

THE PROBLEMATIC OF "INNOVATION" IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE DIDACTICS: A PROPOSAL FOR A CONCEPTUAL MODELLING

by Christian Puren
Professor Emeritus of University of Saint-Etienne
www.christianpuren.com

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Abstract

This article proposes modelling of the notion of "innovation" in cultural language didactics in the form of five pairs of antagonistic concepts illustrated by examples taken from the history of the discipline: innovation and continuity, innovation and conformism, innovation and myths, innovation and regression, innovation and change. This problematization leads to a modification of the perception that one may have of the evolution of the discipline, and it finally imposes the idea that it is necessary to modify the still largely dominant conception of change.

Keywords: didactics of language-cultures (DLC), innovation, regression, myth, progress, change

Introduction

This article takes up the notes I had prepared for a participation, together with Jean-Marc Defays, in a round table organized on the first day of the conference and entitled "Innovation or Progress". It retains its very synthetic form, which in any case suits its purpose, namely to propose a model of the problematic suggested by this title in order to elicit reactions from my co-speaker and the audience. I will limit myself to illustrating each of the five pairs of antagonistic concepts that make up this model - innovation and continuity, innovation and conformity, innovation and myths, innovation and regression, innovation and change - with a few examples drawn from the history of the didactics of languages and cultures (henceforth DLC). These antagonisms would certainly need to be developed and other examples could be cited, but the conclusion would undoubtedly be the same, namely that these antagonisms cannot be properly managed without abandoning the conception of innovation, which is still largely dominant in DCL as elsewhere, like that of an instrument that would be necessary and sufficient to ensure constant and linear progress: it is necessary, in other words, to "change the change".

1. Innovation and continuity

1) One of the main conclusions I reached at the end of some 450 pages of my *History of Methodologies* (Puren 1988a), and at the end of the ten years of research I had devoted to it, was "[t]he permanence, beyond fashions and even 'revolutions', of the fundamental problems to which our era, like the preceding ones, is striving to provide the solutions that suit it best" (p. 261 ed. 2012). Among these problems are the status and functions of L1 in the L2 classroom, the balance between heteronomy and autonomy in the conduct of the learning process, or the respective places of reflection on language and mechanical training. Here are three examples:

- The interlanguage hypothesis and constructivism came in the 1970s to contradict the then-dominant behaviorist theory, forcing the restoration of an important place for metalinguistic reflection and L1 in L2 learning.

- The flipped classroom can be seen as a means not of eliminating the lecture (which would, in any case, constitute a revival of the heteronomy-autonomy problematic), but of revisiting this lecture by means of technology, that mobilized in the production and dissemination of "video capsules", in which the teacher makes a lecture presentation of the contents of his or her course.

- Education for plurilingualism leads us to consider the classroom, in the image of a plurilingual society, as a natural training ground for the joint management of several languages, and thus to revalue the metalinguistic activities of comparison between languages.

- In the action perspective, the greater autonomy left to learners in the initial phase of designing their action then legitimizes greater directivity on the part of the teacher, as a specialist in the language-culture, in the work of linguistic and cultural preparation of that action (cf. Puren 2014d).

2. Innovation and conformity

Innovations often create "fashion effects" which mean that, at all times, experiments tend to focus on the same types of innovation and approaches in a way that, paradoxically, is therefore a matter of a certain conformism. It is much rarer - because it is much more difficult - to innovate in relation to the innovations that are themselves underway, i.e. to make a disruption. If this concept of "disruption" is subject to criticism, one of its interests is to point out the fact that it can consist in operating a reversal of direction with respect to what is considered at one time as the path of progress, i.e. a regression (I will come back to this later in point 4).

This paradoxical relationship between innovation and conformity is constant in the history of DCL, as evidenced by the fact that new ideas always come from the dominant ideas in society at the time, ideas that historians, philosophers, and sociologists consider to mark what they call the "history of ideas. Given this constancy, there are many examples that can be given:

(1) In language didactics, we find in the "teaching machines", which proposed language learning solely by means of batteries of structural exercises, the same idea of assembly lines as in the Fordist factories.

(2) The French audiovisual methodology, centered on the intensive joint use of the fixed film and the tape recorder, appears and spreads at the time of the aforementioned "technological revolution".

(3) At the time of the emergence of the communicative approach, it was the "information and communication revolution" that was taking hold in all fields of the humanities.

(4) The "learner-centeredness" cannot be understood without putting it in the perspective of the development of individualistic ideology in Western societies.

(5) The action perspective appears¹ at a time when its reference form of action, the project, has already become widespread in other fields such as the management of companies, organizations and administrations confronted, due to their size and the complexity of their environment, with great strategic uncertainties.

(6) Innovations based on neurological research using brain imaging have multiplied in recent years, with the emergence of concepts such as "neuro-education", "neuro-advertising", "neuro-management", a list that could not miss the one of "neurodidactics".

(7) In DCL, the notion of "mediation" will undoubtedly meet the same fate in the years to come. The addition of rubrics for assessing this language activity in the February 2018

¹ "Reappears," in fact, because the project first appeared in pedagogy, in the first decades of the twentieth century, with precursors such as Dewey in the US, Decroly in Belgium, or Freinet in France (see Puren 2017c).

CEFR *Supplemental Volume* is to be situated in the "mediation galaxy" highly visible in contemporary social sciences (cf. Puren 2019b).

The history of all these phenomena of osmosis between the history of ideas and the history of DCL is to be made (see already for example my article 2007c, whose draft I take up and complete above). This history will undoubtedly have to integrate the evolution of ideas in pedagogy, with which DCL is necessarily linked: behaviourism, the use of audiovisual technologies, the focus on the teacher, among other things, have given rise at the same time to innovations in other school disciplines. In short, up to now, innovations in DCL have simply replicated those that were being made elsewhere at the same time.

3. Innovation and myths

The idea that hope in innovation can be based on "myths" is not new, but the use of this term, at least in a frequent way, appears with the criticism, developed by some neurologists themselves, of "neuromyths"², many of which concern the possible applications of neuroscience to education in general, and language learning in particular. If not the term, at least the idea, also appears in the criticisms aimed in particular at the unreasonable expectations generated by the use of digital technology in education. The December 2019 issue of the journal *Éducation permanente* is entitled "Le numérique : une illusion pédagogique ? ", but reading its presentation on the journal's website³ leaves little doubt that the question mark is merely a rhetorical precaution:

Convinced or wary, trainers have integrated the use of digital technology into their practices. The market has seized on this new niche and many organizations specialize in "digital transformation" support, often confusing digital investment with pedagogical innovation. In reality, the infatuation with digital technologies generates as many illusions as disillusion, and the positive representations they enjoy are partly based on myths, as no research has demonstrated their particular effectiveness in terms of learning.

This is about adult education, but many of the same findings could be cited, older, concerning school education. In the November 2012 "Dossier de veille" of the Institut Français d'Éducation (IFÉ), Rémi Thibert writes thus, about several "meta-analyses" on ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) in school education, and thus on a great deal of field research:

Meta-analyses attempt to answer the question of the effectiveness of ICT objectively, based on quantifiable evidence (e.g., test scores). Most conclude that technology has a moderate (if any, and sometimes even negative) impact on student outcomes. (p. 5)

The same finding is echoed by OECD experts in a 2015 report titled *Connected to Learn? Students and New Technologies*. They acknowledge that "students who use computers moderately at school tend to be more proficient in electronic reading comprehension than students who use them infrequently" (*sic!*)⁴. But they go on to say: "However, students who use computers very frequently in school perform much worse in reading comprehension, even after controlling for their background. Their assessment extended to two other domains analyzed in the PISA surveys is particularly negative:

On average, over the past decade, countries that have made significant investments in information and communication technologies in education have seen no significant improvement in student achievement in reading, mathematics and science.

² Without hyphen... You can see the numerous answers that a search on this word gives in a search engine on the Web.

³ http://www.education-permanente.fr/public/articles/mail.php?id_revue=1758.

⁴ The opposite would have been surprising! This type of assessment reminds me of the surveys in the USA, in the 60's, comparing the efficiency of the "reading method" still used at that time in the school teaching of foreign languages and the audio-oral methodology, which had been carried out on thousands of students. The only convincing results of these surveys were that students read better with the reading method, but that they understood and expressed themselves better orally with the audio-oral method...

More unexpected, because it goes against the idea that digital innovation would drive pedagogical innovation, is this remark by the coordinators of the aforementioned issue of the journal *Éducation permanente*, Emmanuelle Betton and Jacques Pondaven (2019), according to the summary available online:

Based on several articles presented in this dossier, [the authors] also invite us to consider the relationship with digital technology as a sign of a managerial approach to training and a sidelining of pedagogical issues.

In a book devoted to innovation in education, *L'innovation pédagogique : Mythes et réalités* (Retz, 2017), André Tricot reviews a number of beliefs that he believes to be unfounded concerning nine pedagogical "innovations"⁵, each of which is analyzed in a chapter with the corresponding "myth" statement as its title: 1) Making students manipulate makes them learn better. 2) Students learn better when they discover by themselves. 3) Building on students' interests improves their motivation and learning. 4) Students learn better in groups. 5) Project-based teaching gives meaning to learning. 6) Classroom situations must be authentic. 7) The classroom must be reversed: conceptual input at home, applications in class. 8) Digital technology allows for innovation in pedagogy. 9) The competency-based approach is more effective. André Tricot rightly considers that some of these "innovations" are not innovations⁶, and that all of them have beneficial effects only to a certain extent and if certain conditions are met.

Here is how some of these reservations are presented following an interview with the author the year the book was published:

Should students be introduced to knowledge? For A. Tricot, this approach, which is also ancient, is very demanding. There is a strong risk that it will fail before the student has acquired the knowledge envisaged. Does group work promote learning? A. Tricot shows that it can increase the difficulty of the task. Group work is only really interesting when it is essential to the task at hand. André Tricot analyzes again the project pedagogy, a heartbreaker he says, to find that it engages the students but is very demanding. The same nuanced judgment on the flipped classroom: it is an opportunity to think about the complementarity between work in class and work outside of class. Preparing before coming to class is not really an innovation. (Jarraud 2017)

4. Innovation and regression

Innovations can objectively cause didactic regressions. This was the case with the application of behaviourist theory to the teaching of grammar: the structural exercise which became necessary in the 1960s led to a shortening of the long, cautious and progressive procedure of school grammar teaching which had been dominant until then, making learners jump directly from the presentation of new language forms to their mechanical training, without going through the phases of identification, conceptualization and application which were nevertheless indispensable in the framework of extensive teaching (cf. Puren 010). The first use of computers, in the early 1970s, extended the use of structural exercises, which then provided the model for CAE (Computer Assisted Instruction) "exercises", as did the use of language laboratories, technological innovation in the 1970s, which were used almost exclusively for these same exercises.

The application of the "flipped classroom" to language teaching/learning provides another example of an innovation that is actually "reactionary": the direct methodology of the early twentieth century, in fact, had done away with student preparation before class (it was then mostly translations, then corrected in class) on the grounds that the only way to avoid students

⁵ In a 2015 lecture (slideshow available online), A. Tricot addressed some of these statements, and some others.

⁶ It is even most of these "innovations" - which are in fact beliefs legitimizing devices and practices considered to bring progress - that have a long history in education in general, and in language didactics in particular: apart from the seventh one, these statements are part of the official doxa such as can be found in the current official instructions concerning the teaching of modern languages in France.

going through the intermediary of their native language to understand new material was to have them discover it in class (cf. Puren 2018a).

On the other hand, some backward steps can be beneficial. This was the case, at the end of the 1900s, with the reaction of teachers to the dogmatism into which some official promoters of direct methodology had fallen. In the name of pragmatic eclecticism, these teachers demanded a return to certain procedures of the traditional methodology known as "grammar-translation". One of them, Auguste Pinloche, defended this position in an article from 1908 which he entitled very significantly "Reaction and Progress".

Another example of positive reactivation of old approaches is provided by the authors of French communicative textbooks, who have all reintroduced from level B2, and even sometimes from level B1, the reference activity of the previous methodology - the active methodology of the 1920s-1960s - namely the collective oral commentary in class on authentic documents.⁷

Finally, innovation can be beneficial for some students, and negative for others, for whom it constitutes a regression. This is the case, if there is no parallel implementation of energetic forms of support or even positive discrimination, of the so-called "learner-centredness", which, as Monsieur de La Palice would say, favours only the "learners", i.e. the pupils already actively engaged in the learning activity; It is also the case of differentiated teaching, from which the best students will benefit the most, as they will be able to go faster and further; or again, of the flipped classroom, which will benefit the most motivated and the most autonomous.

5. Innovation and change

Innovation is always linked to experimentation, in which, most of the time, well-trained teachers, placed in the most favorable conditions possible, invest heavily for a limited time. These characteristics subsequently constitute as many limits for a real "change", i.e. for a generalization and perpetuation of the innovation among a large number of teachers in their "ordinary" classes throughout their (long) school years. To the point that one of the "scientific" laws of DCL can be stated as follows: "The more successful an experiment is, the less generalizable it is" (Puren 078). Moving from the problematic of innovation to the problematic of change would involve in particular:

- to reorient at least part of the research on this problematic of change, moving, as I propose in the title of one of my articles, "from accounts of experimentation to research on the ordinary uses of innovations (Puren 2016d) ;

- to conceive the implementation of innovation in a systemic perspective, that is to say, integrated into a global institutional strategy taking into account all the parameters at stake; in a project aiming at the sustainable diffusion of "digital culture" in the university culture in the field of "Foreign Languages, Literature and Cultures" (in French LLCE, "Langues, Littératures et Cultures Étrangères"), I had thus identified what seemed to me to be the "seven pillars of sustainable change" (I take up again below the sub-titles of my presentation of this project in a collective work):

1. *Involve students from the very beginning of the project.*
2. *Start from the students' digital culture.*
3. *Define the scope of the change.*
4. *Take into account the different levels of investment among teachers.*
5. *Search for investment savings.*
6. *Implement the project approach.*
7. *Putting student assessment at the heart of the system.* (Puren 2017b)

⁷ Even if apparently none of these authors, nor any communicative methodologist to my knowledge, has realized this. The cognitive operations of this commentary on authentic documents can be found in the instructions of the PIRLS and PISA tests. See also Maurer & Puren 2019, note 45 p. 176. pp. 64-65 and pp. 211-212.

Conclusion

The dominant conception of innovation in DCL still seems to me to be based on two interrelated elements. These are:

- the scientist ideology of the continuous progress, which makes consider what is new as being of this fact and in itself better than what is old⁸;
- and the optimization-substitution paradigm: we look for the best in the absolute, so that if we are convinced that we have found something better (and this is necessarily the case when it is new: cf. the previous element), we consider that it must necessarily replace what was done before.

From now on, in DCL, it is necessary, on the one hand, to no longer think of innovation in itself but in relation to change, and on the other hand, to "change the change", that is to say, to consider it essentially (in the strong sense of this adverb) as a process of permanent enrichment of a "methodological patrimony" that must remain entirely at the disposal of teachers. The paradigm that must now prevail in DCL is that of adequacy-addition: the ability of teachers to adapt to the complexity of the questions they are asked depends in fact on the plurality of answers they are able to mobilize. And the approach that must now be adopted is a "plurimethodological approach" (cf. Maurer & Puren 2019, pp. 208-209) that does *not* refrain from borrowing from the various methodological matrices available (cf. Puren 073), nor any innovation, but which, contrary to a purely empirical eclecticism, maintains two permanent requirements: that of the synergy between the different borrowings and innovations, and that of the maintenance of a certain coherence, necessarily conceived according to the language and cultural objectives defined as priorities.

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⁸ For examples of this scientific ideology in the CEFR, see Puren 2015f, chap. 3, pp. 9-12.

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