A Critical Review of New Interchange Book Series: Advantages and Disadvantages

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ABSTRACT

Communicative language teaching has been basically regarded as an approach to language teaching and learning than a teaching method. Following the basic tenets of communicative traditions and adapting socialization of language issues, materials developers and syllabus designers have produced ELT textbooks internationally to meet the immediate demand of today's language learning: Communicative competence. The New Interchange series published by Cambridge University Press has caught the attention of EFL/ESL learners around the world. The present paper first reviews the fundamental issues commonly referred to in communicative language teaching paradigms and then focus on the major features of the book series in terms of its merits and demerits.

Key Terms: Communicative language teaching, Socialization, New Interchange series, Communicative competence, Merits and demerits

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1. Introduction

The origins of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) dates back to late 1960s. Until then Situational Language Teaching represented the major British Approach to teaching English as a foreign language (Richards & Rodgers, 1998). In Situational Language Teaching, language was taught by practicing basic structures in meaningful situation-based activities. But just as the linguistic theory underlying Audiolingualism was rejected in United States in the mid-1960s, British applied linguists began to call into question the theoretical assumption underlying Situational Language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

American Linguist Noam Chomsky had demonstrated that the current standard structural theories of language were incapable of accounting for the fundamental characteristics of language -the creativity and uniqueness of individual sentences. Then, British applied linguists emphasized another fundamental dimension of language that was inadequately addressed in current approaches to language teaching at that time -the functional and communicative potential of language (Mitchell, 1986). They saw the need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures. Then, it was claimed that there is a sense in which 'using language in order to communicate' sounds rather strange with reference to spontaneous speech. Because, people do not consciously 'use' language; they communicate and language gets used in the process, which is

not quite the same thing (Richards & Schmidt (1983). The focus shifts away from the language and towards the user, emphasizing the effectiveness with which communication takes place and skills which the user can gather in order to maintain and promote it (Howatt 1984). As the scope of Communicative Language Teaching has expanded, it was considered as an approach rather than a method, which aims to:

a. make communicative competence the goal of language teaching

b. develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. (Richards and Rodgers, 1986)

The current situation of the Communicative Language Teaching is summarized by Brown as:

Today we are benefiting from the victories and defeats of our professional march through history. But today the methodological issues are quite different and quite complex. Beyond grammatical and discourse elements in communication, we are probing the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for "real- life" communication in the classroom. We are trying to get our learners to develop linguistic fluency, not just the accuracy that has so consumed our historical journey. We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance "out there" when they leave the womb of our classrooms. We are concerned with how to facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task. We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential.

Nunan (1991) offers five features to characterize the Communicative Language Teaching:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language

2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation

3. The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning process itself.

4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.

5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

2. Literature Review

2.1. CLT and Communicative Competence

The Communicative approach does a lot to expand on the goal of creating "communicative competence" compared to earlier methods that professed the same objective. Teaching students how to use the language is considered to be at least as important as learning the language itself. Brown (1994) aptly describes the "march" towards CLT:

Beyond grammatical discourse elements in communication, we are probing the nature of social, cultural, and pragmatic features of language. We are exploring pedagogical means for 'real-life' communication in the classroom. We are trying to get our learners to develop linguistic fluency, not just the accuracy that has so consumed our historical journey. We are equipping our students with tools for generating unrehearsed language performance 'out there' when they leave the womb of our classrooms. We are concerned with how to facilitate lifelong language learning among our students, not just with the immediate classroom task. We are looking at learners as partners in a cooperative venture. And our classroom practices seek to draw on whatever intrinsically sparks learners to reach their fullest potential. (p.77)

CLT is a generic approach, and seems non-specific at times in terms of how to actually go about using practices in the classroom in any sort of systematic way. There are many interpretations of what CLT actually means and involves. Central to the development of communicative language teaching has been notion of communicative competence as defined by the sociolinguist Dell Hymes. Hymes was concerned that the concept of linguistic competence put forward by Chomsky (1965), as the underlying rule representation of the speaker was too narrow. Hymes' communicative competence on the other hand focuses on the wider factors beyond linguistic competence, taking into account pragmatic aspects governing the use of the language in everyday situations. Thus creativity is incorporated into communicative competency. Focusing purely on language forms (syntactic structures) was considered too narrow. According to Hymes, "a person who acquires communicative competence acquires both knowledge and ability for language use with respect to a. whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible; b. whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available; c. whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated; d.

whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails" (cited in Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Communicative language teaching therefore seeks to bring learners into closer contact with authentic language examples together with the promotion of fluency over accuracy (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

2.2. CLT and Functional-Notional Syllabus

The functional-notional syllabus appeared as an alternative to the structural syllabus. Its basic principles to syllabus design are described in Threshold level English. Nunan (1987, 1989) enumerated the main components of the syllabus as:

a. The situations in which the foreign language will be used, including topics which will be dealt with

b. The language activities in which the learner will engage

c. The language functions which the learner will perform

d. Topics, and what the learner will be able to do with these

e. The general notions which the learner will be able to handle

f. The specific (topic related) notions which the learner will be able to handle

g. The language forms the learner will be able to use

h. The degree of skill the learner will be required to display

To put the background part of the present paper into an end, the list of CLT features summarized by Finnochiaro and Brumfit (1983) is introduced:

(1) Meaning is paramount.

(2) Dialogs, if used, center around communicative functions and are not normally memorized.

(3) Contextualization is a basic premise.

(4) Language learning is learning to communicate.

(5) Effective communication is sought.

(6) Drilling may occur, but peripherally.

(7) Comprehensible pronunciation is sought.

(8) Any device which helps the learners is accepted - varying according to their age, interest, etc.

(9) Attempts to communicate may be encouraged from the very beginning.

(10) Judicious use of native language is accepted where feasible.

(11) Translation may be used where students need or benefit from it.

(12) Reading and writing can start from the first day, if desired.

(13) The target linguistic system will be learned best through the process of struggling to communicate.

(14) Communicative competence is the desired goal.

(15) Linguistic variation is a central concept in materials and methods.

(16) Sequencing is determined by any consideration of content function, or meaning which maintains interest.

(17) Teachers help learners in any way that motivates them to work with the language.

(18) Language is created by the individual often through trial and error.

(19) Fluency and acceptable language is the primary goal: accuracy is judged not in the abstract but in context.

(20) Students are expected to interact with other people, either in the flesh, through pair and group work, or in their writings.

(21) The teacher cannot know exactly what language the students will use.

(22) Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language.

2.3. CLT and Halliday's Language Functions.

Another related theory of communication is Halliday's functional account of language use. He described seven basic functions that language performs for children learning their first language, and learning a second

language was similarly viewed as performing different kinds of functions. These are:

1. Instrumental Function ("I want"): used for satisfying material needs

2. Regulatory Function ("do as I tell you"): used for controlling the behaviors of others

3. Interactional Function ("me and you"): used for getting along with other people.

4. Personal Function ("here I come"): used for identifying and expressing the self.

5. Heuristic Function ("tell me why"): used for exploring the world around and inside one.

6. Imaginative Function ("let's pretend"): used for creating a world of one's own.

7. Informative Function ("I've got something to tell you") used for communication new information (Richards & Rodgers, 1986)

As to the theory of learning, little has been found in literature, but we can find some elements underlying the Communicative Language Teaching Practices. One of these elements is "communication" principle. According to Morrow (as cited in Chastain, 1986), activities that are truly communicative should have tree features:

a. Information gap: During the communication some knowledge exchange should take place. Asking to someone who knows what today is "What is today?", and getting his response is not a true communication. Besides, Scrivener states that we normally communicate when one of us has information (facts, opinions, ideas, etc.) that another does not have. This is known as an "information gap"

b. Choice: In communication, the speaker should have the choice of what to say and how to say

c. Feedback: True communication is purposeful. Speaker can evaluate whether or not his purpose has been achieved based upon the information he receives from his listener. (cited in Chastain, 1986)

2.4. Language Socialization

Language socialization might be considered as a reaction to purely syntactic as well as psycholinguistic UG-based theories of second language acquisition (SLA) which have preoccupied second language acquisition research (SLAR) circles around the world in the 1960s and 70s. The main tenets of the language socialization are based on the contemporary poststructuralist theories aimed to understand the influence of social variables on second language learning. Originally, the language socialization movement dates back to the emergence of socio-psychological approaches to the study of L2 learning. The pioneering studies of social psychological variables by Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972) which revealed the relationship between motivation and positive attitudes and language learning; and also the Schumann's (1976) Acculturation Model which demonstrated the role of language learners' integration with second language people, and his explanation of social distance and psychological distance between language learners and TL group; and Tajfel's (1978) Theory of Social Identity to emphasize the relationship between L2 learning and ethnic group membership are all more or less attempts to bring the social context to fore in studies of SLA.

Poststructuralist theories, including language socialization, made an attempt to crystallize the social aspects of L2 learning and language use (Cook, 2003). Pennycook is referred in the literature as the pioneer to call for a "critical applied linguistics" for the 1990s, and urged for the need to reconceptualize SLA within the poststructuralist framework. Poststructuralism in this sense refers to the investigation of the role of language in construction of social relations, and the role of social dynamics in the process of additional language learning and language use. Post structuralist approaches reconceptualise L2 learning as "an intrinsically social … process of socialization into specific communities of practice, also referred to as 'situated learning'" (Cook, p.286). Being so, the study of language socialization is related to two areas: "language ideologies and the process of internalization of particular discourses available for appropriation by newcomers"(p.286). Here the term "appropriation " is a technical term referring to "the process of internalization of others' voice and of 'bending' of these voices to the speakers' own purposes" (p. 290). This notion of appropriation is in fact in conformity with Bakhtinian notions of heteroglossia and appropriation. In the field of SLA, the language socialization approaches are materialized basically in interactionist approaches to the study of L2 learning. However, those supporting the poststructuralist approaches in general and language socialization in particular criticize the traditional interactionist approaches due to their limitation to classroom context and their inappropriate quasi-experimental designs. Instead, they argue for longitiudinal ethnographic studies which are in consistency with the nature of poststructuralist approaches to L2 learning. The results of all ethnographic studies of SLA reveal the role of race, gender, age, social status, and social class in interaction through language.

Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen (2004) in their article titled as "Language Socialisation in SLA" imply that Language Socialization (LS) grew out of concerns with the narrowness of child language acquisition theories of the 1960s and 1970s and the recognition that language learning and enculturation are part pf the same process. The basic premise of LS is that linguistic and cultural knowledge are constructed through each other, and that language-acquiring children or adults are active and selective agents in both processes. They continue all activities in which children participate with adults and other children are by definition socially organized and embedded in cultural meaning systems. Thus children learn language in social, cultural, and political contexts that constrain the linguistic forms they hear and use, and also mark the social significance of these forms in various ways.

Watson-Gegeo and Nielson (2004) argue that language socialisation also applies to adult L2 learners, as there is no context-free learning (classrooms may not be as rich as other environments, but they are not inherently "unnatural"). L2 classrooms exhibit and teach–with varying degrees of explicitness–a set of cultural and epistemological assumptions that may differ from that of the L2 learner's native culture.

Watson Gegeo is a researcher on language socialization and tries to socialize the mind. Thus the "Language Socialization Paradigm" that she calls for is, in effect, an attempt to locate the field of SLA within the study of social organization and behavior. The five premises of what Watson-Gegeo calls "language socialization (LS) theory" are as follows:

1. "[L]inguistic and cultural knowledge are constructed through each other". "Learners construct 'a set of (linguistic and behavioral) practices that enable' them to communicate with and live among others in a given cultural setting'.

2. "[A]ll activities in which learners regularly interact with others ... are not only

by definition socially organized and embedded in cultural meaning systems, but are inherently political".

3. "'[C]ontext refers to the whole set of relationships in which a phenomenon is

situated', incorporating macro-levels of institutional, social,political and cultural aspects, and micro-levels involving the immediate context of situation".

4. "[C]hildren and adults learn culture largely through participating in

linguistically marked events, the structure, integrity, and characteristics of which they come to understand through primarily verbal cues to such meanings".

5. "[C]ognition is built from experience and is situated in sociohistorical,

sociopolitical contexts...". "Capacities and skills are therefore built by active

participation in a variety of different roles associated with a given activity over a period of time, from peripheral to full participant" (Cited in Gregg, 2002).

Gegeo, taking into account the language socialization paradigm, gives new interpretations of "language", "learning", and "cognition". To him, the view of learning offered by LS suggests a more complex model than the input-output mechanism advanced in much of SLA theory, and can help to solve the modularity problem by emphasizing the role of interaction in language learning as well as how learning and teaching are shaped by the sociocultural, political, and historical context.

The view of language in LS goes beyond single, isolated, and idealized utterances to focus on discourse practices. Language is integrated into sociocultural behavior, and is both the result and creator of context and structure. LS can thus help SLA studies move beyond traditional modular and individualistic studies. LS argues that language and other forms of cognitive development and knowledge are constructed and emerge through practice and interaction in specific historical, political, and sociocultural contexts. LS rejects the traditional SLA view that cognition happened solely inside the head of the individual (Gegeo & Nielsen, Internet Source).

3. Application and Implication

New Interchange book series is one of the world's most appreciated English courses for adult and young adult learners at the beginning to intermediate levels. It is a four-level series that provides a thorough coverage of all the language skills (grammar, vocabulary, reading, writing, speaking, listening), with a particular emphasis on practical listening and speaking skills in American English.

A higher level course called Passages follows on from the New Interchange series. Passages consist of two levels. New Interchange together with Passages thus provides a six-level series that takes students from beginning level to high intermediate. In an interview with Jack C. Richards to the question of What

methodology New Interchange is based on, he answers that the methodological principles are really quite simple and can be summarized as follows:

• Teach a little at a time

• Build on what students know

• Link teaching to learners' lives and interests

• Give plenty of support for speaking and listening activities

• Teach grammar as a practical tool and not as an end in itself

These principles reflect those of Communicative Language Teaching as well as a concern for learner-centeredness.

Each of the four levels of New Interchange consists of:

• A student book

• A teacher's book

• A workbook

• A video

• A video activity book

• Class cassettes, used by the teacher

• A student cassette, for students to use at home

• A Lab guide

• A CD-ROM

In this review paper, the focus is primarily on the major features of New Interchange 1. The main characteristics of the book can be enumerated as followings:

3.1. An integrated multi-skills syllabus

The course covers the four basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The assumption underlying this multi-skills syllabus is the Indivisibility Hypothesis of language competence introduced mainly by Oller (1979): The language competence cannot be broken down into discrete competencies separated from each other. In fact this view in methodology is highly influenced by the Gestalt Psychology in learning. The Gestalt Psychology is a holistic learning process and is based on two principal assumptions: the whole is different from the sum of its parts, and the perception of the parts depends upon perception of the whole. So, the New Interchange series can be considered as the follower of the mentioned theories the New Interchange is actually materializing the assumptions of those. To this end the organization of each unit can be something like this:

Conversation: this section introduces topics and functions (introducing yourself, talking about prices, talking and asking about past events, expressing likes and dislikes, etc.) essential to the learners to a use language in communicative contexts. Learners are supposed to listen to and practice the conversational section.

Listening: Listening activities develop a wide variety of topics and skills: listening for gist, listening for details, inferring meaning from the context, skimming, and scanning. The listening activities are usually accompanied with colored pictures, charts, graphics, and tables to represent real life authentic tasks.

Reading: Each unit includes a separate relatively short reading passage to be covered by learners. The passages selected cover wide variety of topics and themes: greeting customs, different kinds of shopping, an American family, neighborhood life in cities, telephone manners, cities around the world, sports, clothing styles, and so forth. A point worthy of mentioning regarding the passages in the book is the cultural theme of some passages to familiarize students with the custom and life style of Americans. Each passage is followed by some tasks to develop different reading skills including reading for gist and details, skimming, scanning, and making inferences. The passages are claimed to be adapted from authentic sources.

Writing: Contrary to the claims made by Richards, no specific writing section is designed in students book. Writing activities are limited to some grammar exercises to consolidate the grammatical competence. No attention is paid to real life writing tasks learners are probably to face in their daily life activities. As a result, writing here means sentence-bound activities with no concern for cohesion and coherence essential in long discourse. However, in the introduction of the book, Richards explains that the Teacher's Edition demonstrates

how to focus on the writing process.

3.2. Teach Communicative Competence

New Interchange is to teach communicative competence: the ability not only to produce grammatically correct sentences but also to know when, where, how, and to whom the grammatical sentences be used. In other words, New Interchange emphasizes both grammaticality and appropriacy. To this end, the units are organized around of situations with a variety of uses, social settings of various sorts, different roles played by different participants, and so on. Concerning the components of the communicative competence introduced by Canale and Swain (cited in Brown, 1994), the focus in the New Interchange is basically on the grammatical competence and the sociocultural competence. That is, the strategic and discourse competence are not dealt with thoroughly in the book; as a result, it can be implied that the claim made by Richards that communicative competence is the primary goal of the course is narrowed down to just some competencies and not to the totality of communicative competence necessary for successful communication in real life contexts.

3.3. Mnemonic devices and realia in teaching

Realia are one type of visual aid; they are objects from the real world, ranging from coins to food items, used in language teaching. The use of realia was first advocated by Direct Method teachers (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). New Interchange takes advantage of various types and instances of visual aids throughout the book. Each unit is fully decorated with both colored cartoon pictures and real pictures as well. The pictures are designed so skillfully that catch the attention of students and stimulate the curiosity of students, especially younger adults. In addition to the pictures, there are variety of methods for graphic presentation of information including charts, tables, diagrams, and curves.

3.4. Grammar Focus

Each unit contains two sections assigned for teaching grammar. The syllabus to teach grammar is a non-linear syllabus: the grammatical structures are not arranged in terms of difficulty level sequenced from easy to complex. Instead, the syllabus is based on productivity of use: that is, the structures frequently used in daily life conversational contexts are selected and covered in the book. For example, the first grammatical point which is covered in unit one is wh-questions. Despite the apparent complexity of wh-question formation, this grammatical category precedes the yes/no questions. The methodology used to teach grammar is inductive: no explicit and direct explanation of grammatical points are given. Following each Grammar Focus table, there are some opportunities for learners to practice the rules. Grammar activities are usually accompanied with some brief conversational contexts, short talks, and visual aids to represent more real life contexualization of the tasks.

3.5. Word Power

In each unit a section is devoted to activities to develop learners' vocabulary store house. The technique used to teach vocabulary is basically Word Association Flowcharts and tables and pictures. That is, in each section, a central core vocabulary item—jobs for instance—is written and some related subcategories are formed in a flow chart shape. There is a list of items from which learners are to fill in the flow chart parts-eg., Professionals, management positions, office work, and service occupations. Following this section, there are various types of exercises including oral pair work and group work activities to consolidate the vocabulary items in a more meaningful communicative context. The vocabulary covered in the book are active everyday conversational items supposed to be used frequently in life situations.

4. Drawbacks

In the last part of the present paper, the writer is to mention some criticisms concerning some aspects of the New Interchange.

4.1. Language and Culture Imperialism

Linguistic imperialism is an issue of great concern to sociolinguists and has been of interest to language planners and materials developers. Wolfson and Manes (1985) state that the issues which face language planners are those of power and domination of one language over another and linguistic imperialism.

One aspect of linguistic imperialism is the imposition of one ideology and culture on the rest of the world (Phillipson, 1992). As a result, one language and culture gets domination and others submission.

In case of New Interchange, the themes and topics used to develop materials appear to be imposing Anglo-American ideology and culture on the audience. Indeed, sometimes we witness a type of culture hegemony which results in an American World. To give some overt instances of the hegemony through language, we can mention unit four which focuses on music. Here some Western music types are introduced, some statistics is given, and learners are implicitly stimulated to at least "hear" jazz and rock. In the same unit, some famous American music stars are introduced with colored pictures. In the listening part of this unit, a typical American culture—making a date—is introduced with a famous TV game show popular in America called Who's My Date? In this game, three men are to invite Linda on a date. To win, they need to know likes and dislikes of Linda. In addition, throughout the book, using attractive pictures and graphics, recent American fashions and social norms and etiquettes are suggested to the learners.

4.2. Language Functions Problem

We may see that we again have a description of what should be learnt. Inventories of functions in functional-notional syllabuses are not different from inventories of grammar items. Thus, the problems are the same – being able to perform a certain function does not equal language competence as a whole. Moreover, functions themselves are often trivialised. As stated by Sokol (2000), "The content of most materials is devoid of all the aspects of our lives which make them real: sex, violence, disagreement, real negotiation between opposed viewpoints, misunderstandings, etc. (…) English language teaching materials present a largely non-problematic, bland, uncontroversial view of life" (http://trizminsk.org/eng/002.htm). Does it help to prepare our students for the future? It appears that despite the activities designed in the book and on the contrary to the claims made by Richards for free communicative tasks, there is no guarantee that learners can solve their communication problems in English.

4.3. Neglect of Individual Differences and Cognitive Styles

Classroom is considered to be a heterogeneous community of learners with various personality factors and cognitive styles. Cognitive styles are the cognitive methods to attack a problem in learning which are individualistic and idiosyncratic. As Stevick (197) states, a good textbook material should meet several characteristics, one of which is pluralism: to satisfy differing cognitive styles of learners. Some tasks such as repetition, memorization, writing words or sentences for fixation in the mind, and some other mechanical tasks are proved to be effective with some type of cognitive styles not emphasized in New Interchange. In fact the basic assumption made by Richards is that the so-called communicative problem solving tasks are "all" the activities facilitating learning.

4.4. To Enshrine Authentic Materials and Communicativeness

"Communicative" and "authentic" are terms as democracy and freedom which are overused and applied differently by different people. In the Introduction of the book, Richards claims that the advantage of the book is the use of "meaningful communication" and "authentic communication". Authenticity is a highly vague and opaque issue in the literature of materials design and preparation. There are many different versions and interpretations for "authenticity" of materials. For instance, Widdowson (1979) believes that authenticity is not a characteristic inherent to the materials but the way learners deal with the materials. Even in the heyday of Audiolingualism, the textbooks were full of lengthy conversations and role plays not principally different from those used in New Interchange. Is there any difference between conversations used in New Interchange and Welcome to English except in visual aids, graphic presentation of materials, and attractive pictures. So, authenticity and communicativeness cannot be considered as a unique feature of New Interchange.

5. Conclusion

The New Interchange book series have tried to develop a course book which is allegedly consistent with the most current theories of language teaching—communicative movement in language teaching. To this end, New Interchange meets some requirements of communicative teaching, function-based courses, task-oriented instructions, learner-centred approaches, integrative-skills, and to some extent collaborative learning. It appears that all these requirements bring a type of "face validity" to the designed course, New

Interchange. However, despite the face validity of New Interchange, it appears that some approaches and claims stated are not consistent with empirically proved research in the field of language learning and teaching. That is, some approaches taken by Richards are having theoretical justifications, but when it comes to empirical confirmation, they appear not based on sound research findings. To give an instance, in the arena of SLA research in classroom situations, a distinction is made between form-focussed and form-defocussed approaches to teaching grammar. Research findings (Littlewood, 1992) reveal that in adults classroom contexts form-focussed activities are having strong and statistically significant correlation with learners' achievement. Littlewood's (1992) view of the learning process can be seen as an attempt to reconcile the two approaches, and many teachers are, in practice, somewhat eclectic. They may make use of form-focused presentations leading to progressively less form-focused practice and production stages. In addition, some other variables, as reviewed in the literature of language acquisition and materials development, influencing acquisition of a second language are neglected in the development of the materials including the students' mother tongue influence, learners' variables, the context of use, users' socio-political considerations, and so forth.

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