

Implementing Innovation in an EFL Curriculum

By Elsa Fernanda Gonzalez

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Centre for English Language Studies

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Describe a curriculum change you would like to see introduced in your teaching context. Explain, with justification, how you would create the conditions for the change to be successful, including a consideration of cost- benefit analysis in your explanation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

When approaching an innovation in ELT many aspects have to be thought thoroughly. Information such as who will participate, where and what actions will be carried out (Cooper, 1989 in Markee, 2001) are factors that can determine the failure or success of an innovation. I believe the purpose of the innovation and future achievements need to be set straightforward before making any decisions or carrying out actions. Additionally, an analysis of the cost-benefit of the innovation could aid innovators predict the results obtained. In my opinion there is no point in working with an innovation and developing it in the classroom if the cost is greater than the benefit obtained.

This paper intends to propose an innovation and provide an analysis of the cost-benefit this process may entail. Firstly, a theoretical background to innovation will be provided. Then, I intend to describe my teaching context and the innovation itself. Specific actions to implement the proposed innovation are enumerated and justified. Finally, possible benefits and costs of innovation implementation are considered.

2. BACKGROUND TO INNOVATION

2.1 Concept

In recent years, innovation and change have captured major attention from ELT managers and specialists mainly due to the failure of major innovation implementations in education policies in different countries and schools around the world (Waters, 2009). However, it seems important to consider the different processes and justifications undergone to its implementation in an effort to and identify the best way to implement innovation.

Several authors set forth a difference among the concepts of change and innovation (White, Martin, Stimson & Hodge, 1991; Nicholls, 1983, cited in White et. al 1991; Miles, 1964, cited in White 1987; Markee, 2001) while others use them as synonyms (Wedell, 2009; Murray, 2008 cited in Waters, 2009; Waters, 2009).

White, Martin, Stimson & Hodge (1991) consider that while change is involuntary and happens in a specific period of time, innovation is planned and deliberate (1991: 178). Nicholls agrees with this point of view and (1983, cited in White et. al 1991) defines innovation as

‘...an idea, object or practice perceived as new by an individual or individuals, which is intended to bring about improvement in relation to desired objectives, which is fundamental in nature and which is planned and deliberate’.

Markee (2001: 120), on the other hand, gives consideration to an education system and defines innovation as a ‘qualitative change’ that is new and is brought upon pedagogical materials, approaches or beliefs.

Opposite to these definitions, Waters (2009) uses the terms innovation and change equally and considers they both entail a difference or novelty upon a specific situation.

For the purpose of this paper, the term ‘innovation’ will be used to refer to the proposed curriculum change. Although, I consider Waters’ point of view valid, it is my opinion that change is not always positive in an ELT curriculum. Therefore, if the purpose of the proposed innovation is to improve a flaw found in students’ development I consider the best term to use is innovation.

2.2 Context Influence

The implementation of an innovation is deeply influenced by the context in which it is embedded (Wedell, 2009). On many occasions it depends on the participants’ opinions and values that determines the procedures of implementation. Kennedy (1988) specifies that it is influenced by a number of systems and subsystems. As represented in Figure 1 these systems and subsystems portray a hierarchy, being the outer layers that have greater influence on the inner layers. Any innovation in the classroom is a subsystem that is greatly influenced by any administrative, political, cultural or institutional points of view of the school or education environment.

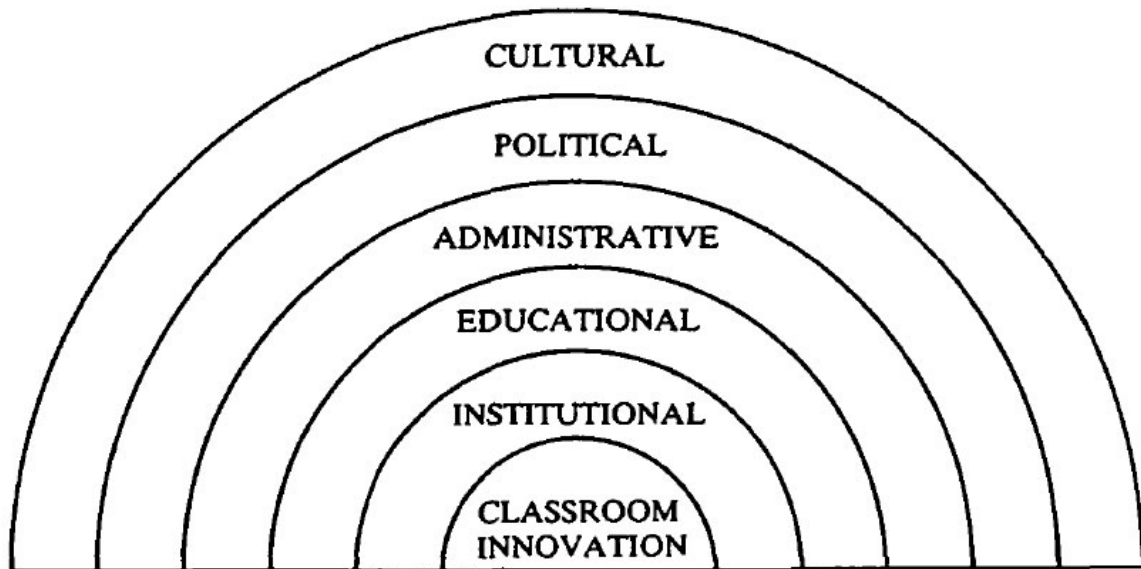


Figure 1. Hierarchy of systems and subsystems involved in an innovation (Kennedy, 1988: 332)

The influence of these systems can become problematic when people managing the innovation ignore them; are aware of the systems but do not intend to work with them or are aware of the systems and extend the innovation objectives in an attempt to change these systems (Kennedy, 1988: 333). When language program managers are aware of context influence and are closed to negotiation or constant communication any proposed innovation may be doomed to failure. With this insight, authors have proposed a more humane perspective of the influence of context in innovation. J. Kennedy & C. Kennedy (1998 cited in Waters, 2009:429) suggest managers need to consider an 'interpretative' point of view to all the subsystems and their potential influence instead of only a 'structuralist' one. That is one that considers the different opinions of the individual participants and the implementation processes (interpretative) instead of a view that only considers the specific structure and nature of roles, procedures and intended results (structuralist).

2.3 Characteristics of Innovation.

Over the years, researchers have identified distinct characteristics that according to their opinion provide greater probability of innovation success. Authors such as Kennedy (1988), Wedell, (2009) and Waters (2009) mention Kelly's (1980) list of characteristics

as the fundamental factors that teachers consider when implementing innovation. First of all, the purpose of innovation needs to correspond to the organization's main objective and be *feasible* for the resources available. That is the institution needs to afford the intended innovation. Secondly, the innovation needs to be *acceptable* to the teaching styles and philosophies of participants. In a teaching context teachers and students are the main innovation participants, therefore the need to feel the innovation corresponds to their teaching and learning values is of major importance. Finally, the innovation should be *relevant* to students' needs, participating instructors and education institution.

I consider these characteristics are teacher and student centred for they consider their needs and teaching styles. Therefore, it is my belief they correspond to the context and specific innovation that is proposed in this paper.

2.4 Benefits and Costs of Innovation.

The whole point of innovation is gaining benefits and positive change for those involved. However, if costs outweigh benefits, participants will prefer to leave innovation aside. The benefits of innovation are unique to each context and project. Therefore, identifying some general gains and losses may enlighten the path of those involved.

Kennedy (1988: 339-34) specifies that innovations may represent different benefits such as *job security* for those who work at the institution. Participants may seek to maintain their job as financial and professional stability and therefore choose to cooperate with the innovation. Secondly, innovation may involve *good relations with adopters*. In other words implementing an innovation requires for all those who participate to have a special channel of communication. Therefore, those who wish to improve their relations with their co-workers may decide to take active part in an innovation. An additional benefit is the *improved service to students*. It is my belief that this is one of the most important benefits for most of curriculum innovations seek teacher and student academic benefits. *Increasing knowledge/skills of teachers* may be a benefit that participants may obtain if innovation implementation requires from instructors to take workshops or any other professional development courses. Once the innovation has been implemented and results

have been evaluated, participants may obtain *intellectual/affective satisfaction or economic/professional rewards*.

Unfortunately, some projects may represent certain losses. They may increase teachers' workloads, demand physical or mental exhaustion, and may require learning new skills. It is difficult to have participants take part in innovation if it takes up their time without an economical reward. In cultures where social and family activities are strictly seen, planning and taking action in an innovation plan on teacher's own time may be difficult to fulfill (ibid).

White et.al (1991) comments innovation implies changes in teachers' attitudes and teaching practices. Although, teachers may react positively, the possibility to negative attitudes should be accounted for. Innovation will most likely lead to increases in teachers' workload, time and fund investment in the program.

Deliberate and careful planning can become problematic especially because in curriculum development the only thing that can be planned is what is to be learned but not what students actually learn (Markee, 2001). On the other hand, I believe that it is difficult to plan the innovation process; participants' reactions are difficult to anticipate. Therefore, improvisation may be a useful tool.

Waters & Vilches' (2005) study described the beliefs of those involved in a possible innovation and their opinions. According to participants, innovation would demand certain costs from teachers and students. Innovation would require students to a) become more involved in the learning process by interacting and collaborating closely with other learners, the teacher, the teaching materials, etc.; b) become more willing and able to accept responsibility for the management of their learning and c) develop a positive attitude towards and ability to cope with the transition to the new teaching and learning methods (Waters & Vilches, 2005: 124).

For participating teachers, innovation in a language program may require them to a) learn appropriate teaching techniques; b) produce teaching materials and other teacher/learning resources; c) cope with integration issues: designing integrated lessons and collaborating with teachers of other subjects; d) identify with and committing oneself to the new

approach; or e) invest time in coping with other teachers, developing resources, ‘research’, etc (Ibid: 124). Table 1 summarizes potential costs and benefits of innovation.

**Table 1 Potential Costs and Benefits of Innovation
(Adapted from Kennedy, 1988; White et.al, 1991 & Markee, 2001)**

Benefits	Costs
Job security for participants	Increase in teachers’ workload.
Good relations with adopters	May cause physical and mental exhaustion in participants.
Improvement of service to students.	Participants may need to learn new skills.
Increasing knowledge/skills of teachers	Changes in teachers’ attitudes.
Intellectual/affective satisfaction	Time consuming.
Economic/professional rewards.	Financial investment required.
	Anticipating results may be hard.

2.5 The Innovation Process.

Trump (1967, cited in White, 1988: 141; White, 1987: 214-216) proposes a five-step process for innovation implementation, 1) analyse co-operatively reasons for present practices; 2) discover what people want that is different from what they are doing; 3) make tentative decisions about the priority of proposed changes; 4) plan the innovation carefully in terms of teacher preparation, student preparation, procedures to be followed and the anticipated effects of the innovation and 5) determine the times and techniques for evaluation.

In the first two steps, information is gathered. It will facilitate the setting of goals. It is necessary to know what exactly is the current situation of the institution to proceed in the most appropriate way. Techniques such as interviews, questionnaires or personal discussions could help gather data among potential participants.

Steps three and four are concerned with information analysis and planning action. It is at this stage where innovation planners analyze current information obtained in stage one and take decisions about how to proceed in the implementation stage. Teachers, students and other staff roles are established. Also, potential issues/solutions are anticipated.

Finally, step five involves the evaluation stage. Such evaluation can be an on-going process or a formative practice. That is while in the on-going process feedback is given during the innovation, the formative evaluation consists of determining if the implementation suited the goals previously set (ibid). During formative evaluation constant communication is necessary so experiences can be shared and situation analysis is carried out.

It is my belief that this five-step process may suit my teaching context and students for all the steps are possible to implement in my actual working place. In the following sections, I intend to provide a description of my teaching context, the proposed innovation and my proposals for creating the appropriate conditions for innovation. Finally, I will give my perspectives in terms of the costs and benefits of this innovation in our school.

3. THE CONTEXT

Every student in this Mexican private university is required (by university policy) to cover six-language core courses and obtain at least 500 points on the Institutional version of the TOEFL test (ITP) by the time they graduate. Students take a placement test when enrolled and are placed in the level the placement test suggests. On occasions, learners with good English skills are placed in intermediate levels at their arrival instead of a beginner level as it is expected. In total there are approximately 30 groups taking English courses with at least 25 students in each. One teacher can teach three groups daily adding up a weekly workload of maximum 15 hours a week depending on the teacher's availability. In terms of administration, all the language teachers are subordinates to a general language coordinator who is responsible for making the entire academic, administrative and innovative decisions. She is also responsible for designating the groups to a specific teacher.

My students are enrolled in the TOEFL ITP preparation course and take part of my lessons on a daily basis for 45 minutes completing 60 hours of classroom instruction per semester. The lessons cover listening, reading and structure practice for these are the only skills covered in the exam. I try to teach them test-specific skills that can help them reach the 500-point goal. However, I come upon students that reach the TOEFL preparation course and do not have the sufficient proficiency level to take the preparation course and in consequence the ITP test. This requires an extra effort from students and can become frustrating.

On the other hand, the general purpose of the university's language program is to give students the sufficient tools to communicate effectively in an English speaking environment, Although, it is a rather ambiguous objective it intends to have students graduate knowing how to speak, write, read and listen proficiently in English. However with 45 minutes of class per day, our objective is hard to accomplish. In order to suit the 500-point requirement with low proficiency students, we have focused our attention on teaching successful test-taking strategies instead of fulfilling the communicative competence goal. I consider the ITP test is not the most adequate to measure our students' proficiency if our main goal is communication. Our world today is highly influenced by technology and demands from students the ability to solve problems autonomously, a part that is not considered in the curriculum.

4. CURRICULUM CHANGE AND JUSTIFICATION

4.1 Proposed Innovation.

I have identified two important aspects that can be improved in the program: a) lack of English language proficiency of students in relation to the curriculum goals of the school, and b) a lack of technology-based autonomous work from students.

Therefore, to address these specific points, I propose to establish a language computer laboratory and elaborate an autonomous-learning program for students to fulfil 20 hours of independent work in it per semester. This will allow the curriculum to provide students opportunities to become independent in their learning and be in contact with technological tools while they develop their language skills.

4.2 Innovation Justification.

As compared in section 2.1 of this paper, change and innovation are considered two different concepts. However, I considered Markee's concept of innovation for it encloses the general goals of my proposed innovation: to implement an innovation that could bring along qualitative change to benefit students' language development.

I believe this proposed innovation would have a macro impact for it will influence administrative, economic and academic issues as well as the actual teaching practice of instructors. Administratively, implementing 20 hours of autonomous laboratory practice would mean diminishing instruction time of other subjects foreign to the language program. Students have a heavy study load and attend school from 8am to 7pm depending on each students' schedule. Therefore, adding instead of diminishing hours would possibly affect their academic performance.

Language teachers would need to dedicate more time to planning for students' autonomous learning in the language lab. They would need to establish a working plan for students to work on while they are in the laboratory.

Economically, a computer laboratory would require the institution to invest in technological infrastructure and software programs, which in our country is very expensive. This investment would allow teachers and students to keep up to date in the latest educational software and teaching/learning tools that will provide them with autonomous learning, life long and professional life skills.

Important consideration needs to be given to the fact that learners are fluent users of technology in all of its different varieties. Therefore, language instructors need to keep up and find teaching techniques that can incorporate technology into their lessons. A language laboratory might facilitate this incorporation.

5. CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR THE PROPOSED INNOVATION.

As described in section 2.6 of this paper there exist, among others, a five-step process to implement an innovation (Trump, 1967 cited in White 1988: 141; White, 1987: 214-216). I intend to describe how to adapt the five-step process to my proposed innovation.

Firstly, I would *analyze co-operatively reasons for present practices*. The main purpose of this step is to gather information so innovation decisions can be taken. I consider that the best way of obtaining information is through teacher meetings. This would be a good opportunity to bring forth any resistance and issues shared towards the implementation of a language laboratory. It would be necessary for the head of the department to be present and any other participants who have important roles.

Then it is important to *discover what people want that is different from what is being done*. As mentioned in section 2.6, interesting data gathering tools are interviews or questionnaires. Therefore, during this meeting, I believe having teachers answer a written anonymous questionnaire would provide information in terms of ideas or issues raised with the innovation. Having the questionnaire anonymous would give the teachers freedom to express thoughts without pressure and would provide important points of view that can enlighten the path of implementation.

Once information is gathered, *participants can follow on to make tentative decisions about the priority of proposed changes*. As mentioned in section 3 of this paper, the head of department takes administrative decisions. However, as Trump believes (1967, cited in White 1988: 141; White, 1987: 214-216) innovations need to be purposeful and adaptable. Therefore, it would be necessary to be open to opinions and create an environment of cooperation to adapt the innovation as close to participants as possible. It is at this stage where the possible advantages and disadvantages of the innovation would be discussed among all participants. For the laboratory to be flexible and adaptable to the curriculum, the opinions, needs and concerns of all those involved need to be accounted for. Instructors could help choose or suggest important software programs and tech-tools that could be included. Once opinions are considered, the decision of implementing a language laboratory is taken involving all the levels of administration of the university and the English teachers involved.

Then, it is necessary to *plan the innovation carefully in terms of teacher preparation, student preparation, procedures to be followed and the anticipated effects of the*

innovation. As stated in part 2.6, innovation should be seen as a means of constant improvement (Miller, 1967 cited in White 1987: 216). Therefore, to fulfil this purpose I would implement the computer laboratory as described below.

Firstly, it would be necessary to coordinate with the administration and finance department the purchase of all the equipment and software. Room, space management and other infrastructure details would need to be taken care of as well. The laboratory would need to contain computers (with Internet access), voice recording devices, tape recorders, CD players, bulletin boards, a coping machine, working tables and chairs.

Then, it is would be necessary to get together with teachers and establish a work plan in which content planning, possible activities for students and attendance policies would be established. I consider that providing students with a program that contains suggested activities for each of the language skills would encourage them to work in the laboratory. These possible activities would be chosen according to the topics and contents they review in the classroom in each unit. Students would be required to fulfil the hours per semester and choose the activities they wish to complete. I also consider necessary the presence of tutors or other English teachers that would be available in the laboratory to assist students when needed.

Once schedules and working plans are organized, with the purpose of maintaining communication at all levels, teacher/manager meetings could be held on a weekly or monthly basis to obtain feedback regarding lab development and students' work in it. Students could be consulted their opinion and preferences with direct interviews or questionnaires. This feedback would have the purpose of improving the laboratory to suit students' needs and constantly be in development. Therefore, weekly or monthly meetings could be a source of information to evaluate if the innovation is actually working and solve issues as they arise.

Finally, if the language laboratory is implemented it is necessary to *determine the times and techniques for evaluation*. On-going and formative evaluation could be considered.

For instance, the head of department could visit students in the laboratory randomly and personally solve their doubts as on-going evaluation to analyze up to what extent the laboratory is beneficial for students' development. Teachers would need to keep a record of students who are actually attending the laboratory and the activities that are being completed. I consider that a possible way of keeping track of work would be to keep a portfolio of the work each student completes in the laboratory. This would provide insight of students' ongoing development and progress with the language. In terms of formative evaluation, I would consider using questionnaires and personal interviews with teachers and other coordinators at the end of the semester to evaluate if the innovation is fulfilling the expectations or if it needs to be improved.

6. THE COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS

6.1 Costs.

6.1.1 Changes in teachers' attitudes and workloads.

A new self-access laboratory will demand more work and time investment on teacher's behalf. Additional from planning their classroom lessons, instructors would need to take time and visit the laboratory to explore and find the suggested activities for students thus representing less time spent at home with their families. This could become an issue especially with those teachers who have to support their families and have up to four jobs to obtain the necessary income. Investing more time to the university will limit their choice of fully cooperating with this innovation. These issues might seriously affect the attitudes towards the use and development of the laboratory.

6.1.2 Administrative Issues.

New equipment, the adaptation of the room/resources and other necessary infrastructure will demand from the university an increase in the budget planned for the year or semester. The university administration will think twice before agreeing to cooperate with the innovation and spending important amounts of money. On the other hand, I believe it is necessary to hire computer and technology experts to provide maintenance to the equipment and be available to users in case of equipment malfunction. Therefore,

possible new staff personnel may need to be hired which would represent an increase in payroll.

6.1.3 Resistance on behalf of students.

The majority of the students take English lessons because it is a requirement of their graduate program. Therefore, many of them do not enjoy learning the language. Increasing their workload will require them to invest time and cognitive performance to the development of their language skills. This demand of extra work may cause them to feel uncomfortable or stressed and express their resistance with unwillingness to attend the laboratory or the denial of fulfilling any of the suggested activities. At the beginning of the innovation teachers may need to cope with resilient and angry students. However as they become more and more involved the number of resistant students may decrease.

6.2 Benefits.

6.2.1 Improved service to students

The most important benefit that is wanted with a self-access computer laboratory is to improve students' performance and the quality of the education the institution provides. Since the main issue identified concerns students' language proficiency and the lack of technology involvement in the language curriculum, the whole objective is to improve the service provided to our learners.

On the other hand, encouraging students to work autonomously in the laboratory, I believe, will provide them opportunities to develop life-lasting skills such as learning autonomy and problem-solving abilities. Finally, I consider the whole point of tertiary education is to prepare graduates for their particular professional lives. Providing opportunities for students to practice their autonomous abilities will aid them in competing and obtaining important job positions in the future.

6.2.2 Increase knowledge and skills of teachers.

This innovation may require instructors to dedicate some time to their professional development. Perhaps several workshops concerning self-access centres and autonomous learning would be necessary to prepare teachers for the implementation and on-going

process of the laboratory. On the other hand, planning suggested activities for laboratory use would increase teacher's abilities to plan and anticipate any possible problems therefore improving their teaching skills. For the university, having better prepared teachers and personal would benefit the quality of the education provided in the university. In the long run, better quality service, and better prepared teacher academics might help increase the student enrolment.

6.2.3 Intellectual/affective satisfaction.

Implementing a language laboratory demands a lot of intellectual, cultural and physical exhaustion on behalf of students, teachers and administrative personnel. The satisfaction of obtaining what was proposed may vary from individual to individual (Kennedy, 1988) depending on the roles each has. In this case if student/teacher needs and opinions are accounted for, then the motivation will be increased.

7. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper I have tried to give some insight into the nature of innovation, how it is approached, its implementation process and some of the benefits and constraints that adopters may face. I have tried to exemplify this information with the description of the implementation process of a computerized self-access laboratory at my current workplace.

Although implementation success varies from project to project (Kennedy, 1988), I believe the amount and quality of communication among participants is fundamental. If there are no open channels for constant exchange of feedback, there is no point in working so hard for the proposed innovation to work. In implementing this language laboratory, the key is the participation of English teachers, the language coordinator, administrators and other staff in the university. Their involvement would allow them to feel the success or failure of the lab as theirs. Furthermore, as Everard and Morris point out (1985:188 cited in White, 1987: 214) constant dialogue and questioning allows for all participants to have a clear picture of what to expect with the innovation but above all, to come to an agreement of its success or failure.

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