Language Teaching *for* the Future [1]

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The prospect, it seems, of a 'new millennium' has captured our imagination. In Britain, as elsewhere, there have been great discussions about how we should celebrate this historically significant event. Like the onset of a new year, however, a new millennium also marks a moment when it is appropriate to think about what we have done, where we are now and how we should plan for the future. By all accounts, we are in a period of rapid change—socially, politically, technologically, environmentally and culturally. It is likely, for example, that people who are now in their twenties, thirties or forties will experience significant changes in their working lives in the years ahead. Younger people (who may for example be around sixty in middle of the next century), will grow up into a world quite unlike the one we inhabit now. The significance of these changes has led many educationalists to call for a "futures curriculum"—that is a curriculum which actively discusses the future and prepares students for their lives ahead. In this short article, then, I want to consider what, ***our*** role as language teachers could be in this. That is, what it might mean to talk of "language teaching *for* the future". My aim is to stimulate discussion—to be provocative, in fact. To do this, I will discuss two related questions:

- What will the future be like?

and from that,

- What should **we** be doing **now** to prepare our students for the future?

What Will the Future Be Like?

Predicting the future is always a hazardous business. Natural occurrences, catastrophes, sudden unexpected events all make it impossible to reliably describe what the future will be like. But we can make reasonable predictions. The future won't just suddenly happen; the nature of the future

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[2] Other articles by the author are available free of charge from the following web address, where you will also find a complete on-line A-Z of ELT methodology: http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/A_Littlejohn

exists in our present. It is here that history can help us. If we look back at our recent past, we can identify trends which are likely to characterise the nature of future society. Social scientists working in this area, have identified a number of aspects which they suggest will typify future 'post modern' society, as they call it ('post modern' being what comes after 'modern' times). These characteristics refer principally to the West, but with the advent of 'globalisation' they will be increasingly relevant everywhere. Some of the more significant of these are:

- *a fragmented society*—A society divided into smaller 'communities' which extend across national borders. The notion of a 'culture' (shared by all) will be replaced by 'cultures'—in which meanings, customs, habits, and references will vary considerably, even within the same geographical area.
- *decline of national governments*—'Globalisation' as a dominant feature, limiting the power and relevance of national governments. Supranational governments and businesses will exercise greater influence.
- *rapid (dis)appearance of jobs*—Technology will cause the disappearance of many types of jobs, but also the emergence of new ones. In their lifetime, individuals may expect to have ten or more different occupations. Making choices, decisions and adapting will be essential.
- *spread of 'the market'*—The force of the market (advertising, consumer products, cost/profit analysis, etc) will be evident in all spheres of life: education, health care, religion, the family, etc. Globalisation will also lead to standardisation in the market - the same products will be available everywhere for.
- *influence of electronic media*—Electronic media (television, computers, interactive video) will dominate as the principal means by which people receive information and spend their leisure time. Electronic media will far outweigh, for example, the influence that the school may have (already, estimates suggest that by the time the average student has finished high school in the USA, they have spent 11,000 hours in class, but over 22,000 in front of a television).
- *'endlessly eclectic'*—An emerging characteristic of many societies now is the manner in which the elements from very different areas of life are combined. Images from traditional life in Africa, for example, are used to advertise fashion clothes. Individuals can deco-

> rate their homes to look like houses from hundreds of years ago. Pop stars sing and politicians speak at the funerals of royalty. At the same time, the limits on what is expected are breaking down—with the result that it is becoming increasingly difficult to be really 'shocked'. 'Expect anything' is the best advice.

Each of these trends, social scientists suggest, are likely to become more evident in the years ahead. Whether they are good or bad depends, of course, upon your own individual point of view. What is clear, however, is that there are dangers. The increasing dominance of electronic media, globalisation and the dominance of multinational organisations, all pose dangers for democracy and individual freedom. Similarly, the spread of the 'market' may also pose dangers for the integrity of social services such as education, where economic efficiency may not always be compatible with educational goals. What this suggests, then, is that we need to be aware of what is happening so that we can make the future as we would like it to be, and not simply drift forward.

What Should we be Doing *Now* to Prepare our Students for the Future?

Language teaching practices today

The description of emerging characteristics of a future society may seem very remote from the day to day moments of language teaching. In reality, however, language teaching is a part of society as much as anything else. It is not difficult to see, therefore, signs of a 'post modern' society already present in contemporary practices in language teaching. A survey through published coursebooks for school-aged students, for example, can identify some significant characteristics The following are based on my own observations which you may or may not agree with.

Language learner as consume—The content of language exercises may be centred around performing commercial transactions (e.g. ordering hamburgers and cola in a restaurant) or expressing preferences about consumer items (e.g. fashion clothes, pop music, popstars, and videos).

Fragmented, eclectic content—A 'unit' of materials may be composed of seemingly random content—linked together perhaps by an underlying grammatical thread. A newspaper article about a protest may be followed by a listening passage on UFOs, which may in turn be followed by a role play to solve a murder—all intended to present examples of the Past tense. ("Expect anything!" being also suitable advice to a language student.)

Significance—Meaning has long since been important in language teaching, but beyond this there is also the matter of *significance.* On the one hand, much of the content of language teaching tasks appear to focus on what is essentially trivia. On the other hand, the true significance of something may be disregarded in the pursuit of a syllabus item. A text about the first tests of a nuclear bomb, for example,—potentially one of the most significant events in modern history—may be made the focus of classwork simply for the form it examples ("What were the journalists doing when the bomb exploded?"). Similarly, a storyline about a boy stealing cigarettes from a shop may be used to practise language forms ("What was the boy doing when the girl saw him?") without the morality of the action being questioned.

Standardised lessons—Although teaching practices and teaching materials have become much more interesting for the learner in recent, one element in this has been the growth in standardisation of teaching practices. I say, superficially, however, because it is not the fact of globalisation that is important here, but what coursebooks and teaching qualifications may actually propose. My own view is that there is increasing tendency towards (and danger of) 'scripting' lessons—standard lessons and lesson formats that are reenacted all over the world. This means, for example, that students and teachers on opposite sides of the planet, in widely differing contexts, can end up working with exactly the same language, through the same standard closed tasks, producing more or less the same outcome.

A 'futures curriculum' in language teaching

I said earlier that I think that it is important that we are aware of how society is evolving so that we can try to make the future as we would like it to be. As an educational activity, there is thus a particular responsibility for language teaching. On the one hand, we need to think about how we can help to prepare our students for the very different demands that the future will make—the need to be able to make rapid decisions and adapt, for instance. On the other hand, we also need to look beyond the concerns of the language syllabus, and not simply drift with the flow of post-modern development. We need, for example, to think about the content and significance of our materials, the values and attitudes we project, the kinds of 'mental states' we are fostering—how, indeed, we contribute to the way the people see themselves.

A futures curriculum for language teaching, then, will be based not

only on what our students are likely to need but also on a vision of how we would like the future to be—how we need to guard against dangers and shape the way we wish to live. This is of course a very subjective matter which will vary from individual to individual, culture to culture, but to end this article I would like to set out six principles that I think could underpin developments in language teaching. As a set of 'desirable' characteristics, they may also function as a means of evaluating what we are doing now, so for each one I have added a question which we can use to review our present practices.

Some characteristics of a "futures curriculum"	**Questions to evaluate present practices**
1 Coherence The use of themes, topics, projects to bind lessons together and provide coherence and a deeper focus and understanding.	Is there a coherent topic over a lesson or series of lessons?
2 Significant content The selection of content that is worth learning and thinking about, dealt with in appropriate ways, which does not, on the one hand trivialise significant issues or, on the other hand, make trivial things seem important. A key topic could itself be "the future" – attempting to raise students awareness of future developments and discuss their own hopes, aspirations, worries and personal action.	Is the content worth knowing or thinking about? Is significant content treated appropriately?
3 Decision-making in the classroom A structured plan for actively involving students in making decisions in the classroom, taking on more responsibility for what happens in their lessons.	Are students required to make decisions? How do the help to shape lessons, such that each lesson is unique?
4 Use of students' intelligence The use of types of exercises which require *thinking*, beyond memory retrieval or repetition, for examples, and involving students in hypothesising, negotiating, planning, and evaluating.	Do classroom tasks require *thought*?

5 Cultural understanding Tasks and texts which require students to look through the eyes of others, to learn the relative nature of values, to *understand* why people in different contexts think and do different things.	Do texts and tasks promote cultural understanding?
6 Critical language awareness To view all language use critically—that is, to look beyond the surface meaning and ask oneself questions such as "*Why* are they saying that?" "What is *not* being said?" and "Who benefits from what is being said?" We might for example ask students to think about deeper reasons for why the passive voice is used in a newspaper headline or why particular adjectives are used to describe a consumer product.	Are students asked to think about *why* language is used that way?