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Research Paper

Key Language Teaching Issues and Concepts over Recent Time: A Corpus Study

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Abstract

This study investigates the prevalence of a number of major issues and concepts in language teaching in the related research literature and reports published from 1968 to 2018. The purpose was to give a taste of the changes that came about in language teachers' concerns over these years. The researcher first selected a large number of high-profile terms in language teaching by browsing through the tables of contents and indexes of language teaching textbooks. He, then, shortlisted these terms subjectively or in informal consultation with language teaching experts. Then, the abstracts available from nine language teaching journals published from 1968 to 2018 were collected and assigned to four-time spans: 1968-1990, 1991-2000, 2001-2010, and 2011-2018. The abstracts were processed for frequency tagged words and n-grams, which produced two lists for each span. Using these lists, the incidence of the target terms in the four-time spans was established. The study presents normalized and comparable statistics about the frequency of occurrence of the target language teaching ideas in the research literature of the four-time spans and refers to examples of insights and messages which can be drawn from these data.

Keywords: Frequency, Language-teaching concepts, Language-teaching issues, Language-teaching terms, Significance change

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which a number of selected issues and concepts in the field of language learning and teaching gained or lost significance and attention in language-teaching (LT) research literature and

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reports in recent decades. The investigation is based on the frequency analysis of some noteworthy concepts and ideas in discussions of LT which featured in the article abstracts of nine well-known and highly representative LT journals published from 1968 to 2018. The issues and ideas which mostly came from the tables of contents and indexes of widely used LT textbooks, were juxtaposed in four arbitrary time spans: 1968-1990, 1991-2000, 2000-2010, and 2011-2018. The assumption was that the ideas and issues which significantly occupied the text space of these journals could be validly and reliably interpreted as the concerns of the LT practitioners and researchers during each of these periods. The findings, it is hoped, might provide some understanding about where LT research and practice were, where they are, and where they may be heading for.

There is no claim that the ideas and issues subjected to analysis here are comprehensive, nor that an all-inclusive and in-depth account of each issue was aimed at. Such goal takes much scholarship and ample space if one wants to pay justice to it, something which has been periodically done in the scholarly journal *Language Teaching* under the rubric of the state-of-the-art article, focusing on a particular issue. Nevertheless, it can be claimed that the current study provides a data-based glimpse of the possible fluctuations of important ideas in LT research and practice over the years.

The developments in LT, particularly foreign language teaching and English language teaching have been surveyed in depth by several seasoned scholars. Kelly's (1969) comprehensive account of *25 centuries of language teaching* and Howatt's (1984) canonical work, *A history of English language teaching*, provide historical overviews of the major themes. More recently, several handbooks of LT and applied linguistics tracked the developments of core ideas in LT and followed their trajectories to the present time. For example, *Routledge encyclopedia of language teaching and learning* (Byram, 2000) and *The handbook of language teaching* (Long & Doughty, 2003) are

comprehensive reference works on LT, which combine the latest research findings and cover a broad range of topics including the psycholinguistic underpinnings of language learning, social, political, and educational contexts, program design, materials writing and course design, teaching and testing, teacher education, and assessment and evaluation. The volume edited by Rossner and Bolitho (1995), *Currents of change in English Language Teaching Journal*, which is a collection of seminal papers on methodology and teacher training published in *the ELT Journal* provides a compendium of trends and developments which dominate the field in the time span targeted by the book.

These works were compiled by teams of experts, who had professional and authoritative knowledge in different subfields of LT. What justifies carrying out this study is the fact that it is robustly based on a comprehensive corpus and hence can serve as an overview of the contemporary concerns of the profession of LT and, more narrowly, ELT. The corpus analysis output given below aspires to communicate the language education zeitgeist in a sequence of recent decades. Looking at the results, the discerning reader can track some developments and changes that occurred within the field of LT as it attempted to build up its knowledge base and research repertoire. The following questions guided this study:

1. What language teaching/learning issues and concepts were frequently referred to in the journal article abstracts in four spans of time from 1968 to 2018?
2. How do the four spans of time compare regarding attention to different issues and subfields of language teaching/learning?
3. What were the most frequent language teaching/learning phrases in the earlier targeted time span and in the last span?

These questions, overlapping though, guided the data collection and analysis and served to produce informative frequency tables as the core of this survey.

2. Literature Review

2.1 General Reviews of the Field of Language Teaching

As the field of LT, particularly ELT, has moved towards professionalism, surveys and overviews have been carried out and published to give the practitioners a sense of its past and some orientation about where it is standing and future directions (e.g., Howatt, 1984; Kelly, 1969). Rossner and Bolitho's (1900) edited volume tries to provide the highly communicative professional zeitgeist by marshalling select articles from the British council publication *ELTJ* as well as "A Chronology of Recent Events and Publications." Moreover, major publishers have included in the libraries and series they publish survey-like volumes and handbooks of the fields of applied linguistics and LT (e.g., Kaplan, 2002; Long & Doughty, 2003). Richards and Ranandaya (2002) anthologize the current practice in LT. Stern's (1983) book is a compendium of classic concepts in LT, and so is *Cambridge guide to TESOL* (Carter & Nunan, 2001), which was designed to provide background to key TESOL topics. In each of these projects, top scholars review articles and books published in the years leading to their publication in order to identify both the established and the newly added terminology in the field, among other things.

TESOL International Association is committed to periodically announce a research agenda to reflect the changes in the discipline and its research priorities. It published its first and second agendas in 2000 and 2004. The rationale for the agendas "was to help TESOL professionals and other interested parties to organize and coordinate inquiry in the field, and to promote broader awareness of what constitutes research in TESOL" (TESOL International Association, 2014, p. 2). The 2014 agenda likewise sketched out

significant developments in language teaching, pointed out gaps in the knowledge bank of this profession, and offered guidelines for new research.

Thanasoulas (2018) provides an overview of ELT history to clarify its background, beginning, the people, institutions, concepts and practices which have made it up, and to expose what has changed, and what has not. Howatt and Smith (2014) offer an overview of the developments and ideas in ELT during the last 250 years. They criticize the profession by saying "since the publication of Howatt (1984) thirty years ago there has only been a limited amount of original research into the history of English language teaching", which "contrasts strongly with work in relation to French, which has burgeoned over the last twenty-five years" (p. 75). According to them "[the] historical research studies which have been carried out since 1984 goes some way towards fulfilling Stern's (1983) call for studies of particular aspects, although much remains to be investigated" (p. 83). But more significantly, they take a critical stance on the dominant progression narrative in the mainstream ELT promoted in books such as, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (Richards & Rodgers, 2014) and *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (Larsen-Freeman, 2011), which tend to overemphasize the breaks, paradigm shifts and differences rather than continuity and similarities while actual practice seems to be a combination of older and newer influences (p. 76).

2.2 Surveys Done Locally

One of the best resources which provides surveys of the ideas, issues and developments and chronicles the state of the art in the field of LT is the journal *Language Teaching* (<https://cambridge.org/core/journals/language-teaching>) debuted in 1968 by Cambridge University Press. It currently features eight thematic sections, including State-of-the-Art Articles, Research Timeline, Plenary Speeches (insight into current thinking and research agendas

worldwide), A Language/Country in Focus (surveying recent research on LT and learning in a particular country), Research in the News (Recent and current work worldwide and reports from symposia), Surveys of Ph.D./Ed.D. Theses (A country-by-country overview of recent doctoral theses on mainstream topics). These reports and surveys update LT practitioners and researchers about the field. For example, Aydınli and Ortaçtepe (2018) cover research conducted in Turkey between 2005 and 2009, and surveyed 140 published research articles in 31 Turkey-based journals between 2010 and 2016. Their goal was to call attention to recent scholarly developments in Turkey and set these in the context of recent shifts in LT in the world.

As another example, Oliver, Chen, and Moore (2016) reviewed research in applied linguistics published in Australia in the period 2008–2014. While acknowledging the Australian research published internationally during these years, they based their review on books, articles, and conference proceedings published in Australia. Some key themes emerged from the review. Porto, Montemayor-Borsinger, López-Barrios (2016) reviewed EFL teaching and learning research published in Argentina from 2007 to 2013. They examined 88 articles published in the local conference proceedings and journals. The examination revealed a wide range of topics and research interests in the Argentine including

the role of imagination, emotion and affect in language comprehension and production, intercultural dimensions, foreign language teacher education and development, content and language integrated learning (CLIL), computer-assisted language learning (CALL), the teaching of English for academic or specific purposes, testing, assessment and evaluation, and materials design and course development. (p.356)

Finkbeiner, Olson, and Friedrich (2013) reviewed the research literature on foreign language learning and teaching published between 2005 and 2010 in Germany. The greatest interests during this period included "educational standards, teacher education, early FL learning, content and language integrated learning, motivation and interest, intercultural learning, literacy, learning strategies and cooperative and computer-assisted language learning." (p. 477)

Moreover, Gao, Liao, and Liu (2014) selected and examined 60 articles out of 1,120 research reports in LT journals in China from 2008 to 2011 and found a wide spectrum of topics "including language learners' cognitive processes, their language performance, and language teachers' professional development." (p. 56) Although they expressed satisfaction with the variety of approaches to teaching language and research, they pointed out missing topics in Chinese research scholarship as reported in the targeted journals. Park (1992) surveyed the practice of foreign language education in South Korea and discussed major developments and current issues and made projections about the future of the field. Zein et al. (2020) reviewed 108 documents including articles, chapters, proceedings and dissertations to map the research on English teaching in Indonesia from 2011 to 2019. They showed how educational, ideological, sociocultural and religious factors shaped English teaching research and practice in that country. A similar survey was reported by Skyrme and Ker (2020) about research on applied linguistics in New Zealand. Some researchers embarked on outlining the state of the art in more specific domains of language teaching. For example, Min, He and Zhang (2020) examined 70 empirical studies concerning language testing in China in the period 2011-2018. In addition to a survey of state of language assessment in China in the past and present, they reviewed the six most frequent themes in Chinese language assessment research, namely, (1) test reliability and validity; (2)

factors affecting test performance; (3) rating and rating scales; (4) technology and language testing; (5) test washback; and (6) classroom-based assessment." (p. 316)

Khany, Aliakbari, and Hajizadeh (2018) meta-analyzed 188 studies in their attempt "to come up with a precise definition of ELT teachers' literacy domain through synthesizing the results of available studies with the application of the meta-ethnography research design and ... the development of a conceptual model". (p.181)

They identified 24 subthemes or knowledge components, which were subsumed under two major categories: content literacy and educational literacy. They discussed the theoretical and practical domains that they identified in reference to the common topics in language teaching and language teacher education and pointed out some gaps. As another contribution to mapping language teaching and language teacher education domain, Askari Matin, Kiany and Ghafar Samar (2018) explored the key parameters and significant dimensions of language teachers' performance in Iranian context. Their thematic analysis yielded 218 main themes and 1655 sub-themes, which specified the areas which an effective language teacher needs to focus on.

The volume, *English language teaching in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Innovations, trends and challenges* edited by Kennedy (2015) and published by the British Council, promises to explore "the innovations, trends, and challenges of English language teaching in the IRI" and hopes that "a future volume may explore the teaching of Farsi/Persian in the UK" (p. 1) . Yet, a close examination of the content does not bear out this claim. Finally, Farhady, Sajadi, and Hedayati (2010) provide some information about the educational system in Iran before 1979 and describe the post-revolutionary foreign-language education in the country.

As this brief review shows, the focus of most surveys was on general and macro-issues and concepts. They do not zoom in on the specific nitty-gritty and nuts and bolts of LT—what this study purports to have done. This study, as was elaborated above, was an attempt to capture the language education zeitgeist of recent decades by tracking the developments and changes that occurred in language teaching practice and research.

3. Method

3.1 Choosing the Target Language-Teaching Issues and Concepts

To be inclusive of the major LT concepts and issues, I consulted the tables of contents and subject indexes of several early and recently published LT textbooks and hunted for potential concepts, issues, and areas which are typically discussed, researched and practiced (the asterisked items in the Reference list for these textbooks). Given the large number of issues and concepts which have been current in LT research, terms at a moderate level of prevalence were selected.

It is acknowledged that topic and concept choice was subjective and it was hard to draw a sharp line between concepts apt for inclusion in the analysis and those which were not. Thus, *transfer* was included while *turn-taking* was not, because of the researcher's understanding that *transfer* is closer to the area of learning while *turn-taking* is more strongly associated with *discourse analysis*, *sociolinguistics* and *pragmatics*. It is worth noting that the goal of this research was not to comprehensively describe the journals' contents as they were but to show how frequently some selected items were presented in them.

Attempt was made to collapse words with the same meanings irrespective of their parts of speech to give a more precise picture of the representation of their respective categories in the LT journals. The words or combinations which turned out to be synonymous or close in meaning (e.g., *problem behavior* and *discipline*), were merged as one category and their frequencies

were added up. So, *error analysis* covers *error evaluation*, too. It should be noted that this was done after counting the frequencies for all the related items. This can give a feeling of relief that the four periods have been treated on par even though some items may have been overlooked.

3.2 The Corpus

Nine Journals, which had learning and/or teaching in their titles or explicitly announced language learning and teaching within their scope, were selected from Thomson Reuters Master Journal list (Appendix). The selection was considered valid by several LT practitioners who were consulted thereabout. Abstracts and titles from February 1968 to July 2018 were collected from these journals and were divided into four groups: 1) from 1968 to 1990; 2) 1991-2000; 3) 2001-2010; and 4) 2011-2018. The reason for the beginning year was on-line availability and the decision for the four-time spans was made by the researcher, considering the purpose of the study and perceptual convenience in comparing the findings for different time spans. Although it made methodological sense to exclude the two middle periods and compare the other two, the middle periods were kept to have a richer and more informative picture of the patterns which emerged.

Originally, journals like *English Teaching, Practice, and Critique*, which stopped publishing before 2018, and *Language Awareness*, which started publishing later than 1960's, were included in the analysis; but, pilot runs supported my intuition that the four periods were more soundly comparable if only journals which spanned all four periods were included in the analysis. Journals like *Language Testing, English for Specific Purposes, Language Learning and Technology, Second Language Writing*, which focused on particular areas of LT were also excluded in order to reduce possible biases toward some areas.

The abstracts of feature articles in the selected journals were copied from their websites onto Word files. Then, words and information other than the titles and bodies of the abstracts were removed. The remaining texts were meticulously reviewed for misspellings. Then, the files were converted to plain-text format to be compatible with the analysis software, *AntConc 5* (see below). Finally, the files of journals were coalesced in four massed files according to the period they belonged in, that is, 1968 to 1990 (326746 words), 1991-2000 (280339 words), 2001-2010 (352434 words), and 2011-2018 (366077 words).

Some articles were not accompanied by abstracts, some abstracts were not in copyable formats, and some journals had not published online article abstracts for their early issues; however, the inclusion of a huge number of abstracts from the four periods lessens concerns about the representativeness of the corpus.

3.3 Data Analysis Procedures

For the purpose of investigating and listing frequent words and word chunks in the corpus, *AntConc 3.3.5* (Anthony, 2012) was used. *AntConc* is a freeware application which runs on both Windows and Linux systems. It has a freeware license and is easy to use, offering several tools including word and keyword frequency generators, and tools for n-gram analysis.

Attempts at corpus development yielded four sub-corpora of presumably representative LT texts dating from 1968 to 2018 as well as a list of key LT issues and concepts. The sub-corpora were inputted to the software *AntConc* and lists of frequency-tagged words and N-Grams were extracted. Then, the target terms were manually sought in the lists of words and N-Grams, which were in descending frequency order. Information about single-word target items were easy to ascertain; but, in many cases, I had to examine the N-grams which included the main words of multiword target items to make sure that no

occurrences was left out. Moreover, all related forms which referred to a particular concept were summed up under that concept. For example, the frequencies for *collaboration*, *collaborate*, *collaborative*, *collaboratively*, and *tele-collaboration*, were all summed up under *collaboration*. An additional advantage of finding the n-grams was the removal of the ambiguity of items such as *need*, and *development*, which could have been used either generally or as words related to language-teaching design.

It was tried not to leave out any occurrences of targeted items. Care was taken to count compound words which were separated by hyphen, using the N-gram list, taking into account the fact that the software considered hyphenated words as two and therefore had to be found in N-gram lists. For example, hyphenated and non-hyphenated words were treated as the same. This meant that both the lists of the words and N-grams had to be checked for items such as pretask/pre-task, posttask/post-task, and audiolingual/audio-lingual.

It is unwise to claim comprehensiveness over the coverage of LT concepts and issues in this study. The general idea was to provide the trajectories of some principal issues and concepts over recent time. For some ideas this goal is hard to achieve based on machine corpus analysis, because *testing* and *test*, for example, may be used in both technical and general senses, even in texts exclusively about language testing and this makes it hard to form final decisions about the weight that *testing* as a subfield received in particular texts or time periods. Likewise, one cannot know from the machine output whether the word *discipline* is used to mean control in the context of classroom management or is used in the sense of *field of study*.

Unlike the word family *test*, whose LT sense seemed more frequent, some words such as *attention*, *development*, and *community*, were highly prevalent in the corpus in their general senses and the frequencies of their language-teaching usage could not easily be determined based on machine counts. So,

they were excluded in spite of their importance in LT. Nevertheless, attempts to get rid of ambivalent words may not have been totally successful because many other seemingly straight and clear words may have also been used in a nontechnical sense, e.g., function, training, vocabulary.

4. Results

In order to allow for the differences in corpus size, adjusted or calibrated frequencies were used in the presentation of the results. This was done by arbitrarily taking the frequencies of the items belonging to the 1991-2000 time-span as the base and adjusting the frequencies of items for the other three spans so that they were logically comparable with one another. For example, the frequencies for *English language teaching* in the four periods before calibration were 18, 27, 57, and 48, respectively; while they were 15, 27, 45, and 37 after such adjustment or *standardization*.

The LT ideas which were singled out and tallied are organized in alphabetical order below in six tables. The criteria for differentiation among the first five tables were stability over time, whether frequency of occurrence increased or decreased over time, and whether the changes were linear or non-linear. Table 6 displays the ideas which are not frequently referred to in the LT journals although well-indexed in LT textbooks. It is noteworthy that the decisions about inclusions, divisions, and linearity/non-linearity have not been made based on a hard-and-fast mathematical yardstick but according to the overall assessment and sometimes arbitrary decision of the author. For example, *learner differences* is included in Table 2, although it is infrequent in the first two time spans.

Table 1 displays the few items which showed close incidence in the four spans. However, many high-frequency items in the other tables, in spite of their relative frequency variations, could also claim some stability.

Table 1

Frequencies of LT Concepts which did not Fluctuate very Much over Time

	Terms	1968-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2018
1	Discipline	52	41	48	50
2	Learning process	39	30	42	35
3	Learning style	34	47	57	35
4	Native speakers	237	294	251	237
5	Strategies	474	590	600	472

Tables 2 and 3 present the frequencies of items which showed an overall increase in incidence over the time spans targeted by this survey either linearly (Table 2) or non-linearly (Table 3), implying a surge in attention to them.

Table 2

Frequencies of LT Concepts Linearly Ascending over Recent Years

	Terms	1968-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2018
1	Academic writing	20	23	35	35
2	Accuracy	71	77	125	160
3	Assessment	101	119	304	393
4	Awareness	84	153	173	181
5	Beliefs	46	157	197	279
6	Cognition	137	172	201	214
7	Collaboration	15	81	108	198
8	Digital	1	1	15	65
9	EFL	136	276	392	488
10	Engagement	1	9	29	110
11	English	1466	1573	1889	1962
12	English language	90	143	209	218
13	English as a foreign language	45	52	80	106
14	Explicit/implicit	57/28	72/43	149/69	176/80
15	Identity	18	74	161	256
16	Language education	37	50	67	69
17	Language teacher education	4	22	23	26
18	Language use	58	59	64	84
19	Learner differences	9	9	39	65
20	Learning	1175	1365	1691	1726
21	Lexicon	83	258	323	331
22	Listening	220	224	246	258
23	Memory/ forgetting	55	57	92	152

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24	motivation	111	137	188	273
25	noticing	2	24	35	41
26	participation	46	61	66	93
27	pedagogy	47	78	102	120
28	performance	275	280	284	364
29	Proficiency level	52	60	77	113
30	Self- efficacy/concept/etc.	10	9	71	89
31	Task/activity	646	860	988	1205
32	Task-based	4	55	74	83
33	Teacher/learner identity	0	2	12	28
34	Teachers beliefs	0	16	28	32
35	technology	47	124	137	140
36	vocabulary	232	360	388	444
37	Vocabulary learning	31	51	94	98
38	Willingness to communicate	0	4	16	43

Table 3

Frequency of LT Concepts Nonlinearly Ascending over Recent Time

	Terms	1968- 1990	1991- 2000	2001- 2010	2011- 2018
1	Age	95	72	119	155
2	anxiety	69	111	180	139
3	aptitude	38	22	49	67
4	Classroom interaction	15	35	23	28
5	Critical thinking	2	23	15	22
6	Cross-cultural	38	45	101	101
7	discourse	227	346	370	270
8	education	432	518	482	442
9	EFL/ESL writing	14	28	14	31
10	English as a ...	136	128	188	221
11	English language teaching	15	27	45	37
12	feedback	84	58	220	348
13	First language	87	79	145	169
14	Fluency	67	52	99	162
15	Formulaic language	2	14	4	40
16	Gender/sex	30/34	62/9	194/2	114/0
17	Gestures	21	9	33	27
18	Grammatical accuracy	7	11	10	11g
19	Humor	2	0	13	22
20	Input	135	205	196	196
21	Language aptitude	16	11	21	21
22	Language anxiety	9	38	44	27

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23	Language processing	6	23	34	11
24	Learner attitudes	20	15	20	25
25	Learner beliefs	3	26	12	35
26	Learning styles	19	47	57	37
27	literacy	112	209	116	141
28	management	41	52	40	51
29	metaphor	9	47	59	47
30	Needs analysis	8	21	14	11
31	output	21	84	87	57
32	policy	79	147	146	108
33	proficiency	458	397	465	610
34	Pronunciation/phonology	198	186	169	290
35	self-evaluation	33	30	37	42
36	social	178	226	203	234
37	sociocultural	20	53	85	51
38	Teacher education	21	97	107	86
39	uptake	2	7	35	20
40	Vocabulary knowledge	8	56	41	51
41	writing	420	602	654	641

Tables 4 and 5 present the frequencies of items which showed an overall decrease in incidence over the time spans targeted by this survey either linearly (Table 4) or non-linearly (Table 5), implying a decline in attention to them.

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Table 4

Frequency of LT Concepts Linearly Descending over Recent Time

	Terms	1968- 1990	1991- 2000	2001- 2010	2011- 2018
1	acquisition	669	615	610	500
2	Audiolingual method	42	1	0	2
3					
4	communicative	345	280	174	136
5	Communicative language teaching	189	31	20	12
6	Communicative competence	76	27	25	23
7	Communicative approach	39	26	6	2
8	composition	158	119	78	59
9	cooperation	51	37	31	9
10	curriculum	254	210	122	116
11	Curriculum development	26	24	15	7
12	dictionary	65	58	40	27
13	evaluation	230	176	1111	70
14	Foreign language teaching/instruction	122	47	29	27
15	fossilization	21	16	6	4
16	Humanism	38	11	2	2
17	Individualized instruction	25	0	0	0
18	Instructional materials	51	50	23	16
19	interlanguage	109	90	68	30
20	Language curriculum	31	29	17	9
21	Language laboratory	30	2	0	0
22	Language skills	76	60	25	25
23	literature	208	175	160	129
24	materials	415	298	166	106
25	Psycholinguistic/s	53	29	29	25
26	psychology	99	66	57	45
27	Second language learning	118	55	52	32
28	skills	523	381	285	231
29	sociolinguistic	61	49	40	33
30	Standard English	27	9	8	4
31	syllabus	131	86	50	16
32	technique	287	98	80	101
33	test	751	637	577	564
34	testing	215	205	109	73
35	Training programs	34	29	6	6
36	translation	119	113	99	79

Table 5
 Frequency of LT Concepts Nonlinearly Descending over Recent Time

	Term	1968- 1990	1991- 2000	2001- 2010	2011- 2018
1	Affective	69	38	54	38
2	Attitude	298	163	392	178
3	authenticity	81	115	89	54
4	Authentic materials	9	23	4	2
5	autonomy	6	98	45	41
6	Bilingual education	45	6	17	11
7	Communication strategies	51	16	21	25
8	comprehension	408	299	334	309
9	Culture	235	263	224	135
10	Cultural	235	319	256	172
11	Dialogue	64	36	49	32
12	Discourse analysis	50	21	31	21
13	English as a second language	93	59	68	64
14	English for specific purposes	14	24	6	5
15	errors	290	213	155	171
16	Error analysis	36	15	2	11
17	ESL	474	411	304	169
18	Foreign/second language education	25	36	25	16
19	Foreign language learning	54	57	63	42
20	function	150	141	104	107
21	games	45	7	16	35
22	grammar	274	387	273	218
23	Grammar teaching	7	56	35	27
24	intelligence	31	18	17	11
25	laboratory	7	12	20	16
26	Language learning strategies	16	52	49	28
27	Language policy/planning	41	80	49	25
28	Language proficiency	118	72	65	82
29	Learner autonomy	2	25	21	11
30	Learner needs	28	6	11	4
31	Learning strategies	62	120	101	60
32	Listening comprehension	81	56	60	57
33	methodology	514	323	336	340
34	Mother tongue	28	25	16	8
35	Nonnative speakers	62	94	72	46
36	personality	30	16	14	23
37	Positive/negative attitude	23	13	20	18
38	process	437	440	394	312
39	reading	689	610	654	607
40	Reading comprehension	112	81	87	98
41	Role play	27	5	17	15
42	Second language acquisition	727	173	205	110
43	Self-access	4	49	31	9
44	SLA	79	186	145	97
45	Speaking	247	228	282	236

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46	Strategy training	15	25	5	12
47	Style	121	103	116	76
48	Teacher development	76	101	29	47
49	Teacher training	70	46	15	29
50	Textbook	105	121	111	101
51	Theory	337	340	274	253
52	training	274	265	145	179

One goal of this study was to identify the issues and ideas which were either ignored or received minimal attention. It is hard to say how much is little and how much is enough; but, presenting the relative frequency of little researched issues can give a general idea about their standing and prevalence in the literature. Table 6 displays the targeted LT key ideas which showed a low incidence in the research reports in all the four-time spans.

Table 6
Infrequent LT Concepts over Recent Time

	Terms	1968-1990	1991-2000	2001-2010	2011-2018
1	Classroom discourse	6	19	14	18
2	Class/student participation	19	9	14	5
3	empowerment	1	21	10	12
4	Emotional intelligence	0	0	10	0
5	Englishes	1	6	17	19
6	Foreign language anxiety	3	13	16	17
7	Foreign language classroom anxiety	0	4	10	8
8	Lesson planning	11	15	6	18
9	Metacognitive strategies	5	8	16	8
10	Peer teaching	6	4	21	3
11	sociology	19	10	6	4
12	Task-based language teaching	0	6	4	20
13	Teacher training courses/programs	12	6	0	10
14	Test anxiety	3	0	6	14
15	Test performance	10	12	10	19
16	Warm-up	2	0	0	1
17	Writing skill	21	18	18	8

To triangulate for the soundness and reliability of the statistics displayed above, terms strongly associated with LT and with frequencies higher than 20 were selected from AntConc N-Gram output for the first two and the last time spans (Table 7). Care was taken to treat all the spans similarly. Thus, the absence of an item in a column means that its frequency was less than 20 in its respective subcorpus. Unlike the statistics in the tables above, the frequencies are not calibrated (adjusted according to the size of subcorpora), but the ranks of the items in each text bank can help the readers to compare and contrast the spans.

Table 7
Comparing Frequent Language Teaching Terms after 2010 with those Frequently Used from 1968 to 2000

1968-1990 terms	freq	rank	1991-2000 terms	freq	rank	2011-2018 terms	freq	rank
language learning	497	15	language learning	480	12	language learning	529	13
language acquisition	403	22	language acquisition	256	29	language teaching	237	56
language teaching	399	23	language teaching	233	33	first language	221	67
second language acquisition	265	35	second language acquisition	173	54	language acquisition	214	71
reading comprehension	130	133	learning strategies	99	153	second language acquisition	144	146
first language	101	194	teacher education	97	160	English as a foreign language	139	159
English as a second language	98	204	reading comprehension	81	204	reading comprehension	128	171
listening	94	218	language testing	66	292	applied linguistics	119	193
communicative competence	88	249	English as a second language	59	346	working memory	119	198
language skills	80	291	language use	57	369	teacher education	112	214
language use	68	362	listening comprehension	55	391	language use	110	219
learning strategies	60	434	English as a foreign language	52	424	language education	90	290
discourse analysis	58	447	oral proficiency	51	446	professional development	88	302
oral proficiency	55	491	language policy	49	471	English as a second language	84	331
bilingual education	52	526	universal grammar	48	491	proficiency levels	84	333
English as a foreign language	52	528	language learning strategies	46	511	self-efficacy	81	353
contrastive analysis	48	596	teacher training	46	515	vocabulary learning	78	377
communicative approach	45	663	language anxiety	38	700	corrective feedback	76	387

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cloze tests	43	717	classroom interaction	35	792	listening comprehension	74	400
communication strategies	42	736	vocabulary learning	33	902	individual differences	72	411
multiple choice	37	913	communicative language teaching	31	943	oral proficiency	68	449
language curriculum	36	946	language planning	31	953	vocabulary knowledge	66	483
teaching materials	36	956	vocabulary knowledge	31	982	learning strategies	61	528
universal grammar	34	1060	teaching materials	29	1075	willingness to communicate	56	595
mother tongue	33	1090	communicative competence	27	1156	heritage language	53	652
cloze test	32	1127	communicative approach	26	1234	syntactic complexity	53	661
foreign students	32	1135	policy and planning	26	1264	formulaic language	52	672
learning process	32	1140	learner autonomy	25	1321	vocabulary acquisition	50	719
language policy	30	1250	vocabulary size	25	1358	peer feedback	48	757
individualized instruction	29	1308	English for academic purposes	24	1389	academic writing	47	764
vocabulary learning	29	1341	grammar teaching	24	1397	English as a lingua franca	44	843
language testing	28	1378	language curriculum	24	1408	learning outcomes	44	854
acquisition research	27	1423	academic writing	23	1451	proficiency level	43	888
background knowledge	27	1433	critical thinking	23	1469	extensive reading	42	909
first language acquisition	27	1440	learner centered	23	1488	self-assessment	41	958
syllabus design	27	1468	learning process	23	1490	stimulated recall	41	959
language laboratory	26	1516	extensive reading	22	1562	learning motivation	40	985
cloze procedure	25	1575	language policy and planning	22	1572	self-regulation	38	1055
language acquisition research	25	1596	language processing	22	1573	teacher training	38	1056
academic writing	24	1648	language teacher education	22	1574	explicit instruction	36	1123
computer assisted instruction	24	1666	professional development	22	1595	language anxiety	35	1182
linguistic theory	24	1686	learning strategy	21	1682	learning styles	35	1184
teacher education	24	1708	reading ability	21	1703	oral production	35	1192
language pedagogy	23	1790	self-assessment	21	1707	task complexity	35	1202
language transfer	23	1792	learning style	20	1792	language teacher education	34	1244
communicative language teaching	22	1868	classroom discourse	19	1874	learner beliefs	34	1245
reading materials	22	1916	cooperative learning	19	1875	task performance	32	1373
second language acquisition research	22	1921	language acquisition research	19	1907	content and language	31	1404
second language research	22	1922	language pedagogy	19	1909	conversation analysis	31	1405

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computer assisted language learning	21	2004	second language reading	19	1942	communicative competence	30	1478
immersion program	21	2027	content based instruction	18	2032	language policy	30	1486
information processing	21	2039	curriculum development	18	2034	memory capacity	30	1491
learning styles	21	2043	language and culture	18	2075	morphological awareness	30	1492
proficiency levels	21	2062	language writing	18	2081	working memory capacity	30	1525
reading process	21	2064	problem solving	18	2108	critical thinking	29	1545
second language reading	21	2070				language aptitude	28	1629
foreign language education	20	2158				language learning strategies	28	1632
language competence	20	2187				learning contexts	28	1633

Table 7 (continued)

2011-2018 terms	freq	rank	2011-2018 terms	freq	rank	2011-2018 terms	freq	rank
writing proficiency	28	1666	form focused	24	1980	gender agreement	21	2384
academic language	27	1673	formulaic sequences	24	1981	language production	21	2405
cognitive processes	27	1689	integrated learning	24	1990	linguistic knowledge	21	2412
discourse analysis	27	1696	language assessment	24	1999	pragmatic competence	21	2433
heritage speakers	27		classroom discourse	23	2084	reading ability	21	2439
language skills	27	1707	content and language integrated	23	2087	reading achievement	21	2440
learning environment	27	1708	grammar instruction	23	2101	content knowledge	20	2536
learning process	27	1709	reading proficiency	23	2142	English for academic purposes	20	2548
efl writing	26	1769	teacher development	23	2152	intrinsic motivation	20	2570
task based language teaching	26	1811	word frequency	23	2177	language learning motivation	20	2576
second language writing	25	1901	writing instruction	23	2178	lexical diversity	20	2582
strategy instruction	25	1905	computer mediated communication	22	2212	metalinguistic knowledge	20	2585
teacher educators	25	1907	English writing	22	2226	positive attitudes	20	2608
test performance	25	1908	spoken language	22	2284	writing development	20	2662
word recognition	25	1935	study abroad experience	22	2289			
collaborative writing	24	1965	classroom interaction	21	2369			

5. Discussion

A first impression consequent to an examination of the tables may be that it is hard to discern patterns or conceptual distinctions across the tables not least because closely related terms happen to be in different groups. For example, while *social* and *sociocultural* show increase, *sociolinguistic* is in a decrease table and *sociology* is of low frequency in a decrease mode. Nevertheless, after closer examination and with more tolerance, we feel reassured that such aberrations are in minority among conceptually related items which concur in the same group and the overall picture which has emerged is reliable. After all, it is easy to see the affinity among such ideas as *engagement*, *task-based* and *collaboration*. This confirms the idea that the realities of the *world* change the *words*. It is in the light of the connection between the developments in the social world and phraseology that the following comments are made concerning the data which are marshalled in the tables.

5.1 Comments on Table 1

Only five targeted terms are identified as stable in occurrence during recent times. This means that these are inherent ideas in LT and attract attention regardless of the developments in the realms of theory and practice. Two points can be made in this respect: Firstly, there are few ideas and concepts which are not susceptible to the changes in the general context and contemporary developments. Secondly, it is outlandish to claim that there are not many ideas which are not strongly present during a relatively long period. But, if we are more tolerant of some difference in occurrence, we will catch more terms in this category. In fact, despite large differences in the incidence of some terms in the literature in different periods, we can be sure that many terms have consistently been and will continue to be among the frequently used terms of LT and communication in the field centrally depends on them, even when their use hits an all-time low. For example, *language use* and *acquisition*, which

have been categorized as ascending and descending, respectively, can both be judged to enjoy a strong presence in the language-teaching literature.

5.2 Comments on Tables 2 and 3

Many terms in Table 2 show multiple-times increases over the four-time spans. Among them, mention can be made of *awareness, beliefs, collaboration, digital, English as a foreign language, explicit/implicit, identity, learner differences, lexicon, memory, motivation, noticing, pedagogy, self-efficacy, task, task-based, technology, and willingness to communicate*. The increase in attention to such ideas as *digital* and *technology* can be attributed to general trends in society. But, the increase in the incidence of most of the other terms should be justified in light of developments and tendencies in social science particularly LT. The strong impression that Table 2 creates is that humanism, learner-centredness, internal factors and practicality are stronger forces in LT now. Likewise, the increase in the use of such items displayed in Table 3 as *anxiety, feedback, gender, humor, learner beliefs, learning styles, self-evaluation, uptake, and age*, may have to do with more humanism and recognition of the role of learner-inherent realities, while items like *interaction, critical thinking, fluency, literacy, needs analysis, proficiency, pronunciation, writing* and *vocabulary knowledge* can be mentioned in support of more pragmatism and acknowledgement of the wider needs of learners. As a matter of fact, an examination of both Tables 2 and 3 supports the idea that LT has become increasingly practical and goal-oriented. At the same time, an increase in the use of items like *formulaic language, language use metaphor, and gestures* may imply more linguistic wisdom or maturity on the part of LT researchers because they now incorporate more of the results of linguistic findings in their studies and reports thereof.

5.3 Comments on Tables 4 and 5

Tables 4 and 5 display the items the occurrence of which in LT decreased over time. The frequency of occurrence for some of these items in the most recent period is not very low. It is likely that they will continue to attract some

attention or even experience a surge in the near future. However, for other items the decrease is sharp and it is hard to provide a justification because many items such as *curriculum development, composition, acquisition, dictionary, language skills, literature, materials, psycholinguistics, psychology, second language learning, syllabus, technique, testing*_ all from Table 4_ are part and parcel of LT. Nevertheless, some of them show a surprisingly sharp decrease in occurrence in the last period compared with the first time span. The same can be asserted about some of the items in Table 5, such as *comprehension, culture, dialogue, errors, methodology, learning needs, and teacher training*.

The decrease for some terms can be because they attracted much attention in a particular period in the past but became less fashionable after researchers explored them for a while; in other words, because of the theoretical developments, their heyday was over. This can possibly be the case with *audio-lingual method, fossilization, individualized instruction, interlanguage, error analysis* and *dialogue*. For some other items, such as *style, personality, and communication strategies*, although they were practically and theoretically relevant, the assessment of the researchers might have been that their potential as research topics has been exhausted. Some items in Tables 4 and 5 may be still as attractive as before or even more frequent, and the apparent decrease in their frequencies had little to do with a decrease in attention, but was the result of using alternative or fine-tuned related terms by the researchers. For example, *communicative approach, cooperation, humanism, affective, and attitude* seem unlikely to have lost much momentum but have probably sometimes been expressed through alternative or related terms.

5.4 Comments on Table 6

The low incidence of the terms in Table 6 and possibly the neglect of many other relevant ideas in recent times can, among other things, be the result of a kind of *academic bandwagonism* in which researchers, particularly novice

ones, too quickly fall in love with what is already *trending* or at best dig in deeper in the same terrains without trying to expand the current horizons and break through new fronts. After all, the issue of “warm-up” is not so insignificant as to justify a frequency as low as 0 or 1 in a bank of texts from a ten-year period. Nevertheless, like the other tables, comparing frequencies of terms in this table can also be meaningful and provide insights into the academic zeitgeists and types of concerns. For example, the difference in the occurrence of *classroom discourse*, *empowerment*, *task-based language teaching* and *test anxiety* cannot be an accident. These terms followed the trends, albeit only weakly. For example, *empowerment* and *foreign language anxiety* support the idea of humanism and learner-centeredness in LT but not in a barrage of occurrences.

5.5 Comments on Table 7

Table 7 compares the currency of some very familiar LT terms during the last period and the first two periods. Not surprisingly, at the top of the table, the periods are very similar; but, as we move down, they become more noticeably distinct. This means that it is with the less frequent items that different time spans diverge from each other. It is also interesting that the period 2011-2018 enjoys the most diversity of terms as it enjoys the highest number of items with frequencies above 20.

6. Conclusion

This article juxtaposed some of the most important key terms in LT in four successive time chunks of recent history to show how much attention they received in the related literature. Although this author expressed some speculations about the reasons for the fluctuations in the occurrence of important LT terms from 1968 to 2018, the potential for gathering insights from the juxtaposed data is much more. The reader can examine the organized data and come to conclusions in light of his experience and knowledge of the

current or recent trends in LT. Each table above is a rich thinking ground which can inspire ideas about what has happened or is likely to happen. The reader can browse the tables with no particular terms in mind or may be interested in certain ideas.

The shortcomings of this work are many. One inherent weakness is the considerable amount of subjectivity lurking at every turn from category choice to interpretation of the output. Another weakness is that there are too many concepts and ideas. While this may not be a weakness per se or even be a positive point, it is cumbersome to organize and interpret the data because there are so many crisscrossing patterns and sets of conceptually interrelated terms; with such a huge amount of information pointing to different directions, any sure interpretation becomes difficult. The alternative could be to, depending on the interest of the researcher, limit the study to a smaller number of ideas and track and study them in depth with the additional practicality of reference to their context of use for possible disambiguation. An interesting discussion could follow with reference to their educational, social and psychological covariates in specified time spans. Such a policy in this discussion would have rendered it imbalanced and partial in favor of some concepts with no justification for preference. As it is, the discussion here is limited to some general remarks about some patterns discerned at first glance.

Much attempt was made to be as precise as possible in counting and not to neglect the occurrence of any of the target terms. One strategy was to tally all the variations of the target items. For example, *curriculum development* here represents *curriculum design*, *curriculum development*, *designing curriculum*, *developing curriculum*, *design of curriculum*, *development of curriculum*, etc. The researcher used the search function inbuilt in the Office suite and hunted as many acceptable combinations as feasible. Obviously, there was some room

for neglecting some disguised occurrences; however, this underestimation could have happened for all the four-time spans.

As was mentioned above, there are many words with more than one meaning. So, the frequency of the word *age* may be overestimated because it can also be used to refer to something other than a factor in language learning. As another example, Jenifer Jenkins (2009) uses the chunk *n/New Englishes* in two ways: With small *n* to refer to varieties developed in the wake of the first diaspora and with capital *N* for those developed during the second diaspora, like Singaporean or Indian Englishes. This distinction was not possible for the software to make.

The conclusions from the frequencies of the targeted terms for prevalent LT theories and practices at different times should also be taken with a pinch of salt because, for one thing, there is often a significant lag between the time an idea begins to brew and when it is published.

Finally, as a suggestion for further research, a content analysis of the research reports in different time spans not based on external terms but on terms drawn from the literature itself can be more inclusive of the questions which were addressed. A related research can be the investigation of the new terms which were introduced over time. A dynamic terminological atlas facilitated by electronic display, can be very helpful.

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Appendix

Applied linguistics journals from which abstracts were taken

1. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics
2. Applied Linguistics
3. ELT Journal
4. Foreign Language Annals
5. Language Learning
6. RELC Journal
7. Second Language Research
8. System
9. TESOL Quarterly



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