EVALUATING CURRICULAR INNOVATION IN EFL EDUCATION

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Introduction

The following article examines a large-scale curricular innovation in English as a foreign language (EFL) education at a university[**] in western Japan where the author worked for several years. This innovation is evaluated through the lens of Numa Markee's (1993, 1997a, 1997b) theoretical framework for analysing and understanding the process of adoption and spread of curricular change in language education.

For the purposes of this article, 'curriculum' is defined as an umbrella term that encompasses various components such as planning, materials, and tasks, but principally concerns syllabus and evaluation (Hall, 2001, p. 9). 'Change' is used synonymously with 'innovation', which is defined by Markee as "...proposals for qualitative change in pedagogical materials, approaches, and values that are perceived as new by individuals who comprise a formal language education system" (Markee, 1993, p. 231).

First of all, Markee's (1993, 1997a, 1997b) framework is outlined, following which a specific curricular innovation is evaluated by using the

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framework's criteria to illustrate particular factors and issues that are relevant to an understanding of the process of innovation in language education.

A Framework for Conceptualizing Innovation

Markee's (1993, 1997a, 1997b) theoretical framework is based on the analysis of the factors that determine the success or failure of an innovation. It consists of a composite question: "Who, adopts, what, where, when, why, and how?" to which responses are provided to each part of the question. In order to answer the seven-part question, a range of issues impacting on curriculum change is considered from the inception of an innovation process to its completion by using a set of criteria and categories which are summarized in the following:

'WHO' refers to the various stakeholders' socially defined roles and adoption behaviours that are based on their psychological profiles. These include change agents, clients, adopters (or resisters), implementers, and suppliers of innovations.

'ADOPTS' outlines the extent to which an innovation is ultimately adopted, dependent on its perceived value by potential adopters involved in the decision-making process. This decision-making process includes five phases, during which adopters: 1) learn about an innovation, 2) become convinced of its merits (or deficiencies), 3) decide to adopt (or reject) the innovation, 4) begin implementing it, and 5) confirm (or disconfirm) their decision to continue using the innovation (Markee, 1993, p. 231).

'WHAT' sets out a definition of curricular innovation as "... a managed process of development whose principle products are teaching (and/or

testing) materials, methodological skills, and pedagogical values that are perceived as new by potential adopters" (Markee, 1997a, p. 46). The exact nature of an innovation, including new ideas, new practices and new behaviours are all involved in this category.

'WHERE' is about sociocultural constraints on implementing an innovation; not the geographical context. Such constraints are likely to include cultural, ideological, historical, political, economic, administrative, institutional, and sociolinguistic factors.

'WHEN' refers to the time required to implement an innovation. The spread of innovation among potential adopters is a slow process. Markee (1997b, p. 84) suggests that the diffusion of new ideas or practices often takes a long time and is a slower process than change agents anticipate.

'WHY' concerns the reasons for adopting or rejecting an innovation. The reasons include sociocultural constraints (see 'Where', above), the psychological profiles of stakeholders, and the innovation's inherent attributes which facilitate or impede the process of adoption. The attributes include: advantages of adopting an innovation; compatibility with previous practice; complexity; trialability; observability; form and design; originality; and feasibility.

'HOW' is about strategies of innovation in language education that are incorporated in a 'diffusion-of innovations' perspective (see below). It categorises different approaches to implementing curricular change, including:

- Research, development, and diffusion (RD&D) model, which is accompanied by empirical-rational change strategies
- Centre-periphery (CP) model which uses power-coercive strategies to

impose change

- Problem-solving (PS) model which is complemented by normative-reeducative change strategies and is reputedly the most popular model
- Social interaction (SI) model involving mainly unplanned change
- 'Linkage' or hybrid model which, recognizing the complexity of change, is a synthesis of RD&D, PS, and SI models

(Markee, 1997b, pp. 86-7)

There are several stages of curricular innovation, including initiation, adoption, implementation, and spread. To understand how each of these proceeds, Markee (1997a) proposes a 'diffusion of innovation' viewpoint which comprises:

1. Explanation of different rates of adoption by user-adopters related to their psychological profiles, sociocultural variables, and intrinsic characteristics of an innovation;
2. Analysis of how various channels of communication (email, memo, research journal, word of mouth, etc.) can be used to notify potential adopters of an innovation;
3. Identification of the stages of deciding whether to adopt, implement, continue (or discontinue), and finally retain (or reject) an innovation;
4. Awareness of the personal and social consequences (beneficial or otherwise) of curricular change; and
5. Understanding how an innovation can be designed, implemented, and maintained.

(Markee, 1997a, pp. 42-3)

Markee (1993) argues that this diffusionist perspective is essential for teachers and researchers to embrace because it provides an integrated framework for understanding the development and evaluation of innovation in language education (p. 242).

Innovation in an EFL Curriculum: A Case Study
WHO?

The stakeholders in a curriculum innovation for all English language classes comprised four main players: the *university administrators who originally adopted and initiated the change; the teachers who were responsible for implementing the change; the students who were the clients; and a computer software company which was the supplier of the innovation.

Teachers (potential adopters and implementers) perceptions of a proposed curricular innovation can vary widely so that categories of adopters can be divided into early adopters, early majority, late majority, laggards and resisters (Markee, 1993: 233).

However, a psychological profile of native English language instructors at the subject university would situate most of them as innovators and adopters. This is because they were "widely travelled, well educated, and upwardly mobile; they tend[ed] to be high-risk takers who tolerate high levels of uncertainty, and they tend[ed] to have a high degree of exposure to mass media and close professional or personal contacts with change agents" (Markee, 1997b, p. 85). Accordingly, most of the EFL teachers could be

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characterized as psychologically receptive to adopting the curricular innovation because they had been educated in advanced western countries and were consequently open-minded and highly tolerant to risk and changed circumstances

ADOPTS?

The innovation was an imposed change by the *university administration and did not involve the diffusion of change process envisaged in Markee's model. The consequences of this power-coercive method of adoption and implementation are discussed in 'How' section, below. Therefore, because of coercion, the early and mid-phases of the decision-making process were not evident and adoption of the innovation did not depend on perceptions of it by stakeholders (implementing it) in classrooms. Notwithstanding, adoption and continuing use of the innovation was able to be confirmed, contrary to the expectation of failure implied in Markee's model, and the innovation was ultimately a success (see 'How', below).

WHAT?

The innovation comprised a large-scale change to the English language curriculum at a *university in western Japan where the author taught 9-10 classes weekly for several years. Formally adopted in 2005, the innovation involved the introduction of electronic learning (hereafter 'e-learning') accompanied by weekly in-class tests as a compulsory component of the curriculum for all first and second year EFL conversation

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classes. The computer software (marketed as ALC Net-Academy by Hitachi) consisted of a self-study e-learning course for beginner level and intermediate level learners to increase vocabulary and improve their listening skills independently, while allowing teachers to monitor their progress. The stated objective of introducing the e-learning and mini-tests was to improve TOEIC test scores, which was to be achieved by encouraging learners to improve their study habits.

The e-learning was completed by learners as homework and became incorporated in the teacher-designed class curriculums. It required learners to systematically complete assigned units of study in their own time using university computers (only, as the software was not accessible from external computers) as necessary preparation for weekly mini-tests (of about 8 minutes duration) held during class time. The mini-test results comprised 20% of term grades and teachers periodically received computer printouts showing a record of total logged hours and number of homework study units completed by each learner.

WHERE?

The sociocultural context was EFL conversation classes in a Japanese *university. Each class typically comprised around 35 Japanese students and several foreign exchange Chinese students. The EFL classes were compulsory and focused on developing communicative competence in speaking and listening skills as preparation for taking the TOEIC proficiency test, which was administered twice yearly in January-February

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and July-August. There were various constraints on curriculum change, including the pedagogical constraint of a disproportionate emphasis on passing tests which is a situation common to most East Asian educational contexts.

Other constraints included a cultural tradition which tends to view teachers as transmitters of knowledge and facts to be diligently received by passive learners, thus militating against CLT (communicative language teaching) principles such as learner-centredness and fostering fluency. This resistance to communicative learning methods being used in classrooms is widespread in Japanese society where teachers are viewed as leaders and authority figures and learners are regarded as 'empty vessels' to be filled. Also, the local educational culture generally rejects the communicative objectives that emphasize a process of learning in preference to the product and outcomes, and likewise opposes fluency being valued more highly than accuracy in a school system where audio-lingualism and grammar translation methods of learning English still predominate.

WHEN?

Introduction of the innovation by the adopter (*university administration) was effected by the implementers (native English language teachers) immediately, beginning in the same month as it was announced in a teacher's orientation meeting. A percentage of part-time teachers were initially somewhat hostile and unreceptive to the innovation and could be characterized as resisters (discussed further in 'How', below).

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WHY?

The innovation was introduced with the express goal of improving students TOEIC test scores by fostering better study habits in learners to help achieve this objective. The adopted innovation contained some attributes which potentially enhanced its effectiveness. These included:

1. E-learning is culturally compatible in Japan because of high computer literacy, world class electronic technology and well-resourced educational facilities;

2. Mini-tests are culturally compatible in Japan because test-taking is an integral part of the education system;

3. The innovation seemed relatively complex in its early stages of operation until user-adopters understood its requirements and began to experience its benefits.

4. The innovation facilitated improved learning, especially listening skill

5. Minimal cost was involved for the computer software application and production of test papers.

HOW?

As noted earlier, in 'Adopts', the innovation was an administration-imposed change so that its introduction and diffusion was almost immediate, once all stakeholders understood what was required of them. However, there was significant initial resistance by some teachers (implementer-resisters) and many students (client-resisters). This was because the requirement for learners to complete regular e-learning homework and prepare for weekly classroom tests made additional demands on their time. Adjusting to this new routine and acquiring the necessary computer skills

needed to complete the homework took several weeks. Also, several part-time teachers were openly resentful, perceiving the innovation as interfering and imposing. In general, the concerns of these teachers about the innovation could be characterized as constraints, comprising:

1. Personal constraints of interference in autonomy, intrusion on limited class time and additional workload on teachers; and

2. Pedagogical constraints of interference in teachers' personally-designed curriculums and how classes are run.

3. Psychological constraints of forfeiting full ownership of their personally-designed curriculums

Perhaps the significant pool of resentment could have been avoided if all part-time teachers (who taught around 80% of classes) had been consulted about the innovation prior to its adoption. But none were. On the other hand, the apparently authoritarian manner in which the innovation was adopted could be justified by the administration on the grounds that all of the teachers affected by the innovation were non-Japanese, of whom the overwhelming majority (including 5 full-timers and around 25 part-timers) lacked adequate Japanese communication ability to express a coherent opinion about anything unless it was expressed in English. However, that was not necessarily a valid reason for imposing an innovation even if possessing legitimate authority to do so.

To reiterate 'Adopts' (above), the adopter of the innovation was the *university administration which required all teachers, including those who

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had objections and resisted it due to personal, pedagogical and psychological constraints it imposed, to adopt and implement the curricular innovation. In this situation, the power-coercive method of effecting curriculum change was an authoritarian and top-down approach to innovation and risked negative consequences such as end users, including learners (influenced by their teacher), feeling dislike or ambivalence rather than being highly committed to the innovation's success. This contrasts with the more egalitarian and bottom-up diffusion process of innovation adoption outlined by Markee (1997b, p. 87) that tends to facilitate positive feelings of investment and personal ownership.

Notwithstanding, after two years of implementing the innovation, it had apparently been adapted to each of the teacher's curriculums and any remaining resisters no longer expressed open dissent. Moreover, the objective of overall improvement in TOEIC scores was realized (the average score increasing by around 8% in two years) and in 2007 the *university received an award for excellence in English education from the Ministry of Education (Japan's peak educational authority). Accordingly, because of the success of the innovation, the *university was able to claim that its original decision to adopt was justified.

Conclusion

In the foregoing example of a specific curricular innovation in a Japanese university, Markee's (1993, 1997a, 1997b) theoretical framework was employed to provide a unified and systematic method for identifying

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and understanding the various factors that impact on the process of adoption and implementation. Application of the framework yielded valuable insights into what actually occurs in the innovation process, including constraints that threaten to undermine success, as well as intrinsic features of an innovation which tend to contribute to a positive outcome if handled appropriately by the adopter from the outset.

The innovation examined in this article was successful despite it being officially adopted and made to become an integral part of revised curricula in an authoritarian and power-coercive change that initially alienated some of the stakeholders charged with implementing it. Though risking failure of the innovation by imposing it in a top-down approach without prior consultation, two years after implementing it the university achieved its objective of raising students' TOEIC test scores.

References

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