

WHAT REMAINS OF THE IDEA OF PROGRESS IN LANGUAGE TEACHING?

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Summary

"Progress is no longer just a hope, but a danger, no longer just a solution, but a problem to be posed and analyzed as such. Four propositions are made corresponding to this observation: 1. the perception of progress depends closely on the dominant values of the moment. 2. Progress in knowledge can be progress in uncertainty. 3. Progress in one area may cause regressions in another. 4. Progress in one area can be a regression in another. Each of these propositions is illustrated by several short examples drawn from the evolution of foreign language didactics in schools in France since its constitution a century ago. Two postfaces are published following this text, one dated 2008 ("Ten years later"), the other dated 2018 ("Twenty years later"), which take up these proposals to point out their permanence or modifications by means of new current examples.

Introduction

We know that at the heart of the modern idea of progress, as bequeathed to us by the 19th century, was the conviction that the permanent increase in scientific knowledge and technological capacities should necessarily lead to a simultaneous and continuous movement of economic, social and moral progress. We also know that this optimistic conception of progress has been undermined, especially over the last half-century, by the dangers, failures and devastation caused in particular by research on the atom (the military use of nuclear fission) and on the cell (genetic manipulation), as well as by the numerous perverse effects of the development of rich countries (pollution, depletion of non-renewable resources, industrial food, unemployment, exclusion, exploitation of poor countries, forced emigration, ghettoisation of certain districts...).

One can legitimately be irritated by the intellectual ease with which these criticisms are too often made in the media. But calling a cake a "cream pie" does not, by the mere virtue of the name, make the pastry, the fruit or the possible pits disappear: whether we like it or not, we can no longer continue to believe in "progress" in any field whatsoever with the same calm assurance and insouciance as in the past. This suspicion applies to the human sciences in particular (it is indeed above all the progress of humanity itself that we doubt...), and language didactics, which is part of it, cannot escape this general questioning: the future progress of knowledge in linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and other neurosciences can no longer be naively considered as necessary and sufficient conditions for the progress of language teaching and learning.

No more so than the previous 'progress' of these sciences has actually been in the past. I have already had occasion, in my *Histoire des méthodologies* (1988), to quote the following lines in which a future Inspector General of English, Denis Girard, listed in 1968, at the height of the era of 'applied linguistics', what constituted in his eyes the four fundamental principles of any 'modern pedagogy' of languages:

- firstly, isolate the oral system from the written system;
- adopt a frankly 'behaviourist' rather than 'mentalist' attitude;
- create a constant need for communication;
- avoid any reference to the mother tongue in teaching practice (quoted in C. Puren 1988, p. 387).

And I pointed out that of these four principles, which were unanimously considered at the time as "scientific achievements" of language didactics, only the third one (and even then) had resisted for three short decades until today. This should make everyone wary of the "progress" periodically announced by specialists in the so-called "reference" sciences of didactics, or even (a typically French speciality in the same way as snails and frogs' legs, and also pleasantly exotic in the eyes of other Europeans) imposed in principle at the same time on every teacher in every school in our country by administrative means.

It is not a question of giving in to the pessimism which, according to certain informed observers, characterises the current state of mind of the French, nor even less to the millenarian catastrophism of the approach to the year 2000, but of taking into account the intellectual environment in which we live, in which progress is no longer just a hope, but a danger, no longer just a solution, but a problem to be posed and analysed as such.

This is precisely what I have chosen to do in this article, in the unconventional form of four proposals briefly illustrated by a succession of short examples drawn from the evolution of school-based language teaching in France since its inception a century ago.

1. The perception of progress is closely linked to the prevailing values of the time

This is one of the most obvious lessons that seem to emerge from the historical evolution of foreign language teaching methodologies in France:

a) When Louis Liard, vice-rector of the Académie de Paris, presented the spirit of the general reform of the education system in 1902, which included the imposition of direct methodology for the teaching of modern languages (instruction of 31 May 1902), he said

***We must act**, or we will wither away; we must face the currents, or we will be left on the shore like a wreck. Therefore, a national education that is not resolutely modern in substance and spirit would not only be a harmless anachronism; it would become a national peril* (quoted in C. Puren 1988, p. 100, emphasis added),

It poses as a condition and motor of progress an active principle which invalidates in the teaching of foreign languages all the traditional methodology oriented towards the passive reception of classical texts, hence the -status of the indirect method (translation)-, in favour of an immediate use of foreign languages for personal communication, -hence the status of the direct method (learning the foreign language through the foreign language) in the new methodology.

b) Audiovisual methodology was developed in France between the end of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, at a time intellectually marked by the theme of the 'technological revolution'. The effect of what can be called 'technological ideology' (i.e. the idea that technology itself would bring progress) was reflected in the design of the audiovisual teaching unit, which was built on the basis of maximum didactic integration¹ around a single medium (the 'basic dialogue'), the presentation of which made use of both image and sound reproduction techniques.

c) The so-called "communicative" approach, the notional-functional version of which has strongly influenced the official instructions for English over the last ten years or so, and more recently those for other languages, was developed in Europe in the early 1970s, at a time intellectually marked by the theme of the "communication revolution".

d) The same type of coincidence (which of course is no more than a coincidence) could be noted between the demand for learner empowerment in language didactics (noticeable in the official French instructions from 1985 onwards) and the appearance in the history of Western ideas of what Pierre Rosanvallon has called "the auto galaxy" (according to P. Dumouchel and J.-P. Dupuy 1983, p. 17).

2. Progress in knowledge can be progress in uncertainty

One of the great epistemological lessons of the contemporary scientific adventure is that progress in knowledge often leads to the discovery of complexity². And this is precisely what we find in many recent developments in language didactics:

a) The competences targeted, which were previously limited to language activities (written and oral comprehension and expression) now include the different components of the so-called "communication competence" (language, but also referential, discursive, socio-cultural, strategic), which are more difficult to define in theory, and more difficult to teach in practice

b) The linguistic description of reference, which was previously limited to verbal and grammatical morphologies and to a structural description of the phrase, has diversified into a plurality of approaches (in particular pragmatics, textual grammar and linguistics of enunciation) which are themselves complex and difficult to articulate.

¹ Maximum didactic integration occurs when a maximum number of teaching/learning activities are organized from a single support. This support is a literary text in the active methodology of the 1920s-1960s (and up to the present in the official methodology of Spanish), and a basic dialogue based on communicative situations of everyday life in the so-called "second generation" audio-visual methodology as implemented in the current first cycle textbooks of German, English, Italian and Russian.

² In contrast to the concept of "complicated", in which it is believed that the description of the object is not currently available but can be achieved later through the progress of knowledge, the concept of "complex" postulates that a comprehensive description, a perfect understanding and a total control of the object can never be achieved. A complex object is in fact an object whose components are: 1) plural, 2) diverse, 3) interrelated, 4) variable, 5) unstable, 6) contradictory and 7) impossible to observe without effects caused by the very act of observation.

c) From the conception of language learning progress as a cumulative acquisition of words, expressions and grammatical rules (in the direct methodology) and then as a successive assembly of basic automatisms (in the audiovisual methodology³) - acquisition or assembly considered to be collective - we have passed, with the cognitivist hypothesis⁴ currently in force, to that of the permanent construction/deconstruction of an "interlanguage" specific to each learner and defined as a complex process inaccessible to linguistic description⁵.

d) The same applies to cultural learning, which is no longer seen as the cumulative acquisition of objective knowledge but as a personal and therefore partly unpredictable journey of intercultural discovery.

e) The definition, in the cognitivist theory, of "positive" errors relating to hypotheses that the learners have tested and that turn out to be false, makes the teacher's evaluation of his students' productions even more problematic than in the past. These errors, which should not be penalized but valued, are often difficult to separate from the others by analysis.⁶

f) "Learner-centredness" would require the teacher to move from a single teaching based on a universalist methodology to a diversified teaching according to the individual learning types and strategies of each of his or her students, which is neither possible nor desirable in a group teaching context.⁷

3. Progress in one area may lead to regressions in another

Such a phenomenon is characteristic of interventions in complex environments, and there are many examples of it in school didactics:

a) The increase in the number of authentic documents in the didactic units of current (third generation) audiovisual courses has weakened the quantitative and qualitative control that designers can exercise over the lexical and grammatical content of each unit.

b) The implementation of the functional (*i.e.* speech act) approach in these same courses produces the same effect, since their designers now have to diversify the linguistic realizations of the same speech acts by varying the socio-cultural parameters of differentiated communication situations.

c) The simultaneous inclusion in the recent official instructions⁸ of linguistic description by speech acts and the cognitivist hypothesis means that four different approaches (lexical, thematic, grammatical and functional) are juxtaposed, the concrete articulation of which is problematic both in textbooks and in classroom practice

d) The final version of a part of the literary text explained, reintroduced in the 1995 version of the "baccalauréat", no doubt has its advantages. But because of the strong modelling power of this examination on learning strategies throughout the second cycle, it risks leading teachers to considerably reduce or even totally abandon the principle of the initial explanation of misunderstood words and phrases in the foreign language. Now this "direct principle", even if it cannot be and has never been absolute⁹, does not seem to me to be able to be abandoned without significant risks of didactic regression.

³ At least in its first generation (the 1960s), which was heavily influenced by behaviourist theory.

⁴ In this hypothesis, foreign language learning is seen as an internal mental process specific to each learner.

⁵ On interlanguage as a complex process, see the excellent work by K. Vogel 1995.

⁶ Research on error analysis, on which didacticians had placed great hopes in the 1970s and 1980s, has become increasingly rare.

⁷ On the notion of 'learner-centeredness' in the school context, see my 1995 article, which is entirely devoted to its critique.

⁸ Instructions of 1995 for LV1 and 1996 for LV2.

⁹ It has never been included in official French instructions since 1902, with the notable exception of an instruction (never published) of December 1908.

e) The official methodology for Spanish provides another good example of this proposal 3. In order to encourage students' spontaneity, it recommends that teachers provide the foreign language equivalent of French words or expressions as soon as they are requested by a student who is mentally preparing a sentence or who has already begun to verbalize it: it is clear that such a procedure favors mental translation (which, moreover, it is said to be trying to avoid), and that it limits the use by students of the means they already have at their disposal, i.e. the reuse that is essential for assimilation.

4. Progress for some can be a regression for others

This is– contrary to the ideology of progress for all– another characteristic of action in complex environments:

a) The access of an entire age group to “college” and then to “lycée” is obviously a social advance that no one would dream of denying or questioning. The fact remains that, in the teaching conditions that they face, and which have not changed as a result, this progress is not progress for the teachers, who see their difficulties worsen.

b) The end of established methodologies and the entry into a new eclectic era open to the maximum diversity of procedures, techniques and methods¹⁰, are an opportunity for experienced teachers to give free rein to their didactic creativity. But these same phenomena make it more difficult to train beginning teachers, at least those who feel the need to rely on a strong overall methodological coherence from the outset.

c) The same applies to learners. Some– the “good students”, no doubt– will take advantage of this to enrich their own strategies and build up a personal learning methodology that is both rich and adapted. Others, on the contrary, will suffer from the absence of a strong and global teaching coherence on which they would need to rely.

d) The generalization of EILE (“Enseignement d'Initiation aux Langues Étrangères”), with the addition of four years of LV1 learning (from CE1 to CM2) before the end of the 6th year of secondary schooling, will perhaps lead to an improvement in the learning of this language among the best and most motivated pupils, who will above all have benefited from constant monitoring throughout their course. On the contrary, this same addition of four extra years risks accelerating and aggravating, for other pupils with no guaranteed follow-up, the well-known phenomena of demotivation and regression in the mastery of the language which already appear at the beginning of the second cycle. In other words, the work of teachers in sections adapted to this new teaching (such as 'bilingual' or 'European' sections) will undoubtedly be facilitated, but it will be made even more difficult in the others.

e) Throughout a century of evolution of constituted methodologies, the demands made on teachers have increased and diversified in such a way that the native teacher has increasingly been seen as the 'natural' ideal teacher, at the expense of the non-native teacher.¹¹

f) The implementation of differentiated pedagogy and empowerment in the classroom is clearly a step forward for students, but it implies a significant additional workload for the teacher and increases the cost of managing heterogeneity, which can only increase as a result.

¹⁰ On this point, which I cannot develop here, I refer to my 1994 book.

¹¹ This progression is constant in the evolution that can be observed between the traditional methodology of the end of the 19th century, the active methodology of the beginning of the 20th century, the audiovisual methodology of the 1960s-1970s, and finally the communicative approach of the 1980s-1990s. The only exception is the active methodology of the 1920s-1960s, which was better adapted to French teachers than the previous one. The current cognitive and intercultural approaches, with their emphasis on **learner-centered** contrastive analyses of language 1-language 2 and culture 1-culture 2, tend to give decisive importance to the specific skills of the non-native teacher.

In conclusion

If the notion of "progress in the absolute" no longer has any meaning at this point in the history of ideas in the West, the fact remains that each of us has our own conception of progress, which we will necessarily define according to our own values. And it is mine that I would now like to present - assuming all the subjectivity that it implies - based on the few values that seem to me to be saved from the great relativistic shipwreck in which we have collectively sunk:

a) I believe in the **virtues of consciousness**, and I therefore consider it progress to question progress itself, its ideological functioning, its limits, its self-serving exploitations, its contradictions, its perverse effects.

b) I believe in the **virtues of diversity**, in didactics as well as in politics, society or the biosphere, and that is why I consider that the eclectic period we are currently experiencing in language didactics holds more potential for progress than the previous era of constituted methodologies.

c) I believe in the **virtues of responsibility, freedom and creativity, and this is** why I would consider it a decisive step forward if all the dogmas and prohibitions, still too common among some of those in charge of initial and in-service training for language teachers in France, were to be put to an end. In particular, it would be a decisive step forward if the authors of official instructions and programs were to deal only with what they are institutionally and deontologically responsible for, i.e. the objectives and content, leaving teachers, as teaching professionals, full freedom and responsibility for the means they use to pursue the one and transmit the other.

d) I believe in the **virtues of movement**, which is at least what remains of progress when one is no longer sure of the direction it is going to take or that it should be given, and I therefore consider that the rigorous protection by some of their didactic traditions does not constitute, as they imagine, a valuable stabilization in these times of uncertainty, but quite the opposite, a continuous regression. I am a Hispanist by training, and it is— why hide it?— that I am thinking in particular about the teaching of Spanish in schools in France, and the incredible stagnation that has been imposed on it for several decades (until when?).

e) Finally— and my readers will certainly have understood this long before they reach this point in their reading...— I firmly believe in the **virtues of discussion, dissent, discordance, divergence and dissidence**: modern sciences only ensure the progress of knowledge because the right to public debate and controversy is permanently recognized and used in them, and I do not see how it could or should be any different in French language didactics. This epistemological observation happens to coincide with the analysis of the current state of our discipline as well as with the fundamental democratic values of our country. And this is why I feel triply entitled to state here loud and clear that in language didactics, any normative discourse, whoever the author, the addressee and the object, is proof of inconsistency, unconsciousness, incoherence, incompetence or intolerance: please tick at least one of the five corresponding boxes.

I had originally thought of calling this article "Language didactics: but where is the progress of yesteryear? I was right to change my mind, since in the end I have at least one very reassuring certainty (I hope) to share with all my readers: in school language teaching as elsewhere, the regression in our country of centralizing and authoritarian idiosyncrasies would obviously constitute decisive progress.

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"Ten years later..." (Afterword of September 2008)

I thought it would be interesting to revisit this 1997 article ten years later, precisely at a time when the adoption of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) is expected to lead to significant changes in curricula, textbooks and practices, both in terms of teaching/learning (following the introduction of the action perspective) and assessment (following the introduction of standardized scales of proficiency).

Introduction

I noted in the introduction to this 1997 article that "progress is no longer just a hope, but a danger; no longer just a solution, but a problem to be posed and analyzed as such", and that the same was true of language-culture teaching. I will take up here the four corresponding proposals that I set out in this article by declining this idea, to add to the various examples that I gave, drawn from the history of our discipline, those that inspire me this end of the 2000s. These examples are not intended to be exhaustive - any more than those I gave in 1997 - but they are representative of this permanent questioning that we must maintain with regard to current ideas.

Four proposals

I take up these four proposals, each of which I illustrated with several examples, adding one or more others related to each of the two current novelties, namely the scales of competence levels (EC) and the action perspective (AP).¹²

1. The perception of progress is closely linked to the prevailing values of the time

e) EC: The "positive-ascending" model that the CEFR systematizes in evaluation (only what each person is capable of doing is taken into account, and therefore only their achievements are valued)¹³, corresponds perfectly to the dominant ideology, which values the individual and his or her abilities. "We must be positive" is a slogan that is used in all areas of our society, as can be seen immediately by typing the expression into an Internet search engine.

f) PA: In recent years, managerial thinking has been marked by a shift from what can be called a "communication paradigm" to an "action paradigm". There is talk of "competence-based management" and "project-oriented" companies. One may suspect, as Jean-Pierre BOUTINET does¹⁴, that this is a ruse on the part of company managers (more or less conscious, since we are in the field of ideology): bosses can no longer force their employees to work and control them as before only by informing them and asking them to inform (the communicative approach has also reached its limits here...); but if they leave them a certain margin of autonomy and responsibility in the framework of projects, these employees will motivate and control themselves (p. 308). Any resemblance to the current situation in schools could be more than coincidental...

¹² The alphabetical numbering of these new examples extends that of the 1997 article. ¹³ On the different models of evaluation, see PUREN Christian (2006), "L'évaluation a-t-elle encore un sens?", www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/article.php3?id_article=36. ¹⁴ BOUTINET Jean-Pierre. 1990. *Anthropologie du projet*, Paris: PUF (coll. "Psychologie d'aujourd'hui"), 6th ed. 2001 (1st ed. 1990), 351 p. Developments concerning the influence of dominant ideologies on the evolution of ideas in cultural language didactics can be found in PUREN Christian 2007. "*Cuadernos de Filología Francesa* (Revista del Departamento de Filología Románica, Área de Filología Francesa de la Universidad de Extremadura, Cáceres (España), No. 18, October 2007, pp. 127-143. Also available online at www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article1323

2. Progress in knowledge can be progress in uncertainty

This is clearly one of the most obvious effects of the consideration (progress in knowledge) and implementation (progress in uncertainty) of the CEFR.

On this point, I already refer to slide 50 of my lecture at the IUFM in Nancy¹⁵ and to the oral comments on the following slides. After the "didactic implications" of the CEFR, I present the "didactic complications" that it generates, and that I recall below by the questions I asked there:

g) CE: "How to articulate the assessment of pragmatic competence and the assessment of linguistic competence? "How to assess social action and cultural competence?"

h) PA: "How to integrate the new cognitive model?" "How to integrate the new didactic configuration?"

Two other possible examples of this proposition are

i) EC: The designers of the CEFR proficiency scales explained and rationalised the assessment criteria by basing them on descriptors of observable language behaviour. But on the one hand, the authors of this document honestly admit that they do not have a theory of language competence (CEFR p. 23). On the other hand, when grids are developed for certification tests (and I am one of those who have had this experience, as a member of the Scientific Committee of the DCL, Diplôme de compétence en langues), one realises that the more precise they are, the more their concrete implementation in the evaluation of candidates' productions reveals the incompressible margin of subjectivity of the evaluator, as well as the fragility of the extrapolation operation that must then be carried out to move from observed performances to the attribution of levels of competence.

j) PA: The actional perspective corresponds to a new social objective of reference, which is the training of a "social actor". The aim is to train people who are no longer capable of exchanging information with passing encounters (a social objective which corresponded to the communicative approach), but of working in a foreign language over the long term. However, the appearance of this new component reactivates all the components previously favoured in the history of school didactics of language-cultures: In order to be culturally competent in long-term work with people from other cultures, it is indeed necessary to create a common culture of action (co-cultural component of cultural competence), but also to share values and goals (transcultural component), It is also necessary to have a good knowledge of the culture of others (meta-cultural component), to have distanced oneself from one's own culture and to be aware of the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that are always possible from one culture to another (intercultural component), and also to have agreed on behaviours that are acceptable to all (multicultural component).¹⁶

There is thus an undeniable progress of knowledge with the emergence of a new component of cultural competence, the co-cultural component, adapted to new social challenges. However, the teacher no longer has a single, predetermined orientation for cultural teaching and learning, as was the case before.

3. Progress in one area may lead to regressions in another

f) EC: I warned, in my 2007 conference already cited (see note 4), that progress in the objectivity of evaluation, obtained thanks to the CEFR's descriptors of levels of competence, could, if one were to give in to the fantasy of steering teaching-learning by results, provoke a return to the errors of objective-based pedagogy (see slides 19 to 22 in that conference, with their oral commentary).

¹⁵ "Quelques questions impertinentes à propos d'un Cadre Européen Commun de Référence", Journée des langues de l'IUFM de Lorraine, 9 May 2007. Online conference in the form of a sound presentation: www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article990.

¹⁶ For a more detailed presentation of these different components of cultural competence, see

"La didactique des langues-cultures entre la centration sur l'apprenant et l'éducation transculturelle". Lecture delivered at the International Colloquium in Tallinn, Estonia, 8-10 May 2008. Online lecture, oral version, commentary on slide 3: <http://www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article1774>.

g) PA: With the implementation of project-based pedagogy, there is definite progress in terms of motivation, learner autonomy and the authenticity of what pupils can say. But the teacher's control of the collective progress of language learning becomes all the more difficult. Hence the rule I set out in an article to be published on the APLV website ("The perspective of social action in the didactics of foreign languages and cultures"): "The more autonomous the learners are in carrying out their project, the more directive the teacher will eventually have to be in teaching the language that will be mobilized.

4. Progress for some can be a regression for others

g) EC: Frequent evaluations presented as objective can be a source of motivation for the best, but of stress and demotivation for the weakest.

h) PA: Project-based teaching is certainly a source of satisfaction for the best and most autonomous pupils. On the other hand, it risks making the weakest and most dependent pupils feel guilty, as they are left to their own responsibility in the event of failure.

In conclusion

The values I stated in my 1997 article still seem relevant to me. I therefore continue to believe:

a) the virtues of conscience

I believe that we must apply to the CEFR what I asked to be applied to progress in my 1997 text, and therefore also question "its ideological functioning, its limits, its self-serving exploitations, its contradictions, its perverse effects".

b) the virtues of diversity

Not only does it seem necessary to me to take into account all the components of cultural competence (cf. 2.j above), but more broadly all the previous "didactic configurations"¹³. The interest of project-based pedagogy, in my opinion, is in particular that it makes it possible to integrate the achievements of other progressive pedagogical orientations which are also well known, such as differentiated pedagogy, negotiation pedagogy and contract pedagogy.

c) the virtues of responsibility, freedom and creativity

This is why I am more interested in project-based pedagogy - which was created precisely to develop these values - than in scales of competence levels, which are open to interpretation and exploitation against these same values.

d) the virtues of movement

For me, the main interest of the CEFR, of the action perspective and even of the scales of proficiency is that it leads teachers to ask themselves new questions, and above all to revisit the same questions but from a... new *perspective*. I am pleased to see that even the didactics of Spanish in schools are beginning to move, at least in the first cycle textbooks.

¹³ I presented the concept of "didactic configuration" and the historical evolution of these configurations in school didactics of foreign languages in France in "Comment harmoniser le système d'évaluation français avec le Cadre Européen Commun de Référence" www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article30 (September 2006, slides n° 12 and 13), as well as in the article "De l'approche communicative à la perspective actionnelle", *Le Français dans le monde* n° 347, September 2006, pp. 37-40

e) the virtues of discussion, dissent, discord, divergence and dissent

For the moment, I unfortunately have no reason to be more optimistic on this point today than I was ten years ago. France is one of the countries where reservations and criticism of the CEFR have been the latest and most timid, which led me to rename this document, in the polemical title of my conference already cited in note 4 *above*, a "Common European Framework of **Reference**".

The way in which the Ministry of National Education and the General Inspectorate conducted the affair of the validation of level A2 in the DNB in 2007-2008¹⁴ is unfortunately not likely to change my mind on this point, and consequently I persist, at the end of this postface written in 2008, in the judgement stated at the very end of the conclusion of this 1997 article: "The regression in our country of centralizing and authoritarian idiosyncrasies would obviously constitute decisive progress.

But there are now encouraging signs of change. So, let's be positive, and let's meet again in 2018 for a resolutely optimistic review of the issue...

¹⁴ See <http://www.aplv-languesmodernes.org/spip.php?article1754>, on the APLV website. *Les Langues Modernes* n° 2/1997 page 10/ 10

"Twenty years later..." (Afterword November 2018)

Presentation

The 1997 article gave rise to a first postface ten years later, in September 2008. This one, from November 2018, revisits 'twenty years later' the different 'proposals' I made in it concerning the idea of progress in language and culture didactics, and the different values I felt should be defended in this discipline. I refer, by means of directly 'clickable' computer links, to the various works I have published that correspond to new developments (the inverted classroom, neuroscience, mediation, standardized assessments, the notion of 'sustainable change'), and to those through which I wanted to continue to 'cultivate the virtues of dissent': the questioning of the concepts of 'interculturality', 'representation' and 'innovation'; the ideology of 'good practice'; the errors of the 'bonus island system' in French school education; the undue pretensions and unrealistic proposals of certain sociolinguists for language teaching in the Maghreb; the perverse effects of the dissemination of integration pedagogy in Africa ; the persistent confusion among some EFL didacticians between the communicative approach and the action-oriented perspective; the deficient consideration of the training of language teachers in the use of textbooks; the need to revisit autonomy in school teaching by thinking of it in a complex way in its relation to heteronomy; and finally, in a very general way, the absence of a real scientific debate among EFL didacticians in France

At the end of my 2008 afterword to that same 1997 article, entitled 'Ten Years Later', I concluded:

[...] there are now encouraging signs of change. So, let's be positive and set a date for a resolutely optimistic review of the issue in 2018...

Here we are at the date of this meeting. It was tempting - and I couldn't resist the temptation - to call this new afterword 'Twenty years later', as a nod to the sequel that the French novelist Alexandre Dumas gave to his novel *The Three Musketeers* in the mid-19th century...

The four 'propositions' I made in 1997 and repeated in 2008 concerning the question of progress in the didactics of language-cultures were the following:

- 1. The perception of progress is closely linked to the prevailing values of the time.*
- 2. Progress in knowledge can be progress in uncertainty.*
- 3. Progress in one area may lead to regressions in another.*
- 4. Progress for some can be a regression for others.*

These propositions remain valid today - which is hardly surprising, because they derive directly from the general epistemology of knowledge - and with the same examples I gave 10 years ago; I will simply add two more examples that have become available since then, namely neuroscience and the flipped classroom:

- On proposal 1, I note in my that [blog post dated 8 May 2013](#) that neurosciences often come to justify current pedagogical ideas *a posteriori*.

- Concerning proposal 4:

- The introduction of the flipped classroom can undoubtedly constitute a beginning of progress in university teaching, because of the radical reorganization that it must logically provoke in relation to a tradition that is still often very transmissive. On the other hand, in the teaching of modern languages in schools, this reversed classroom system is a reaction to the 'direct revolution' of the 1900s, which did away with the preparation of students to discover foreign language texts 'directly' and to deal with them 'directly' in the foreign language in the collective oral commentary in class under the guidance of the teacher. For more developments on this issue, I refer to my blog posts of [23 December 2014](#) and [31 January 2016](#) (intervention No. 8 of 1^{er} May 2016), as well as my [2018](#) slide show(a).

- It is likely that neuroscience will bring about progress in the conception of language teaching and learning, whether mother tongue or foreign, even if this seems to me to be yet to be demonstrated. For the time being, they have mainly brought about progress in this area:

- or the a posteriori validation of existing pedagogical ideas (see my remark above on proposal 1),
- or, conversely, the reactivation of what Edgar Morin calls the 'simplification paradigm' (cf. [PUREN 063](#)), i.e. a scientific approach whose limits and perverse effects are already known (cf. my [blog post dated 4 January 2014](#) on the teaching-learning of reading),
- with, lately in France, an instrumentalization in the service of a reactionary pedagogical project (cf. the *Postscript* dated 21 November 2018 to my [blog post dated 8 May 2013](#)).

Some neuroscientists themselves have been warning against what they call "neuromyths" since the beginning: see the article entitled "[Cognitive sciences at school: beware of neuromyths](#)" on the [sciences-cognitives.fr](#) website.

The values I stated in 2008 are also still relevant today, namely the virtues :

- a) of consciousness,
- b) diversity,
- c) responsibility, freedom and creativity,
- d) movement,
- e) discussion, dissent, discord, divergence and dissent.

- Concerning "the virtues of diversity", however, I would now make the reflection more complex, by emphasizing at the same time the necessary permanent tension between diversity and unity: cf. my [2017](#) lecture(e) entitled precisely "Managing complexity in language-culture didactics: thinking jointly about diversity-plurality, heterogeneity and unity".

- With regard to the 'virtues of discussion, dissent, discord, divergence and dissent', I wrote in my 2008 afterword:

I believe that we must apply to the CEFR what I asked to be applied to progress in my 1997 text, and therefore also question "its ideological functioning, its limits, its self-serving exploitations, its contradictions, its perverse effects".

Since then, Bruno MAURER has developed, in his 2011 book, *Enseignement des langues et construction européenne. Le plurilinguisme, nouvelle idéologie dominante* (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines), a very convincing critique of what he rightly calls the "ideology of plurilingualism" of the Language Policy Unit of the Council of Europe. See my [2012](#) book review(a).

I continued to 'cultivate the virtues of dissent' on a number of issues that I felt deserved critical analysis, such as

- the flipped classroom, already mentioned above,
- concepts that are insufficiently interrogated in language-culture didactics, such as 'intercultural' ([2011j](#)), 'representations' (blog post of [4 April 2011](#), [17 April 2012](#) and [30 August 2014](#)) or 'innovation' ([2016d](#), [2018c](#), [blog post of 29 March 2017](#)),
- the ideology of 'good practice' (blog posts of [21 January 2014](#), [17 February 2015](#), [5 January 2016](#), [29 March 2017](#)),
- the errors and the implausible institutional promotion of the "bonus island system" in French school education ([2013d](#), in collaboration with two GFEN colleagues, Maria-Alice MEDIONI and Eddy SABAHI),
- what I consider to be a counter-formative, authoritarian and inadequate conception of teacher inspection in France ([2013j](#)),
- the perverse effects of the spread of integration pedagogy in Africa, especially in language teaching and learning, where it is at the expense of didactic integration ([2016h](#), [2018e](#)),

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- the persistent blindness or denial among some EFL educationalists regarding the structural opposition between the communicative approach and the actional perspective, and their misunderstanding of a complex conception of their relationship as both opposing and complementary methodologies ([2014a](#)),
- the undue claims and unrealistic proposals of some sociolinguists regarding language policy and language teaching in the Maghreb ([2018g](#)),
- the inadequate consideration of initial training of language teachers in the use of textbooks ([2015e](#)),
- the need to revisit the issue of autonomy by taking into account, at least in school language-culture teaching, that of heteronomy, which is its indispensable counterpart ([2014d](#)),
- Finally, the general absence of a real scientific debate among EFL educationalists in France ([2015f](#)).

Among the ongoing developments that I will be watching in the months and probably years to come, there are in particular :

- mediation,

This concept is very present in the humanities in general, and in language didactics in particular. The place it occupies in the [CEFR Supplementary Volume](#) published in February 2018 is one of its recent manifestations. I am due to publish an essay on the subject in the coming months).

- evaluation,

Two ongoing phenomena are changing this issue, namely the rise of:

- of *project-based pedagogy*, in which individual and, even more so, collective self-assessment, both of which are indispensable, raise questions that are, if not new, at least unusual in language-culture didactics,
- and *standardized international* (PIRLS and PISA) or national (e.g. CEDRE in France) *assessments* which currently focus on mother tongues (but PISA will include foreign languages from 2024 onwards), and which broaden the issue of assessment, well beyond that of the *CEFR*, to questions of efficiency and justice in school systems.

- teacher education for sustainable change.

For personal reasons - originally an intervention at university level ([2017b](#)) and for the past three years a series of interventions in Algeria in the context of the ongoing reform of national and foreign language teaching - I have been led to take an interest in a problematic that is constant in foreign language didactics, that of teacher training, but which must be revisited when considered from a perspective of sustainable change, that is, widespread and perennial change ([2018c](#)). My current research is oriented towards fields where intervention is based on well-established knowledge and where the aim is to bring about lasting changes in the attitudes and behaviour of the general public, as is the case in public health, land-use planning and urban policy. In all these fields, research has been developed not **through** intervention (as in the so-called "action research"), but **on** intervention, *i.e.* research on the most appropriate differentiated intervention programs in relation to the differences in the environment of the planned action. It is paradoxical, on reflection, that the didactics of language and culture, which since its emergence nearly half a century ago has been a discipline of intervention (cf. [PUREN 003](#)), has never, to my knowledge, taken an interest in the knowledge and know-how acquired by what is often called, in these other fields and in particular in the field of public health, "intervention research" (a forthcoming article is to be published on the subject).

Next appointment, if I can still do it, in 2028...

Christian PUREN, Castillon-en-Couserans, 21 November 2018