Exploring Key Issues in Materials Development

N.P. Sudharshana in conversation with Brian Tomlinson

Prof Brian Tomlinson, a leading expert on materials development in ESL/EFL contexts, founded MATSDA, (Materials Development Association, 1993) and the world’s first MA dedicated to the study of materials. He has conducted numerous workshops and given several plenary sessions on materials development in over sixty countries and authored several well-known books on materials development such as The Complete Guide to the Theory and Practice of Materials Development for Language Learning (with Masuhara, 2018), Developing Materials for Language Teaching (2013) and Materials Development in Language Teaching (1998, 2011) and contributed to textbooks for many countries.

N.P. Sudharshana (NPS): Professor Tomlinson, thanks for accepting our invitation. It is indeed a privilege to have you with us today. Your name is synonymous with “materials development.” You started MATSDA in 1993, an organization exclusively dedicated to materials, and also established the world’s first MA in Materials Development. What were your thoughts behind this?

Brian Tomlinson (BT): Certainly, at that time materials were not considered to be worthy of academic study. Back in the 1990s, there were very few universities who had courses on materials. There were no journals, or publishing materials. Materials development was called ‘materials writing’, and it was considered to be a practical pursuit, not really worthy of academic study. And to me, this was wrong because this was actually leading to materials which were not helping learners to acquire language. The people writing the materials were not sufficiently informed. If you analyse course books over the last 40 or 50 years, they haven’t changed. They have different blurbs and buzzwords like ‘communicative’, ‘natural’, ‘functional’ and ‘notional’. But if you
actually analyse the units, it’s the same... it’s PPP, presentation - practice - production. So, I thought it was time to challenge this dogma and the only way of doing that really was to get people to talk about, think about, learn about how language is best acquired. And that’s why I started the M.A.

**NPS:** You have suggested an important link between materials and second language acquisition. How important are materials for successful second language acquisition?

**BT:** The best materials writer for a class of students is the teacher. The teacher knows the class, so ideally, materials develop organically as the writer of the materials becomes more familiar with the students who are going to use them. But that’s not realistic. In many countries, teachers might be teaching 40 lessons a week; they do not have time. So, some of this has to be done externally to help the teacher; but the materials must never replace the teacher. The materials are there as a resource to be accessed and exploited by the teacher and the students. I want exposure to the language in use. Most students around the world cannot get it outside the classroom; they can only get it inside the classroom, and they get it from materials. So that’s what I really want from a course book, a lot of language in use... a lot of text. I did a research for a British publisher in 12 different countries around the world and the teachers in different countries such as Argentina, Australia, Russia wanted interesting texts. And they said, “If you give us interesting texts, then we can exploit them ourselves”. And the students said, “We want interesting stories, not grammar practice.”

So, what to me is important in materials is the exposure to language in use, and also the stimulus to learn. We tend to assume that all students are motivated. But my experience in different countries around the world is that the majority of students learning a foreign language are not motivated to learn that language. They find it difficult. They don’t succeed. They get low marks. They’re demotivated by this negative experience. So, the main job of the teacher, and therefore of the material, is to stimulate, to motivate to get students to really want to do the activity. And therefore, we need interesting texts and engaging activities.

**NPS:** There is a sort of misconception among many teachers—for them materials mean only the printed coursebook and the workbook. How would you actually define ‘materials’?
BT: I’ve always said that to me materials are anything which can be used to facilitate language acquisition. So, the obvious thing is the coursebook. But I would also argue that a newspaper, for example, could be language-learning materials. In many countries, I have brought in speakers of the language into the classroom. They are not teachers, but they’re interesting people. They have a story to tell about their life or about their work. And they are providing motivated exposure to the language in use. So, they are language-learning materials as well. I’m saying the teachers and learners should look out for English. Look for English in the environment, bring it to the classroom. Look for possible exposure to English in interesting and different ways. You can’t do that in every lesson; it’s supplementary but very important.

NPS: You are often critical of published coursebooks and maintain that ‘Materials cannot substitute teachers’. But teachers often do not have enough time or any training in developing materials. In India, most often, the course books are prescribed by a centralized authority. What can teachers do in such situations?

BT: In such situations where the coursebook is prescribed, there is a prescribed syllabus, and there is an examination which the students are working towards, then the teacher is constrained. But the teacher can make small changes to the material, which makes the material more meaningful and more engaging for the learners. Well, I’ll give you an example. Usually in case of a book dialogue, you often get students to read out the dialogue. It’s normally pretty meaningless since there’s no context. It’s not engaging. So, what I would do in that situation is to give a context. This was for an adult class. There was a dialogue in a shoe shop, where a male salesman is selling shoes to a female customer. What I did was to tell the students that the salesman and the customer - they were married to each other but have recently got divorced. The female customer didn’t know her ex-husband was now working in the shoe shop and the salesman didn’t know his ex-wife was a frequent customer. So, then it’s not just “Good morning Madam! What can I do for you?”; “I would like a pair of shoes”. It’s - “Good morning madam! Hmmm... What can I do for you?” and it becomes a drama! So, in other words, turn it into a creative activity. So, it’s little changes, you don’t need to write anything on the coursework, you just do that verbally. The key word is ‘open’. Keep to the syllabus but open up some of the closed activities. And one other thing would be to add more texts. I’m
a great believer in extensive reading—not to answer questions, but to enjoy reading. Most units are organized around a topic or a theme. So, I would look for other texts on the same theme. Or I would ask students to look for texts on the same theme, bring them to class, and read them.

NPS: Can you please elaborate on what it means to ‘open up a closed activity’?

BT: If you look at most coursework materials, they are closed. There’s only one answer. For instance, multiple choice, yes/no, true/false, filling in the blanks, matching. They’re all objective. But what I’ve done is to take a closed activity and open it up. A quick example: I use a lot of children’s literature with adult learners of second language. At a university in Oman with a group of 19-20-year-old students, I used a very famous children’s story. It is called ‘Not Now, Bernard’. It’s about a little boy who comes home from school. Says “Hi Mommy” and the mother says, “Not now, not now dear”. And then he says, “Hello Daddy”, and the parents ignore him. There’s a monster in the garden. And he tells his mother that there’s a monster in the garden and he’s going to eat him. The monster eats the kid and replaces him. The parents don’t notice that the monster has replaced their child. Now, instead of lots of comprehension questions I asked the students who was to blame for the death of the boy. It’s a very serious question - very silly story, but very serious, open-ended question. And this was a class where all the males were on one side and the females on the other. Normally, they didn’t interact. But on that day, the arguing went on for an hour in English! I found that sometimes learners, who don’t normally speak, open up. And of course, it’s not going to be grammatically perfect, but it doesn’t matter; what matters is that they are communicating. The accuracy can come later.

NPS: You have raised the issue of accuracy. In ESL contexts grammar teaching is extremely popular. In most cases, teaching English is synonymous with teaching grammar. Should grammar be taught or not?

BT: I suppose I can answer that in one word and the one word is ‘eventually’, and not at first. Don’t start with grammar teaching. That’s a big mistake. If you look at any coursebook, almost any coursebook straight away starts teaching grammar. If you look at natural acquisition of first or second language, grammar is delayed for a long time. What comes first is the acquisition of vocabulary because if you have vocabulary
you can communicate. But if you just have grammar and not enough vocabulary, you can’t communicate. The learners’ inner desire, in-built agenda is ‘focus on meaning’. The teachers and the coursebooks focus on accuracy. So, you’ve got a conflict. The students find it frustrating. They don’t succeed initially. And, this initial failure carries on right through the course and right through their lives. When acquiring a language naturally, you only gradually acquire the syntax. And the native speaker children, for example, say the first conditional, they might never acquire it. It might take at least four or five years to acquire a lot of the verb tenses and verb forms we teach in lower elementary classes. But nobody asks the question - why do the learners really need this tense? Isn’t it more important that they are acquiring more vocabulary? Isn’t it more important that they learn how to communicate? What does it matter if they can’t use that tense at this time? And those are the questions never asked but should be asked.

**NPS:** The keyword you used regarding grammar teaching is ‘eventually’. Can you give an example how this can be implemented?

**BT:** We ran a project in Indonesia in which one class of 11-12 year olds in most secondary schools throughout the country became experimental classes. We developed an approach called ‘TPR plus’ and the emphasis was very much on vocabulary and meaning. So, instead of just commands and physical responses such as “stand up, sit down, put your hands on your head”, the teacher would tell a dramatic story, something very silly or very dramatic. The students would act out the story in the class. So, if they didn’t know a word, they would look and watch other students. If nobody knew it, then the teacher would mime. So, no grammar teaching, no grammar practice. They listened and mimed, they listened and played games, they listened to instructions and cooked food. Gradually, they started to use the language themselves. They did acquire a lot of grammar passively; but the focus was on meaning not on grammar.

**NPS:** Another controversial issue in ESL/ EFL contexts is using learners’ mother tongue. Do you think L1 can be a resource or does it actually hinder acquisition of English as an L2?

**BT:** I believe that forcing students to use the L2 from the beginning is a big mistake. Nobody in the world has ever started a course in language by producing perfect sentences and perfect communication. It’s impossible because the language acquisition process requires you to get things
wrong to get them right. If you watch children acquiring their first language, they don’t immediately get everything right. They get things wrong and gradually they revise their hypotheses and start to conform to the norm. This is a big problem that there is an approach to language teaching which says language teaching is about listening, reading, speaking, writing. So right from the beginning, we start teaching the four skills, which is a huge mistake because natural language acquisition is first of all listening. Young children listen for a long time before they start to produce. And we, you know, in the first lesson ask students to produce and therefore they make mistakes. So, I would certainly not force students to produce the L2 from the beginning. I would ask them to listen to the language. Going back to our study in Indonesia, TPR plus was based on this approach that some of the kids talked in their L1. We didn’t stop. We certainly didn’t make them speak English. They listened and responded physically. About three weeks later, they started reading. Then later to writing, and then to speaking. The speaking sort of came automatically. We insisted that though the students could use their first language at some time, the teacher should always use English. What they were doing was giving an instruction in English and then translating it into Bahasa Indonesia. So, we encouraged teachers to stop this so that they only gave the instructions in English because instructions satisfy many of the criteria for language acquisition – they are meaningful, salient, and necessary. They are recycled over and over again. And we found that the students had no problem. After a few weeks they could understand all the instructions. And I’m also a great believer in code switching. I’ve tried that, and I think that’s a very valuable approach for beginners in the classroom.

NPS: So basically, it’s important to make learners comfortable by allowing them to use their L1. It’s equally important to encourage learners to step out of their comfort zone by consciously attempting to listen to the teacher’s English. In your project you insisted that teachers use only English.

BT: Yes. It’s a fine balance between keeping the students happy but at the same time challenging them to move forward. In that study, at first the students were disturbed, and they weren’t out of their comfort zone. They were challenged; but they realized, if they didn’t understand the instructions in English, they couldn’t do the activity. So, they were motivated to really listen and try. And the teacher used a lot of
repetition, a lot of examples to make it meaningful, and gradually had to use fewer examples. And, you know, gradually the instructions were more easily understood. The students were happy with their success. It was rewarding for the students. We have done this in a course book. I would grade the activities according to their challenge. So, each activity gets more and more challenging. The students wouldn’t necessarily do all the activities. So, some of the more confident students will go on to the very challenging ones and some of the others would not. I’m a great believer in giving choice and letting students decide for themselves.

**NPS:** An important issue in the current scenario - we are talking about online teaching and digital materials. Your thoughts on this?

**BT:** There is an assumption that digital materials are better, because they cost a lot of money, they’re very modern and up to date. Digital materials are portable, you can use them anywhere. The materials are more flexible. There are things you can do with digital materials you’ve can’t do with paper like you can give instant feedback. So, there are these benefits or affordances. But that doesn’t mean that they’re necessarily more useful for the learner. It’s what you do with these materials that matters. Unfortunately, a lot of digital materials are simply reproducing what happens in the coursebook and are not exploiting the affordances. It’s not digital materials per se which stimulate creativity or anything else. I’m not saying that digital materials aren’t useful. They can be extremely useful. But I’m saying to materials writers - look at ways in which you could do things with digital materials, which you can’t do with the coursebook. I’m a great believer in blended learning, where you combine face-to-face instruction, and peer-to-peer interaction, and also digital learning. There is an interesting case study on taxi drivers learning to speak English in Turkey. The course was a combination of the classroom where the taxi drivers came and had instruction with the teacher, but because the taxi drivers were working, they couldn’t spend a lot of time in the classroom. So, they were given materials on their phones. So, if they were waiting for a customer, they would use the phone and also, I think, they then put into practice with the customer if the customer was English speaking. The teacher can interact as a human being with you, providing exposure, setting up interesting activities and giving advice, but also can respond by monitoring the learner. The computer can’t do that. But the computer can do things which the
teacher can’t do. And therefore, what I say is to combine the two in blended learning approach.

NPS: Prof Tomlinson, teachers would want to improve their proficiency and language skills. Any suggestions for them?

BT: I strongly believe in materials development for teacher development. In a project in Indonesia, the teachers came out from the schools for a two-week in-service workshop where they did a lot of materials development. What we found was in revising, say, a reading comprehension activity by themselves, it made them better teachers of the reading comprehension in the coursebook, because they were more able to understand the principles behind it. When the teachers came, they had no confidence. But during this two-week course, they gained tremendous confidence. Then they went back to their schools and put into practice a lot of the things we did on the course, by making small changes, by adapting the coursework, by supplementing the coursework.

NPS: Professor, thank you once again for being with us. It was wonderful talking to you. I am sure our readers will find this interview very useful.

BT: Thank you very much! It was indeed a very enjoyable experience!

N.P. Sudharshana is an assistant professor of English at IIT Kanpur and has research interests in SLA and TBLT.
sudhipnadig@gmail.com