NEW LAMPS FOR OLD: REALISM & SURREALISM IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING *

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In recent years we have become more aware that the theory and practice of language teaching (and learning) is subject to a process similar to that observable in the exact sciences. Perhaps the most cogent exponent of this process is Thomas Kuhn, in his "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions". (Kuhn 1970). Kuhn postulates long periods of stability, when one theory or 'paradigm' is dominant, followed by periods of intense and heterodox experimentation, before the emergence of a new paradigm. Looking back at the past 10 years or more in the field of foreign language teaching, it is clear that we have been living through just a period of professional insecurity, which, if Kuhn's proposition holds good, should herald the emergence of a new paradigm.

At the heart of our "professional insecurity" is the failure to answer satisfactorily Stevick's riddle. (Stevick 1969) "In the field of language teaching, Method A is the logical contradiction of Method B: if the assumptions from which A claims to be derived are correct, then B cannot work, and vice versa. Yet one colleague is getting excellent results with A, and another is getting comparable results with B. How is this possible?"

This article is in no sense an attempt to answer the riddle. It is hoped however that by sympathetically examining the various elements in the current debate, something of value will emerge.

It will be convenient to examine these factors under the following headings:

Theories of Learning, Views of Language, Programme Design, Methodology, and Psycho-Social factors.

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Theories of Learning

1. Acquisition and Learning

One of the more interesting theories to have emerged is the so called 'Monitor' model developed by Stephen Krashen. (Krashen 1978). Krashen posits two quite distinct processes for the learning of a foreign language by adults. These he calls Acquisition (A) and Learning (L).

Learning (L) is characterised by the need for a conscious effort of concentration on what is being learnt. It proceeds in a logical, analytical, step-by-step manner, and involves the learner in the pain of forgetting, regressing, and re-learning. It is subject to a monitor mechanism, that is, a kind of psychological censor, which vets all items before they are uttered and corrects them if it detects error.

Acquisition (A) by contrast, is a largely sub-conscious process, in which the human organism abstracts, processes and organises relevant information from the linguistic environment and stores it in long term memory ready for immediate retrieval. In this case the monitor mechanism is by passed. This is then a system not subject to rational or voluntary control. Provided there is an environment sufficiently rich in data, it will operate.

When we apply this theory to the day-to-day business of classroom teaching, it is clear that most of our procedures favour Learning (L). It is relatively speaking easy to set up Learning (L) situations (even if no one learns). That is what classrooms are, traditionally, about. But how can one arrange for Acquisition (A) to take place when it is by definition involuntary?

This is one of the teasers which, if Krashen's theory has any validity, our methodology must come to terms with. How can we by pass the inhibiting effect of conscious processing and tap the roots of Acquisition?

It carries in its train a whole host of minor puzzles: how is it, for example, that certain items are instantly Acquired by some learners and not by others, and that items are resistent even to Learning (L), and that these also vary from learner to learner?

2. Errors & Mistakes

Both linguists and psychologists have long been fascinated by the so-called L.A.D. (Language Acquisition Device). This mental device, sometimes called the Black Box, since we do not know quite what goes on inside it, certainly operates efficiently at least in respect of first language acquisition.

What is more pertinent to our concern however, is that research is tending to show that not only the first language but also second languages are acquired in a predictable order. (Corder 1979).

We are all familiar with children who progressively eliminate typical errors (eg aberrant past tense forms in English like 'he catched') as they grow older. A similar in-built progressive elimination of error is observable in foreign learners of a language.

The process of learning the foreign language can be likened to a series of steps on a staircase. On any given step the learner will exhibit the errors characteristic of that step. These will disappear as he moves up to the next step. And he will do this when he is ready. In other words, each learner passes through a natural sequence of developmental stages.

This is often obscured in classroom teaching by the fact that learners progress through the stages at different rates. But the order is the same for all.

These findings help to explain the apparent imperviousness of many, if not most learners, to correction procedures. No amount of correction will move them to the next step until they are ripe for it.

There would seem to be at least two important implications in this for the classroom. Firstly, 'mistakes' should not carry a feeling of guilt or failure with them, since when regarded as 'errors', they are a natural part of the learning process.

Contrary to what we were brought up to believe, in the heyday of behaviourism, errors are an indispensible part of learning. Without them no true learning can take place. (Dakin 1973).

Secondly we should perhaps re-examine the amount of time spent on error correction, ar at the very least modify our procedures so as to develop more responsible self-correction by the learners themselves. After all, if we cannot significantly affect the rate of error elimination, why spend one-third (Flanders 1970) to one-half of classroom time on it?

3. Input and Intake

There are two major and opposing theories of learning anything, not just languages. Let us characterise these as the pint-pot theory and the home-brewery kit theory.

The pint pot theory sees the learning process as one of pure transfer of information/knowledge/skill from one receptacle into another. The teacher simply empties his barrel of knowledge into the pint pots of his students. There is no organic interchange. It is the student's job to absorb as much of the elixir as he can contain and not to spill any! Intake is taken to equal input.

In England, it is common for people to make their own beer. They simply buy a kit with the ingredients, then following the instructions, they brew their beverage. The other view of learning is analagous to this, in that the teacher is seen as provider of raw materials and instructions on how to use them. The learner then works on them at his own individual pace and in his own style. Input is identical for all. Intake (and output) is different for everyone.

It is more convenient for most teachers, and all systems of education, to adopt a pint pot approach. And it can be shown to work. It is possible for students to commit to memory large chunks of material from the foreign language and to reproduce it for examination or classroom purposes. But materials learnt this way is all too often rendered inaccessible (Johnson & Morrow 1981) for use in wider contexts. It is as if a psychological wall had been built around it, cutting it off from contexts of use. Language tends then to become a body of knowledge, not a tool for communication.

4. Eureka!

Arthur Koestler's book "The Act of Creation" (Koestler

1966) investigates in detail the processes of creative behaviour in general. Such behaviour can range from the discovery of DNA, to the production of a sentence no one has uttered before.

Koestler draws attention to the work of Helmholtz, who postulated a three-stage process. He speaks of a stage of Preparation, in which relevant data is assembled and subjected to conscious examination and questioning. This is followed by a period of Incubation during which the mind works on the data at a sub - or - unconscious level.

Finally there is Illumination when, quite suddenly, things fall into place - the problem is solved, the invention is made, the poem is written. This final stage is often the result of what Koestler calls 'bisociative' thinking, when two apparently incompatible elements come together in an unusual arrangement which sheds new light on the problem.

Some of the work in innovative approaches to the teaching of languages such as the "Silent Way", "Suggestopoedia", "Community Language Learning", "Total Physical Response" etc. draw in some measure on the Helmholtz model. And there are surely lessons to be learned from it for day-to-day language teaching. In particular, the need to leave the learner time to process input before expecting output. Also the desirability at least occasionally of providing unusual inputs to stimulate the bisociative mechanism (somewhat in the way the Surrealists did in art and literature).

Views of Language

In general the past 10 years have seen a shift in the focus of attention from concern with the formal properties of language, to a view of language as primarily a vehicle of communication. This is reflected in the following areas:

1. Structures and Functions

It was customary until relatively recently (indeed in many areas of the world it still is) to regard a language as being made up of a series of syntactical building blocks. These characteristic patterns were isolated, ordered in a sequence from 'least' to 'most' difficult. Teaching materials were then

devised to exemplify and give practice in these patterns.

The main criticisms levelled against such a procedure were that it focussed on language as form rather than language as use. And that it rested on the unproven premise that, equipped with a set of structural building blocks, the student could proceed without difficulty towards constructing skyscrapers. We shall call this the 'atomistic fallacy'.

In the early 1970's an alternative organising principle was mooted by Wilkins (1976) and others. This was labelled 'Notional/Functional'. Regrettably the terminology in this area is now a semantic minefield, so let us call it the Functional approach for short.

In this approach the forms of language subserve the major use of language as a vehicle for meaning. Teaching syllabuses were to reflect this by concentrating on such major areas as Time, Spatial Relations etc., and language functions such as 'Suggestion', 'Obligation', 'Suasion' etc. all of which had manifold exponents in language form.

There is no doubt that this movement, and the Council of Europe documents inspired by it, have effected a considerable change in the ways we view language, and in the content and procedures of teaching it. It is however not without problems. So far there is no universally agreed and adequate description of the functional categories. It is also not clear what the qualitative difference is between teaching a list of discrete functions rather than a list of discrete structures. Functions in use, like structures, are embedded in a matrix. Methodology has lagged behind theoretical speculation (Johnson and Morrow 1978). The pendulum here seems to be swinging back towards a mid-point of common sense with structure/grammar considered as a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the acquisition of a foreign language.

2. Sentence and Discourse

Until relatively recently the attention of linguist had been bounded by the sentence. Grammar included everything up to the sentence, but nothing beyond it.

Emphasis has now shifted towards an investigation of the devices used to link sentences or utterances together to form 'text' (written or spoken), as opposed to a haphazard collection of propositions.

For example, it is clear that:

'Howard said he need go no farther. Do not use quotation marks. Where is my car?'

does not form a coherent text. The three propositions are unrelated syntactically or semantically. Widdowson (1978) has made the useful distinction between textual cohesion and textual coherence. Cohesion has to do with syntactic co-reference (eg. anaphora, deixis etc) and coherence with semantic bonds.

To date most work has been done on the written language (Halliday and Hasan 1976). But the way in which connected speech is similarly structured has also formed the basis for some interesting work (Sinclair and Coulthard 1975).

These insights have proved especially useful in the teaching of reading and listening skills, and have angled us towards the teaching of sentences embedded in contexts of use, not simply as tokens of the formal properties of language (Coulthard 1979).

3. The Negotiation of Meaning:

Language as Social Interaction

It is still common to encounter the view that meaning is somehow there, to be apprehended. That words are like trucks, each one carrying its load of meaning.

A more complex view has recently gained currency however (Widdowson 1978). It holds that meanings are not externally given but are dependent to a degree not hitherto suspected on other factors.

Even so simple an utterance as 'What's the time?' can be variably construed according to such factors as setting

(where it is spoken) topic (about what), participants (with whom), their respective roles and status, the intention and mood of the speakers, the style or register they are using etc. Such sociological and psychological factors deeply affect language and are in their turn affected by it.

The meanings a writer conveys are similarly conditioned, and set off chain reactions of associative meanings in his readers, which are necessarily different from one person to the next.

The problem posed for teachers by such a view is considerable. To what extent can such things be taught? And if they can, how? (Candlin 1981).

Both the renewed interest in the receptive skills, especially listening comprehension, and in more adventurous forms of production via role plays, simulation and drama work have their origin in this question. On the one hand we now seek to expose learners to a larger range of language contexts to enable them gradually to form their own criteria for appropriacy of language use. On the other, we provide them with more possibilities for trying out what they feel may be appropriate.

Programme Design

1. Needs Analysis

The idea of analysing the needs of language learners proceeds from the highly commonsensical notion that no one is able to learn a language totally. Even native speakers use only a small part of the total resources of their language. Surely, the proponents of needs analysis argue, it is a waste of time to try to teach the whole of a foreign language? We should instead concentrate on what the learner will need to use the language for when he finishes his course. If we can develop a model for ascertaining in detail the needs of learners, then we can translate this into a syllabus, and from the syllabus derive appropriate teaching techniques and materials (Munby 1978).

There are however a number of practical and theoretical objections to such a view. In the first place, it proves

extremely difficult to predict the needs of a group (which is necessarily composed of a number of individuals possibly with conflicting needs). Munby's model prescribes a procedure for defining an individual's needs, which are then extrapolated to a group, but the justification for doing so is tenuous.

It has also been pointed out that, for a majority of learners, we simply do not know what uses they will find for the language at the end of their course.

Moreover, any description of needs is static, not dynamic. There may well be, and there often is, a difference between the potential terminal needs of learners (eg. air hostesses) and their needs as perceived by themselves, which envolve throughout the learning process. Perhaps wants is a better word than needs in this case.

At a more abstract level it has been pointed out that needs analysis tends to reinforce a product view of learning, rather than a process view. If we know what the learner needs (barrel of beer), we can pour it into his pint pot. The implication is that the syllabus designer always knows best. Clearly it is the syllabus designer's job to take decisions, but it has been argued that learners are not necessarily best prepared for a given set of terminal behaviours by giving them practice in these terminal behaviours alone (Widdowson 1980).

Needs analysis however cannot be ignored. It is a powerful tool for the avoidance of wasted effort and time. Used with a dose of commonsense, it can eliminate much superfluous teaching and make way for what is truly useful.

2. Simplification and Authenticity

There are currently two strongly held opposing views on the matter of simplification.

Some would argue that students cannot simply be left to deal with the awesome foreignness of the new language in all its manifestations, but must be helped by judicious (and some would claim, scientific) simplification. They can then be led by small degrees to the full complexity of the language.

Others claim that simplified materials are a very poor preparation for the encounter with the real language outside the classroom context. In their view, the syllabus designer should be selecting appropriate authentic texts and devising exercises which facilitate learners' comprehension of these texts.

This discussion leaves to one side the question of the authenticity of learner output, considering only the authenticity of input.

We should not however be concerned solely with input. How can we devise techniques which will allow the learner scope to be himself in the foreign language? It is conceivable that even traditional inputs can be made to produce a personalised response. (One highly heterodox suggestion is to encourage learners to formulate criticisms of the very materials they are obliged to learn from!) It is also true of course that highly original techniques, in the hands of an unimaginative teacher, can stultify learning as much as any other approach.

3. The Decline of the Textbook

There is a tendency for the monolithic textbook of our youth to give way to less rigid forms of instructional material. This ranges from the various types of supplementary materials which now surround the central core of many courses, or exist independently, to teacher-oriented ideas inventories, and to so called modular materials.

The modular idea is a fascinating one, attempting as it does to reconcile the need for some kind of backbone to a course, with the individual and changing needs of real life learners. It also allows for the realisation of the idea that learners in a single class may progress at different rates, have different interests and be working on different materials at the same time.

Taken to its extreme, it leads into the field of individualised learning where the teacher provides the learner with guidance to a range of resources but does not intervene unnecessarily in their learning process.

It is interesting to note in passing that the increasing opportunities for choice in learning, seem to be part of the wider pattern of enlarged choice about which Alvin Toffler speculates in his futurological book. The Third Wave. (Toffler 1981).

4. Is Your Syllabus Really Necessary?

It has always been customary, and this even before developments in systematic needs analysis, to base language teaching materials upon a previously decided list of items (whether skills - or language based).

These 'a priori' syllabuses assume a need on the part of the syllabus designer or text book writer to select and order the material presented, usually in terms of its linguistic usefulness or frequency. That is, such syllabuses were, and are, linguistically graded.

An alternative procedure (but one not much applied thus far) is to devise a series of interesting activities, using more or less authentic texts irrespective of linguistic grading except in the roughest sense. The activities are graded, not the texts. Only afterwards are the language items selected for attention and set out in the form of a check list (Maley, Grellet and Welsing 1981).

The most compelling argument against 'a priori' syllabuses is the fact that they distort linguistic and situational reality by an over-concentration on certain language forms. Text as pretext.

The strongest argument is for 'a posteriori' check lists is that, if linguistic items are truly frequent and useful, then they can be presumed to occur naturally in representative samples of the language in normal use. There is too the logical inconsistency between the known fact that all learners are different, and the imposition of a set programme which is identical for all, both in ordering of items and rate of progress.

In purely practical terms a syllabus is doubtless of some use especially for the skills or oral production and writing. One has to learn something, to start somewhere. But the argument for such a syllabus loses much of its force in the field of

listening and reading comprehension, where the very essence of the skill is ability to deal with the unknown and the unexpected and accommodate it to a framework of meaning.

Methodology

1. Accuracy and Fluency

The distinction has been widely discussed in recent years (Brumfit 1980). Accuracy activities typically focus on the form of the language and try to ensure that it is correct. The concern is with getting it right, whether it is phoneme, morpheme, word, sentence or text, not with appropriacy of use. (Transform these sentences from the Present into the Past tense, fill in the blanks, learn this list of words for tomorrow - all these are typical examples of accuracy work).

Fluency work, by contrast, is marked by a concern with developing the learners' ability to handle language interactions appropriately in real time. This ability is built up through more open ended activities favouring relatively uncontrolled interchange where errors are tolerated provided communication is effective, and through exposure to much more varied samples of the spoken and written language.

It is easier for teachers to organise accuracy work than fluency activities. No one should be surprised therefore to note a predominance of accuracy work in classrooms. But if language is to become a living vehicle for communication then the balance between accuracy and fluency work needs to be redressed in favour of fluency.

2. Language Centred and Task Centred Views

Much classroom activity even nowadays is typically focused on the language as prime target. There is however a danger that we may lose sight of the fact that language is essentially a means for getting things done. Some recent approaches have tried, as an alternative, to develop activities which are meaningful and interesting, and in which the learners can invest something of themselves. Absorption in the activity takes over from obsessive

concern with the language. Such activities may take the form of problem solving (in the broadest sense) drama work, simulations or self discovery (Maley et. al. 1981). The claim is that, by losing himself in the task, the learner loses inhibitions on his use of the language.

In order to complete the task of course it is necessary for him to engage in language activity (reading, writing, speaking, listening and usually a combination of two or more of them). But this is no longer an end in itself, but a necessary step on the way to what is often a non linguistic outcome.

3. The Politics of the Classroom

Methodology is often a reflection of the power relationships obtaining in a given classroom.

A host of studies (Flanders 1970, Barnes 1971, and Stubbs 1976) testify to the way typical classroom interactions are teacher dominated, leaving little psychological space for student initiative.

Much teaching for example is still of the lockstep variety. That is, everyone in the class is put through the same hoops at the same time, irrespective of individual ability or inclination.

While it is true that it is the teachers' responsibility to provide a framework of overall control within which learning can take place, the over heavy exercise of control will stultify the learning process. Too often teachers lose sight of the fact that only the learners can learn: teachers cannot learn for them.

How then can teachers affect the power structure in positive ways? Even quite minor physical changes, such as the way the desks are arranged, whether the teachers sits or stands, and where he is can make a great difference.

The procedures adopted can likewise modify relationships significantly. For example by having students ask each other questions, or working in groups. The form of activity may also be significant. For example a problem solving activity involving the exchange of information between groups. But an

over riding factor will be teacher attitude. It is a sad observation that many teachers who exercise rigid control do so from a sense of insecurity. They are worried about their inability to operate in a situation where everything is not in their control. This is a natural enough fear but one which experience usually proves unjustified when they try a more relaxed approach. It is fear of the unknown more than anything else.

Psychological Factors

1. Learning Styles

It is now a commonplace that no two learners are alike in their mode and rate of learning. We are however beginning to know a little more about just how they may differ. There are those learners who prefer a linear approach, where every step is exhaustively explained before passing to the next, and who are uneasy when faced with the unexpected or the unexplained. Others seem at home in situations where they are invited to come to conclusions for themselves, often on the basis of incomplete data. These are the holistic learners, who see the wood and do not trouble themselves unnecessarily about the trees.

Similarly there are the convergent thinkers, already referred to, who tend to seek reassurance in the right answer. And every question must have one! Whereas divergent thinkers are rarely satisfied with the most obvious answer. They go on looking for others, and will even accept the fact that there may be no answer (Hudson 1966).

No doubt these preferences are linked to left or right hemisphere dominance. The right hemisphere of the brain would seem to control our creative, artistic, intuitive side, and the left hemisphere our logical, rational, mathematical functions (Blakemore 1977).

There are too visualisers and verbalizers, manipulative and intellectual approaches (Bockaerts 1979).

The implications for the classroom would seem to be threefold. Firstly we should not adopt a normative attitude to

these differences. There is nothing inherently inferior or superior in left hemisphere or right hemisphere dominance etc. It is simply a fact to be taken account of.

Secondly we need to offer a variety in teaching which will give equal opportunities to differing styles. (A purely rational explanation of a rule of grammar would usually only be absorbed by a proportion of the class. A visual representation would account for a further proportion. A visual plus a manipulative presentation - for example via the "Silent Way" - would reach still others) (Vester 1978). Finally, such varied alternatives may help individuals to develop their latent abilities. Rational types may find release in intuition, verbalizers in visualising etc.

2. The Threat of Learning and The Zest of Risk

There would seem to be two alternative, and fluctuating views of learning, as seen from the point of view of the learner.

One of them highlights the feeling of threat to self esteem which accompanies the act of learning (Rogers 1969). It is claimed that adults in particular come to have negative feelings in a learning situation, because they feel that their whole personality is put at risk, and that they are in danger of losing their self respect if they admit to not knowing. Learning then turns into a protective affair, where people learn things simply to shield themselves from the accusations of stupidity emanating from the teacher, their peers or their conscience.

Lozanov (1978) has pointed out the way in which most classroom situations give off the negative suggestion that what is to be learnt is difficult and unlikely to be learned successfully, so that learners are immediately faced with an impossibly high wall to scale. "Suggestopoedia" (Lozanov's approach) and approaches based on Counselling learning seek to lower the threshold of threat induced resistence by creating an atmosphere of non-judgemental acceptance and supportiveness.

The other view however regards all learning as a risk taking business. Without exposing oneself to risk, and the possibility of error, no learning takes place. And risk entails danger. To remove risk is to perform a pedagogical lobotomy, with learners awash in the pink champagne of everyman's approval.

Each person is alone in the act of learning, and must make his own leap into the abyss of uncertainty. The best kind of teaching according to this view, prepares learners for the encounter with the unknown, and does not embalm them in feelings of false security.

Conclusion

Realism tends to be associated with the solidly based, the well founded, and the serious. Surrealism with the zany, the lunatic fringe and the irresponsible. Yet if we wish to take account of even some of the factors discussed above, I would claim that our teaching procedures are going to look more surreal than real. If we wish to favour Acquisition, revise our view of error, allow for the difference between input and intake, and give house room to the Eureka principle, and if we are to take account of individual learning styles in a less rigidly controlled framework where authentic tasks make up much of the programme, there will be changes in methods, materials and techniques.

Such changes have already begun to happen. There is now an almost bewildering variety of published materials. Ideas flow and are exchanged in a plethora of conferences and articles. Returning to the starting point, with the theory of scientific revolutions, one begins to wonder whether it can be applied to us. We do not for the present seem to have rejected one paradigm to accept another - unless the absence of a paradigm is itself a paradigm! For now we seem exhilarated with riding the surf wave of change - and trying not to lose our sense of balance!

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From The Editor

The purpose of the MEXTESOL Journal is to publish articles of both a theoretical and practical nature for the betterment of English language teaching, specifically in México. In the past every attempt has been made to keep the Journal free from being used as a podium for political, commercial or personal viewpoints.

The publication in this issue of the comparative book review of REAP and Read in English, as well as the response to the review from Mike Scott, is in no way setting a new precedent for the Journal. Future numbers of the Journal will not be open to further comments on this particular issue.

Jerrilou Johnson