Language Tangle

Predicting and Facilitating Outcomes
in Language Education

by

Thorold (Thor) May
B.A., Dip.Tchg., RSA/CTEFLA, Master of Applied Linguistics

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I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis is the result of original research and has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.

(Signed):

[Signature]
Dedication and Acknowledgements

This dissertation is dedicated to the many thousands of students who, over a thirty-three year period, have forced me to rethink my teaching again and again. They came from South Korea, China, Indonesia, Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, a dozen far flung island nations of the Pacific, and as immigrants from every corner of the globe. So many stories, such amazing people – they gave far more than I could ever hope to return.

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# Table of Contents

Abstract 12

Section 1: Language Tangle and the productive teacher 16

Productivity 21

The paradox of measuring productivity 26

Competing metrics of productivity 29

The virtualization of human activities 30

Knowledge worker productivity 32

The problem of substitution 35

Teachers and students as knowledge workers 40

a) Language Learners 40

b) Language Teachers 42

Concepts of productivity within educational institutions 45

Domains of productivity applied to an educational context 48

Teaching productivity 53

The predictability of learning 53

The special case of learning complex systems 54

The unique case of learning complex language systems 55

The argument for teacher productivity through de-skilling 59
Teaching productivity mediated through the class 62

Learning productivity 65

General productivity issues arising in the case studies 69

What is the model framework for the analysis? 72

Biographical case study 74

What rationale can be given for data inclusion, organization and weighting? 80

Elements in Thor May's character formation 82

The teacher as language learner – a personal view 88

Types of data in the dissertation 91

Teaching validation 93

Section 2: Personal case studies in issues affecting language teaching productivity 96

Introduction 96

Case Study 1: Tangaroa Junior Secondary College, 1976 98

Case Study 2: The Chiko Roll Factory, 1977 103

Case Study 3: Scallop Fishermen, 1977 108

Case Study 4: Government Aircraft Factory, 1977 113

Case Study 5: Vietnamese Refugees, 1979 116

Case Study 6: English for Special Purposes in Papua New Guinea, 1983 & 1985 121

Case Study 7: Banjalang* Language Rescue, 1984 129
Case Study 8: Solomon Islands Project, 1984 137

Case Study 9: University of the South Pacific, Suva 1987–1990  141

Case Study 10: Fijian Language Survey, 1990  146

Case Study 11: Myer House Adult Migrant Education Program*, 1990 to 1993  153

Case Study 12: Saudis at Western Metropolitan TAFE, 1993–1994  162

Case Study 13: English for Mechanics, 1993–1998  166

Case Study 14: Koba Tin Mining Company & John Batman College of TAFE, 1996  174

Case Study 15: Wuhan Technical University of Surveying and Mapping, 1998  182

Case Study 16: Central China Normal University, 1999–2000  187

Case Study 17: Sungsim College of Foreign Language Studies, 2000 – 2003  194

Case Study 18: Pusan University of Foreign Studies, 2003 – 2004  202

Case Study 19: Chungju National University, 2004–2007  212

Case Study 20: The Intimate Learner  221

Section 3 – Analysis  231

Part 1 – Productivity factor analysis  231

   The choice of productivity factors for anecdotal productivity factor analysis  241

   Explication of productivity factors  245
Summary of Productivity Factor Analysis 328

Part 2: Analysis of case study trends, patterns and implications 329

Role ambiguity and productivity 331

The professionalising of teaching 332

Negotiating language teaching through the narrative spaces of institutions 337

Unasked questions and untrodden paths 342

Summary of case study patterns 352

Conclusions 355

The repair of unproductive educational institutions 355

Empirical findings and the potential for further research 356

1. Students ultimately control learning, but are sensitive to immediate reward 358

2. The primary (but not the only) role of any successful foreign or second language teacher is to leverage student motivation. 359

3. Teaching productivity turns, ultimately, on the teacher's ability to influence the probability of student learning. 359

4. Curriculum and method are best negotiated with students rather than with institutions 360

5. The phenomenon of the 'intimate learner' demonstrates a potent,
although minority alternative to mass language education 361

6. Teacher–student learning reciprocation is among the most important of all motivational tools 362

7. Certification may outrank actual language learning as a student and institutional goal under certain cultural conditions 363

8. Institutional players are not always interested in student language learning productivity, and tend to be poorly equipped to evaluate it 363

9. A significant proportion of language teachers remain ignorant about language learning and effective language teaching 365

10. The understanding and practice of knowledge worker productivity remains weakly developed in language teaching institutions 366

The complexity and potentials of productivity concepts 367

Appendix 1: Summaries of Case Studies 368

Case Study 1 synopsis: 1976, Tangaroa College, New Zealand 368

Case Study 2 synopsis: 1977, Chiko Roll Factory, Melbourne 368

Case Study 3 synopsis: 1977, Scallop Fishermen, Melbourne 369

Case Study 4 synopsis: 1977, Government Aircraft Factory, Melbourne 370

Case Study 5 synopsis: 1979, Vietnamese Refugees, NSW 371

Case Study 6 synopsis: 1983, PNG Engineering Students 371
Case Study 7 synopsis: 1984, Banjalang Language Revival, Lismore NSW 372

Case Study 8 synopsis: 1984, Solomon Islands Aid Project, Lismore NSW 373

Case Study 9 synopsis: 1987–90 USP (a), Fiji and a Military Coup 374

Case Study 10 synopsis: 1990 USP (b), Fiji: the Suva language Survey 375

Case Study 11 synopsis: 1993, AMEP, Myer House, Melbourne 375

Case Study 12 synopsis: 1993, Western Metropolitan TAFE, Melbourne 376

Case Study 13 synopsis: 1993–98, English for Mechanics, Batman TAFE, Melbourne 377

Case Study 14 synopsis: 1996, Consultancy, Pulau Banka, Indonesia 378

Case Study 15 synopsis: 1998, WUTSM, Wuhan, central China 379

Case Study 16 synopsis: 2000, Central China Normal University, Wuhan 380

Case Study 17 synopsis: 2000, Sungsim College of Foreign Languages, Busan, South Korea 381

Case Study 18 synopsis: 2004, Pusan University of Foreign Studies, Busan, South Korea 382

Case Study 19 synopsis: 2004–2007, Chungju National University, South Korea 383

Case Study 20 synopsis: The Intimate Learner 384
Appendix 2: Listing of productivity factors affecting institutional language learners 386

Appendix 3: Table of productivity factors in language teaching 389

Appendix 4: Productivity factor listing for the case studies 395

Appendix 5: Sociolinguistic Survey: Language in Suva – language use and literacy in an urban Pacific population 403

References 439
Abstract

This thesis argues that foreign and second language teaching productivity can only reach its proper potential when it is accorded priority, second only to language learner productivity, amongst the many competing productivities which are always asserted by stakeholders in educational institutions. A theoretical foundation for the research is established by examining the historical concept of productivity, and its more recent manifestation as knowledge worker productivity, especially as applied to teachers. The empirical basis of the thesis is sourced from a chronological series of twenty biographical case studies in language teaching venues in Australia, New Zealand, Oceania and East Asia. The biographical case study methodology, although rare in applied linguistics, is justified by reference to its wide and growing application in other fields of qualitative research. The case studies are analysed for common patterns of productivity, as well as teaching productivity inhibition or failure. It was affirmed across all of the case studies without exception that external parties could not control or even reliably predict what individual students might learn, and how well, from instances of instructed language teaching. This was regardless of the power of institutional players, external resources, curriculums or the teacher. Student belief in the immediate value of what was to be learned in a given lesson, and personal confidence in
an ability to learn it were the most critical factors. Teaching productivity was found to turn, ultimately, on the teacher's ability to influence the probability of student learning. The teacher could best influence learning probability by enhancing student motivation. The most effective environments for teaching productivity were seen to be those where the teacher was professionally equipped and politically enabled to exercise judgements which maximized opportunities for student language learning productivity. A negotiated pact concerning both curriculum and method often proved effective, especially with mature students, and at times required some deception of institutional authorities. Empirically, the encouragement of reciprocal learning relationships between teacher and students was found to be powerfully enabling for language teaching productivity in the case studies. In many venues a small but effective minority of 'intimate learners' were also able to leverage their language learning productivity by forging more personal relationships with the teacher. The wider cultural paradigm within each of the countries represented in the case studies sanctioned different paths and limitations for both language learners and teachers, and hence was seen to influence teaching productivity in critical ways. It was found that under certain conditions, notably (but not exclusively) those prevailing in many East Asian educational institutions, that certification of foreign language skills had a higher cultural, employment and monetary value than the actual ability to exercise foreign language skills. A negative influence on teacher productivity
in many of the case studies was an ignorance about language learning and teaching amongst institutional players. The disregard of language teacher professionalism was fed by a belief that being able to speak a language was all that was necessary to teach it, and reinforced by misinterpreting the meaning of test results. Related to this, an imbalance of power relationships between teachers or students with other institutional interests was consistently found to interfere with teaching and learning productivities. Overall, the model of productivity understood in institutions instanced by the case studies tended to reflect a 19th Century economic paradigm of capital, raw materials (students) and labour (dispensable classroom workers) rather than any more sophisticated grasp of knowledge worker productivity. It was demonstrated in the context of the case studies that productivity, and in particular knowledge worker productivity, is a complex concept whose facets require detailed analysis to arrive at a proper understanding of the role that foreign and second language teachers play in educational institutions.