The Dynamics of the Language Classroom

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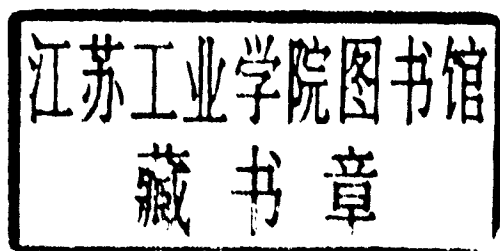
The Dynamics of the Language Classroom

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Abbreviations

AKL	American Kernel Lessons
ESOL	English as a second or other language
EFL	English as a foreign language
ESL	English as a second language
CLL	Community Language Learning
CLT	communicative language teaching
LSP	languages for specific purposes
TL	target language

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Introduction

This is a book about language teaching which is meant for teachers and other language educators involved in the practical realisation of language teaching programmes or in organising teacher education courses. It rests on the belief that language teaching is a complex, dynamic activity, and that this complexity is frequently underestimated both in the popular imagination and in much of the official discourse of language teaching. The goal of the book is to explore the complexity of language teaching as it is lived out in classrooms and, in this way, to provide teachers and other language educators with guidelines for exploring the dynamics of their own teaching situations, and, thus, of developing what Elliott (1993a) refers to as 'situational understandings'.

Few practising teachers would consider as particularly remarkable the suggestion that language teaching is a complex activity: many, in fact, would see it as a statement of the obvious. I feel, however, that this point deserves to be made for at least two reasons. First, although practising language teachers are well aware of the complexity of their task, the same cannot always be said for the other actors who, in one way or another, play a role in the endeavour of language education; these are, for example, political and educational authorities, the management or administration of teaching institutions, clients, sponsors, parents, and many others. This may result from ignorance in the sense that these actors may simply be unaware of the precise details of what teaching entails. It may also, however, result from a more or less conscious will not to see or acknowledge the realities of teaching: the elegance of clear, rationally formulated curricula or the confident claims of current 'best practice' having a greater attraction than the complex and often untidy nature of teaching as it is lived out in real classrooms. And yet, it is often within frameworks set up by these actors that teachers have to live out their tasks in the classroom. If only for this reason, then, there is a good justification for recalling the complex nature of language teaching. Second, and more fundamentally, there is the question of whether the complexity of language teaching is

something incidental – grit in the machine of pedagogical efficiency – or whether it is an inherent feature of the activity itself. This book suggests that the latter is the case, and that acknowledging and working openly with this complexity is fundamental to any honest attempt to understand language teaching as it really is.

Fortunately, there is a growing trend in thinking on language teaching which explicitly acknowledges and seeks to work constructively with the complexity of language teaching as it really is, as opposed to how we might like it to be or feel it should be according to one idealised schema or another. This trend is discussed in Chapter 1 in terms of what is referred to as the ecological perspective on language teaching. This perspective involves a fairly substantial shift in approach from that which has dominated (and in many ways still dominates) much thinking on language teaching. The ecological perspective offers an alternative to a positivistic and hierarchically based approach to the conceptualisation and planning of teaching programmes. It portrays language teaching as an emergent phenomenon, i.e. a reality which emerges dynamically from the actions and interactions of very many individuals working within specific contexts which operate according to rules that are proper to each as a reality in its own right. The ecological perspective on language teaching has parallels with the concept of sustainable development in economics, and with the call for more local forms of democracy and decision-making in the political field. It also shares a good deal of common ground with insights which have been developed in recent years in many fields of science and which have found expression in complexity theory, or the study of complex adaptive systems.

Viewed from this perspective, if we wish to understand language teaching as it is lived out in real classrooms, we need to explore the meaning which teaching and learning procedures have for individuals in their own terms and not against a template of abstract, situation-external precept and generalisation. We then need to explore the dynamics which arise out of the interaction between the individuals present in each specific situation. This can, of course, vary considerably from one context to another, but the totality of language teaching emerges from this vast kaleidoscope of detail and diversity. The elegant plans of educational planners and the generalisations of theorists can and do influence the reality of teaching as it is lived out in classrooms. However, they are not the full reality, nor can it be assumed that they represent a canonical view of what this reality should be. They are simply elements of the complex dynamics of teaching and learning, i.e. elements that reflect the perspectives on language teaching of certain groups of participants, but that interact dynamically with the perspec-

tives of many other participants. In this view, language teaching is less a matter of the hierarchical, top-down realisation of ideal curricular structures and methodological principle than the emergent product a very large number of local, dynamically self-organising systems.

This book works within this perspective on language teaching and has the goal of providing teachers and other language educators with guidelines for exploring the dynamics of their own teaching situations and of their own interaction with these situations. The book is organised as follows.

Chapters 1 and 2 establish the theoretical background within which the book is placed. Chapter 1 briefly surveys trends in language teaching over the last few decades in terms of the shift in emphasis from a technological to an ecological perspective on language teaching. Chapter 2 introduces the dynamic perspective on language teaching which will underpin the subsequent chapters.

Chapters 3 to 5 examine some of the more frequent visions of language (Chapter 3), of learning (Chapter 4), and of the classroom (Chapter 5) which teachers are likely to encounter among their students, in teaching materials, in educational programmes, and in their own individual conception of teaching. These chapters do not argue for any one vision of language, of learning, or of the classroom. The goal is rather to evaluate a variety of perspectives not only in terms of their own inner logic, but also and crucially with respect to their interaction with various aspects of context. These chapters argue for an inclusive acknowledgement of diversity in pedagogical decision-making and seek to highlight the dynamic interaction between methodology and context.

Chapters 6 to 8 build on Chapters 3–5 to study the dynamics of classroom teaching from a number of perspectives. Chapter 6 focuses on the interaction between methodology and context, Chapter 7 on the exploitation of local traditions of learning and Chapter 8 on the concept of 'negotiation' in the creation of classroom realities. These chapters make use of the categories of methodological choice discussed in Chapters 3–5, but do this with reference to a number of case studies (two in each chapter). Not all of these studies could be considered to have happy endings; nor are they intended to be seen as exemplars of 'best practice' to be put in a display cabinet for admiration. They are simply slices of the complex, dynamic reality of language teaching as lived out by flesh and blood people working together in one particular setting or another. These chapters explore the dynamic nature of classroom interaction between students and teachers as lived out in specific contexts, with the goal of providing teachers with insights which they can then use to explore these realities in their own classrooms.

Finally, Chapter 9 briefly sums up the main points made in the

previous chapters and provides a number of guidelines for methodo-
logical decision-making and for teacher education.

As already stated, this book rests on the hypothesis that language
teaching is an activity whose complexity is often underestimated, and
that a key factor in understanding language teaching as it really is
involves exploring the dynamics of teaching and learning as they are
lived out in the specifics of individual settings. On this basis, it seeks to
provide teachers with guidelines for exploring their own teaching
context and the 'local' meaning which methodological choices can
assume for their students in the specifics of this context. The book
therefore questions the idea that pedagogical choices can be made on
the basis of situation-external criteria or notions of 'best practice'.
Specifically, it suggests that pedagogical decision-making needs to rest
on a critical analysis of methodological principles in the light of their
local meaning, and on the exploration of the dynamic interaction of
students and teachers with the teaching–learning process in the full
context of their lives within but also beyond the classroom.

This book is first and foremost a 'teacher reflection' text whose goal is
to help teachers explore and respond to the dynamics of their own
situations in an open and realistic manner. The book pursues this goal
in two ways. First, the main text seeks to establish a framework of
reference and to provide stimulus for thought. Second, the tasks (which
are boxed in the text) invite readers to use this input as a basis for
reflection on their personal interaction with aspects of language
teaching and for the exploration of their own teaching situation. If
teachers are following a professional development course at the time of
reading, they may wish to relate these tasks to one or more situations in
which they have worked previously. In the case of novice teachers, these
tasks may be used projectively as a guide to their interaction with
concrete teaching situations and to their personal development as
teachers. Some tasks, to be approached systematically, call for a degree
of data collection, and may thus provide a starting point for action
research projects. These tasks can also, however, be used more lightly as
input to the ongoing type of curiosity and observation which is so
important in the teacher's professional life.

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

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-

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

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

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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