

Language teaching *for* the future

Andrew LITTLEJOHN

As we move into the new millennium, there is a need to consider where we are now and what lies ahead. Much of our classroom practice has a very long heritage, and draws on ideas shaped in a world very different from the one which we will inhabit in the years to come. This paper will explore some of the social and technological changes that we are predicted to experience into the next century and how these may bear on the practice of language teaching. These may include, for example, the increasing effects of so-called "McDonaldisation", processes of 'de-skilling' and 're-skilling', the displacement of national boundaries in favour of 'globalisation', and new forms of literacy.

As educators, we need to take into account the implications that social and technological change may have for the practice of language teaching, and to see our work in the context of such change so that, as educators we may be able to contribute to the creation of the social world which we hope for. Many commentators take a pessimistic view of the future, but it is clear that social and technological developments can offer both constraints and numerous opportunities. I will emphasise a shift from syllabus towards methodology, ideas from critical pedagogy, the need to structure the development of student decision-making, and a preparation for change. I will also give many practical examples of what this can entail in classroom work.

INTRODUCTION

*When I was just a little girl, I asked my mother what will I be?
Will I be pretty? Will I be rich? Here's what she said to me:
Que será, será, Whatever will be, will be.
The future's not ours to see. Que será, será*

So ran the sentiments of Doris Day in the mid-1950s, just half a century ago from where we stand now. This was a time of seeming confidence in the present and the future, that "whatever will be" will be fine. "You've never had it so good", British Prime Minister Macmillan declared. In the West, this was a time of great optimism, dominated by the idea that we can improve ourselves and our environment, and that social, economic, intellectual and spiritual advance can all be planned for. The signs of this rational, technical approach to the problems confronting us could be seen in every area of society – while Frank Lloyd Wright was designing houses which would blend into the environment and Utzon was putting finishing touches to the sail designs of the Sydney Opera House, automobile engineers were busy refining aerodynamics so that a car would move as effortlessly as a bird through the air. While architects were designing 'palaces for the masses' – the high rise buildings that came to dominate city skylines in the 1960s - aeronautics engineers were beginning work on *Concorde*, the plane that would revolutionise air travel. Furniture and appliance manufacturers were producing sleek, mathematically symmetrical designs for tables, beds, cupboards, and cookers and "the lucky housewife" was greeted with one new technical innovation after another in the kitchen.

What has all this got to do with language education? Well, one of the first points that I would like to make is that I think we can learn a lot about our future by looking back. In other words, it is important to see that our work in a social and historical context, since, like any other area of social life, language education is likely to be responsive in its form and scope of concern to the 'zeitgeist' or spirit of the times. In the case of the late 1950s and 1960s, for example, it is not surprising that the emphasis on rational, technical solutions was also reflected in thought in language teaching then. A dominant concern, for example, was to find "the single right method", the simplicity of behaviourist conceptions of learning and the introduction of language laboratories and mim-mem as a technical methodology which would enable "the masses" to learn. And, as the late 1960s gave way to social fragmentation and the illusion of Doris Day's era became clear, it was also no coincidence that the rise in "alternative" ways of living, self-help groups, a rejection of "the establishment", and the emergence of 'do it yourself' philosophies were accompanied by a similar fracturing in language teaching thought. Into the 1970s we have the seeds of a concern with humanistic, 'whole person' issues in the classroom, learner-centred teaching, the arrival of self-access centres and the mushrooming of numerous 'fringe' methodologies (mostly described rather than practised, in fact), all of which aimed at rejecting the established language teaching orthodoxy of the times.

A brief look at our past, and the context in which it arose, establishes the necessity for us to look at our context today and ask ourselves how similar forces of social change may be finding reflection in our classroom practices, something which we may not otherwise be aware of. The question is an important one, because it will be important for us to see if there may be differences between what *is* happening in language education and what we *would like* to happen. Education has a crucial role in shaping the future as we would like it to be, and this is no less true for us, involved in language education. This is something to which I will return shortly, but let me first turn to the social context of today and what it may offer for the future and suggest some links to what is happening now in language teaching.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND LANGUAGE TEACHING PRACTICES

It is brave fool that ventures to predict the future in so public a manner, but fool or not, I will try. The future doesn't just happen. The future is a continuation of our present, and, as such, is a development of factors that are at work now. We can thus learn a lot from the analyses of social scientists working in the area of social description. Many of these, generally critical in their orientation, have identified a number of key emerging characteristics of Western industrialised societies (see, for example, Apple, 1986, 1988; Ritzer, 1993). 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) is being replaced by 'cultures' - meanings, customs, habits, and references that 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 exercising greater influence.
- ***rapid (dis)appearance of jobs*** Technology is causing 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. The ability to make choices and decisions and to adapt will become essential.
- ***spread of 'the market'*** The force of the market (advertising, consumer products, cost/profit analysis, etc) is now evident in all spheres of life: education, health care, religion, the family, etc. Globalisation is leading to standardisation in the market - the same products are increasingly available everywhere.
- ***influence of electronic media*** Electronic media (television, computers, interactive video) now 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.
- ***'endlessly eclectic'*** Elements from very different areas of life are combined and recycled. Images from traditional life in Africa, for example, are used to advertise fashion clothes. Individuals can decorate 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.

These general characteristics represent very broad features which are to a greater or lesser extent reflected across Westernised societies. It comes as no surprise that perhaps they are most evident in the United States, the powerhouse of multinational corporate thinking. George Ritzer (1993), an American social scientist, has also further identified tendencies in what he calls the "McDonaldisation of society" in the United States – the manner in which the logic, priorities and modes of organisation of the world's biggest hamburger chain are gradually colonising other areas of social life. Specifically, Ritzer suggests a number of aspects which define McDonald's approach to business and human interaction. McDonald's, he argues, is characterised by a very high degree of control – he speaks of a "caged society" where efficiency and total predictability are key, such that a McDonald's is a McDonald's wherever you are in the world. To this end, every action in McDonald's is routinised and scripted. Service assistants, for example, are only permitted to use specific formulaic utterances in their dealings with customers. In consequence, all interactions are standardised and dehumanised. The product, also, is fully standardised and controlled, with very little room for human "error" in producing a non-standard, non-McDonald's conforming hamburger. And since hamburgers themselves are largely unremarkable products, it is not the hamburger that is sold but a packaged *experience*, an experience of fun and entertainment in going into a branch of McDonald's.

The most telling aspect of Ritzer's analysis, however, is not so much his critique of McDonald's, but his assertion that similar forms of standardised, dehumanised and packaged interactions are becoming evident

in other areas of social life. The logic of the goals of efficiency and predictability have, he suggests, now invaded not only other food and service industries but also the media, entertainment, and – crucially, for us – education, such that we effectively have ‘McTV’, ‘McNews’, ‘McNewspaper’, ‘McCinema’, ‘McUniversity’.... all offering increasingly standardised, routinised products. This is the ‘bite-sized’ culture where knowledge is reduced to easily digestible forms, compact ‘nuggets’ of information that can be taken in and promptly forgotten, bullet-pointed lists where salient facts are previously identified to reduce the demands for cognitive work and ensure fast, effortless learning – like fast food. It is also the development of ‘unit-credit’ approaches to University courses, where isolated courses earn students “credits” which they can accumulate towards a degree. With this, too, is the nurtured expectation that learning is to be fun – the concept of ‘edutainment’, familiar from computer software, is becoming evident in the classroom, with teachers increasingly under pressure to ensure that their students – or ‘customers’ as they are often now known – ‘have a good time’ in the classroom.

Where does this leave us in language education? My earlier assertion of links between the wider social context and educational practice should lead us to ask whether the forces of McDonaldisation are at all evident in our work today, and to look hard at some of the recent developments in language teaching. In fact, we probably don’t have to look very far to identify some initial tendencies. The first of these is, I believe, the emergence of what we can call “McCoursebook”. McCoursebook contains ‘units’ of classroom work, increasingly standard length ‘bite-sized’ nuggets of two or four pages, each containing routinised interactions that have the potential to produce exactly the same classroom outcomes wherever they are used in the world, with whatever students. McCoursebook is, of its nature, a global text, but it is not this fact that is its essential characteristic. Rather it is the way in which explicit scripts are provided to teachers and students with the aim of producing standardised outcomes – rather than unique classroom events. The devices for doing this are now commonplace: closed ‘ask and answer’ routines, the gap-fill exercise with its easily countable right/wrong solutions, questions the answers to which are all supplied in accompanying texts, and invitations for personal contributions by students which are reduced to the status of a ‘warm-up’ before the ‘real’ learning of the scripted interactions is to be done. For teachers, too, McCoursebook gives explicit indications of what precisely they are to do in the classroom and even say. These characteristics of coursebooks are now so common that we hardly give them a second thought – in fact, it seems that that is what a course book *is* – and we assume and hope that it is for the teacher and students to adapt, amend, omit as they see fit. But, in many schools and school systems around the world this is precisely *not* what is expected to happen – the directions of the coursebook are a means by which predictability, accountability and control are maintained by the hierarchy above the classroom teacher. It is also a means by which inexperienced and often untrained teachers can be employed – cheaply.

Just as the McDonald’s hamburger may be low in nutritional content, so too is McCoursebook. McCoursebook contains eclectic, random topics which jump hither and thither, strung together by a focus on form. Texts about testing an atomic bomb lead on to exercises in which students complete sentences such as “They were making butter when....” “She was playing her flute when....” – atomic bombs, butter and flute-playing all united in the exemplification of a grammatical form. Central to McCoursebook is the separation between *learning content* and *carrier content*. Learning content is strictly identified as the forms and uses of English. Carrier content is the language which is used to present the language, and which it is not intended will be retained by the student. The result is that McCoursebook contains bland, trivial content and often, in secondary school aged materials, an emphasis on the pop and consumer industries.

It is tempting to believe that behind McCoursebook is a conspiracy of materials writers. Alas, this is not the case. McCoursebook is the way it is because it increasingly meets the expectations of teachers and students, who are now used to fragmented and routinised products in other areas of their lives. McCoursebook is clear evidence that forces of social change are now entering the classroom and structuring educational practice.

And while McCoursebook is selling well and structuring our expectations of what should happen in classrooms, similar moves are evident in teacher education. With the need for greater quality control – whatever that may be – in an expanding market for language instruction, the teacher certification business has expanded accordingly. Most recently, we have seen how it is now rapidly moving towards global standardised conceptions of what a ‘good teacher’ is, a conception that is largely rooted in a Britain-centred view of ELT and a British inspired ‘weak’ variant of Communicative Language Teaching. The ‘model lesson’, now generally structured around the ‘PPP’ (presentation-practice-production) framework is expected of trainees, a script to be unfolded regardless of context, to be acted out with adults and children alike, rendering schools detached from any wider educational goals in the pursuit of an efficient, predictable means towards language proficiency. And again, it is not the global nature of this teacher certification that

is of concern. It is rather the standardisation of routines and interactions that it proposes – that may effectively stand between the students and the teacher recognising each other *as individuals*.

SO WHAT?

There will be those who say that this is simply the way things are going, that the claims I am making are exaggerated and, in any case, our concern is simply to teach language – we don't need to bother about issues of content or the form of methodology as long as the foreign language gets learned. Such a view I believe is naïve at best and irresponsible at worst. It is an illusion to think that our classroom practices have no other impact than the learning of the foreign language. As educators, particularly in the teaching of young students - we are uniquely privileged in helping to shape the views that students have of themselves – not only their view of themselves in relation to language learning, but in relation to learning as a whole, and their relations with authority figures. We may shape, for example, the extent to which they see themselves as active agents in their own education or passive recipients of transmission based education. It is also naïve to think that somehow English teaching is untouched by ideology. Ideology is ingrained in our practice, in the materials we use, in our attitude towards assessment and evaluation, and the issues of relative power and control in the classroom. We may continue as contemporary forces lead us, or we may stop and consider how we want things to be.

Beyond this, we also need to think about what we *can* do. If, for example, the nature of future society will require continual change and adaptation on the part of our students, then we have to ask ourselves whether the scripted, closed nature of the tasks found in McCoursebook are really adequately preparing students. We also have to ask whether the evident dangers for democracy in the emergence of supranational corporations are best confronted by classroom practices which do not involve students in real decision-making and real contributions to the content of their lessons. We also need to question whether the forces of the market – consumerism, pop appeal, and accumulation – *should* be reproduced in educational practice. As the media more and more become centralised into the hands of the very few, and used to persuade us to think and act in certain ways, we need to ask ourselves whether, *as teachers of communication*, we should aim to help our students to develop a questioning attitude to what they read, see and are told, particularly as, for many students, their recurring contacts with English will be in situations of vested interests - advertising, sales and marketing, inter-government relations, dealings with multinational corporations, politically motivated media, and so on.

A 'FUTURES CURRICULUM' IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

It is clear that any answers to how we should respond – if at all - to the issues I raise here will be a very personal one. This will to a certain extent depend on one's own sets of values and priorities, and indeed political stance. My concern is that we move away from any tendencies which exist towards the 'McDonaldisation' in language teaching, and that we ensure that what goes on in our classrooms is educationally nutritious. I am also concerned that within the limited possibilities of language teaching, such as they are, that we make a coherent, principled contribution to shaping the future as we would like it to be. To end this paper, therefore, 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

1 Coherence

The use of themes, topics, projects to bind lessons together and provide coherence and a deeper focus and understanding.

Ask: *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.

Ask: *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.

Ask: *Are students required to make decisions? How do they 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.

Ask: *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.

Ask: *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.

Ask: *Are students asked to think about why language is used that way?*

Finally, we must not believe that the nature of the future is a fact. The future is one we shape. There may well be developments that seem unstoppable, but it is incumbent upon us to look for opportunities in these developments, to ensure that they enrich our lives by stretching our pedagogic imaginations to the full. In language education and the teaching of the young, we have a unique opportunity to help to shape the future as we would like it to be.

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