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1 A changing perspective on language teaching

1.1 A new technology of language teaching

People have been learning languages other than their first language throughout history. How they did this, however, is something which remains shrouded in mystery as the long history of language learning is largely unrecorded. It is likely that a very large part of this learning occurred in a naturalistic manner by means of contact with speakers of another language with the goal of interpersonal communication for purposes of trade, social organisation or the conveyance of a belief system. There have also been attempts to help language learners by means of structured approaches to the presentation of the target language (TL) or the practice of elements of this language. That is what we would now call approaches or methodologies.

Neither the learning nor the teaching of languages, then, are novel activities. The period of language teaching history which stretches from the 1960s to the present, however, is probably unique. To begin with, the scale of the learning and teaching of languages is in all probability greater than has ever been the case previously; this is as a consequence of the expansion in international exchanges of all types which characterises the modern world. This period has also witnessed an unprecedented intensity of reflection and experimentation in all fields of language teaching. In this respect, it is useful to bear in mind that language teaching is a social phenomenon and is therefore influenced by the sociocultural context in which it occurs. It is therefore useful to look at the reasons for the development of language teaching in recent decades, and also at the general directions that thinking on language teaching have adopted over the same period.

The period around the 1960s witnessed a number of significant changes in the map of the world and in international relations. On the international level, colonial empires were disappearing, and a large number of states which had recently obtained their independence were investing heavily to provide their populations with improved standards

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of education and to develop their economies in order to be able to compete on the international market on more equal terms. This led to the need for knowledge of foreign languages as a means of gaining access to information in the fields of science and technology, and of enabling citizens to communicate with people from other countries in various aspects of economic and commercial life. In view of the role of English as an international language in the fields of science, technology and business, a significant part of the expansion in the demand for language learning involved English. At the same time, the countries of Europe, which were still emerging from the destruction and trauma of the Second World War, were rebuilding their economies and seeking to create greater mutual understanding and cooperation in both economic and social fields. One of the manifestations of this effort was the setting-up in 1963 of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, an ambitious scheme which was designed to promote language learning throughout Europe. Increasing prosperity gave further impetus to this drive as a result of increased economic exchanges as well as by providing the bases for the expansion of travel for leisure and cultural purposes.

These changes in society influenced language teaching in two main ways. First, they increased the overall demand for language teaching dramatically. Second, they altered the nature of this demand. Before this period language teaching had been marked by a focus on the language code and by a strong scholastic and literary orientation. The changes alluded to above, on the other hand, set primarily functional goals for language teaching. In many cases, they related to the development of specific competences in more or less restricted domains of usage such as basic transactional skills for travel or tourism, the ability to read specialised material in a given domain of activity, oral communication skills in a particular field of economic life, and so on.

In order to be able to respond to this changing demand, the language teaching profession had to develop a new set of procedures for establishing goals, constructing learning programmes, and realising these programmes at classroom level. This led to work on needs analysis (cf. Richterich, 1973; Munby, 1978) and on functionally based approaches to course design (cf. Wilkins, 1976; Mackay and Mountford, 1978; Widdowson, 1978), as well as on the development of a new approach to classroom methodology (cf. Strevens, 1977; Brumfit and Johnson, 1979; Savignon, 1983; Brumfit, 1984a). These efforts led to the creation of what could fairly be described as a new 'technology' of language teaching, as seen in the options that were made available to language educators for investigating students' learning needs, constructing coherent learning programmes, and realising these pro-

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grammes in terms of learning tasks and activities. By about 1980, the theoretical landscape of language teaching had undergone a significant change, and what came to be known as the communicative approach had established itself as the dominant paradigm in language teaching. This intense work of reflection and development has continued into the present and there is no reason to believe that it will stop in the near future.

The period since the 1960s has been marked by a considerable amount of creativity and energy in language teaching. This has manifested itself in terms of the theoretical developments mentioned above, and also in an impressive productivity in terms of teaching materials and learning aids of many types, including the use of various technical facilities such as video, computer-assisted learning, and multimedia. With respect to methodology, it is fair to speak of an explosion in the range of materials which are available to teachers. A parallel expansion has taken place in terms of the number of professional journals, language teaching associations, and courses in applied linguistics or language teaching methodology which are available. The world of language teaching is now a very much richer and more diversified place than it was in the 1960s. What could be described as the 'technology of language teaching' – namely the theoretical perspectives and practical options which are available to language educators for designing and implementing learning programmes – has expanded dramatically.

In one sense, the language teaching profession has good reason to feel satisfaction with this period of creativity: it points to the considerable efforts that have been made in response to the demands of society to develop new means of approaching the task of language teaching in an effective manner. In many ways, these developments reflect the positivistic belief in the power of human reason to find solutions to the various challenges of life and, thus, parallel developments in the fields of medicine, science, and technology. As a result, the language teaching profession has a much richer array of options at its disposal at the start of the twenty-first century than was the case a few decades ago. A teacher faced with the request to set up a learning programme for a given group of students thus has a varied and well-developed set of resources to choose from in terms of investigative and course design procedures, teaching materials, and learning aids; he or she also has an impressive array of methodological ideas as a source of inspiration. It would thus be reasonable to say that over the last few decades the profession has developed what could be seen as a new technology of language teaching.

This, however, is not the whole story. Having a rich technology at one's disposal is certainly a help. Technology, however, offers a potential

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but does not in itself guarantee that a given result will be obtained, not in a complex human activity like teaching, at least. The real effectiveness of educational technology lies not just in the inherent logic and potentiality of the technology itself but in the appropriacy of its use, and this involves consideration of a variety of 'soft' data relating to the perceptions and attitudes of the people who will be using it and to the type of context in which it will be used. This in turn calls for a different perspective on language teaching, one which is complementary to but, nonetheless, separate from the development of the 'technology' referred to above.

Evaluate your own interaction with the technology of language teaching in terms of the approaches, methodologies, materials, or learning aids with which you have worked.

- In which ways has this technology facilitated your task as teacher?
- Have you ever felt tensions or dissatisfaction with elements of this technology? Specifically, have you ever felt that technology did not appear to offer you what you might have expected it to?
- If so, try to identify the origins of these tensions or dissatisfactions.
- In which ways have you responded to situations of this nature?

1.2 Towards an ecological perspective on language teaching

If it could be assumed that learners were 'simply' learners, that teachers were 'simply' teachers, and that one classroom was essentially the same as another, there would probably be little need for any approach other than a technological perspective on language teaching. Objective differences – such as the age of learners, the specific goals being pursued, or class numbers – could be included in a pre-established matrix and accommodated in a reasonably straightforward manner as departures from a given norm, rather in the way that the same production machinery can be recalibrated to produce different cars. In this scenario, a well-developed technology of language teaching would be sufficient to guarantee a fairly predictable set of results.

This, of course, is not the case. Learners are not 'simply' learners any more than teachers are 'simply' teachers; teaching contexts, too, differ from one another in a significant number of ways. In other words, language teaching is far more complex than producing cars: we cannot

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therefore assume that the technology of language teaching will lead in a neat, deterministic manner to a predictable set of learning outcomes. For the technology of language teaching to produce effective results, it has to work with people as they are in the context in which they find themselves at a given point in time. The technology, then, has to be used appropriately, and deciding on what is or is not appropriate calls for consideration of the total context of teaching in both human and pragmatic terms. Certain writers (Holliday and Cooke, 1982; Van Lier, 1997) have referred to this as an 'ecological' perspective on language teaching, i.e. one which looks at language teaching within the totality of the lives of the various participants involved and not as one sub-part of their lives which can be examined in isolation. Van Lier expresses this in the following terms:

> An ecological perspective on language learning offers an alternative way of looking at the contexts in which language use and language learning are situated . . . It proposes to be a radical alternative to Cartesian rationalism, body–mind dualism, and the anthropocentric world promoted for several centuries. It replaces these views with a conception of the learning environment as a complex adaptive system, of the mind as the totality of relationships between a developing person and the surrounding world, and of learning as the result of meaningful activity in an accessible environment. (1997: 783)

In an ecological perspective on teaching, technology is simply one element among others, an essential element indeed, but still only one. Furthermore, it is unsafe to assume that the effects of educational technology can be predicted confidently from the inner logic of the technology alone, as this inner logic inevitably interacts with the perceptions and goals of those involved in using it. This means that in order to understand precisely what takes place in our classrooms, we have to look at these classrooms as entities in their own right and explore the meaning they have for those who are involved in them in their own terms. In other words, a classroom is not just an exemplar of a certain pedagogical idealisation: it is something living and dynamic which does not necessarily fit into an idealised picture of what a classroom should be. Consequently, understanding the reality of teaching involves exploring the meaning it has for students, for teachers, and for the others who, in one way or another, influence what is done in classrooms.

The ecological perspective has gained more attention and has come to assume a more dominant role in mainstream thinking on language teaching in recent years. It has, however, been present for some time, running parallel with the development of the new technology of

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language teaching mentioned above. Indeed, the two are by no means incompatible. The technology of language teaching as seen in approach, methodology, materials, and learning aids provides language educators with options from which they can choose in setting-up a course or planning a class. The ecological perspective, on the other hand, focuses attention on the human and pragmatic factors which influence the use and likely effectiveness of this technology. There can, however, be a tension between the two perspectives. A technological approach to education seems positive and confident, and it promises a specific product. An ecological perspective, on the other hand, often calls upon us to 'Wait a moment' and has many instances of 'It depends'. Perhaps for this reason, the technological perspective has the most attraction for those who are further removed from classroom realities, i.e. planning committees, educational authorities, and so on. Practising teachers, however, are in (and part of) one small ecosystem which is the classroom, and it is much more difficult for them to ignore the 'rules' or inner logic of this system and simply to 'apply the technology' according to the instruction manual. The teacher's reality is an ecological one which is shaped by the attitudes and expectations of students, of parents, of school administrators, of materials writers, and of many others including, of course, each teacher as an individual in his or her own right.

Understanding what takes place in classrooms therefore involves understanding what different participants – students and teachers in the first instance, but many others, too – bring with them to the classroom, and how this influences what they do within it. This, in turn, involves exploring participants' identities and listening to their voice. The next three sections therefore look at trends in research in recent years which have explored this aspect of teaching, namely the identity of participants and how this influences the voices they express.

> This book works within an ecological perspective on language teaching and seeks to provide teachers with guidelines for negotiating a shared and sustainable approach to teaching within their classrooms. Think about the two perspectives on language teaching which have been outlined here.
>
> - Which do you work with more?
> - Which was dominant in your training?
> - Have you encountered tensions between the two?
> - If so, analyse the origin of these tensions and how you have dealt with them.

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1.3 Learner identities

A significant part of the new technology of language teaching which was developed in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the demand for a functionally oriented approach to teaching. The development of the new technology of language teaching was thus strongly influenced by pragmatic considerations which focused on 'hard', objectively observable phenomena. Within this framework, students were seen primarily as social actors whose identity was defined in terms of the social role in which they would have to use the language, e.g. a tourist needing to organise travel and accommodation, a student needing to read a certain type of specialist material, a businessperson needing to describe his or her company's products or negotiate a contract, and so on. The main emphasis was thus on students' objective needs, what they would have to do in the language, and the translation of these needs into a coherent pedagogical form. As far as it goes, this is a perfectly valid perspective on the final goals of language teaching.

The functionally based approach to teaching had not been in use for long before it became apparent that the objective relevance of learning content is no guarantee in itself that effective learning will occur. The latter depends on the willing and active involvement of students in the learning process: students therefore need to perceive the relevance of learning content and be willing to interact meaningfully with the learning activities in place. This, however, depends on factors of an affective and attitudinal nature, which have come to be studied under the heading of subjective needs. This area of concern relates to the identity of learners within the learning process itself, not just as future language users, but as language learners who are involved in developing a certain competence in interaction with a given set of teaching procedures and learning activities.

This is clearly a complex area and has been investigated from a number of angles. One of the first was the learning strategy research of the 1970s (for an overview of the earlier work in the area, cf. Rubin, 1987; for subsequent developments, cf. Reid, 1995). Early work on learning strategies arose out of the observation that some learners seem to be more at ease with and achieve higher levels of success in language study than others. It therefore seemed reasonable to investigate whether it would be possible to identify those behaviours which were typical of more and of less successful learners. One motivation of this research was to assess whether the behaviours of successful learners could be pinpointed as the basis for a sort of ideal learning strategy agenda which could be used to provide guidance for less successful learners. It did in fact emerge that more successful learners manifest a certain

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number of characteristic behaviours. At the same time, it also became apparent that these behaviours are expressions of a certain attitude to the learning process which is deeply rooted in the personality and experience of each learner. Students' interaction with the learning process therefore arises out of a complex of attitudes which is specific to each one as an individual. For this reason, it was realised that the behaviours characteristic of more successful learners could not be transformed into a discrete set of steps to be learned and imitated by others like an aerobics routine. The learning strategy research of the 1970s was pivotal in that it opened up a research agenda which has led us to explore the complexity of students' interaction with their language study, an agenda which has made us appreciate the individuality of each learner, and of their interaction with language study.

One of the main lines of investigation in this area has related to individual differences among learners (for overviews, cf. Skehan 1989, 1991). Individual differences are those factors of a psychological, cognitive or attitudinal nature which influence the way in which learners perceive and interact with their language study. Individual differences studied with respect to second language learning include motivation (Dörnyei, 1990, 1994, 1998; Oxford and Shearin, 1994; Tremblay and Gardner, 1995), anxiety (Scovel, 1978; Horwitz and Young, 1991), tolerance for ambiguity (Chapelle and Roberts, 1986), and field dependence–independence (Abraham, 1985; Chapelle, 1995). Another area of research is learning style, even if there is some disagreement as to the status of this concept. One perspective (Oxford and Ehrman, 1993) is that learning style is an individual difference alongside others. Another (Willing, 1988) sees it as a more powerful concept which encapsulates the combined effect of a number of individual differences as they relate to language learning. Since the 1980s a considerable body of research has been built up in this area. Attention has also been devoted to 'theories' or beliefs about language learning that students bring with them to the classroom, and how these may influence their interaction with teaching and learning procedures (Wenden, 1987).

This line of research has made us aware that factors of a subjective nature exert a significant influence on how learners perceive and experience the learning process and, therefore, how they are likely to react to various learning activities or modes of teaching. For example, for one student an oral production task may represent a welcome opportunity to express his or her personality and/or to experiment with his or her ability to use the language for its 'real' purpose, namely to exchange ideas with another human being. For another student, the same activity may be a stressful and unwelcome experience in which he

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or she feels judged on his or her use of a language that has not as yet been 'learned properly'. This means that what the teacher has in mind when preparing a class may not be what students perceive or experience during the class itself. The reality of teaching therefore arises out of the meaning that methodological choices assume in the minds of students and the dynamics that this generates within the learning group.

Research in individual differences has played a valuable role in increasing our understanding of the factors that make language teaching and learning what they are in the minds of our students. Nonetheless, much of this research has focused on one specific aspect of learners' perceptions of language study at a time. This is understandable in research terms, but it leaves us with the unresolved problem of knowing how to put the various elements together in the moment-to-moment dynamics of classroom teaching.

Williams and Burden (1997: 89–95) make a number of pertinent remarks in this respect about the variables which are studied under the heading of individual differences. To begin with, they point out that these variables are hypothetical constructs. In other words, researchers agree to speak about factors such as intelligence, anxiety, or risk-taking in order to gain insight into the psychocognitive reality of students' interaction with language learning. However, these terms are not the reality itself, nor can we be sure whether they are the best way of encapsulating this reality. Williams and Burden also suggest that while individual differences tend to be viewed as fixed or at least relatively stable phenomena, most are better viewed as 'variable, context specific, and amenable to change' (1997: 90). They point out, for example, that anxiety is highly situation specific, that it is affected by a variety of factors, and that a behaviour that would be seen as anxious in one culture might be construed differently in another. Indeed, they suggest that 'the whole area of individual differences is fraught with unanswered questions' and argue for an approach which focuses on 'the unique contribution each individual brings to the learning situation' (p. 95). For Williams and Burden, such an approach would involve a change in the way in which the psychocognitive aspect of language learning is considered:

> So, instead of asking the question: 'How are learners different from each other and can we measure these differences?', it would be more helpful to seek answers to such questions as: 'How do learners perceive themselves as language learners?', 'What effect do these "personal constructs" have upon the process of learning a new language?', 'How do individuals go about making sense of their learning?', and 'How can we as

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> teachers assist learners in making sense of their learning in ways that are personal to them?' (Williams and Burden, 1997: 96)

These are all valid questions, and they frame the investigation of students' subjective interaction with the learning process in terms which are pertinent to the concerns of the practising teacher. They are not, however, easy questions, and we are some way from settling on adequate answers to them. Nevertheless, the fact that they are being posed is in itself an indication of how far our awareness of the role of learners' subjective interaction with the learning process has developed over the last few decades. We can no longer assume that our students are 'simply' students, nor that they are bundles of discrete variables. They are complex human beings who bring with them to the classroom their own individual personality as it is at a given point in time, and this influences how they interact with what we do as teachers.

Attempting to disentangle and analyse the many strands which make an individual who he or she is is a valid strategy for researchers. Practising teachers, however, deal with individuals integratively. The inner coherence of a learner's classroom identity has to be explored and understood in its own terms, and as it is at a given point in time and in a given setting. Stevick's (1989) *Success with Foreign Languages*, which is built around an exploration of the perceptions and strategies of seven successful language learners, provides an insightful illustration of how complex an undertaking this can be. Stevick describes the seven learners under the following headings: intuitive, formal, informal, imaginative, active, deliberate, and self-aware. It is unlikely, however, that Stevick would feel too attached to these terms as such: they are an attempt to encapsulate a certain learner identity, but this is a reality which can never be fully pinned down and which is unique to each learner as an individual. Stevick also gives some very useful advice about helping different learners to build on their basic disposition to learning in a productive manner. His last piece of advice (1989: 150), however, – 'Beware of building a system of teaching around one type of learner' – seems to be crucial in that it points to the importance of working with the diversity of learners as they are and their attempt to find personal meaningfulness in their language study.

Over three decades of research into learners' subjective interaction with language study has led us to acknowledge the uniqueness of each language learner, and therefore of the need to accommodate this uniqueness and, in this way, the learner's identity, in our pedagogical actions and choices.

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