1 The linguistic, language teaching and language testing background

This volume studies four examinations in the English language, all of which figure prominently in the development of a new examination, the Certificates in English Language Skills (CELS), which was first administered in June 2002. The four original exams were the following:

- the (British) Association of Recognised English Language Schools (ARELS) oral examination, which appeared in 1967
- the Oxford Examination in English as a Foreign Language, in reading and writing, first administered in 1978
- the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) Examinations in the Communicative Use of English as a Foreign Language (CUEFL), 1981
- and the successor to the CUEFL exam, the Certificates in Communicative Skills in English (CCSE) exams, 1990.

The ARELS, Oxford, CUEFL and CCSE exams all claim to take full account of the methods and approaches of the second and foreign language teaching of their times. This chapter will thus attempt a historical overview of the language teaching and testing context for the development of these exams, citing mainly the theoretical and applied linguists and language testers of the era. Chapters 2 and 3 will trace the particular evolution of the ARELS, Oxford, CUEFL and CCSE examinations, taking account not only of the theories and methodologies of the times, but also of the "external, non-theoretical, institutional, social forces that, on deeper analysis, often turn out to be much more powerful explanations of actual practice" (Spolsky, 1990: 159). In Chapter 4, the rationale, development and specifications of the new Certificates in English Language Skills (CELS) exam will be presented and analysed. Chapter 5 illustrates the new exam with actual samples of its tests and support materials.

Approaches to language teaching

As all language teachers know, 'movements' in language teaching are rarely exclusive. The principles of new approaches to language teaching are applied in different intensities, with different emphases in different situations. So

1

much so, in fact, that it is quite normal (e.g. Wilga Rivers 1968) to refer to "the eclectic method" of language teaching, meaning a selection of approaches from different "movements". Howatt (1984: 192) reminds us that language teaching "movements" that we may consider as "discrete" are often actually variations of what he calls the same "underlying philosophy". Howatt would thus see as related some of the language teaching approaches treated in this volume as more independent of each other:

> *These ideas have been known by a variety of labels (Natural Method, Conversation Method, Direct Method, Communicative Approach and so on), and the classroom techniques associated with them have also changed from time to time. But the underlying philosophy has remained constant* (1984: 192).

The term "approach", as used in this chapter, follows Strevens' portmanteau definition (1980:13): that is, a "fully developed 'package deal' of attitudes, principles, perhaps theories, backed by a substantial range of teaching materials and exemplifications of the ideology in practice that inform a particular school of thought in language teaching". From the characterisation of some of the language teaching approaches below, it may emerge that the differences are more significant than Howatt would imply. Be that as it may, the changing influences of both educational and linguistic theories are certainly reflected in language teaching. These influences often came from those categorised by Strevens (1980: 52) as the *descriptivists*, for example Sweet (e.g. 1899/1964), Jespersen (e.g. 1933), Palmer (e.g. 1938), Hornby, (e.g. 1954–56, 1959–66), Quirk *et al*. (1972), all of whom, through their linguistic descriptions, inventories of sounds, lexis, structural patterns, views on language learning and teaching problems, or their English language teaching materials, figured in the approaches summarised below. Further powerful influences on language teaching came of course from the theoretical and applied *linguists*, including the psycholinguists, sociolinguists and discourse analysts referred to below.

Grammar-translation approach

The grammar-translation approach to the teaching of a foreign language is often called the classical approach, influenced as it is by "the formal teaching of Latin and Greek in Europe for many centuries" (Rivers 1968: 14). Given that the method was still applied in the mid-twentieth century to the teaching of non-current languages such as Latin and ancient Greek, its objectives would, it might be assumed, differ from those of the teaching of modern languages. Howatt (1984: 131) explains that the grammar-translation method was originally an attempt to adapt the scholastic study of foreign languages for a reading knowledge of their culture and history "to the circumstances and requirements" of school students. Hence, he suggests, the emphasis on sentence-level usage. Howatt claims that the first grammar-translation course for the teaching of

1 The linguistic, language teaching and language testing background

English was written by Johann Flick, in Germany, in 1793. Yet many modern language-teaching classrooms of the nineteen-fifties bore the typical characteristics of this approach, summarised here in Figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

The Grammar-translation method

Approach	Objectives	Sample classroom activities	Problems
Grammar-translation	• to inculcate an understanding of the grammar of a language • training in the translation and accurate writing of the language • to provide students with a wide literary vocabulary • to use language-learning as an intellectual discipline	• students learn target language vocabulary lists (with L1 equivalents) from their textbook • teacher (T.) and/or students read textbook passage in target language (TL) aloud • students translate sentence by sentence • T. explains rules of grammatical usage featured in the passage • students copy grammar rules, paradigms examples, exceptions in their notebooks, and can expect their knowledge of the rules to be tested • students do written practice exercises, e.g. filling in blanks in grammatical phrase or sentence-level exercises, or translate into TL specially selected phrases or sentences containing the grammatical usage concerned • students regularly do "proses", i.e. passages for translation to or from the TL	• little interest in TL pronunciation, intonation • TL not generally seen as a means of expressing one's own meanings, in writing or in speaking • thus little communicative activity in the TL

It was a common occurrence for students, even with years of grammar-translation language learning experience, nevertheless to find their first experiences of functioning in real TL-using situations (for example their first visit to France) very fraught, especially in aural-oral communication.

Direct method

Direct methods of language teaching, that is those avoiding the use of the learner's first language in the foreign-language classroom, would appear to contrast more strongly than Howatt suggests with the grammar-translation approach, but (see Hagboldt 1948: 5–9) were already in use by the nineteenth century. Figure 1.2 summarises the main features of the direct method.

Figure 1.2

The direct method

Approach	Objectives	Sample classroom activities	Problems
Direct	• to recreate L1 learning conditions, where understanding comes mainly through listening, speaking through actually speaking • to encourage direct association of TL words and sentences with objects, notions and actions without the mediating use of L1 • to provide practice in aural-oral skills before reading and writing • to facilitate learning of grammar through practice and inference rather than explanation • to ensure learners can function in the TL early, orally and in writing	• T. addresses students in TL and expects them to reply in it • T. talks in TL, about classroom objects, asking questions, giving orders; students obey orders and tell class in TL what they are/ have been doing • T. uses pictures to describe activities and events in TL • T. demonstrates meanings of new action or relational words by miming • students repeat new words and phrases in TL • students asked to form own TL sentences according to what they have heard • students read aloud passage of related content after the teacher, chorally then individually • T. asks questions about passage in TL, students reply in TL • difficulties of vocabulary or structure explained in TL • students make TL notes • students write in TL, mainly on what has been covered in listening and speaking activities • lesson ends with song in TL	• learners expected to express themselves in TL too soon with too little structural knowledge • inaccuracy and vagueness in learner TL performance • need to learn by induction suits some students more than others

4

In its purest form, the practice of the direct method often created feelings of tension and exhaustion in both students and teacher. This was partly because of their mutual knowledge that their own first language, already mastered, was there as a potential resource (as well as a source of unclarified interference), yet was not being used.

Reading method

Rivers (1968: 22) suggests that the reading method of foreign-language teaching had pragmatic rather than theoretical origins, recommended as it was by a U.S. report (Coleman 1929) suggesting that a concentration on FL reading competence was the best that could be achieved for the majority of learners, who spent only two years studying a foreign language. Here is an interesting pre-echo of the concept of "partial competence" discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, with reference to the Communicative Use of English as a Foreign Language (CUEFL), Certificates in Communicative Skills in English (CCSE) and Certificates in English Language Skills (CELS) exams. Figure 1.3 presents the main features of the method.

Howatt links the 'reading-first', receptive before productive skills programmes of Marcel (1869) with the "more modern idiom" of Smith (1978: 50) and his emphasis on reading as a crucial cognitive process through which "readers must bring meaning to print rather than expect to receive something from it". The value of the reading method had also been noted by Michael West, an educationalist of the British descriptivist tradition, whose influential *General Service List of English Words* (1953) and *New Method Readers* (1935 onwards) helped learners to acquire vocabulary in a gradual though contextualised way.

Figure 1.3

The reading method

Approach	Objectives	Sample classroom activities	Problems
Reading	• to develop TL reading ability, intensive and extensive, as the realistic goal for most short-term TL learners • to develop correct pronunciation, basic grammar and aural comprehension, use of simple speech patterns, and basic writing skills, as required for TL reading ability	• students use short readers (e.g. 20 pp. continuous reading text) in simple TL based on frequency word-count • interesting/amusing stories, usually in TL settings • new words explained in TL footnotes • T. describes, in simple TL, setting of story	• learners tend to go for quantity (e.g. number of readers read) rather than quality of reading • graded readers made transition to authentic TL reading materials hard • neglect of aural-oral skills showed

		• T. reads first section of story aloud, students following in their books • T. asks questions in L1 re the reading • students re-read section silently, looking for answers to questions they were unable to answer, inferring meanings rather than using translation • T. asks further questions, in TL, students find answers in text, framing replies in TL • students continue reading story in pairs, or individually; T. helps as requested • at ends of sections, students take reader to T. who asks them questions in L1 • T. checks how many pages each student has completed • homework: written TL answers to questions on sections just read or project on related TL life, customs, etc.	

The audio-lingual approach

The 1960s saw a transitional trend, rather than a clear-cut switch, from the grammar-translation, direct and reading approaches of the 1940s and 1950s to what soon became known as the audio-lingual (or "aural-oral") method, itself, in Howatt's words, "derived from the structural approach developed by Fries at Michigan" (1984: 225).

Audio-lingual and structuralist approaches emerged, Wilga Rivers (1968: 38) suggests, under the influences of behavioural psychology (notably Skinner, e.g. 1957) and the American structural linguists (e.g. Bloomfield 1933, Fries 1945, Harris 1951) and anthropologists (e.g. Pike 1947), who analysed, described and explained the structures and systems of languages from listening to them in native-speaker use.

Audio-lingualism is summarised by Moulton (1961: 86) as being based on these slogans:

Language is speech not writing.
A language is a set of habits.
Teach the language, not about the language.
A language is what its native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say.
Languages are different.

The audio-lingual method proposed the teaching of the four language skills in the order of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In audio-lingual textbooks, pre-composed dialogues would introduce and practise, in a tightly-controlled manner, structural and lexical items graded according to difficulty and frequency of use. There would be copious repetition and drills, choral, group and individual, of the selected structures and vocabulary, before further practice in gradually broadening contexts. Reading and writing were then practised through texts, again strictly graded and adapted to contain the structures and vocabulary already encountered in the listening and speaking activities. "The emphasis," Rivers said (1968: 44) "is on structuring the situation so that the student will not make mistakes, or at least will make very few."

The overlap between language approaches may again be illustrated here. The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the British tradition of English language teaching influenced by A. S. Hornby's *Oxford Progressive English for Adult Learners* (1954–56), which he referred to as situational. This meant, for Hornby, "that each new pattern or lexical item should be introduced to the class in advance of the work with the text" (Howatt 1984: 263), a principle central to the audio-lingual approach. The 1960s also saw the kind of situational approach represented by the audio-visual courses of the Centre de Recherche et d'Étude pour la Diffusion du Français (CREDIF), which related filmstrips and recorded dialogues. The situational method tended to organise its language syllabus according to relevant physical and social situations, but then used techniques from direct and audio-lingual methods to pursue syllabus objectives. In the audio-lingual and situational courses of the 1960s, the theory was that good linguistic habits would be formed by the carefully controlled introduction and practice of structures and lexis, mastery, especially in terms of accurate usage, being achieved through over-learning.

The audio-lingual and related methods of language teaching are summarised in Figure 1.4.

Strevens (1980: 49) considers that the "ideas and materials" associated with audio-lingual approaches "constituted a real advance on most of what had ... preceded them", and that they were often very successful with motivated students in contexts where the target language was in use.

1 The linguistic, language teaching and language testing background

Figure 1.4

The audio-lingual method

Approach	Objectives	Sample classroom activities	Problems
Audio-Lingual	• to develop listening and speaking skills as the foundation for reading and writing skills • to use grammar as a means to an end, not an end in itself • to enable learners to communicate in TL	• students repeat sentences in TL in chorus, imitating the pronunciation and intonation of T., then in groups, then individually • contexts, usually dialogues, perhaps with A/V support, based on everyday incidents in life of student in TL country • students act out conversational interchanges in pairs • students practise reading together after the teacher what they have just been repeating • students repeat several times after the teacher pattern sentences containing key structure • students repeat other sentences of identical structure but with minimal changes of vocabulary • on cue words from T., students construct slightly different sentences on same structural pattern • T. gives cues to small groups, then individuals, to make sure that all have assimilated the uses of the structure being drilled • students asked to write out drill they have been repeating aloud, adding lexical variants of their own choosing	• emphasis on drilling structural patterns mechanical and non-individual • TL used artificial and restricted • reading and writing skills delayed

We should of course, remember in reviewing all the approaches above, that eclecticism, even the eclectic method referred to by Rivers, often operates in classroom practice as teachers strive to overcome problems and take what seems to work for them from various methods with which they are familiar. Such was the structural-situational approach, which would base its syllabus on inventories of sentence patterns such as A.S. Hornby's 1959 *The Teaching of Structural Words and Sentence Patterns*, grouped according to appropriate situations, and taught, perhaps, through a combination of direct, audio-lingual and reading method techniques. Or the cognitive code approach, which emerged as a further intermediate development, described by Morrow (1979: 10) as:

> *a reaction against the over-mechanical aspects of behavioural methodology, [placing] less importance on repetition and drilling, and more on activities involving conscious thought and application e.g. problem-solving. Grammatical explanation is provided if it is felt to be of use and learners are led to formulate (implicitly or explicitly) hypotheses concerning the functioning of the language they are studying.*

It was nevertheless to be expected that there would be a reaction against the tightly-controlled syllabus, textbooks, and teacher-centred techniques of audio-lingualism and most of its variations. It thus came as no surprise that the audio-lingual method should be succeeded by a radically more learner-centred approach to language learning and teaching, influenced by a changing theoretical and applied linguistic context. The late 1970s would see the advance of the communicative approach to language teaching, which will dominate the analyses and discussions of all the four examinations that become the focus of this volume in Chapters 2 to 5.

Psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and discourse analysis

The 1970s and early 1980s saw important influences, from both linguistic and descriptivist "lines" (Strevens, 1980: 45–50), affecting the teaching of English to speakers of other languages.

Noam Chomsky seems to have influenced the transition from audio-lingualism-structuralism in two almost contradictory ways. To Chomsky, the "creative aspect of normal language use" (1966: 3), which enables us to produce and understand new utterances, could not be explained wholly in the stimulus-response terms of the behaviourists; it demanded a more comprehensive explanation. But Chomsky's own view of "competence and the generative grammars that purport to describe it" as "a system of rules with the three major components ... the syntactic, phonological and semantic" (1965: 15–16), itself seemed too restricted to some linguists. Psycholinguists Campbell and Wales (1970: 247) considered that Chomsky's interpretation of

the competence concept omitted "by far the most important linguistic ability, the ability to produce or understand utterances which are not so much grammatical but, more important, *appropriate to the context* in which they are made" (my emphasis).

Shades here of the "context of situation" of Malinowski (e.g. 1935), an anthropologist whose ethnographic studies involved him inevitably in the analysis of language in context; and of Firth (e.g. 1957: 93–118), a linguist analysing language in its relationships with contextual factors such as the "non-verbal action of participants", the "relevant objects" and "the effect of verbal action" (Robins 1964: 28).

The sociolinguists, who probably had the most direct influence on the teaching approaches of the 1970s and 1980s, were even more insistent on broadening the competence concept. In particular Hymes, in his key paper *On Communicative Competence*:

> *We break irrevocably with the model that restricts the language to one face towards referential meaning, one towards sounds and that defines organisation of language as solely consisting of rules for linking the two. Such a model implies naming to be the sole use of speech, as if languages were never organised to lament, rejoice, beseech, admonish, aphorize, inveigh, for the many varied forms of persuasion, direction, expression and symbolic play. A model of language must design it with a face toward communicative conduct and social life* (1970: 15).

Indications here, indeed, of the *communicative functions*, in their many contexts, that were soon to become units of currency in the new breed of syllabuses for the communicative approach to language learning (see references to applied linguists and descriptivists such as Richterich (1972), Van Ek (1975) and Wilkins (1976) below).

There was misunderstanding of Chomsky's notions of competence and performance. Chomsky, the theoretical linguist, legitimately 'idealised' the raw data of language in order to "characterise in the most neutral possible terms the knowledge of the language that provides the basis for actual use of language by a speaker-hearer" (Chomsky 1965: 9). He thus assigned to 'performance' "such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors ..." (1965: 3). But for the proponents of the communicative approach to language teaching, with their practical rather than theoretical focus, performance, that is "actual use" of language, was the crucial evidence of learners' target-communicative competence, of their appropriate use of language in real communicative events.

Halliday, in the Firthian tradition and from his socio-semantic standpoint, emphasised that "the particular form taken by the grammatical system is closely related to the social and personal needs that the language is required to serve. But in order to bring this out, it is necessary to look at both the system