Workshop on Curriculum Innovation in ELT: Innovation characteristics

Innovation research and theorising shows that the characteristics an innovation has can have a strong influence on its chances of success. We will look at the nature of some features of innovations of this kind, and how they can be used to analyse and evaluate existing and proposed ELT curriculum innovations.

1.1 Rogers’ innovation characteristics

On the basis of his study of research into a very large number of innovations of many different kinds, Rogers 2003 identifies which of their features appeared to correlate either positively or negatively with successful adoption, as follows:

1. **Relative advantage**: the degree to which an innovation is perceived as better than the idea it supersedes.

2. **Compatibility**: the degree to which an innovation is perceived as being consistent with the existing values, past experiences and needs of potential adopters.

3. **Complexity**: the degree to which an innovation is perceived as difficult to understand and use.

4. **Trialability**: the degree to which an innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis.

5. **Observability**: the degree to which the results of an innovation are visible to others. (Rogers ibid: 14-16, and also see Ch. 6)

The relationship between these characteristics and adoption is as follows: “Innovations that are perceived by individuals as having greater relative advantage, compatibility, trialability, observability and less complexity will be adopted more rapidly than other innovations.” (ibid: 16)

The above are the most frequently-cited of Rogers’ criteria. However, he also mentions a sixth, that of “re-invention”, which he defines as “the degree to which an innovation is changed or modified by a user in the process of its adoption and implementation”. (ibid: 17) This characteristic is seen to correlate positively with adoption.

1.2 Task A: ‘task-based learning’ as an ELT innovation

We will use Rogers’ characteristics to analyze a recent major ELT curriculum innovation, namely, ‘task-based learning’ (TBL).

Many definitions of language learning ‘task’ exist, but they can all be seen to boil down to meaning something like *a kind of activity in which the students have to put language into practice to solve a communication problem of some sort*, i.e., the focus is on language use and ‘learning by doing’. ‘TBL’ is likewise defined in different
ways in different parts of the literature, but here, following Ellis (2003: 30-34), it will be seen as a ‘communicating to learn’ approach – in other words, the focus is on getting the students to do communication tasks, with the language work arising out of this, in a ‘just in time’ (‘focus on form’) manner (see, e.g., Samuda 2003).

A well-known version of TBL is the Willis model (see Fig. 1 below) (Willis 1996a: 53; cf. Willis 1996b, Ch. 3; also see, e.g., Skehan 1996, Nunan 2004: Ch. 2).

![Fig. 1: A TBL framework (Willis 1996a: 53)](image)

A typical task in this approach would be, e.g: ‘Think of a teacher from your early schooldays whom you remember well. Write down three things you remember about him and her. Then, in pairs, tell each other about them. Try to find two things your teachers had in common.’ (Willis in Willis & Willis 96a: 53) The pre-task phase involves an orientation to the task; in the task cycle phase, students do the task, then prepare a report on the results, and present it; in the language focus phase, there is analysis and/or practice of language points related to the earlier phases (Willis 1996b: 38).

Use one or more of Rogers’ criteria above to analyse the characteristics of the Willis TBL framework as an ELT curriculum innovation. What conclusions can be drawn in terms of its potential for adoption?

1.3 Task B: additional curriculum innovation characteristics

What other characteristics do you feel also influence how likely it is that an ELT curriculum innovation will be adopted, over and above those mentioned in Rogers? Describe their nature and say why you feel they are significant.

1.4 Task C: analysis of proposed or actual local ELT curriculum innovations

Use one or more of Rogers’ and/or any other relevant criteria to analyse the characteristics of a recent proposed or actual ELT curriculum innovation in your own situation. What conclusions can be drawn in terms of its potential or actual degree of adoption?
RECOMMENDED READING

- Rogers 2003, Chs. 1 & 6;
- Markee 1997, Ch. 2: this is full of examples of the kind of analysis this workshop has been concerned with;
- Finally, in one part of Bax 2003, there is an example of an attempt to apply Rogers’ criteria to the analysis and evaluation of CALL.

REFERENCES


Samuda, V. 2001. “Guiding relationships between form and meaning during task performance: The role of the teacher”, in Bygate, M., P. Skehan & M. Swain (eds.) *Researching Pedagogic Tasks Longman* (Ch. 6)


In this part of the workshop, we are concerned with approaches to ELT curriculum innovation implementation. In other words: how can an innovation be put into practice in such a way as to maximise the likelihood of adoption?

1.1 Innovation implementation strategies

One of best-known conceptualisations of approaches to innovation implementation is Chin and Benne’s ‘change strategies’ framework (Chin and Benne 1970: 32–59; cf. Kennedy 1987: 163 – 170), viz:

- **The power-coercive strategy** (P-C): the use of legislation and other sanctions to force change to occur (‘brute force’). A mainly top-down, one-way approach.

- **The rational-empirical strategy** (R-E): the use of reason and other forms of evidence to show the need for change (‘brute sanity’). Also primarily top-down and one-way.


1.2 Task A: applying the strategies

*How do each of the three strategies typically manifest themselves in practice? Which of the following items would you associate with each of them, and why? Can you think of any further examples?*

i. academic input, via talks, articles, books, courses, etc.
ii. action research
iii. brainstorming
iv. curriculum documents, syllabi, prescribed programmes, implementation plans, etc.
v. legislation
vi. orientation meetings
vii. problem-solving
viii. research evidence, test results, feedback
ix. sanctions/rewards/incentives

1.3 Task B: advantages and disadvantages

*What are some of the main potential advantages and disadvantages of each of the strategies? Put the number for each of the following in the appropriate place in the table below:*

i. addresses the “why” of the change  
ii. complex and time-consuming  
iii. creates resistance  
iv. encourages ownership  
v. gets things moving  
vi. ideas may be viewed as impractical at chalk-face  
vii. assumes people are mainly motivated by reasons, factual evidence, etc.  
viii. basis for consensus-building  
ix. overestimates agency (i.e., power and authority) of “grass-roots” personnel  
x. resources often insufficient for full operation  
xii. tends to breed unthinking conformity

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Do any others come to mind?

1.4 Task C: applying the strategies - a curriculum development case study

Read the following description of the framework used by a university ELT centre (the “IELE”) to manage its curriculum development activity, and:

i) identify what aspects of it correspond to each of the three change strategies, and

ii) say how effective you think the system is likely to be in practice.

The system consists of two main elements, “Activity Areas” and “Area Plans”. An Activity Area is similar to a “quality circle”, as found in the world of industrial or commercial management. Each one comprises a cluster of related courses, e.g., ones concerned with English for Academic Purposes (see Fig.1 below).

Each Area is staffed by an Area Co-ordinator and a team of 2 -5 tutors. The staff stay with their Area for at least two years, in order to allow sufficient time for long-term planning and a significant build-up of expertise. The Area staff are responsible for formulating and implementing curriculum development policy for the Area, in consultation with the IELE Director and IELE Committee (the latter consists of the Director, Area Co-ordinators and tutor representatives).

The other main element in this system is the Area Plan. This consists of a document, drawn up by the Area staff, detailing prospective curriculum development activity for the subsequent 12 - 18 months. It covers the following main aspects:
- *projected activity*: this is a factual record of what sorts of courses and other forms of curriculum activity the Area intends to mount during the period of the plan;

- *course development*: a statement of what development is planned for a) existing Area courses, b) with respect to new courses;

- “*telling the world*”: details of plans for curriculum development-related conference presentations, publications and publicity;

- *research*: what research will be undertaken by the Area in connection with the rest of the Plan;

- *financial forecast*: a projection of income and costs for the period of the Plan (the Area is required to at least “balance its books”);

- *staff and resource development*: this section deals with the staff and resource development implications of the Plan.
The Plan is prepared in draft by the Area staff and submitted to the Director/IELE Committee for discussion and approval. Towards the end of the period covered by the Plan, a retrospective Area Plan Review is prepared by the Area staff, in order to analyse the success or otherwise of the plan, record unforeseen developments, and so on. This is likewise discussed with the Director/IELE Committee, and the conclusions form part of the input to the next, prospectively-oriented planning cycle, and so on.

(based on (Waters 1997: 1-11))

REFERENCES


Alan Waters (a.waters@lancaster.ac.uk)
Lancaster University, UK
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