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Future Developments in the Teaching of Foreign Languages

It is always easy to look back and point out, with the benefit of hindsight, how mistaken our predecessors were in their ideas about just about everything. This is probably nowhere truer than in linguistics (pure or applied) and in the area of teaching methods, especially methods used in foreign language teaching (FLT). We have doubtless all felt, on occasions, that teachers of our own subject must have been rather naive or slow-witted (or both) to have propounded theory x or to have used method y, just as we doubtless all have colleagues (sometimes without any formal training in teaching) who are only too keen to tell us how we should conduct our lessons - on the assumption that a method that works well for them must work well for everyone. In this article, I make no attempt to look back at the past nor to say how teachers in future years should go about their job. My aim is solely to speculate on where current trends are leading us.

One may be tempted to think that our present methods are so perfect that there could hardly be any reason to change them, but such a view is clearly erroneous for two reasons: firstly, it ignores the fact that mankind's knowledge of everything is constantly improving so that every methodology is only a provisional one, which will be dropped once our knowledge enables us to identify a better way of performing job x; and, secondly, it leaves out of account people's natural desire for change, which grows as we become accustomed to something – a little adrenalin flowing through the system due to the use of a new set of teaching materials can work wonders for the efficacy of a teacher's performance. Thus, change is programmed in advance, so it is perhaps wise to ponder on where we may be heading, so that we can be ready for at least some of the things that will come our way.

It is clear that FLT is a complex process involving several different elements that unite in a single, though intricate, effect. To name but a few of its constituent elements, FLT involves a theory of how languages are learnt or acquired; this theory includes elements of psychology and sociology, and is (presumably!) applied as best it can be in the methods and materials employed by the teacher; the theory must inevitably influence the type of materials chosen and the uses to which they are put. To complicate the situation, there may well be developments in all these areas simultaneously (indeed this is what one would expect), so that, even if theory and practice start out, so to speak, in harmony, there will be changes in various areas, the net result of which will be that the initial state quite quickly ceases to exist.

Moreover, evolution in any one area involved in FLT is independent of what is happening in any other area (at least in theory), so one can see that the situation is far from stable. Thus, methods may change while much of the hardware remains unchanged, although software will quite probably change to reflect the new theory that underlies the new methodology. What sometimes seems to happen is that hardware available to the teacher evolves and is supplemented by new types of hardware which the teacher will have to ask himself if he can use. The best recent example of this kind of process is the way in which the computer is starting to penetrate the FLT classroom, though it is not expressly incorporated into the prevailing theories about FLT, and indeed seems, as often used (i.e. for drilling grammatical points), to go against much of the current conventional wisdom. Despite its questionable theoretical standing, the computer is being used by ever more FL teachers, presumably in part because, like Mount Everest, it is there. The interesting thing will be to see whether the use of the computer will lead to a reappraisal of methods and theory or whether it will gradually adapt (in terms of the software available and the ways in which it is used) to prevailing ideas in the realm of FLT theory. It will also be interesting to see whether the computer is a temporary fad or whether it will become and remain an integral part of the armoury of the FL teacher.

While it is difficult to foresee precisely what point FLT will have reached, say ten years from now, a little speculation on this question does no harm, and may help to head off the less promising developments. In some areas, it is possible to discern certain trends with some degree of accuracy, but others remain by their very nature practically impossible to make any forecasts about. One can justifiably distinguish between hardware, software, methodology and general/applied linguistic theory. There are theoretical and practical reasons for making this distinction, and each of the four areas mentioned has an influence on FLT.

I shall start with what is in some ways the easiest area in which to make forecasts, namely hardware. It is clear that current developments in video, especially the *video-disc player,* will have an influence on what is taught and how it is taught. Not only does the video-disc give better picture and sound quality than tape, but it also offers the unique possibility of instant random access and can be played frame by frame or as a moving-picture sequence. This facility allows a much more flexible use of video material (not just in FLT), and should leave its mark on the whole area of FLT and language acquisition. The video-disc's most potent role, though, is probably in conjunction with another development that is just starting in Europe and is on the way to becoming a commonplace in North America, namely computer-assisted instruction (CAI), or, in the present case,

computer-assisted language learning (CALL). However, one problem remains for the moment, namely a financial one: the video-disc player is currently too expensive for most educational institutions, especially as, firstly, there is as yet comparatively little available to play on it and, secondly, it is not yet possible to record on such players, though presumably it is only a question of time before this becomes possible, as a result of current research into optical storage of information in computers. Naturally the price of video-disc players will fall rapidly once demand for them picks up, as is witnessed by the dramatic way in which the price of compact disc players has declined over the last two years.

Developments in the realm of the video recorder are not too difficult to imagine, since the path is already being explored. One imagines that, until video-disc players drop in price and offer the ability to record, the search for a better quality picture and research to cram ever more information onto ever smaller cassettes will continue. Miniaturisation of the machines themselves can be expected to continue, though clearly this will be limited in part by the size of the cassettes used. One hopes that manufacturers will manage to agree on one single norm for video cassettes, but this is probably a forlorn hope! Of interest to the FL teacher, fast wind forwards and backwards will probably become faster (though these machines will always suffer a little from their inability – unlike video-disc machines – to offer fast random access to a given sequence of pictures. Probably the means of controlling video recorders, especially when they are linked to computers, will also be improved. Indeed, the possibilities here are already being explored and developed, as was well demonstrated at AILA 84 in Brussels by David Little and Eugene Davis (Trinity College, Dublin), whose AUTOTUTOR uses a Sony U-matic video recorder controlled by a BBC microcomputer to produce interactive video. The main restriction on AUTOTUTOR as demonstrated in 1984 was that, to keep the winding times required by the interactive nature of the system short, video sequences had to be kept relatively brief, a drawback that a video-disc-based system would not suffer from.

The successor of the LP record, i.e. the *audio-disc,* could well also come into its own, provided interesting and useful material is made available on it. The reason is not difficult to imagine: as compact disc players offer the advantage of random access and are now cheap enough to be affordable, they could quite easily be used to provide an oral element in computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Clearly, this is only likely to occur on any large scale if video-discs and their associated hardware do not rapidly drop substantially in price. Presumably, audio-discs will also become capable of being recorded on, in due course, a factor which should increase their attractiveness considerably.

Computers are bound, in my opinion, to have a profound effect on FLT in the long run, especially as both software and hardware become cheaper and increasingly powerful. One need only look at the increase in memory size that has occurred over the last few years, at the same time as prices have fallen dramatically, to see that the end of this process is nowhere in sight. With increased memory capacity comes the ability to handle more sophisticated (which usually means lengthier and more complicated) software. This means that the computer can be expected to be able to do ever more, which means that it should, in theory, be an ever more useful tool for the FL teacher. It is difficult, in my opinion, to see how the increasing penetration of the computer into FLT can be resisted (or WHY if should be resisted), since it is clear tomorrow's FL learners will be even more used to working with computers than are today's, and will EXPECT them to be used in the teaching and/or learning of most subjects.

The most powerful argument in favour of the computer is its interactive ability. This enables a much greater degree of individualisation than the language laboratory can hope to offer, since the computer can constantly monitor and assess all aspects of a student's performance and, if necessary, switch him/her to an easier or more difficult exercise. This interaction, though, is not the one that has the most immediate pedagogical attraction. Rather, it comes second (at least for the moment), behind the more obvious interaction that occurs between student and machine, as the exercise develops. This interaction (deprecated by some as mere illusion of interaction) can be very motivating to the student, who has his/her own individual tutor right there in the computer, a tutor who is, moreover, not prone to fits of anger at failures to produce the correct answer and is willing to repeat a question as many times as necessary, without the slightest hint of impatience and without showing any concern for what the rest of the class is or should be doing. In many cases, conscious attempts are made to anthropomorphise the computer by programming it to ask the student's name and then use it when addressing him/her (e.g. «Well done, John, you got it right again!»). There is evidence that some people tire of this, if it is overdone, with the result that, when asked for their name, they enter any sobriquet that comes to mind, ranging from «Mickey Mouse» to obscenities of the crudest kind. This has led some programmers to include a dictionary of all the obscene words and names that they can think of in their programmes and to have the computer check the entered name against this list; the computer then refuses to accept obscenities, perhaps adding a chiding remark. However, such procedures seem to me counterproductive, since

they only incite the user of obscene words to see if the computer's vocabulary is as extensive as his/her own!

Apart from sound or vision produced by linking the computer to an audio-disc or a video-disc player, it is possible to produce sound by synthesis. The Dalek-like sound of early speech synthesis put many people off, when the first examples of speaking computers were presented, but techniques have come a long way since then, and respectable speech can now be produced by even quite small computers (e.g. Apple's «Smooth Talker» for the Macintosh). The main problem is the amount of memory that speech synthesis consumes, but this should soon cease to be a problem as the size of standard memories grows (128kb has become practically the minimum, now, and 256kb is increasingly frequent, even on machines that are at the cheap end of the market).

The other side of this particular coin, i.e. speech recognition, presents a rather different picture. Here, there remains much to be done before we can hope for anything like a workable system for use in FLT. Part of the problem remains the amount of memory that things connected with speech consume – and this applies a fortiori to speech recognition. It is possible to «train» a computer to recognise a highly restricted list of words spoken by a given individual, by having him speak the words into a microphone connected to the computer. The machine will also be fairly successful at recognising the same words spoken by someone whose voice it does not know, but the efficiency will be markedly lower. The problem resides in the plethora of voices that must be allowed for in the recognition programme, not just voice timbre but also the differing ways of pronouncing a given phoneme that will characterise different people, as well as the fact (well known to all phoneticians) that any given phoneme is pronounced differently each time an individual pronounces it. The progress being made in teaching computers to recognise a face, despite the fact that the owner deliberately distorts it, should produce some ideas that will be of use here. However, while speech synthesis is basically with us now, and will soon be widely available, even on fairly humble machines, there is little prospect that speech recognition will be a commonplace in 1996, at least not on the equivalent of the Sinclair Spectrum on which I am writing this.

The *language laboratory* will almost certainly continue as a tool amongst others in the language teacher's workshop. Among its advantages are:

1) that headphones still offer better sound in the average classroom than loudspeakers,
2) that it enables many different (authentic) accents and voices to be heard,
3) that preparing materials is relatively easy, at least when compared to the preparation of CALL materials,

4) that it is comparatively inexpensive and robust.

I expect that laboratory design will go different ways: firstly, there will inevitably be an increasing use of technology in general and of microprocessor technology in particular, so that the hardware will offer more scope, become more flexible in use and, in particular, be increasingly linked to computers and/or video-players. The latter will provide more varied types of input, but also varying degrees of interaction with the students as well as very sophisticated monitoring of their performance. What remains unclear to me, at this stage, is the extent to which such facilities can ever be of much use in the average school, where the teachers have too little time to tussle with such technology, even if the tussle mainly consists of reading the long and bewildering manual of a system that is in itself relatively easy to operate. We may, though, be approaching a time when, due to declining student numbers, teachers are given a few more hours' free time in the week for preparation in the place where it often makes most sense, namely their schools. In any case, it looks to me as if the accelerating pace of technical change is in danger of leaving a good many teachers as mere spectators on the sidelines, unless steps are taken to ensure that they are more actively encouraged to become acquainted with the latest technology and its use in schools. Since it seems unlikely that every school will, in the foreseeable future, have a technician who is also a qualified and highly experienced electronics engineer, it seems inevitable that teachers will have to be given more free time in order to keep abreast of what is happening around them. If some teachers are frightened of the standard language laboratory, one can imagine the total panic that would be induced by a laboratory equipped with video monitors in the booths and a console controlled by a computer!

The second way that one can see the language laboratory evolving is towards simpler, lighter equipment which is cheaper to buy, simple (therefore easy to use and maintain), and only offers the basic facilities that most language teachers want most of the time. This rationalisation of the laboratory is already in motion, and many surviving manufacturers are busy bringing out stripped down versions of their earlier over-equipped laboratories. Such a development is logical from both the financial and the pedagogical points of view, and will doubtless continue. Its ultimate consequence could be that, in many cases, the laboratory ceases to exist as a room (as is already the case in some institutions in North America), and becomes simply a trolley on which is a collection of audio-active headsets that function by wireless or induction loop and which are taken wherever required, distributed and fed with a programme from the console on the trolley. From this console, the teacher can monitor the students' perfor-

mance and, perhaps, speak to them individually or collectively. In large institutions, one might imagine, in a more distant future, a variant of this system where the headsets are able to communicate at a distance of up to 20 km with the college's computer. It would thus be possible to call up and perform at home any of the exercises that were stored on the computer; in consequence, a laboratory exercise could be set as homework, and the teacher would know, by looking at a printout, which students had not done their homework.

In higher education institutions, I expect language laboratories to become the basis of what might be termed *«language media centres»*, where all kinds of media relevant to teaching and learning languages will be available to teachers and students. Language laboratory rooms will be used, but the actual laboratory installation may only be used for ten minutes in a given lesson or may be used throughout it; equally, it may be judged irrelevant for a given topic and not used at all. Thus, the old division into booths is probably also a thing of the past, and language laboratories will in future be multipurpose rooms, whose electronics are available but do not dominate everything. In this form, the laboratory can also be of considerable use, even in a school's rigid timetable, though the usefulness of the old-fashioned booth system seems increasingly doubtful.

Television broadcasting by satellite will almost certainly leave its mark on FLT, since it will make authentic material instantaneously available around the world. This will widen the scope of possible teaching materials considerably and (it is to be hoped!) solve the problem of differing T.V. norms at a stroke. *Two-way interactive television,* possibly even by satellite, will probably also be experimented with, as a widening of choice and a method of economising by avoiding duplication of work; how much it will be used 10 or even 20 years hence is difficult to assess.

Turning to methodology, I find it hard to be as specific as with hardware, since methodology is inevitably linked with, and conditioned by the other three factors I have distinguished. It must, after all, reflect the hardware and software currently available, and it is bound to be influenced by prevailing linguistic (and pedagogical) theories.

I suspect that methodology is also prone to swing with fashions, rather as a pendulum swings back and forth. In its swings, it probably passes through what is in fact the most sensible position, but human beings do not like to remain always in the same sensible, but dull position, and so we tend to go for change, not least because it provides a stimulus, and for a position that has a certain amount of profile to it. Thus, we have passed from a largely Skinnerian FLT methodology to a more intuition-based one. This has coincided largely with the rising concern for child-centred education. In FLT, we are still in the middle of the «communicative» era, concerned with language functions and with enabling students to use what they learn as effectively as possible. This era is the successor of the structuralist one, when, under the influence of behaviourist psychology, it was thought sufficient to drill the structures into students' minds, without bothering too much about giving them practice at communicating effectively.

To forecast where we go from here is difficult, but I expect the trend towards individualisation to continue, especially where this is easiest, i.e. higher and further education. The interest of individualisation is clear, and its merits are such that, in a world where increasing opportunities are offered for doing one's own individual thing at one's own pace and in one's own way, individualisation of FL learning makes sense also on the level of people's expectations. As a pedagogical principle, its soundness is obvious, and the best teachers have always done their best to apply it, though in schools it can often be very difficult to accomodate in any significant way. Individualisation fits quite comfortably with the idea of language acquisition, and the attention currently being paid to providing students with opportunities to acquire language should ensure that the emphasis placed on individualisation does not diminish in the next decade. Individualised acquisition can very well and appropriately take place in the language laboratory or at the microcomputer, and I would expect these media to be strongly involved in furthering this particular aim.

The computer probably offers the most interesting opportunities for individualisation, with its flexibility of response to a student's input. In the individual context, the computer can act both as a tutor (a role it often fulfils today) and as a tester. In both cases, it can replace the teacher, but it is clear, firstly, that behind every teaching programme there is a teacher and, secondly, that FL learning without a teacher of any sort other than a computer will remain the rare exception rather than the rule. If a classroom has enough microcomputers or terminals, one could imagine each student, during a lesson, working away at the assigned exercises at his own place and in his own way, with the teacher keeping an eye on what is going on, exactly as in the language laboratory. It would be more in keeping with current ideas, though, if the students shared a terminal and were obliged to discuss the lesson in pairs (or larger groups) in order to do the exercises required of them. Such situations are capable of generating a lot of language, and are thus very useful exercises. Outside the tutorial and test formats, there are a great many things that the computer can be used for, provided one has the imagination to see them and the skill (or a programmer!) to programme the machine adequately. An example is simulations,

which can be used either by individuals, or by groups or even by the teacher in front of the whole class. Typical of this is the programme for the Spectrum called «GBLTD», which enables one to be Prime Minister of Great Britain and to make decisions about taxes, etc. and to see their results on the economy. Naturally, such exercises as this can generate vast amounts of appropriate discourse, and have immense follow-up potential.

One exercise much used in FLT until some thirty years ago is *translation.* With the advent of the direct method, such activites in the classroom became akin to high treason, and, for the last three decades, translation has been most definitely «out» as a method of teaching foreign languages. This is not to say that some teachers did not go on indulging in this (to judge by the violence with which it was excoriated) immoral practice in the squalid garrets of some degenerate schools, since there is often a distinct cleavage between current theory and current practice, a cleavage that probably grows in size as the age of the teacher advances. It is noticeable that recently, however, people are once more talking about the use of translation in the FLT classroom. The difference from 30 years ago is that it is not seen, coupled with a study of a language's grammar, as the very basis of the teaching method. Rather, it is part of a wider strategy, and rightly so, since it helps to make the student aware of some of the differences between the thought patterns of the foreign language and those of his own language, an exercise which, in the context of Krashen's monitor theory, makes a lot of sense.

In teacher training establishments, increasing emphasis is being put on the teaching of *reading* in L1. It is conceivable that this will produce a renewed emphasis on reading in L2, an element currently of growing importance because of the increase of CALL. What will happen, however, once computers really begin to talk is not so clear, but one could expect a renewed swing away from the written form of the language. On the methodology front, it is worth mentioning the less conventional approaches, since they obviously work for their proponents and may become popular. Some of them doubtless have considerable usefulness and can be used by any teacher as felt appropriate, e.g. total physical response. Others, which are more demanding, such as suggestopedia, may become the standard way of teaching certain groups, e.g. mature learners, but I doubt if they will command very wide acceptance, not least because the average school classroom is ill suited to the relaxation that this kind of method requires. By and large, though, I doubt if methodology will move very much in the direction of these less conventional styles. In short, there is little to suggest that there will be a dramatic swing away from the current conventional wisdom that the best way to learn/acquire a language is to use it, so that the best method

is one which provides the maximum number of opportunities to use the foreign language for some sensible and comprehensible purpose. It is difficult to see any real uniformity of methods evolving, because each teacher is an individual and each class is a unique combination of individuals that will never be repeated. In such circumstances, it is difficult to see how the average teacher can adopt a single, unchanging methodological approach to his/her work. Rather, the key to successful teaching must be flexibility, even if it involves doing things that are considered old-fashioned by some. For instance, drills are portrayed by some pedagogues as hardly more respectable than committing grievous bodily harm. However, there are many students who prefer drills, at least at specific points in the learning process, and for whom they seem to be at least as profitable as the exercises put forward in their stead.

In the area of software, developments will largely be conditioned by progress in hardware. The basic software, namely the *book,* will doubtless continue to be with us, even in the 21st century, though some people are forecasting that books will (relatively soon) become electronic, because of the rising cost factor involved in producing books as we know them today, in comparison with the declining cost of putting the same information into an electronic memory.

Audio-tapes will continue, both as documents and as sources of exercises. The latter will doubtless attempt to become more meaningful, a change which users of language laboratories everywhere are already working on. The problem resides in the quantity of information that can be input by a single channel and also in the amount of information that a learner can store in short-term memory. Audio-discs will presumably begin to supplant tapes, though this depends on the cost of discs that can be «written» on.

Video-tapes will obviously be used increasingly, as will *video-discs,* since pictures increase authenticity, meaningfulness and motivation. It is uncertain how direct broadcasting by satellite will influence the role of videotape, though, logically, it should not diminish it, since such broadcasts will often need to be stored, at least for short periods. Video-discs will increasingly be under the control of computers.

Computer software will doubtless continue the path it is already engaged on, namely that towards greater user-friendliness. This will be enabled by hardware developments such as the touch-sensitive screen, the light-pencil, the mouse, etc. It will also result from increasingly sophisticated programming, which will provide a whole battery of supplementary information, better routing through available material, ever wider choices of exercise, etc.

I see little long-term future for *movie films,* as video-tapes and video-discs are already supplanting them. Conceivably, *film slides* will continue to be used because they are relatively cheap and easy to use, though one wonders how long they will hold out against the video-disc.

Lastly to linguistic theories and theories about language learning/acquisition: their influence, while variable, is profound. The behaviourist school of psychology, which grew up parallel to the structuralist school of linguistics, helped to shape the latter, and was doubtless in part influenced by it. Between them, they produced a Skinnerian view of language learning, partially shaped by the successful crash courses in various languages given to members of the American forces during World War II, whose result was the structural approach to FLT, and whose ultimate expression was the language laboratory with its associated paraphernalia. With the birth of Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar, a fresh breeze blew through the FLT scene. With the rise of the new theories, stressing as they do, the innate nature of much of our linguistic ability, the strategy employed in FLT courses has swung away from drilling in the structures of the language towards attempting to harness innate abilities, taking advantage of students' acquired knowledge of how language in general functions and trying to provide ways in which knowledge in the student can be unfolded and developed in the most natural way and on the broadest possible front.

Among the theories that have helped to shape FLT in the last 20 years or so, one could mention: pragmatics and its offspring, the functional-notional approach, Krashen's theories on language acquisition and the communicative approach. I see these as linked theories, which have given orientation to much that has been done in FLT. However, despite the enthusiastic espousal of the new ideas by some people, many FL teachers have continued to plough their own furrow, feeling that the pendulum had swung too far in the opposite direction. There is a danger, in all human endeavour, that reformers will throw out the baby with the bath water, which is a very good reason to exercise caution when a new bandwagon appears on the FLT horizon. We all remember how the language laboratory was supposed to make language learning semi-instantaneous, painless and much more successful. Those of us who have been in FLT for a couple of decades will also know how the failure of the laboratory and its associated theory to deliver the impossible resulted in its being written off by many as theoretically unsound, etc. That expectations where too high is clear. It is also clear that the language laboratory was mis-used almost as much as used by many and that the human element had a major role in its «failure».

Lest the above sound too cynical, let me state that theory is an indispensable part of progress in FLT. The prophets of each new theory naturally tend to exaggerate their claims (that's marketing!), but those with intellectual maturity should be able to stand back a little and see things more in perspective. It is, however, the valuable function of the prophet to shake up the conventional wisdom and the old habits. The structuralist era left much in its wake that is valuable. The communicative tide will also leave more than a few pebbles on the strand of FLT practice. It is hard to say what the prevailing theory will be in ten years' time, but, whether it is a total break with the present or a straightforward development of current ideas, it will doubtless be hailed by many as just what we needed to finally set FLT on the right road.

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