

Afterword

David Crystal

University of Bangor, UK

I come to this Afterword as a linguist not an ELT professional, but I must say I have felt very much at home reading through the impressive list of 21st century skills identified in this book. There are so many points of contact between ongoing thinking in this area and contemporary research in English linguistics. I am particularly struck by the attention repeatedly devoted to authenticity, technology, and culture – three domains where linguists have made a contribution.

A focus on authenticity

As Michael Carrier puts it in his Preface, “21st century skills are about reality [...] that what we teach is what people actually need for their real lives, in the real world”. That could equally be a characterisation of descriptive linguistics, for there too we find an affirmation that language study should be about ‘real lives in the real world’. But it is a hugely ambitious goal, for the real world includes – everything. So where should we start? Highlighted in this book are areas which have been particularly neglected, such as gender inclusiveness (Bollas) and where the need for new literacies (and I would add, oracies – see further below) is most in evidence. These terms go well beyond the traditional pairing of literacy (the ability to read and write) and oracy (the ability to listen and speak). The value of the plural nouns is clear in Mavridi’s emphasis on “the literacies required to thrive in an increasingly multimodal world where exposure to ‘life-like’ English is taking place via text, image, video and sound”, and in the multimodal communicative context discussed by Donaghy. There is indeed a ‘fifth medium’ now, with ‘viewing’ added to the four traditional skills.

What is viewing? Donaghy defines it as “an active process of attending and comprehending visual media, such as television, advertising images, films, diagrams, symbols, photographs, videos, drama, drawings, sculpture, and paintings”. It is a characterisation influenced by the stage we have reached online, which is still a predominantly graphic medium. ‘Audition’ (in its original sense of the action of hearing or listening) is only hinted at in a passing reference to ‘sound effects’, but it won’t be long before this will build up into a sixth medium. The digital industry is already predicting a sea-change in online experience, within the not-too-distant future, as oral/aural interaction increases its online presence, making much visual/graphical interfacing redundant. Speech-to-text and text-to-speech are still at an early stage of development, but speech assistants such as Alexa and Siri are already showing us that we will not need to type everything for much longer. Any skills models will need to take account of that.

In the meantime, it is important, as several contributors say, to get students (and teachers) acclimatised to a multimodal world – not a world where images always replace language, but one in which printed texts and images work together to form a communicative act. For me, this message is actually not new. It was very much a theme of the 1960s, when Thomas Sebeok and others (1964) were developing the domain of *semiotics* – a term which accreted various definitions in different academic areas, but which in the context of linguistics and anthropology was “patterned human communication, in all its modes” (Crystal & Varley, 1998, p. 4) – sound, vision, touch, smell, and taste. Sub-disciplines evolved – *kinesics* for the visual, *proxemics* for the tactile. Apart from the occasional reference (such as by Gunther Kress, e.g., Hodge & Kress, 1988), this semiotic perspective seems to have been forgotten in language teaching, but it is due for a come-back, and this collection of essays points the way.

A focus on technology

Technology has added a new dimension of complexity to the multimodal world, and the new horizons offered by digital technology are repeatedly affirmed in this book. Some authors point to its still only partially realised potential, such as Alchini on distance collaboration, or Gabriel on the need to build a bridge between online games and the outside world. Others draw attention to the huge difference between knowing how to use digital tools and knowing how to use them well, such as “to evaluate online information effectively or avoid potentially dangerous online contact and conduct” (Mavridi), “to discern what is true or false” (Milosevic), or “to exploit the explosion in online knowledge and resources responsibly” (Nunan). At the same time, we need to teach online etiquette and appropriate English, especially bearing in mind the lack of non-verbal cues and immediate feedback (McRae). The point is addressed differently by these writers, but the intent is the same, and in many ways it is summed up by the need to demonstrate critical thinking (Ur, Milosevic) and to develop “activities related to content creation and civic engagement” (Mavridi).

Further illustration of the point is made by Marsh, who draws attention to the way the shortness of social media messages does not give learners practice in the skills required for narrative and expository texts. His advice: “engaging them through creative reading tasks becomes increasingly urgent in the classroom”. Several of the chapters explore ways of developing creativity, such as the random word generator described by Farrugia. Nunan sums it up succinctly: students “need to know how to access information that is fast changing and constantly morphing, and to develop inquiry skills to exploit this information to solve problems in a meaningful, adaptable and integrative way”.

An associated theme that emerges from these papers is the need for a sophisticated perspective in any discussion of the way digital technology affects language. Context is the critical term here. It is a major feature of the framework described by Borg, who draws attention to variation “from classroom to classroom and school to school depending on the technological infrastructure available to the teacher and students, be it mobile phones, tablets, computers or online courses”. We see it again in relation to text curation, which “can lead to genre analysis and comparison of the way different websites present information” (Constantinides). It is there in relation to online games, where the context of a game needs to be put “in a wider context and linking it with real situations and knowledge” (Gabriel). And above all, it emerges in relation to culture.

A focus on culture

Globalisation is another underlying theme of this book, along with the recognition of cultural diversity. Indeed, if there is a competitor for the title of ‘fifth language skill’ along with viewing, it has to be, as some writers in this collection assert: culture.

Mercer puts it like this: “Learners are expected to develop their appreciation of other cultural perspectives, their empathic skills and their willingness to build positive relationships with others from cultures different to their own”. This is especially important online, as McRae points out: “Even more so than face-to-face contexts, English language teachers should be aware of cultural differences in their cohorts, anticipate potential clashes, and promote cultural understanding by creating an inclusive and respectful online environment” – which means the “comprehension of different cultures [...] deepening the students’ understanding of the world they live in” (Brzezinska).

"Intercultural awareness is a vital part of language learning", say Dudzik and Dzieciol-Pedich. They illustrate from healthcare, but the point applies just as forcefully to all workplace cultures. Galante draws attention to the fact that "in the global workplace people often work on the same project from different locations in the world", both synchronously and asynchronously. Because people are now more interconnected, as a result of technology, she says, "multicultural literacy and global awareness are needed to communicate effectively and achieve the best possible results. [...] Learners can go through a process of enculturation through which they gradually enter a new community and its culture". How is this to be done? Among the many ideas illustrated in this book, Walklett's paper shows how song is a valuable way of achieving a new level of cultural awareness in the classroom, as well as developing creativity. "Music/songs have the potential to bring diverse groups together as they cover an array of everyday issues that may unite students, as well as focusing on important social, cultural and political issues that they may well want or need to be informed about".

A greater level of awareness about cultural diversity is essential, given the spread of global English. The adoption of English as a lingua franca in a country inevitably leads to its rapid adaptation to express local identities. This has always been the way, ever since English began to travel. American English began to evolve within weeks of the first British settlers arriving in North America, but it took a while before the world became aware of the fact. The process of cultural diversity expressed through language has now been massively speeded up because of digital technology, and it is now commonplace to encounter multiple identities in social forums and other online situations. Teachers and students need to reflect about all this, in order to identify and (especially) explain variant forms, and to avoid a superficial response. The risk is that anything different from the norm being taught will be naively called an 'error'. This is a point made by Samlal in relation to proofreading and editing software, which "can only be as good as they were programmed to be". "In most instances," she says, "they overlook the nuances of the English language". A nuanced description is precisely what linguists try to provide. And what we are discovering these days is that many of those nuances are the result of global cultural variation.

The need, as ever, is for good linguistic descriptions of the nature of language variation and change. This is where my world of linguistics is most intimately connected with ELT, for the dynamic nature of language structure and use is at the heart of several branches of the subject, such as sociolinguistics, stylistics, pragmatics, and historical linguistics. But it is a two-way relationship. Linguistically informed studies can help teachers to see more clearly what needs to be taught; at the same time, the demands that come up in the context of ELT can draw attention to new areas where linguistic research is needed. A good example from the present book is in relation to online games. Gabriel observes: "To be successful in a game, the underlying system needs to be understood", and adds "games used for teaching foreign languages should not contain too complex structures". This points the way to a new domain of corpus linguistics – online games – and an associated linguistic analysis to determine just how complex the structures are.

As Nicky Hockly says in her Foreword: "Marrying the teaching of English with the development of 21st century skills not only empowers students to take part more effectively in this world, but it can also make our English classes more interesting and relevant". This book – and I hope linguistics too – will play its part in making this modern marriage successful.

References

- Crystal, D., & Varley, R. (1998). *Introduction to language pathology* (4th ed.). London: Whurr Publishers.
- Hodge, R., & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Sebeok, T. A., Hayes, A. S., & Bateson, M. C. (1964). *Approaches to semiotics*. The Hague: Mouton.