

**Brian TOMLINSON (Ed).** *English Language Learning Materials: A Critical Review.*

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**Nicolas Robert Hurst**

nrhurst@letras.up.pt

*Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto (FLUP)*

*The Centre for English, Translation and Applied Language Studies (CETAPS)*

Brian Tomlinson is responsible for an extensive list of publications related to the development of English Language Teaching (ELT) materials. He is regular speaker at international conferences (including the recent 5<sup>th</sup> International Forum on ELT at the Faculty of Letters, the University of Porto (FLUP) in October 2011) and he is the president of MATSDA – The Materials Development Association.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Two books he edited are the cornerstone reference works for the FLUP subject ‘The Production of ELT materials’ which is taught in the second year of FLUP’s ‘Masters in Foreign Language Teaching’ course. The two books are:

Brian TOMLINSON (Ed.) 1998, *Materials Development in Language Teaching*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (revised edition, April 2011).

Brian TOMLINSON (Ed.) 2003, *Developing Materials for Language Teaching*, London, Continuum Books.

The recent publication of the paperback edition of *English Language Learning Materials* makes available to a wider readership a wealth of information, both theoretical and practical, through a series of studies of ELT materials and contexts from around the world. The depth and breadth of the descriptions and reflections provided is a valuable resource for any ELT professional working in Portugal. A common complaint among these practitioners is a sense of isolation, that having left university and entered the state or private school system, or other areas of more precarious ELT employment, they have few opportunities to stay in touch with developments in their field and in this way are less able to validate their teaching procedures and materials; this does not mean that the various ‘teacher development’ courses and conferences offered and organized by various institutions around Portugal are not without merit, it is more a question of the infrequency and lack of permanence of these events. This book brings the world of ELT into our local professional orbit in one easy to consult volume.

This paperback edition is divided into four sections:

Part 1: Introduction: pp.1-14.

A general discussion relating ELT materials to aspects of learning theory.

<sup>1</sup> MATSDA also publishes a journal ‘Folio’ which contains pertinent articles on the subject of ELT materials. See: <http://www.matsda.org.uk/about.html>.

Brian Tomlinson provides readers with his own highly personal (polemical?) views on what facilitates language learning in general and then relates that to what it is about current ELT materials that actually helps learners of English and what it is about current ELT materials that actually prevents language acquisition and development.

Part Two: Different types of materials: pp.15-156.

Seven different chapters relating ELT materials to specific contexts of learning.

This section of the book approaches its brief from the perspective of reviewing the materials currently used for different types of target learners. Beyond the more usual perspectives related to learners of General English, specific consideration is also given to Young Learners (a growing market in Portugal thanks to recent government initiatives related to providing ELT at primary level), to English for Specific Purposes (an area in which many Portuguese ELT professionals find work: in companies, in banks and so on) and to English for Academic Purposes (an area in expansion, especially at post graduate level where English is the designated language of instruction and where English bibliography tends to dominate). In addition, this section reviews materials for extensive reading, materials for self-access learning and multi-media materials.

Part Three: Materials in Use around the World: pp.157-316.

Nine different chapters relating ELT materials to different geographical locations.

In this section of the book materials development experts review what is going on in the particular geographical area they are most familiar with. There are contributions from all around the globe. Focussing on the distinctive local characteristics of the ELT materials being used there, their use is described and evaluated and suggestions are provided for their improvement. In this way, readers can find assess their own materials in the light of different practices from a wide range of teaching contexts, all of which will provide relevant points of comparison, but no single unified 'golden rule' or 'magic formula' regarding the development of ELT materials.

Part Four: Conclusions: pp.317-323.

A summing-up of the 'state of play' of ELT materials around the world.

Brian Tomlinson discusses five key deficiencies of currently used ELT materials as well a series of five further general criticisms but also provides some counter-weight to this negativity with a list of five positive attributes of currently used ELT materials and five recommendations for future developments of ELT materials. In addition, he makes an appeal for greater support to be given to the role of reading in ELT, and specifically to the importance of extensive reading as being a cost-effective, easy to implement approach to improving language acquisition and development.

Worthy of comment is Brian Tomlinson's starting point in this world-wide exploration of ELT materials: he emphasises the need to re-focus this area of professional expertise on the learner; indeed, the title of the book suggests just that: it is the learner and not the teacher who should be at the heart of materials design, both at initial stages of language acquisition and later stages of more sophisticated, multi-purpose language development. The key is that the materials

should “provide exposure to authentic use of English through spoken and written texts with the potential to engage the learners cognitively and affectively (ibid: 4)” and should “include activities which help learners to notice for themselves salient features of the texts (ibid: 5)”.

Perhaps of most immediate utilitarian value in this volume is the checklist of criteria provided in the discussion of General English materials, published for the international market. The fourteen point materials evaluation scheme (pp.24-29) could be usefully applied by most foreign language teachers (especially school teachers) working in Portugal in relation to their coursebooks, regardless of whether they are published overseas or locally. Local ELT practitioners would likely conclude that it should be possible for “commercially published coursebooks to satisfy learning principles and incorporate flexibility ... [and] try to focus more on how to maximise intake rather than concentrating on language item coverage (ibid: 36)”. The use of such a criterion driven evaluation scheme might just help to make that happen.

All in all, this volume is an important addition to Brian Tomlinson’s extensive list of contributions in the field of ELT materials. While not cheap (around 30 euros from Internet bookshops) it does provide a plethora of differing perspectives that can challenge and provoke change in a real sense: by encouraging critical analysis and by providing practical suggestions and applications.

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