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qui doit être utilisé pour toute référence à ce travail

Never mind the width, feel the quality.
From quantity to quality in language teaching at advanced levels

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1. Advanced learning and teaching: areas for concern

Either as language learners ourselves or through observation of our students, we have all experienced various plateaus in our abilities and skills in and knowledge of a target language. Such plateaus often arise from a need to know more about the target language, they often require a greater mastery of what we already know. Usually, both quantitative and qualitative progression are involved. Teaching languages at advanced levels is customarily assumed to be concerned with teaching learners who are traversing such plateaus.

We can assume that the vast majority of learners we are talking about have a fair degree of experience as language learners in formal settings, they may be motivated in any number of ways to continue learning the target language, and they will be probably embarking on this undertaking in a different institutional setting to that in which they learnt previously. Advanced learners may pursue a variety of possible learning paths and, thanks to their previous learning, will often be fully aware of which path they would like to follow and how they want to travel along it.

Evidence abounds that such learning paths are difficult to define for language learning at advanced levels:

- there is a marked lack of help and resources for both teachers and materials writers at advanced levels compared with the wealth of planning instruments available for lower levels;
- language teaching at advanced levels is often surrounded by a degree of uncertainty and a fair portion of "doing what we are used to".

These deficits are felt by learners in various ways:

- the demotivating remedial work on aspects of the syllabus which have not yet "stuck",
- the painstaking teasing out (by the teacher) of even more tricky areas of grammar,
- the ever-increasing load of more vocabulary and idioms,
- frustrating attempts to improve pronunciation and intonation,

- juggling with the finer points of performing more language functions in different settings using a wider range of register.

In the face of such contents it is hardly surprising that learners and teachers at advanced levels search for and find more meaningful and satisfying subjects such as Literature and Culture, or Business, or Technology. Language teaching becomes no longer "purely linguistic". The implication here is not that Literature and Culture should in some way be kept out of the foreign language syllabus. On the contrary, they can be seen as an enrichment, they lend meaning to and become carriers of language learning. What, then, are the consequences for the foreign language syllabus itself?

The tasks ascribed to syllabus designers traditionally consist of setting objectives, selecting contents and deciding on appropriate methodology to ensure progress in the learners. These tasks and of course the question of evaluation are often muddied by the requirements of institutionalized examinations which unfortunately tend to play an ever more important role in language learning and teaching, especially at higher levels.

There seems to be a problem for the language teaching profession here. Just as with teaching languages at lower levels, advanced levels require a clear framework for the specification of learning objectives and contents. Such a framework does not yet exist. Even at lower levels the traditional understanding of syllabus design as an analysis and preselection of bits of the target language, lumped together into predigested, "teachable" chunks has been shown to be by no means satisfactory. Given the diversity of possible learning paths at advanced levels, an exclusive focus on the "***what***" of language (the equation of items on syllabus lists with actual plans of action for language learning and teaching) is probably even more problematic than it is at lower levels.

2. A learning perspective

A review of one's own successful, or less successful, learning experiences, or a study of research into the criteria for successful learning, both suggest that neither syllabus design, nor materials design nor even language teaching have any regular, proportional effect on learning outcomes. Second language acquisition (SLA) research has shown that the sequence of learners' acquisition of morpho-syntactic features is resistant to formal

instruction.[1] As we all know from experience (but curiously and persistently ignore in our teaching practices and especially in the way we plan language teaching), learning outcomes rarely equate to teaching input.

SLA research has also taught us a great deal about different learner-types and learning styles.[2] The well documented awareness of the heterogeneity of learning groups, of the need to take account of individual differences in language learning, has yet to be transferred into syllabus design. Sound proposals regarding the methodological consequences of such an awareness are available, they have been tried and tested[3], but more often than not they are still not incorporated into overall curriculum design. It is probably only natural that economies of scale dictate that educational planning aims for the middle, that the lowest common denominator should be taken as the measure of all things. However the result of this is that individualisation, personalisation and differentiation are usually left up to the teacher alone. Surely this is not a satisfactory state of affairs.

On the basis of these findings from SLA research, we may feel pessimistic about the lack of articulation between language teaching and learning outcomes. But SLA research has also provided us with more optimistic results. For example, that formal instruction does improve the *rate* of learning and, what is relevant for teaching at advanced levels, it may well have a positive effect on the ultimate level of language learning *attainment*[4]. How can these two sets of findings be reconciled? The key factor seems to lie in the positive effect formal teaching has on the use of certain language learning strategies. Here the focus is not on what is taught but how.

For example, for a learner to go beyond what is explicitly dealt with in class, to process a text, say, and recognise certain grammatical rules at work, he/she needs to be able to call upon certain concepts of grammar, to generalise them, apply them and draw conclusions from what he/she encounters. The knowledge called upon here is not declarative knowledge (of the type: "the 'passé simple' is usually only found in literary texts") but rather procedural knowledge gained solving real problems and through

[1] see ELLIS 1986 for an excellent summary of key issues in SLA and their relevance to language teaching.

[2] A useful and provoking collection of articles on learning styles can be found in DUDA & RILEY 1990.

[3] see NUNAN 1988 for just a sample account of the implementation of learner-centred approaches.

[4] see DOUGHTY 1991 for evidence that formal instruction can effect ultimate levels of attainment in language learning.

evaluating the outcomes. (In the case of the 'passé simple' it would involve looking at and listening to authentic texts, speculating on the discoursal significance of the 'passé simple', looking at other examples of text and seeing whether the observations made hold true, or need revision.)[5] Opportunities provided in language teaching for the development of such procedural knowledge would be clearly beneficial in terms of enabling learners to learn beyond the classroom. This is especially true at advanced levels where learners may well have greater contact with the target language outside the classroom and are in fact preparing to become independent users of the target language.

Enabling learners to go beyond what is given implies learner autonomy as one of our goals in language teaching. Incorporating learner autonomy as a goal of language teaching has fundamental methodological consequences, not only consequences for our definition of language teaching content. We cannot simply add lists of learning strategies and techniques to our syllabus and claim to have included a learning to learn dimension. Autonomy is not something one can teach. It is not a method. One cannot progress from being non-autonomous to being fully autonomous according to some predefined syllabus. Autonomy is a state of individual and group development within which independent decisions can be taken, acted upon and evaluated.[6] Autonomy is not a stable phenomenon over time, nor does it reside exclusively within individuals. Degrees of autonomy can change from one day, or lesson, or phase of a task to the next in the same way as they can change from participating in one group or another.

The consequences of taking the findings of SLA research and concepts of learner autonomy into account in language teaching seem to indicate that we need to embrace the process of language learning and teaching in syllabus design. Especially at more advanced levels, learners will develop along their own individual lines: their levels of attainment at the outset will differ, their learning experiences and styles will differ, and their aims will differ. In view of this, it is the job of those responsible for language teaching to concentrate on learners' learning and not exclusively on the object of that learning (i.e. an analysis of the target language). In other words, we should help learners accomplish tasks designed to allow for and

5 see LONG & CROOKES 1992 for further illustrations of the development of procedural knowledge.
6 see BREEN 1984 and 1987 for further discussion of learner roles in learning tasks and LITTLE 1992 for an excellent overview of issues relating to learner autonomy.

encourage differentiated learning paths and outcomes whilst giving access to relevant information about the target language.

3. A language perspective

In the same way that insights into *learning* can lead us to a shift in focus in our approach to teaching languages, an examination of insights into *language as interaction,* an examination of what is now taken for granted in fields of study such as discourse analysis, pragmatics, ethnomethodology and computer assisted descriptive linguistics, lead us to a similar shift in focus.

As was mentioned earlier, one of the major concerns in language learning at advanced levels is the improvement of the ability to use one's knowledge and mastery of the target language appropriately as a means of interaction. In-roads made by descriptive linguistics into describing language as interaction have much to offer language teaching. However, many of these insights have been oversimplified and adapted to fit into existing models of language teaching (cf. functions and notions), whereas they really demand a complete reorganisation of the concept and role of the syllabus. There is a mismatch between current models of language and approaches to language teaching and learning.

One basic differentiation that has been made in recent descriptive models of language is that between transactional and interactional dimensions of language[7]. Transactional views of language focus primarily on the propositional content and direct illocutionary force of utterances and texts. The language teaching professions invest a great deal of energy in devising examples to illustrate these features. It is this type of language that is typically found in language teaching materials. The language of textbooks often remains formulaic, exemplary and dry. It gives us the ready-made chunks of language which, at advanced levels, fail to encourage independent learners of the target language. Interactional dimensions of language, on the other hand, carry the personal, the interpersonal, the discoursal import of any utterance. They are not just the "idiomatic extras" or the "slippery connectors" which stick "the important bits" together. Interactional language is central to projection of self, social contact and politeness conventions.

The following example illustrates the importance of this distinction:

7 See McCARTHY 1990, 1991.

[Woman describing incident on radio 'phone-in programme]

1	Woman	..... I've been a victim *only* four days ago.
2	Interv.	Of what?
3	Woman	... Of of erm harassment. Err what happened *basically* was
4		six months err.. I was having *this* harassment.
5		*You know* stones thrown at the doors *and stuff* and... and in the end it got *rather rather* nasty......

The words in italics, the way in which the woman directly modifies what she is talking about are clearly examples of interactional language. Her choice of tense, aspect and voice also indicate clearly how she feels about the incidents:

line 1: ***"I've been a victim four days ago..."***: the use of the perfect, although incorrect according to traditional grammars, indicates clearly that she still feels in some way a victim, she is still involved

line 4: ***"I was having this harassment..."***: the use of the past continuous in this case sets the scene (textbook use), it also implies that being the object of harassment could be classified as a "not out of the ordinary" state of affairs ("it was always happening"). Similarly, the woman's choice of "have harassment" and not "be harassed" underlines how commonplace, and unexceptional this incident is for her. i.e. *"having harassment"* (like "having back-trouble") as something which she was used to, rather than *"being harassed"* a more specific and maybe more unusual event.

line 5: ***"stones thrown at the doors..."***: the use of nominalisation in this case as a gloss of "harassment" compounds the "usualness" of the event, or at least the assumption by the woman that the interviewer shares her knowledge of what this kind of harassment involves. In choosing to explain "harassment" in this way, she is portraying herself for the moment as a victim of an anonymous, general phenomenon and not of any specific aggravation.

These are just a few examples of what is meant by interactional language in this short extract. Further analysis could focus on intonation, pauses, choice of lexis and lexical patterns. What is interesting for those teaching languages is the whole network of choices which go together to make this text coherent and cohesive, even if it does not fit in with traditional models of language.

The woman's choice and use of language forms is not in any way idiosyncratic, haphazard or even "incorrect". Here is a native speaker

speaking on the radio being understood by thousands of others. The fact that she is readily understood depends on her using common, everyday English. This indicates that the choices she makes, although they may be classified "incorrect" by traditional grammars, do, in fact, fit into a larger shared system of discoursal conventions. Computer-assisted analysis of spoken texts have begun to reveal the dynamic nature of such systems and demonstrate the importance of choices which are made within them. What we in language teaching can see emerging in the descriptions of these discourse-systems are what can be termed "grammars of speech". In contrast to traditional pedagogic grammars, such grammars of speech are based not only on reference to the transactional, (i.e. structures to be applied); they are also based on interactional choices (i.e. structures to choose from in order to express directness, involvement, cultural assumptions, etc.).

Looking back at our example we can see two other features of spoken language at work which have attracted the attention of linguists but unfortunately have not found their way into the mainstream of the language teaching profession: genre analysis and the study of cultural values and how they shape language use.

Even without the dots at the end of the example we know that the woman has not yet finished what she set out to do, namely tell her story. But how do we know that she set out to tell a story? How do we know that she has not finished?

The aspect of language analysis we are looking at here (genre) allows us to look at language and describe what people typically "do" with it. Here we are dealing not with isolated speech acts but rather combinations of speech acts, whole speech events. "Telling a story" is not a speech act, but a combination of speech acts interlaced with other, discoursal features.

In line 1 the woman announces she had an experience, and the use of "only" indicates that the experience is in her opinion still newsworthy, it is still worth telling the story. Already here we know that one possible way forward for the interview is for her to tell her story and, sure enough, the interviewer (in whose power it would lie) does not change the topic but invites her to continue with her story. In line 3 the woman actually announces the beginning of her story: ***"... what happened basically was ..."***. But by line 5 she is already talking about the end and actually evaluating what happened. She has hardly started telling her story and it is already over. What, then, is missing? We know from genre analysis that the central feature of a narration is that at least an event is described, here

we have no actual event described as yet. But we also know from genre analysis that one common way of initiating a narration is to give a taste of what is to come (e.g.: "It was a dark, unfriendly night and no-one could foresee the dreadful events which were to unfold.").

The implications of this sort of genre analysis for language teaching at advanced levels are:

a) we can provide a much more useful specification of what people *do* with language, i.e. not just functions but an account of what people do with them, how they combine and what implications this has for choice of vocabulary and grammar[8], and consciously provide more opportunity to practise a variety of genres;
b) we can deal in whole speech events and we therefore need to create opportunities for learners to experience and participate in such speech events with all the interactive, interpersonal features and choices that are characteristic of them.

Going one step further, we also need to ensure these speech events and the learning activities around them take account of the embedded cultural values which inform language choice. In our example we have already mentioned the assumption by the woman that the interviewer shares, to a certain extent, her life experience, her cultural values with regard to the phenomenon of harassment of this kind. Using such a text with advanced learners would not only imply that learners would need an explanation of these cultural values but they should also be able to see how such values clearly influence the woman's choice of language ("*You know* stones thrown at doors and stuff.").

In summary, we can see that the language teaching profession has tended to over-emphasise a transactional approach to language at the expense of an interactional one. A static, prescriptive view of language concentrating on isolating small, digestible pieces and features of the target language tends to continue from language teaching at lower levels to more advanced levels. The implications for language teaching of taking account of more dynamic views of language, such as interactional analysis, are methodological. This is the same conclusion derived earlier in the learning perspective section. In order to experience language as interaction we need

[8] Cultural differences in the way genres are realised are noticeable between most languages. For example, the frequent resistance by Spanish learners of English to use common politeness formulae in, say, making requests, or the unease felt by many English learners of German on suddenly finding themselves on the receiving end of a serious lecture about of the dangers of a southerly wind when they thought they were engaged some harmless chit-chat about the weather.

to devise learning activities and tasks that allow this. In the next section I outline and exemplify the criteria for such tasks and their features.

4. Tasks in language learning and teaching

This final section aims to capture the points made so far and proposes a methodological construct to advocate a different approach to teaching language at advanced levels. As I have indicated above, language learning tasks are suitable units of analysis for language teaching and they can act as appropriate vehicles with which we can plan and carry out our teaching. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is nothing new. In Europe, however, it has not gained much attention, probably as a result of a tendency to draw clear distinctions between objectives and contents on the one hand and methodology on the other.[9]

The major concern of TBLT does not consist in drawing up a priori taxonomies of tasks and activities but, instead, addresses the quality of tasks. It is concerned with describing the features and criteria which render learning tasks meaningful, fruitful learning experiences. This implies looking closely at the learning activities learners get involved in. In the following I should like to summarise the necessary features of language learning tasks, the criteria for factors such as relevance, difficulty and authenticity.[10]

NUNAN 1989 suggests the following framework for analysing tasks:

4.1 Features of language learning tasks

Types:	Communication tasks reflect actual tasks a person may undertake when communicating through the target language. They are characterised by the skills and strategies required in order to contribute meaningfully, appropriately and accurately to achieving communication. Learning tasks address metacommunicative issues and as such complement communication tasks so as to render them learning experiences. Such tasks involve decisions as to how communication in the target language works, they refer also to procedural matters, i.e. how to organise a communication task in the group or class.

[9] see BREEN 1986 for a thorough treatment of TBLT.

[10] A detailed, comprehensive overview of task design with numerous examples can be found in NUNAN, 1989.

Goals: In any group individual learners will have different goals. The process of negotiation involved in accommodating differing goals within a given group activity presents an important learning opportunity in itself.

Outcomes: Learning outcomes from any given task will differ from learner to learner. What should feature in task design, therefore, is the possibility for there to be various outcomes (texts, summaries, tables, presentations, insights, group decisions, etc.).

Activities: Tasks incorporate various activities. The nature of these activities will vary from cognitive to affective, from physical to reflective, from group to individual, etc.

Input: Control over input for language learning tasks cannot lie solely with the teacher, i.e. external to the learners themselves. Learners should be offered and encouraged to use a variety of input sources.

Evaluation: Evaluation or monitoring of a task will involve questions such as: who does it? when?, how? and to what degree will this interfere with or even become part of the task itself?

Roles: Roles, both in the meta-sense of who manages the task as a group activity and in the sense of roles defined within the task itself should be appropriate and relevant to teachers and learners.

Settings: The setting or position of any given task within a language learning-teaching programme will be problem-generated. E.g. the evaluation of a task involving writing a letter to the editor, may well give rise to another task focusing on discourse patterns in this type of text.
The settings inherent to any given task must be subject to the same conditions of appropriacy and relevance as those applying to learner and teacher roles.

4.2 Criteria for tasks

After outlining the principal features of tasks, the following[11] briefly lists criteria which can be applied to any task in order to examine degrees of relevance, difficulty, and appropriacy.

[11] This list is based upon factors suggested by BRINDLEY 1987.

Relevance: Is the task meaningful to the learners a) at this stage of their learning and b) in terms of their goals?

Context: What is presumed in terms of knowledge of the world, the target language and socio-cultural behaviour on the part of the learners? What is provided? To what extent do the participants have to suspend their "classroom" reality in order to be able to complete the task? To what extent would genuine participation in decision making in class militate against earlier or parallel learning experiences?

Complexity: How many steps might be involved in completing the task? Is it possible to discern a clear procedure? Are the instructions clear? What cognitive demands does it place on the learners? How much information are the learners expected to process in order to complete the task?

Process-ability: Is the language that learners are expected to interpret and produce in line with their processing capacity in terms of textual features, level of abstraction, interpersonal behaviour and cultural load?

Expected outcomes: What degree of accuracy is expected? In interactive tasks, what is the desired outcome in terms of action, decision, effect on interlocutor? Is it possible, given the classroom context? Is the form of the expected outcomes clear to the learners?

Time: How long do the learners have to carry out the task? Have they any say in this?

Help: What help is available to the learners? Teacher? Books? Other learners? Are there any conditions attached to asking for and getting help? Is the teacher (or other source of help) sympathetic to the needs and moods of the learners?

5. Conclusion

In arguing for a re-examination of language learning and teaching at advanced levels I have proposed expanding our concept of syllabus design to incorporate both potential areas of content of language learning programmes and ways in which learners and teachers might work on these contents. The proposed synthesis of two realms which are traditionally dealt with separately is derived from insights into the nature of both learning and language. At advanced stages of language learning such a synthesis seems to present a logical solution to the problem areas outlined

in section 1 of this paper. Tasks are proposed as a powerful means of encapsulating this synthesis in syllabus design as well as providing meaningful opportunities for classroom action. Applying the criteria listed in section 4 learners are required to communicate to learn and learn to communicate, thus preparing themselves to become independent users and learners of the target language.

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