studies of the sustainability of innovations or how they are modified over time. Retrospective analyses could also be valuable, such as studies which review how an innovation moves through stages of adoption, implementation, and then abandonment, renewal, or institutionalization. Finally, more contributions on the management of innovation in language education from scholars outside the main Anglophone countries would be particularly welcome (Waters, 2009).

**SEE ALSO:** Language Assessment in Program Evaluation

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#### Suggested Readings

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