Challenges and Opportunities in Designing a New Curriculum for School-Age Learners

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In the teaching of English, a distinction has traditionally been made between English as a second or additional language (ESL/EAL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). Graves (2008) has reframed this distinction from one that is based on the learner’s relation to the target language (TL), whether foreign or second/additional, to one that is based on the relationship between the TL and the contexts in which it is learned. The distinction is between TL-embedded contexts and TL-removed contexts. In TL-embedded contexts the language that is being learned in the classroom is also the one that is used throughout the school and is predominant in the wider community, province, or nation, although it may not be the one of the student’s own community outside the classroom. In TL-removed contexts, the language being learned in the classroom is different from the language used throughout the school and wider community—that language is usually the students’ mother tongue.

The accounts of curriculum development in this volume describe innovation and reform in English language curricula in TL-embedded and TL-removed contexts. Six themes emerge throughout the chapters: the role of context, English as a language of access, the impact of educational reform, an integrated skills-based approach to language, learning subject matter content through English, and the role of technology. The association between these themes and the two contexts is illustrated in Table 1.

In this volume, two chapters address curriculum development in TL-embedded contexts, both in the United States, and eight chapters address
## Table 1. Characteristics of Target Language–Embedded and Target Language–Removed Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of context</th>
<th>TL-embedded contexts</th>
<th>TL-removed contexts</th>
<th>Commonalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• The target language (TL) is the language of the classroom, school, community, state.</td>
<td>• The TL is generally the language of the classroom only and not the wider community.</td>
<td>Learning the TL affords enhanced opportunities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• It is learned as a means for learning subject matter content and succeeding in school.</td>
<td>• It is often taught as a school subject, not as a language to be used outside the classroom.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• The demands of high-stakes testing constrain the ways in which the language is taught.</td>
<td>• It may compete with other subjects in the school curriculum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>English as language of access</td>
<td>• The TL is the local language of access.</td>
<td>• The TL is a global language of access.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• It is a means to participate in the school and community.</td>
<td>• It is a lingua franca for two-way exchange.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impact of reform</td>
<td>• The focus is on learners’ rights.</td>
<td>• The focus is on learners’ competence.</td>
<td>The focus is on learners actively speaking, listening to, reading, and writing English in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrated skills</td>
<td>• The TL is a necessity for learning school subjects and participating in school.</td>
<td>• The TL is a necessity for learning to read, write, speak, and understand the language beyond the classroom.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subject matter content</td>
<td>• It is a given that language instruction is aimed at enabling learners to learn subject matter content.</td>
<td>• Subject matter content may be learned through the TL.</td>
<td>There are different approaches to integrating content and language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>• Technology is a means for creating virtual language communities across countries.</td>
<td>It is a means for teacher training and lesson sharing, individual and collaborative materials development by teachers or learners, and delivery of instruction.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
curriculum development in TL-removed contexts: Egypt, Japan, Belarus, Russia, China, Israel, Italy, and Colombia. The accounts in these chapters show that, with respect to teaching English, different countries face different challenges. Thus we cannot make broad generalizations about English language teaching and curriculum development throughout the world.

The Role of Context

There is a saying that “all politics is local.” Similarly, one could say that “all curriculum is local.” Even when curriculum is planned at the national level, the way it is enacted inevitably depends on local factors. When one looks at the issue of the context in which a language is being learned or taught, emic or insider accounts of curriculum practice provide a valuable perspective on both the design and enactment of curriculum. As insiders, the contributors to this volume document the thinking that goes into decisions and how their understanding and experience of particular contexts influences those decisions. These accounts provide the double gaze of insiders looking at the curriculum both as enactors of the change and, by writing about it retrospectively, from an outsider’s perspective.

TL-REMOVED CONTEXTS

In TL-removed contexts such as Japan and Belarus, the primary context for learning and using English is the classroom itself. For language learners to successfully learn how to be speakers, listeners, readers, and writers of English in the classroom, the curriculum must emphasize active participation in using the language in the classroom. Preparing and enacting such a curriculum faces a number of challenges. First, in many school contexts English has mainly been taught as a subject-language (Larsen-Freeman & Freeman, 2008), similar to other subjects such as mathematics, history, and science, in that certain material is covered and students may be tested on that material. They are tested on the subject of the English language. Classes are often conducted in the first language (L1) with the aim of mastering material to be tested. In chapter 4, Tomita, writing about Japan, points out that “the predominant approach in English instruction is still geared to the kinds of knowledge about language that can easily be tested, rather than to communication ability. Thus, from the outset, developing an awareness (not only in the children but also among parents and even some teachers) that the purpose of English classes was to build communication skills was an important aim” (p. 49).

The second challenge to successful learning of English in TL-removed contexts is the nature of the classroom itself. In classroom cultures where most discourse is mediated by the teacher and learners are given few
opportunities to speak or use the language, successful learning is impeded. This situation is worsened if the teacher is not confident of his or her abilities in English and so relies on the L1 when providing instruction. In classrooms where learners actively use the language and teachers orchestrate the structures that engage learners in active use, successful learning is promoted.

A third challenge is that, as a school subject, English competes with other subjects in the curriculum; thus it may not be allocated enough time for language learning to occur. In chapter 11, Lopriore points out that learning subject matter content through a language other than the L1 is one way to address the issue of time. At the primary level, another concern is whether the study of English should occur at the same time as the development of literacy in the L1. One of the findings from Thornton, Toubab, Bakr, and Iannuzzi’s needs assessment in Egypt (chapter 2) was “the perception that the early introduction of a foreign language would interfere with learning Arabic” (p. 21).

TL-EMBEDDED CONTEXTS

In TL-embedded contexts, the focus of the curriculum is to provide English language learners (ELLs) with the means to participate in the school and the larger community. Challenges facing curriculum designers in such contexts include figuring out how to help ELLs (a) learn the content at the same time that they are learning the language in which the content is presented and (b) participate academically in mainstream classes at the same time that they are learning the language of instruction. There is great pressure for ELLs to be “brought up to speed” because they are tested on the content in English along with their English-speaking peers. As Park says in chapter 5, “they must perform on high-stakes standardized assessments at levels equal to those of their classroom peers for whom English is a first language” (p. 73). Schools are rated according to their overall test scores, and federal funding may be withheld if those scores are too low. Park describes an innovative, successful approach to science learning in which middle school students whose L1 is Spanish create their own science materials in English and teach and test their peers. Sadly, because the school’s overall test scores placed it in jeopardy, the program was discontinued so as to more quickly transition ELLs to the mainstream.

Curricular innovations are inevitably affected by factors in the local context—from educational policy to teacher education, from school conditions to parent involvement (Murray, 2008). New curricula evolve in response to such factors. Those that succeed in the long term are supported by a variety of stakeholders at all levels of decision making: policy makers, administrators, teacher educators, teachers, parents, and students. Park’s innovative program succeeded brilliantly at the classroom level but
was undermined by interference from high-stakes tests at the state level. In contrast, other chapters in this volume describe curriculum innovations that have received wide support and have endured, such as the introduction of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in the Italian context (chapter 11) and the introduction of English in a Japanese primary level (chapter 4).

**English as a Language of Access**

In both TL-embedded and TL-removed contexts, English is a language of access—to education, to jobs, and to participation in global knowledge construction and exchange.

**TL-REMOVED CONTEXTS**

In TL-removed contexts the old notion of English as a “foreign language” implied that English was the property of English-speaking countries. This is not the view that informs the curriculum development detailed in these chapters. The growing debate on issues related to English focuses on its role as a global language (Crystal, 1997; Graddol, 2006; Pennycook, 2007), the development of World Englishes (Kirkpatrick, 2007), and the notion of English as a lingua franca (Jenkins, 2007; Seidlhofer, 2004). These issues not only have raised the question of the “ownership” of English (Widdowson, 1994), but are inevitably challenging the ways that English is being taught and materials are being developed. This has been particularly true in the so-called expanding circle of countries (Hollliday, 2005; S. L. McKay, 2002; Seidlhofer, 1999), a term coined by Kachru (1986) to describe countries where English is not a national language but where it is both the de facto global lingua franca (i.e., a common language used by speakers for whom it is not their L1) and a necessary skill for functioning in the modern world, similar to math and computer literacy. Those who have the ability to use English have access to educational, technological, and economic opportunities and advancement as well as opportunities to participate in global knowledge construction. The type of access provided by English differs both subtly and powerfully depending on the context.

In the TL-removed contexts discussed throughout this volume, English is generally not the local language of access to education because it is not the language of instruction in other subject areas (except in the case of CLIL in Italy, as detailed by Lopriore in chapter 11). Rather, English is a two-way means of access. On the one hand, it provides access to information, further education, and employment. On the other hand, because most interactions in English around the world now take place among people for whom it is not their L1, it is increasingly a medium for imparting and exchanging
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information about oneself and one’s culture to and with members of other cultures.

In the materials developed for primary school learners in Egypt (chapter 2), the majority of voices on the audiotapes are those of Egyptian speakers of English, underscoring the developers’ belief that English “is an international language that belongs to all users” (p. 23). In the curriculum developed for primary school students in Japan (chapter 4), the objectives for the third year are “to foster an understanding of others and their cultures” and “to understand oneself and others through a broad perspective on the world” (p. 54). The students in Sherris’s class in Israel (chapter 6) produced a video documentary about their school and its philosophy of education. The entire video “was in English because we envisioned our audience to be outsiders who would be more apt to speak English than Hebrew” (p. 102). In the project described in chapter 10, students in Colombia, Chile, Canada, and Scotland participated in an online global forum, “a platform for building language learning communities and exchanging insights into knowledge about and culture related to the target language” (p. 167).

Although the dominance of U.S.- and British-influenced materials is on the wane, these materials are still being developed and used depending on various countries’ ties to and funding from the United States or the United Kingdom. In chapter 9 Gersten and Sysoyev describe a U.S.-funded materials development project in Russia whose aim was to provide information about U.S. culture. This was meant to serve as a counterbalance to the predominant portrayal of British culture and as a way for students to look at their own Russian culture by contrast and comparison. From the materials developers’ perspective, the project demonstrated a commitment “to the quality of English language education in Russia and to the principle that students should be exposed to multiple English language variants and should think about English as a global language” (p. 133).

As discussed in chapter 11, in Europe, where the emphasis is on plurilingualism, one aim of educational reform has been for learners to be proficient in three languages: the L1 and two additional languages. Even though the role of English has seemingly been deemphasized by European plurilingual and pluricultural policies that offer no official status for English, in most European countries English remains the most widely taught language from primary school through university.

**TL-EMBEDDED CONTEXTS**

For school-age learners in TL-embedded contexts such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, the debates surrounding the role of English in the world are not of immediate relevance. English is not a global language in these countries; it is the local language. It is the means
to participate in the school and the larger community. For learners in these contexts, it is the local language of access to education and it is necessary for access to literacy, numeracy, and educational instruction in all subject areas at primary and secondary levels. That education, in turn, is necessary for access to employment opportunities and further education. Access to English is thus a legal right and is a matter of equity and fairness within the school and community (Bérubé, 2000; Snow, 2000).

The Impact of Educational Reform

Educational reform is a primary motivator for the development of new curricula in primary and secondary school, and the chapters in this volume bear this out. Reform operates differently in TL-embedded and TL-removed contexts because it achieves different ends.

TL-EMBEDDED CONTEXTS

In the TL-embedded context of the United States, for example, the aim of reform is to guarantee equal access for all learners, including ELLs, to education (Freeman & Riley, 2005). It is fundamentally about civil rights. As Park makes clear in chapter 5, students have a right “to learn the subject matter that is taught in U.S. schools and . . . to the academic achievement that their abilities and commitment to study indicate, regardless of the level of their ability to speak English” (p. 74).

TL-REMOVED CONTEXTS

In most TL-removed contexts, reform is concerned with how the subject matter of English is taught. The aim is to improve the effectiveness of language instruction in order to produce competent users of English. In chapter 4, Tomita frames her discussion of an elementary school’s English language program around a Japanese Ministry of Education and Science “action plan to establish a system for creating a Japanese population that has the ability to use English” (p. 48). As a result, English is now being introduced in elementary school and the curricula for middle and high school are undergoing redesign. As Lapitskaya and Linse point out in chapter 3, since Belarus gained independence, “English language instruction is now designed to help students gain the linguistic skills necessary to effectively communicate on interpersonal and intercultural levels with English speakers” (p. 39). And Sherris (chapter 6) says that in Israel there has been a “move away from lists of lexis and grammar” (p. 92) to the integration of reading, writing, speaking, and listening within a national standards-based curriculum.

Within these reforms the role and function of the nonnative teacher have been widely acknowledged (Davies, 2002b; Medgyes, 1994; Seidlhofer,
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(2001) and have highlighted the need for teacher training or retraining, particularly for primary teachers in countries that are now introducing English at primary levels. In Europe early language learning has been encouraged and primary teachers have been trained for that purpose. One factor in the success of CLIL in Italian primary schools is the extensive training in CLIL that the teachers have received. “The involvement of teachers in educational change is vital to its success, especially if the change is complex and is to affect many settings over long periods of time” (Hargreaves, 1994, cited in P. McKay, 2006, p. 3). The European experience indicates that when teachers play a role in the reforms and have the expertise and support to implement them, the reforms will be successful. When an innovation is officially introduced into the national or regional curriculum, it makes sense to involve as many stakeholders as possible—school authorities, teachers, families, publishers—because the more involved they are, the more likely they are to take responsibility for and actively promote the change.

One approach to reform is to describe the intended outcomes of the reforms in a set of standards. Standards-based reform is concerned with the creation of standards that describe the outcomes of a curriculum. The notion of standards has two meanings. One is to set the standard, that is, to describe the desired or required outcome. The other is to standardize, that is, to create uniformity of results across schools. In chapter 2, Thornton et al. describe the role of standards in educational reform in Egypt, “one initiative of which was to develop national standards to ensure that reform efforts would move collectively in the right direction and would have maximum impact on the educational system” (p. 15). In chapter 7, Nowalk details how he reviewed numerous standards for language learners and then distilled content from the two sets of standards that best fit the needs of Chinese middle school students to create curriculum materials to be used online.

In the United States, where educational authority is decentralized and there are state as well as district boards of education, each state and, in some cases, each district creates its own set of standards for each subject area. At the same time, federal (national) funding is contingent on schools meeting federal accountability requirements that are tied to state standards. For teachers of ELLs this means reconciling and aligning standards at the national, state, and district levels for both content areas and English. In chapter 8, Dupuis describes the system she used for aligning standards for literature and English at these various levels to create units that addressed them all.
An Integrated Skills-Based Approach to Language

In TL-embedded contexts, because learners must learn to participate academically in school, it is necessary to have an integrated skills-based approach in which students develop their capacities as speakers, listeners, readers, and writers of English. In schools in TL-removed contexts such as Japan and Egypt, on the other hand, because English has long been taught as a subject, discrete grammar points and vocabulary items are the backbone of materials for language teaching. Under the rubric of communicative language teaching, materials are often based on grammar points cloaked in a communicative veneer and teacher-fronted classes are often the norm. A number of the chapters in this volume depict a very different approach, an integrated skills-based approach that uses contextualized or content-based materials. The emphasis is on encouraging students to speak and listen to each other, not just the teacher, about topics that are interesting and relevant to them; listen to and read age-appropriate texts; research and create material themselves; and write about topics that describe their worlds and experiences.

The materials developed for the 6-year-old learners in Egypt (chapter 2) deal with the world that the children are familiar with—their own. Thornton et al. point out that “because children of this age are coming to terms with their own identity, we felt that it was appropriate to center the course around the world of the Egyptian child rather than exposing them to foreign cultures in the earliest years of the curriculum” (p. 22). Similarly, Lapitskaya and Linse (chapter 3) say that in Belarus “literacy is embedded and integrated into the overall [English language teaching] primary school curriculum, the content of which includes topics that are interesting to 6-year-olds and highlights communicative, age-appropriate language activities” (p. 40). Sherris’s middle school students in chapter 6 spent their year researching the challenges and accomplishments of their country, Israel, as well as the history of their Kibbutz and their school. The year culminates in a video documentary about their school and its approach to education.

Learning Subject Matter Content Through English

TL-EMBEDDED CONTEXTS

In TL-embedded contexts such as the United States, the point of English language instruction is for learners to be able to learn all subject matter content in English. For students in these schools, two kinds of learning must happen at the same time: learning the subject matter content along with their native-English-speaking peers and learning English to access the
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content. In chapter 5, Park points out that ESL teachers “are scrambling to find ways to truncate the journey to academic language proficiency while at the same time helping students gain proficiency in the content area knowledge” (p. 73). Students face formidable academic, linguistic, and cultural challenges, so providing them with both support and means for success is crucial. In the program Park describes, creating student engagement by having students teach each other was motivating and led to successful learning of science in English. In chapter 8, Dupuis seeks the overlap and complementarity among the various content and language standards that guide her curriculum planning for high school literature courses. She suggests the following formula:

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\text{A standards-based directive} + \text{specific proficiency needs of the students} + \text{district curriculum} + \text{the flexibility of revision based on formative assessment} = \text{ELLs taught with the same high standard of curriculum and learning goals (p. 127)}
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**TL-REMOVED CONTEXTS**

CLIL projects in Europe also teach content and language simultaneously. According to Lopriore (chapter 11), CLIL is an approach that “views language as an integral part of the educational process and that prepares Europe’s students for plurilingualism and pluriculturalism by means of using different European languages as the medium of communication in content area subjects” (p. 173). It thus provides strong support to both content learning and the search for new ways of teaching English. CLIL differs from the teaching of content in TL-embedded contexts, where the stakes are different for students—they must learn content and language simultaneously to succeed in school. In TL-removed contexts such as Italy, teachers may teach content through English (or another language) or use content as the focus of language instruction. Lopriore explores the ways in which schools are gradually accepting CLIL as part of their overall curricula.

**The Role of Technology**

Technology plays a variety of roles in curriculum development, delivery, and diffusion. It provides a means for teachers to learn about new approaches and to create and share materials. In chapter 11, Lopriore describes Web-based professional development modules that were developed for teachers to learn about how to integrate language and content in their classes. In addition, CLIL units developed by teachers were shared via the Web. In chapter 9, Gersten and Sysoyev describe how online groups enabled teachers
from different parts of the vast country of Russia to collaborate in the design of materials.

Technology also provides a means for delivery of material to learners. The impetus for Nowalk’s curriculum efforts in China (chapter 7) was delivery of English language instruction via technology. The aim was to develop “a Web-based system with multimedia features [that would] facilitate more active, engaged learning of English [and] promote listening and speaking skills” (p. 108). The system was seen as a way to compensate for an acute shortage of teachers and to achieve the goal of providing English language instruction to 200 million students.

Technology also plays a role in creation of materials by learners. In chapter 6, Sherris’s students researched the Web for information about the history of their country and developed a video about their school. In terms of the distinction between TL-embedded and TL-removed contexts, technology plays a role in blurring those boundaries. We said earlier that the primary context for learning and using English is the classroom itself. In chapter 10, Clavijo, Hine, and Quintero describe an exciting use of technology: online communities among students in Colombia, Chile, Canada, and Scotland that create a context for language use beyond the confines of the classroom. As the authors point out, “we have been able to provide opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to interact in ways that were simply unthinkable in the past” (p. 153). This type of technology use creates social equity so that students in state schools who normally would not have opportunities to interact with people from other cultures are able to do so in the virtual forum.

**Conclusion**

These are exciting and challenging times for English language curriculum development for school-age learners. The global reach of English has spurred a rethinking of its role in education and, consequently, a rethinking of how to teach it. In the accounts in this volume, English has either contributed to innovative local curricula or been the driving force of change carried out within the school curriculum. In both cases, English has had a pivotal role in affecting traditional syllabuses as well as forms of teacher education.

In spite of the differences in the educational systems in which curriculum design takes place, their different language teaching traditions, the degree to which the target language is embedded, and the native language(s) of the stakeholders, what emerges are some common threads that sustain the innovations:
• the shared emphasis on skills integration
• a willingness to actively engage with educational reforms
• the growing relevance of content as an effective way of using the target language for authentic purposes
• the shift from language as a subject to language as a means to know, to learn, and to make sense of the surrounding world
• ways to use technology and not to be used by it
• the growing relevance of plurilingual competence as a right
• the shifting role of English from a global language to a language owned by different peoples and in different ways that provide access to information and intercultural communication

Taken together, the chapters in this volume help us better understand how different educational systems are currently interpreting traditions and innovations in language teaching in an age of change, a time when English is acquiring new identities.