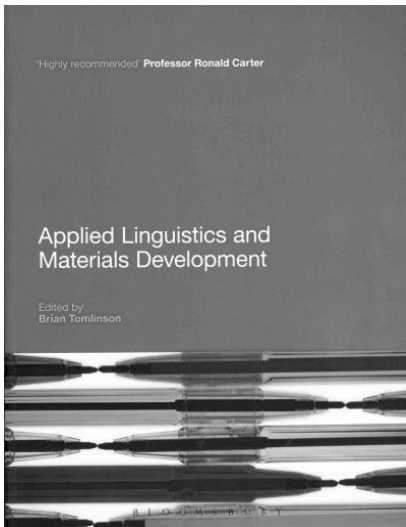🖶

Applied Linguistics and Materials Developments

Brian Tomlinson (ed.)

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Recensione di Paola-Maria Caleffi*

Applied linguists and language educators are well aware of the big gap between applied linguistics research and language classroom practice. They are therefore likely to welcome *Applied Linguistics and Materials Developments,* a volume that is aimed at helping bridge the gap between theory and practice by proposing materials developers as a vehicle for a more concrete cooperation between researchers and practitioners. Indeed, the book investigates the application of current applied linguistics theories in materials development practice and the extent to which language teaching materials allow teachers to gain knowledge of research findings and consider them in language classroom practice. Besides being a concise but wide-ranging report on the state-of-the-art of second language acquisition (SLA) findings and language teaching practices, the book offers a number of concrete ideas for materials developers to be taken into account if they actually want their publications to become an efficient and effective link between the theoretical and the practical sides of applied linguistics.

The volume is edited by Brian Tomlinson, a leading expert on materials development for language teaching, and includes, besides the editor's introduction, eighteen contributions (two of which are written by Tomlinson himself) by an international group of academics, scholars and specialists in the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition, language teaching and teacher education, materials development and writing. Written in an easy-to-understand didactic style, with lots of checklists, tables, practical examples and lists of suggested ideas and activities, the book is organized in a neat structure following a "What we know-What we think we know-What we need to know" format that accompanies the reader throughout the volume. The contributions are grouped in four different parts covering several areas of applied linguistics. Part 1, "Learning and teaching languages", deals with language pedagogy and includes four papers; Part 2 focuses on "Aspects of language use" and is comprised of five entries; Part 3 is about "Language skills", which are analysed in five different contributions; Part 4, "Curriculum development", pertains to language policy and language planning and includes the last four papers. Each part is commented on by the editor, and each contribution is accompanied by an extensive bibliography with suggested readings on the relevant topic(s).

In the brief introduction to the volume, Tomlinson declares that he does not know of "any publication which has explicitly tackled the topic of the application of applied linguistics research and theory to the development of materials for language learning" (p. 4), notwithstanding the persistence of a disconnection between theory and practice. The editor admittedly recognizes his worry that such disconnection may prevent the exploitation in L2 teaching of research findings with a potential to facilitate L2 language acquisition. Tomlinson's worry seems to be substantiated by many expert materials writers admitting to not applying principles to practice, thus failing to develop principled criteria or frameworks before or when designing their publications. In this scenario, the editor's declared aim is "to find out what the gaps between theory and practice are in relation to materials development and to make suggestions as to how to reduce the gaps so as to help learners to learn in more efficient and effective ways" (p. 2). The volume is geared towards academics, materials developers and teachers, with an open invitation for all of them "to read the book critically and constructively" (p. 5). To make his invitation more challenging, the editor prompts the readers to consider modifications to their theories and practices, and to "write up potential chapters for a follow-up publication" whose central topic is announced to be "the effects of innovative approaches to materials developments".

In Part 1, the first contribution is by the editor. Brian Tomlinson leads us into the world of SLA by providing a brief but clear outline of the research findings from SLA literature, with a focus on those main factors generally agreed to facilitate SLA. A comparison of SLA findings against a number of recently published global language coursebooks seems to reveal that typically "there is a very weak match" (p.15) between instructional materials and SLA theories.

Tomlinson reports on a number of pedagogic approaches that actually draw on SLA findings and for which specific materials are indeed available. For each of these approaches, he proposes examples of activities, and briefly explains how they apply SLA theory to practice.

The second contribution is by Peter Lutzker. Based on the assumption that language and communication encompass the large amount of non-semantic information conveyed through the non-verbal elements that accompany the acts of speaking and listening, Lutzker highlights the relevance of findings in the study of linguistic-kinesic behaviour for foreign language teaching. He advocates the use of drama and drama techniques in the foreign language curriculum, and suggests viewing foreign language teaching as an *art*. In the perspective of an "embodiment of language" (p. 36), teacher education should offer opportunities for teachers to be trained in interpretative skills, and age- and grade-specific coursebooks should propose creative and performing tasks to physically, affectively and cognitively involve learners.

In the third contribution, Brian Tomlinson reports on the main findings in classroom research. The typical classroom-research approach that tends to focus on what is measurable and recordable, he argues, fails to capture "what might be happening in the minds of teachers and learners" (p. 43) and does not consider crucial aspects of classroom behaviour (like the rapport between the teacher and his/her students) and their accumulative effect on language acquisition. A better knowledge of these aspects, alongside a clearer idea of what teachers want materials to help them to do, would facilitate the job of materials writers. Tomlinson suggests some handy and useful tips for coursebook writers to design their materials in a fashion that better matches what is indeed already known about teachers' and learners' classroom needs.

The last contribution of Part 1, written by Irma-Kaarina Ghosn, leads us into the world of young English language learners (YELLs) and the ever growing practice of teaching English to young learners (TEYL). Ghosn explores the situation concerning ELT materials and reports on an analysis of four internationally marketed YL coursebooks. Her study shows a collision between what is known about the developmental nature of child language learning and YL materials. What is missing in particular seems to be the inclusion of stories and of emotionally-engaging content, crucial features for a YL-coursebook to become a medium of language learning. The storybook-based approach proposed by Ghosn is an encouragement for teachers to move away from the rigidity of coursebook-based traditional teaching and let children learn from more natural environments.

In the first contribution of Part 2, Ivor Timmis delves into application of spoken language corpus research to ELT coursebooks. He reports on some studies investigating how far corpus research findings have filtered through to coursebooks. What emerges is that corpus-based research has only partially informed coursebooks design, and in different degrees across instructional materials. It seems that the spoken language syllabus is still largely based on intuition only. Instead, he argues for a combination of both intuition and an explicit knowledge of corpus data, the latter providing *facts* about linguistic features. This does not mean that corpus data should dictate what to include in materials, but that it might inform materials development.

Alan Maley is the author of the second paper in Part 2. He deals with vocabulary and its key aspects, at the same time highlighting the importance of corpus research to know increasingly more about the way words behave. By contrast, he argues, we still do not know much about the teaching of vocabulary. In this regard, Maley suggests a number of in-class and out-of-class activities for teaching vocabulary, with an emphasis on the importance of actively engaging learners in the processing and use of words. At the same time he underlines the teacher's key role in offering his/her students "a range of strategies and techniques from which learners can choose to develop their own uniquely personal relationship with vocabulary" (p. 109).

From vocabulary we move on to pragmatics with the essay written by Andrew D. Cohen and Noriko Ishihara. The authors' claim is that currently available instructional materials are not a good enough model to foster learners' pragmatic competence, primarily because "the actual dialogues may sound awkward or stilted, and are inauthentic in that they do not represent spontaneous pragmatic language as used in natural conversation" (p.116). This inadequacy seems to be the consequence of textbooks not exploiting the information about L2 pragmatics provided by research findings. Rather, instructional materials are based on curriculum writers' intuition and do not draw on the empirical sources which would provide them with explicit knowledge and natural data about how language is used for pragmatic purposes. A research-based approach is therefore recommended by the authors.

Starting from the observation that our understanding of 'text' and 'discourse' has changed, Ben Fenton-Smith investigates the application of discourse analysis to English language teaching (ELT) materials. He observes that most commercial ELT resource materials – though proposing made-up examples – are discourse-oriented. Conversely, it appears that most books *on* discourse analysis, besides failing to indicate language teaching as the area where discourse analysis can best be applied, do not take into account the fact that today 'discourse' could include, besides language, multimodal forms of expression linked to new forms of technology-driven communication. An increased cooperation between discourse analysts and teachers (including material writers), alongside a higher consideration of "the student voice" (p.132), would help learners become familiar with the contexts they are more likely to encounter in their lives outside the classroom.

Michael Byram and Hitomi Masuhara have authored the last entry in Part 2. Their focus is on the area of intercultural competence, which has become one of the aims of foreign language teaching, thus introducing "complex matters of values in education which materials producers have to take into consideration" (p.146). The entry is equipped with two sets of evaluation criteria that can be used respectively to evaluate materials with more emphasis on intercultural education and materials with more emphasis on language learning. After an exemplification of the application of the two sets of criteria to two recently published English language coursebooks, the authors conclude that "there does seem to be an urgent need for interdisciplinary exploration of the optimal syllabus, methodology and materials for intercultural language education" (p.156).

Part 3 begins with a contribution by Alan Maley and Philip Prowse. The topic they deal with is reading and the way it is proposed in instructional materials and taught in the classroom. The authors report the results of a study they made on the treatment of reading in coursebooks for teenagers and adults, in reading skills books and in graded reader series. The findings reveal a very conservative approach, the skill being mostly dealt with in the form of language-focused intensive reading, with little or no attention to the benefits of 'reading per se'. What Maley and Prowse suggest is an integrated skills approach, that is, "a lesson where the four skills support each other" (p.177). Like all the other contributions, also this one is accompanied by an example of materials development application.

We are driven back to the world of young learners by Annie Hughes' paper. She highlights the difficulties of TEYL, especially when it comes to teaching children reading and writing in the target language. One first step to help young learners could be the creation of what she calls the "English literacy environment" (p. 190), where everything in the English classroom should be labelled (with both text and symbols). As for materials, currently available picture dictionaries, story books, graded readers and the like are indeed suitable to support the teaching of reading and writing to YELLs. However, Hughes argues, this is not enough. The adoption of a "Teaching English Reading and Writing Teacher's Kit" (p. 196), based on a blended approach and drawing on materials designed for the native speaker market and appropriately adapted is a practical idea to start filling the gap.

Rimma Ableeva and Jeff Stranks deal with listening comprehension (LC). The stress on the importance of L2 listening research shifting from the product (correct/incorrect answer) to the process (how students achieve/fail comprehension), goes alongside the recognition that there is a need for the application of more qualitative approaches to investigate the listening process. The authors' concern is that the results of such qualitative approaches can "not only inform the field of second language acquisition but also guide L2 educators in creating new instructional listening materials" (p. 204). Partially reflecting the gaps in research into listening comprehension, currently available published materials do not tackle the real problems faced by learners while listening, in that the tasks are mostly product-oriented and 'listening per se' is hardly proposed. Task-less listening could be a more suitable and effective methodological approach.

Materials for writing are analyzed by Jayakaran Mukundan and Vahid Nimehchisalem. Their paper provides an outline of the different trends and methodologies in ELT that have influenced writing tasks and materials, from the AUDIO-Lingual Method of the 1960s to the computer-driven instruction of the twenty-first century. Each of the examined methodologies has had repercussions on the design (and spread!) of materials for writing. The authors provide a number of examples of writing activities that were and have been developed based on the examined approaches, highlighting the pros and cons of each. The point they make is that "it is best to approach the materials developed for teaching ESL writing cautiously and only after gaining a clear picture of the needs and interests of the target students" (p. 228).

As Anne Burns and David A. Hill state in their contribution, speaking is arguably the skill on which both ELT researchers and practitioners (including materials writers) have focused the most over the last decades. This is mainly because of the new role of English as the international language of communication, with people from all over the world using it as a lingua franca for the most disparate needs. However, their analysis of three current textbooks reveals that coursebooks do not seem to have updated their way of working on account of "what is really going on in the world of English" (p. 246). Coursebooks, the authors claim, do not present realistic models of interactions and fail to help learners develop the competence to perform genuine communication, let alone in a global environment. Some practical suggestions on how a speaking-practice activity should be designed complete the paper.

In the first paper of Part 4, Chris Kennedy and Brian Tomlinson deal with language policy and planning (LPP) and the match between LPP and the materials used to implement it. What they notice in particular is the different extent to which internationally and locally published materials correspond to LPP. Global coursebooks in particular seem to not cater for all types of students, but rather to target primarily "middle-class urban learners in private schools" (p.262). The main problem the authors see with LPP and its implementation is the lack of cooperation between language planners and administration on the one hand and applied linguists, teachers and materials developers on the other. What is suggested is a direct involvement of language learning experts in the drafting of LPP "so that they are compatible not only with political, social and educational ideals but with language acquisition theory and language learning practice too" (p. 265).

Freda Mishan provides an overview of language teaching methodologies and analyses the match between each pedagogy and the relevant instructional materials. What she concludes is that "there remains a mismatch between pedagogical approaches incorporating the findings of applied linguistic research, and the teaching materials which (should) apply them" (p. 280), the blame for this laying not only with coursebooks publishers but also with their users, whose expectations are more likely to be met if the coursebook is conventionally designed, rather than innovative or piloting. The question may be then if coursebooks are actually "the best mode of delivery of reliably SLA-based learning materials" (p. 281). Probably, other resource books are more suitable.

Freda Mishan is also the author of the contribution dealing with modes of delivery of language learning materials. She focuses in particular on the new generation of learners, the *Millenials*, and the new needs generated by an environment in which technology has become a natural component of the learner's life. In such a context, she argues that blended learning "combining the triumvirate of teacher, learner and technology emerges as the most successful in terms of language learning" (p. 298). For instructional materials developers this means taking into account multifaceted modes of delivery, where the Web and the new ways of learning of the multi-skilled digital generation can no longer be neglected. Mishan provides concrete examples of how the Web could be exploited.

The last paper is by Kathleen M. Bailey and Hitomi Masuhara. The topic of their contribution is the effect of testing on materials design and classroom practice (Language Testing Washback). They examine both test-preparation materials and global coursebooks to assess the washback effects on them and provide a number of practical

suggestions as to how both types of materials should be designed and used. What they insist on is that examinations and materials should "represent up-to-date understanding of language, language learning, language teaching and language assessment" (p. 316) and promote both language acquisition and good teaching. It seems that a good starting point is offered by the Common European Framework of References (CEFR), in that "the syllabus, methods and assessment are designed to match each other".

Although the attempt to report fairly comprehensively on current theories in each area and to thoroughly discuss how the materials presented or referred to may (or may not) exemplify the illustrated principles might be regarded as over-ambitious, the volume arguably provides 'reader-friendly' information from three different sources within the field of applied linguistics – research, materials development and language teaching. We are used to reading either scientific academic writing reporting on research findings, or summary descriptions of the criteria on which instructional materials are based, or practical teachers' guides instructing practitioners on what to do in the classroom and how to do it; each in their own 'jargon'. This book puts the three sources and their 'jargons' together, so that in one single volume we can read about research findings, principled criteria for materials design and ideas on how they can be applied to classroom practice. Also extremely valuable are the useful tips for the targeted readership. Academics are informed about a number of areas which still need to be researched to more effectively meet the needs of practitioners; materials writers are provided with further principles for materials design, whereby the rationale should be more concerned with the application of research findings that can actually foster language acquisition and development; and finally, teachers are made more familiar with applied linguistics research and the principled criteria on which the materials they use are based. It seems that the main aim of the volume – *encouraging* a closer link and a constructive cooperation between theorists and practitioners by means of fully-informed and principled materials development practice – has been achieved. The question is whether or not both theorists and practitioners are ready (and willing) to reconsider their behaviour and practices, and to critically analyse the extent to which applied linguistics knowledge has filtered down into language teaching materials design and classrooms practices.

* Paola-Maria Caleffi (paolamaria.caleffi@univr.it) is a PhD Student in English Studies at the University of Verona. She holds a BA in Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching and an MA in Linguistics. She has experience in teaching English as a foreign language to both young learners and adults. Her main research interests include corpus linguistics, English language and linguistics, language change and language description, English language teaching. Her research project is on the features of English in the digital age, with a special focus on social media.