

THE PROBLEMATIC OF LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH IN THE SCHOOL CONTEXT

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First publication

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Abstract (1995)

The aim of this article is to analyze the practical problems posed by the implementation of "learner-centered approach" in school didactics. After showing its inadequacies, we propose to replace it with the idea of "multi-centered approach" (on the learner, the adolescent, the learner, communication, content, language, the teacher, materials, methodology, the group, the institution), whose simultaneous management (through different selections, combinations and modulations) can only be conceived within the framework of complex didactics.

Afterword from June 2024

This short afterword is written almost thirty years after the publication of this article, on the occasion of its publication online in its original French version and English translation on the ResearchGate website.

The various criticisms made of the notion of "learner-centered approach" and of the implementation of needs analysis in the communicative approach still seem to me to be valid, as do the tools used for these criticisms, namely ideology, epistemology and deontology, which constitute the three positions of the "didactological" perspective in complex didactics of languages-cultures (the other two being the methodological and didactic perspectives)¹.

I also consider that these tools remain valid for the analysis of the current situation in our discipline, and that they must also be applied to the new Social Action-Oriented Approach (SAOA), in the development of which we must avoid the same drifts to which the development of the communicative approach gave rise. Some didacticians, in particular, propose building action scenarios on the basis of CEFR competence descriptors, which is a way of maintaining needs analysis as it was conceived in the communicative approach. As a result, the teacher-centeredness is just as open to criticism as the summative hetero-assessment-centeredness. Both this prior analysis of language needs without learner participation, and the inclusion of this type of assessment right from the design of project scenarios, are totally incompatible with the natural pedagogical model of the SAOA, particularly in school didactics, namely project pedagogy and its educational goals².

Acronyms

CA: Communicative Approach

FFL: French as Foreign Language

DLC: Didactics of Languages-Cultures

LCA: Learner-Centered Approach

¹ On these three disciplinary perspectives, see "Les trois perspectives constitutives de la didactique des langues-cultures", <https://www.christianpuren.com/biblioth%C3%A8que-de-travail/002/>. On the notion of "complex didactics", see my manifesto "Pour une didactique complexe des langues-cultures", <https://www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux/2003b/>. [June 2024 note].

² See the "Bibliographies" section of my website (<https://www.christianpuren.com/bibliographies/>) for my many publications on the action-oriented perspective and project-based pedagogy, as well as my forthcoming collaborative work: A. ACAR & C. PUREN 2024, *The social action-oriented approach in language teaching: from social goals to practices*. Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK, Cambridge Scholars Publishing. (The publication, exclusively in hard copy, can be ordered from the publisher's website, <https://www.cambridgescholars.com/pages/buy-a-book.>) [June 2024 note].

The learner-centered approach to the teaching/learning of modern languages is without doubt the fundamental pedagogical and ideological option of the "Modern Languages". Project (René RICHTERICH 1981, p. 9)

There is no one rule that remains valid in all circumstances, and no one instance to which one can always appeal. (Paul FEYERABEND 1975, p. 196)

Introduction

One of the key concepts of the communicative approach (CA) has been, and still is the "*learner-centered approach*" - a concept that is expressed in didactic discourse in numerous expressions such as "learner-centered teaching, learning, evaluation...".

Although CA was originally designed for adult learners, it was subsequently used as the basis for the renewal of the didactics of French as a Foreign Language (FFL)³, before later and more gradually penetrating the school Didactics of Languages-Cultures (DLC) in France *via* the addition, in official instructions, of a notional and functional presentation of linguistic content alongside the traditional lists of points of interest and grammar points⁴. The result is that the concept of "learner-centered approach", as developed within CA, interferes with the closely related concept of "active methods", central to the discourse of school pedagogues if not to classroom practice since the end of the 19th century. The pedagogue G. COMPAYRÉ wrote in 1880:

The soul is not inert matter that lets itself be shaped as it pleases, that passively obeys everything that is done to it: far from it, it constantly reacts, mingling its own action with that of the master who instructs it (p. 383).

The active method -along with the direct method and the oral method- forms the core of direct methodology at the turn of the 20th century. E. BAILLY explained the corresponding didactic principle in 1903: "A language [...] is learned by living that language!" (p. 178).

The aim of this article is in no way to cast doubt on the need for active methods in language teaching, but to question the concept of "*learner-centered approach*" in school DLC (taking the example I know best, that of France) in order to assess its place, function and relevance.

1. Learner-centered approach at the origins of the communicative approach

1.1. Learner-centered approach and ideology

Based on his long personal experience, Frank MARCHAND examines the reality of "pedagogical progress" in the official instructions for French as a mother tongue over the last century:

It's hard to say whether these changes can be described as progress. However, it must be said that a number of them represent changes that are exactly in line with the evolution of social values outside school. To move from a school where we evolve from effort to pleasure, from censorship to freedom, from copying to invention, is also to move

³. See for example L. PORCHER 1980.

⁴. See, for example, the instruction of Nov. 14, 1985 for English 1st cycle, the instruction of Feb. 5, 1987 for English 2nd cycle, and most recently the draft programs for the 6th grade for German and Portuguese (M.E.N. 1995).

from one social state to another. In this respect, progress in pedagogy is but a copy of "social progress"... (1985, p. 123).

And I myself have repeatedly suggested that not only, as L. Marchand writes, have successive methodologies -CA included- always been developed according to the dominant ideological models, and that the break with the previous methodology was conceived in each of them on the ideological model of change in force at the time in society⁵.

1.1.1 Humanist and democratic ideology

On the one hand, the work and recommendations of the Council of Europe, which gave rise to the CA in Europe, explicitly refer to a certain ideology. It is, as J.L.M. TRIM reminded us in 1981, "the doctrine of Human Rights and [...] the notion of lifelong education", whose first objective, "to lead each individual to organize his or her own experience", "is placed in the perspective of an approach centered on the learner and his or her motivations" (p. VIII). Some FFL didacticians have taken it up, such as Robert GALISSON, who in 1980 described CA as:

- **democratic** (*born of consultation between learners and teachers, who debate together about educational objectives and how to achieve them*);
- **humanistic** (*it places the learner at the center of its concerns and seeks to satisfy his or her needs, by developing the institutional framework that supports them*) (p. 23, underlined in the text).

On the other hand, the ideology of the new approach is implicit, and I have proposed elsewhere (C. PUREN 1994a, p. 52) to distinguish between two models, that of contemporary individualism and that of the "information revolution" or "communication revolution".

1.1.2 The individualist model

In the individualist model, the pursuit of the good is achieved primarily through individual fulfillment and happiness. Or, to use an ideological formulation, individual fulfillment and happiness are goals **in themselves**.

We can recognize this model at work in most of the key concepts in DLC over the last fifteen years - individual needs, expectations and motivations, individual learning strategies, individualization, autonomy, self-directed learning, resource centers... These include, of course, "learner-centered approach". In this last expression (as in the variants mentioned in the introduction), the use of the singular definite ("**the** learner") is not neutral, nor is the morphological expression of the action ("centered"), which, by erasing the various agents involved (the teacher, of course, but also the institution, the authors of textbooks, the trainers, the didacticians), isolates each learner in the individuality of his or her own approach.

This model has inevitably weighed on the place and function assigned in the CA to the learner-centered approach, the most obvious effect having been to undermine the importance of the formative and collective dimension of all institutional learning, as René RICHTERICH very pertinently pointed out as early as 1985:

Other misconceptions would not have arisen if the notion of need had not been constantly associated with those of personal pleasure and satisfaction. Admittedly, the aim was to redefine the central role of the learner in the interplay of the components of training systems, but institutions and social groups also have needs, and therefore requirements, on which, incidentally, those of the individual depend (p. 29).

1.1.3 The communication revolution model

1.1.3 The communication revolution model

In the model of the communication revolution, any increase in the ability to communicate and in the amount of information exchanged would **in itself** imply individual and social progress. Hence the importance of communication between learners in all its forms (particularly *peer work*) in the new approach, to which it gives its name, and where it occupies the central place reserved,

⁵. See e.g. C. PUREN 1994a, pp. 46-54.

in any established methodology, for concepts to which the principle of end-means homology is applied. Thus, for Louis PORCHER, "what has come to be called 'communicative methodologies'" are "ways of teaching that aim to focus on communication both as an approach and as an objective" (1995, p. 16).

1.1.4 The revolutionary model

But beyond the change in the ideological model of reference in relation to the previous methodology (the information revolution in CA vs. the technological revolution in audio-visual methodology), there is a fundamental continuity, namely the permanence of the revolutionary model, which we find in the discourse of communicative methodologists through its various characteristic features.

One of the characteristics of this model is its radicalism, which justifies a total break with previous methodology. Henri HOLEC writes, after emphasizing that each learner has his or her own characteristics and "trajectory of acquisition":

*Different learners therefore learn in different ways, both in terms of content and progression. Pedagogically, this implies a **constant** adaptation of objectives and content, and therefore of learning materials, to the evolution of **each** learner (1981, p. 74, emphasis added)⁶.*

A second characteristic is methodological abstraction, with radicalism leading to the elaboration of an ideal methodology for an ideal learner, in the face of which reality tends to be experienced only as a set of constraints. In the text quoted above, Henri HOLEC considers that "the permanent and momentary characteristics of the learner as a learner" (the "preferred form of learning", the "type of memory", "qualities such as perseverance, sociability"...) are "internal constraints" which, like "external constraints" ("spatial-temporal framework", "duration of learning", "distribution of total time", "material conditions"...), "**weigh** on learning" and can represent "**obstacles**" to that learning (pp. 77-78, my emphasis).

A third characteristic, linked to the two previous ones, is a standardizing and authoritarian tendency towards teachers and learners, who will be required to radically question not only their practices, but even their personal convictions. This can be seen in the following passage, written in 1981 by the secretariat of the Modern Languages Project Group:

*If the effects of pedagogical innovation are not to remain partial and provisional, but to lead to **significant** and **lasting changes** in teaching **practice**, [...] **learners** must find that the new methods lead to **success** and are **enjoyable** to follow; they must **understand** and **accept** the foundations of the aims and methods; **teachers** must be convinced that the new working methods will be more **effective** and bring them greater **satisfaction** in their work (COUNCIL FOR CULTURAL COOPERATION, pp. 191-192, emphasizes in the text).*

And the second passage below seems to me to be all the more exemplary in that the author arrives at an internal contradiction, his text, which is also an act of communication vis-à-vis teachers, violating the principles set out at the very moment he lays them down (cf. the passage I have underlined):

Teachers who teach a program based on communication must be prepared to accept that communication is a free interaction between people of all talents, opinions, races and socio-cultural backgrounds, and that communication in a foreign language in particular

⁶. I would like to make it clear that the quotations from educationalists included in this chapter strictly indicate, in my view, only the punctual presence in their writings of a trace of the ideology in question, and in no way any general orientation of their work as a whole, or even of the texts from which the quotations are taken. Thus, a few pages after the lines quoted here, H. Holec writes with great pragmatism: "The empowerment of learners should not be considered as the 'remedy' for all the ills of language learning, and should therefore be seen in its relation to the traditional approach to teaching: it is from the interaction between the two approaches that new pedagogies will emerge, in line with the educational orientation that has been taking shape in Europe in recent years" (p. 81).

*serves international understanding, human rights, democratic development and individual enrichment. **It therefore requires above all an open mind, a spirit of self-determination and respect for others, their history, their environment, their attitudes and their opinions*** (Christoph EDELHOF 1981, p. 83, I emphasize).

A fourth characteristic, also linked to the previous ones, is the emphasis placed in the trainers' discourse on the need not only to believe in the new methodological principles, but also to "believe in them", *i.e.* to invest in them emotionally. The following passage, like the others, is taken from an official publication of the Council of Europe, and more specifically from a chapter devoted to reports on experiences of implementing CA in the field. It seems to me highly revealing of the corresponding ideological effect, insofar as the author acknowledges, with great intellectual honesty, that there is no direct link between the results and the methodology used:

It was encouraging to see the enthusiasm and passion with which the teachers involved in the projects carried out their lessons. One possible explanation was, of course, that many of the learners were more motivated because they found the teaching more interesting and saw that they were actually making step-by-step progress in the language. And yet, the teaching was sometimes very traditional, often including functional elements, but rarely a communicative approach in the true sense of the word (Rune BERGENTOFT 1981, p. 159)⁷.

1.2 Learner-centeredness and epistemology

The theoretical emphasis on learner-centered approach from the very beginnings of CA can be partly attributed to the influence of two new epistemological models: subject epistemology and the systemic approach.

1.2.1 The epistemology of the subject

It's no coincidence that the application of structuralist linguistics to language teaching -with the required subordination of learning strategies to materials designed from an "objective" description of the language object- coincided with the triumphant era of structuralism in the Human Sciences, one of whose orientations was to consider man more as an object unconsciously subjected to external forces than as a free and conscious subject. And it's no coincidence either that the emphasis on learner-centered approach in DLC coincides with the shift, in the Human Sciences, from an epistemology of the object to an epistemology of the subject: historians are revaluating the role of great figures; marketing specialists are proposing that companies move from a product logic to a customer logic; and in DLC, communicative methodologists are giving priority to learners' hypotheses over constituted linguistic objects (the objective descriptions of language produced by linguists), and to individual learning strategies over constituted methodological objects (methodologies).

1.2.2 The systemic approach

As for the systemic approach, this is an interdisciplinary problematic which began to develop in Europe at the end of the 60s, and in which the aim is to develop methodological principles of knowledge and intervention concerning "systems", *i.e.* complex assemblies made up of sub-assemblies and interacting elements whose interdependence ensures the maintenance of a certain permanence over time. This approach has given rise to what is known as "systemic analysis", in which emphasis is placed "on the relationships between available means, objectives pursued and constraints internal or external to the system" (Bernard WALLISER 1977, p. 10).

The members of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project have consistently advocated the systemic approach:

⁷. An analysis very similar to the one I've just developed on the revolutionary model can be found in the passage R. RICHTERICH devoted to "non-conventional approaches" (*Community Language Learning, suggestopedia and the Silent Way*) in his 1985 book. In particular, we read: "What is striking is that they [these approaches] all claim to respect the learner's personality, but as they all believe they hold the truth or some truth in the matter, they nonetheless impose on everyone, each in its own way, a single way of teaching and learning foreign languages to which, if one wants to succeed, one must fully adhere" (p. 10). But the propagators of CA have not always been exempt from the same reproach.

–in terms of their objective, to develop *Systems for Modern Language Learning by Adults*: this is the title of the first major study published by the Council of Europe in 1973 under the direction of J.L.M. TRIM, which includes a graphic model of the proposed systemic analysis approach;

–and with regard to the preferred analysis tool, “learner needs analysis”, which the same J.L.M. TRIM, then advisor to Project No. 4, presented in 1981 in a very orthodox way in relation to the systemic approach as I have defined it above⁸:

Learner needs analysis has evolved into the identification and ongoing monitoring of the needs, motivations, characteristics and resources of all parties involved in the learning process. We need to identify as many of the characteristics of all stakeholders as possible, and assess their effect on the situation of learners, taking into account the differences between them in terms of age, experience, intelligence, learning style and learning expectations, as well as their needs and motivations (p. IX).

1.2.3 The effects of positivist epistemology in CA

History shows, however, that these two models of modern epistemology were not really exploited in the early days of CA, and that they were largely neutralized by the still dominant positivist epistemology, which postulates that it is possible, thanks to the scientific method, to achieve increasingly objective knowledge and increasingly perfect mastery of both physical and human reality. This positivism seems to me to have had a number of effects on the development and implementation of CA three of which seem particularly negative from my perspective of school didactics.

1.2.3.1. Simplifying complexity

One of these effects is the simplification of the complexity of the didactic problematic through disjunction, reduction and abstraction, to use Edgard MORIN's terminology for the three principles of the "simplification paradigm" (1990, p. 18). From teacher-centered approach (in traditional methodology) to method-centered approach (in audio-oral and audio-visual methodologies) to learner-centered approach (in CA the same simplifying approach has been pursued, giving one of the elements of the system the privilege –unwarranted in theory and untenable in practice – of being the sole principle of coherence. Gilbert DALGALIAN *et al.* wrote in 1981:

*The idea of investigating needs and audiences was not born solely out of our desire to individualize learning: it is also rooted in the search for a new coherence in the learning system, no longer focused on content, or method, or institution or teacher, but now on the **learner as the reference and foundation of the whole system** (p. 47, my emphasis).*

And we can see in the following passage, written by one of the promoters of the "Modern Languages Project" of the Council of Europe, how, in the same movement of simplification, the complex, in this case recursive, relationship between society and the individual (who is just as much created by society as he is by it⁹) is at least momentarily obscured:

In education, our aim is to give our learners the maximum opportunity to realize their potential as unique individuals in a society that is ultimately their creation. (Jan A. van EK 1988, p. 16)

⁸. We'll see later that this wasn't always the case, as the systemic approach was interpreted in the early days of CA in a very positivist spirit. It is to this evolution that the author alludes in the first sentence of the quotation.

⁹ Cf. e.g. Edgar MORIN: "The relationship between the individual and society provides further examples of such a (recursive) process: the individual is the product of the reproductive process, and society is produced by interactions between individuals, but once produced, [it] retroacts on individuals and produces them (1990, p. 100).

But the most obvious illustration of the simplification of complexity caused in CA by positivist epistemology is the way in which systemic analysis, a model for apprehending complex recursivities, has become a reductive linear model in the hands of program designers. Denis GIRARD recently presented "the Council of Europe's systemic approach" in this way:

1. *identification of needs;*
2. *definition of notional-functional objectives;*
3. *analysis of linguistic content;*
4. *development of a methodology and teaching materials;*
5. *implementation in the classroom, through various activities focusing on communication;*
6. *evaluation integrated into the approach and enabling it to be modified* (1995, p. 105).

We can see that, in the chosen formulation, the learner himself is significantly absent as a subject, and that the only recursivity envisaged (in 6.) loops the whole device without any possibility of calling it into question. As J.L.M. TRIM point out in 1980: "The system is completed by a *feedback* which will provide useful information on the various participants in the learning/teaching process as **the program continues**" (p. 1, my emphasis).

This type of systemic analysis from the 70s, with the notion of "needs" (where requests, expectations, motivations, needs and objectives are often confused), is undoubtedly one of the points most often and most clearly criticized in CA by FFL didacticians from the early 80s: see among others Henri BESSE (1980 pp. 63-64), Daniel COSTE (1981, p. 39), or René RICHTERICH, who in 1981 subjected it to the following radical criticism:

*But is defining what an individual will need before learning really learner-centered teaching? Is it not, in a more subtle way, because it's based on an analysis of real facts, imposing once again what he's going to learn, without him being able to intervene in any way? **Can we really speak of learner-centered teaching when it's the system, i.e. the institutions, that have decided that the learner will be at the center and how? What's more, isn't it illusory and utopian to want to take into account the needs of each individual, when most of the time they don't even know what they are, and they turn out to be multiple, diverse, varied and particular?*** (p. 12, emphasis added).

The matter now seems to be settled, if we are to believe Denis LEHMANN, who wrote in 1994 that, "with regard to systems of the needs-objectives-contents type, the 'learner-centeredness' was little more than an illusion" (p. 14).

1.2.3.2. The claim to totality

A second effect of positivist epistemology in CA is the "totalitarian" claim (the word here being taken in its original sense only: "encompassing all the elements of a given whole"), a claim perfectly expressed in a formula such as "Everything is communication", which communicative methodologists would no doubt not contradict. I recently heard an intercultural specialist say "Everything is culture", proving that here too, change in DLC is unfortunately taking place within a framework of epistemological continuity. We all remember the "Everything is politics" of the 60s and 70s, to which a philosopher once replied: "Yes, except that 'everything' doesn't exist...". Likewise, the concept of learner-centeredness, as it has been used in CA, has the underlying idea that such an approach would make it possible, directly or indirectly, to take into account all the parameters at play in a situation that is, as the equally established formula suggests, **teaching**-learning. It's contradictory to claim to be a systemic analyst and, at the same time, to want to apprehend and master the totality of a system by "focusing" on just one of its elements, however important that may be.

1.2.3.3. The claim to universality

A third effect of positivist epistemology in CA is the assertion of the universality of the principles adopted and of constituted coherence, with all that this may imply in the production of materials and training strategies, in which, incidentally, CA is once again situated in the epistemological extension of earlier constituted methodologies. In a 1982 article, Francis DEBYSER rightly calls for greater caution when "transferring pedagogy from one country to

another", because ideology – "i.e. [the] system of ideas, representations and values of the society in which this pedagogy was conceived" – can be incompatible with others. He asks:

Does the strong emphasis on a logical-semantic model of rational, efficient communication for practical transactions, really correspond to other cultures' representations of the hierarchy of language functions? (p. 26).

But the same kind of (rhetorical) question can be asked of learner-centeredness as it has been conceived in CA: it clearly corresponds to a model of teacher-learner relations that is by no means universal. And in this respect, French school education is probably as far removed from adult education as Europe is from Asia or Africa, if only because the didactic teacher-learner relationship interferes with a psychological adult-adolescent relationship and an institutional teacher-learner relationship.

2. Learner-centered approach put to the test in school didactics

In 1977, the Modern Languages Project Group of the Council of Europe was asked to extend its work to school teaching. The first study carried out shows the central role that needs analysis still plays in the didactic process, as a *sine qua non* of learner-centeredness, since it is an *Adaptation du Niveau-seuil aux publics scolaires (Adapting the Threshold Level to the School Audience*", Louis PORCHER 1980).

2.1. The interest of the concept in school didactics

Applied to school didactics, the concept of learner-centeredness has a number of advantages that explain its appeal:

–It rejuvenates and reactivates the ideas originally contained in the concept of "active methods", but somewhat worn out by a century of minimalist application in difficult conditions. As a former Inspector General of English, Denis GIRARD, wrote in 1995:

*For many years now, we've been accustomed to recognizing the predominance of the learner in any language-learning situation. But we have to admit that this was **mostly lip-service** (pp. 13-14, expression highlighted in English in the text).*

–It appears to be a new tool in the fight against one of the major problems facing school education, namely learner heterogeneity:

The fundamental advantage is that this [notional-functional] approach, which puts the learner's language needs first, necessarily leads to greater individualization of language teaching. I believe I have shown the need for this individualization, to meet the challenge posed by increasingly heterogeneous classes (id. p. 15).

–Finally, he establishes a link between CA and the cognitivist theory (which also emphasizes the internal activity of the learner), thereby helping to re-legitimize the specific didactic school objective of "intellectual training" (particularly in the form of "learning to learn"), and to invalidate the old pedagogies still in use, that of recording (in traditional methodology) and that of conditioning (in audio-lingual and audio-visual methodologies).

This undoubtedly explains why, in the discourse of today's didacticians, needs analysis and other "functional approaches to program development" have been replaced by learner-centeredness as the overall principle of CA coherence. For Louis PORCHER, "the pedagogical option of 'learner-centeredness' [...] engages the entire didactic process" (p. 24), and Denis GIRARD can go so far as to assert (in my opinion abusively) that "communication-centered teaching is by definition learner-centered" (1995, p. 24).

2.2. The difficult penetration of this concept into School Didactics of Languages-Cultures in France

Nevertheless, to my knowledge, the concept of "learner-centeredness" only appeared in official French instructions in 1995, and then only for three languages: German, English and

Portuguese¹⁰. The German program "outlines a framework for learning that is methodical, **learner-centered and oriented primarily towards direct communication in a foreign language**" (M.E.N. 1995, *German*, p. 1, underlined in the text), while the Portuguese program "proposes teaching centered on learner practice (*sic*) and oriented primarily towards direct communication in a foreign language (M.E.N. 1995, *Portuguese*, p. 1). The teaching of English, on the other hand, is "resolutely centered on the learner, on his or her tastes, interests, on what are commonly called his or her language needs, and has as its primary objective the appropriation of the linguistic tools necessary for personal expression and communication" (M.E.N. 1995, *English*, p. 21).

We may well wonder why this concept has penetrated school didactics so late and to such a limited extent, despite the advantages outlined above. Of course, one could argue that the space was already occupied by the concept of active methods, or blame the inertia peculiar to the field and its actors, but I'd also like to show that in this case the reticence and resistance were amply justified.

2.3. The concept's shortcomings in school didactics

Implementing the concept of "learner-centered approach" is problematic, to say the least, in school didactics.

2.3.1 The absence of "needs"

In school didactics, the notion of "needs" –the primary basis, as we've seen, of learner-centered approach– is widely criticized, and can essentially be summed up in the following two points: learners in exolingual environments have no present needs in a foreign language, and they generally lack sufficient maturity and/or a sufficiently well-defined professional project to be motivated to prepare for future needs¹¹. This is why, in the 1980s, the focus of didacticians shifted from curriculum development to ways of creating and exploiting the "immediate needs"¹² of learners in the interactions generated by classroom management, document work, group work, task work and, in particular, information gap and problem-solving. As Kathleen JULIÉ writes:

The life situation in which the teacher and his learners find themselves is that of the classroom. Before any other pedagogical tool (textbook, notebook, visual aid), it is therefore this that must be examined, since it is in the classroom itself that the teacher will draw the means of his communicative pedagogy (1994, p. 34).

However, without in any way wishing to deny the reality of the needs thus created, and the pedagogical interest of the approaches thus proposed in the classroom, it seems clear that the teacher's response to such "needs" has little to do with a genuine focus on the learner, insofar as it is more often than not the teacher who has generated them through the choice of documents and the organization of activities. The autonomy given to learners in this respect –and whatever the merits of the implementation proposals that have already been put forward¹³– can in practice only be limited, ad hoc and carried out under the supervision of the teacher, who in this case is the guarantor of the collective dimension of teaching and respect for institutional objectives. The need, in school education, for an official reference program for each class, *ipso*

¹⁰. See M.E.N. 1995. For the time being, these are only draft programs submitted for national consultation in September 1995, but the final texts should not differ greatly in content. In German and Portuguese, for the first time, a notional-functional program is proposed at the same time, which the English Inspectorate had already included in 1987 (*Programmes de la classe de Seconde*, B.O. n° spécial 1 du 5 février). For the sake of completeness, I'd like to point out that the instructions common to all languages for EILE (Enseignement d'Initiation aux Langues Etrangères) have proposed this type of inventory since the beginning of the experiment (Circulaire du 14 juin 1989, B.O. n° 26 du 29 juin).

¹¹. I don't think many French secondary school teachers agree with Louis PORCHER when he writes that "communicative learning has become the goal of the vast majority of learners today" (1995, p. 31).

¹². On this notion of "immediate needs" and its implementation in the classroom, see e.g. D. GIRARD 1995, pp. 106-107.

¹³. See, for example, the 18 "practical suggestions" by L. DICKINSON and D. CARVER in their excellent 1981 article.

facto excludes the possibility of a truly **constant** focus on **each** learner, as the maximalist interpretation of the concept would demand.

2.3.2 The learner's multidimensionality

It may seem paradoxical, when you think about it, that the **communicative** approach bases its coherence on a focus on the "learner" and not on the "communicator"¹⁴. The concept of focusing on the "learner" is erroneous and misleading insofar as each learner acts and reacts to the teacher and other learners not as a simple learner (of this or that foreign language) but as a multidimensional being: an individual with his or her own personality, a learner in an institutional context, an adolescent facing an adult, a member of a group (school class, family, peer group, neighborhood, social class, community...). In practice, this means that the teacher is constantly shifting from focusing on one dimension of the learner to another during the course of a single class hour. As Denis GIRARD rightly points out: "There are moments for learning and moments for communicating, even if certain classroom activities combine both objectives" (1995, p. 51).

It is no doubt because of the advantages that the concept of learner-centered approach can offer in school didactics (cf. above) that it has not only been maintained but has taken on the importance we have seen over the last decade, even though, if we are to believe René RICHTERICH, taking into account the multidimensionality of the learner has been part of the concerns of CA promoters since the early 80s:

The recent orientations of the "Modern Languages" Project [...] resolutely tend to make the learner progressively autonomous and responsible for his own learning in its fourfold dimension:

- as an individual communicator (developing communicative competence);
- as a learner ((developing one's own learning strategies, learning to learn a language);
- *as a social being (facilitating integration);*
- *as a person (developing and asserting one's personality)*(1981, p. 12).

2.3.3 The collective dimension

Nor is it the slightest paradox of CA that it is based on the concept of learner-centeredness, while at the same time emphasizing group work, which is indispensable for the development of authentic interactions. As the author of the recent draft curriculum for Portuguese writes:

*These programs propose a teaching approach centered on learner practice and geared primarily towards direct communication in a foreign language. Classroom activities and exercises are therefore constantly based on **individual, group and collective activity**, producing the interactions necessary for the development of exchanges that are as natural as possible (M.E.N. 1995, Portuguese, p. 1, emphasis added).*

In theory, it's always possible to argue that the interests of the group and those of the individual learner are compatible or even –ideological radicalism permitting– perfectly complementary. The fact remains, however, that in classroom practice, they often clash, as Denis GIRARD acknowledges when he examines the problem of communicating work previously carried out in small groups to the large group:

The aim is to reconcile two often conflicting interests: individual (or small-group) interests and the interests of the class. The small group must be able to express itself. There's a certain joy in sharing your discoveries. But this communication must not be met with indifference by the class, and thus discourage further endeavors (1995, p. 81).

¹⁴. See above the quotation from L. PORCHER defining "communicative methodologies" as "ways of teaching which aim to focus on communication both as an approach and as an objective" (1995, p. 16). We can therefore understand why he asserts that "communicative learning has now become the objective of a very large majority of learners" (see note 8 above), a postulate that has become indispensable for safeguarding the theoretical compatibility between communication-centeredness and learner-centeredness.

2.3.4 The methodological dimension

Method-centeredness " is currently getting a bad press, since it was against it in the first place that the now-dominant concept of learner-centeredness was forged. Nevertheless, in classroom practice (a level where ideology doesn't have as free a rein as it does in the discourse of didacticians and trainers...), moments of method-centeredness are just as necessary as those of learner-centeredness, for at least three (good) reasons:

1) The first reason is that professional competence relies in part on methodological "routines": only to the extent that they operate with a certain degree of methodological automatism can teachers devote maximum attention in real time to their learner's actions and reactions. To a certain extent, then, and without in any way cultivating a taste for gratuitous paradox, a certain method-centeredness (implied in the decision to launch a predefined methodological sequence) is a *sine qua non* condition for the implementation of learner-centeredness¹⁵.

2) A second reason is that contact with authentic documents, in reception, and the completion of communicative tasks, in production, weakens the weaker learners, who will feel a strong need to rely on the methods proposed by the teacher. As René RICHTERICH writes:

The role of the teacher and of the method then becomes paramount, serving as an intermediary between the learner and the infinite complexity of language, and gradually providing, within a framework that is reassuringly coherent, the means to cope with the unpredictability of language communication (1985, p. 9).

This position seems to me to be more realistic and, above all, to present fewer risks of elitist drift than the one Daniel COSTE seems to defend in the following lines:

We believe that it is the learner himself who, in the very movement of his learning, and on the basis of partial coherences (coherence of a task or a series of tasks, coherence of a notional-functional categorization, coherence of a grammatical description, coherence of a role or of an interrelation between roles, etc.) constructs the more or less transitory systems of his foreign-language communicative competence (1981, p. 44).

3) A third reason is that in DLC, methodology has become, after communication, both a goal and a means. I fully agree with the following analysis by René RICHTERICH, dating from 1985:

Recently, the methodological approach, which had been somewhat neglected in the 70s, has come back in force to combine with the psychological approach¹⁶. Learning how to learn a foreign language, helping learners discover their own learning strategies, enabling them to develop and exploit them, teaching them to become autonomous, these are just some of the key features of current pedagogy and didactics. It is interesting to note that the methodological burden is twofold: on the one hand, it concerns the teacher, who must find the practical means to carry out the above tasks; on the other, it concerns the learner, who must acquire a method for learning. Methodology therefore applies to both teaching and learning (p. 13).

There is, of course, one way of trying to salvage the idea of learner-centered approach in methodology, and that is to demand that teachers implement "a different method for each learner", as Denis GIRARD suggests, albeit with a welcome degree of caution in this instance, given the manifest unrealism of this maximalist position ("I'm not far from believing that...", 1995, p. 15).

¹⁵. As the scope of this article does not allow me to develop this point as fully as I would like, I refer readers interested in the problematic of methodological automatisms to C. PUREN 1994b.

¹⁶. See my conclusion for R. Richterich's definition of these different approaches.

2.3.5 The institutional dimension

In school teaching, the institutional dimension is so pervasive that I personally don't see how the concept of learner-centeredness can be implemented beyond what active methods have already been proposing for a century. In 1985, René RICHTERICH clearly stated:

*The definition of content and the roles of teachers and learners can only be conceived in relation to an institution, on which everything ultimately depends. It is therefore the determining component of systems, and it is **in relation to it that pedagogy and didactics must be defined** (p. 11, emphasis added).*

And Denis GIRARD is right to write in 1987 that "if we really want to take needs into account and focus teaching on learners, it is essential to provide procedures that enable them to participate both in identifying their needs and in developing programs" (p. 109). A few pages later, however, he acknowledges that, in the school context, the (non-rhetorical) question "How can we make a program a negotiating forum where all the partners in a teaching-learning project can take decisions by mutual agreement?" remains unanswered for the time being. In other words, until concrete, reliable and **generalizable** implementation proposals have been made to solve this problem in the classroom (and to my knowledge, they still haven't)¹⁷, the learner-centeredness, beyond active methods, will remain largely a catchword or an incantation in school didactics.

2.3.6 Teacher-centeredness

In the school context, and again without seeking to be paradoxical or provocative at all costs, learner-centeredness implies teacher-centeredness. Without wishing to be exhaustive, I offer my readers three arguments on this subject:

1) The absence or weakness of motivation to learn means that very often the learning process is passively modelled on the teaching process: there are times, in concrete terms, when certain learners only work if they are energetically "pulled" by the teacher, or even under his or her constraint. It's an illusion to think that communicative methods must necessarily and constantly motivate learners because they are communicative: some learners –and **all of them at times**– simply don't want to communicate in the classroom in a foreign language, because they don't even feel/no longer feel those "immediate needs" that are supposed to make up for genuine language needs. I'm convinced that many teachers would be ready to adopt Louis PORCHER's following lines to describe certain moments in their practice...

The learner does not expect the teacher to do the learner's work for him. [...] He works for himself, plots his own path towards the goal he has set for himself. He does not wait for someone else to dictate to him (1995, p. 28).

... but only after subjecting them to a well-known structural exercise in DLC: converting negative-form sentences to the affirmative form, and *vice versa*.

2) Évelyne BÉRARD rightly points out that "[in CA] the teacher's role is undoubtedly much less codified than in AVM [audiovisual methods]: his or her personality will play an important role" (1991, p. 59). In the role of facilitator that the teacher is called upon to play, for example, he or she will quite legitimately take into account his or her own profile as a teacher, or his or her psychological dispositions at the time: it's surely better that he or she momentarily forego having his or her learners play if he or she doesn't feel comfortable in the role that will be his or her during the sequence.

3) Classroom practice inevitably presents situations of double constraint, some of which can only be managed by alternating learner-centeredness and teacher-centeredness, or even by

¹⁷. We can always imagine and carry out –and some have no doubt already done so– effective implementations of this type of negotiation in experimental situations. But one of the fundamental characteristics of school didactics –and one that is rarely taken into account– is that innovations, if they are to be viable outside their initial field of experimentation, must themselves integrate the conditions for their generalization.

superimposing or overlapping these two types of centeredness. I'll give three examples from recent writings.

a) The first example, taken from an article by Monique WAENDENDRIES, explicitly presents a paradoxical case of dual focus on the learner and the teacher:

*The task of the master-teacher-in-the-making is a complex one: he or she must not only listen and respond to learners' needs, but also guide the dialogue in a way that is sufficiently coherent and economical to achieve his or her objectives. He must therefore, in fact, both center teaching on the learner and remain centered on his own project*¹⁸ (1995, p. 61).

b) The second example is taken from a book by Kathleen JULIÉ, who uses an image to describe the teacher's strategy that may surprise or even shock some of my readers (see the underlined passage in the quotation below). This image probably expresses, in the author's words, not the idea of any kind of duplicity on the part of the teacher (an authoritarianism masquerading as liberalism), but the paradoxical management of a very real double constraint, that of having to encourage learners' autonomy while keeping it within limits compatible with the maintenance of collective discipline:

*Many colleagues fear the consequences of implementing such a pedagogy [communicative] because it requires a refocusing of initiatives, responsibilities and speaking time towards the learner. The result is a less monolithic, noisier classroom, with less control. But communication is a noisy business, and refocusing does not entail the loss of power if it is carried out by **"an iron fist in a velvet glove"*** (1994, p. 38).

c) The third example is undoubtedly more significant, since the author declares that he is expressing "the principle that has guided the authors of the various Council of Europe threshold levels" in a Council of Europe publication; in his view, this principle makes it possible to manage the contradiction between the need to define a grammatical progression *a priori*, and the need to start from the needs of the learners, in the production of textbooks:

Ultimately, the gradation and choice of grammatical elements depends on the intuition of experienced teachers working with materials collected to express functions derived from the needs and interests of their learners, which are themselves determined on the basis of "classroom experience" and "common sense". This is unquestionably the best way to proceed... (Denis GIRARD 1987, p. 95).

Conclusion

In the history of foreign language teaching, René RICHTERICH (whom I've called on a lot here) identifies five "pedagogical and didactic approaches", which he defines as follows:

- The language-based, centered on contents.
- The methodological approach, centered on teaching methods and the teacher.
- The psychological approach, centered on learning processes and the learner.
- The socio-political approach, centered on institutions.
- The systemic approach, centered on teaching/learning systems and the interactions of their components (1985, p. 12).

And the author points out that they are never applied in isolation, but always in various combinations. It will come as no surprise, at the end of this article, that I am convinced that, in school didactics, it is in fact each of these centeredness that is indispensable, as the concrete management of a class requires the teacher to select, combine and modulate different centeredness in many different ways. Assessment is a case in point: depending on the situation, the teacher has to select, combine and modulate in different ways a number of criteria, such as the effort made by each learner, his individual progress and the maintenance of his motivation

¹⁸. The term "project" makes it possible to interpret the formula as a focus on both the teacher and the method, but it doesn't change my argument.

(learner-centeredness), the average level of the class (group-centeredness), the progression adopted by the textbook and its content (method-centeredness), the official program and the level expected in relation to the curriculum as a whole and/or in relation to the official exam (institution-centeredness).

Should we therefore continue to grant learner-centered approach in didactic discourse the exclusivity that is generally reserved for it today? This is an important question, because the two possible answers refer to two major divergent types of formative strategy:

1) We may decide to continue presenting teachers with an exclusive centeredness on the learner as an ardent obligation, an ideal towards which they must always strive, by playing up what Althusser, I believe, called "the strategy of counter-curvature": when a stick is twisted on one side, to straighten it out you have to deliberately exaggerate the opposite curvature. In training, this means emphasizing the sole centeredness on the learner –thus exaggerating the importance of his or her place and function– to correct the excessive centeredness on method and/or teacher that is attributed to established teachers or considered the "natural" inclination of beginner teachers. But the two risks involved are enormous:

–one, disciplinary in nature, is to weaken the credibility of didactic training in the eyes of practitioners, as learner-centered approach, as it is presented, is not viable in the day-to-day reality of the classroom;

–the other, of an ethical nature, is to provoke unnecessary frustration and even guilt on the part of some of the most motivated teachers, who will find themselves unable in the field –and with good reason!– to implement learner-centered approach as strongly and systematically as they think they should.

2) On the contrary, we can decide to consider experienced teachers as responsible professionals, and trainees in initial training as responsible adults and responsible future professionals, and play the transparency card with them. And in this case, after careful consideration¹⁹, I believe that the concept of "centeredness", **provided it is constantly applied in all its dimensions²⁰ and the simultaneous implementation of these dimensions is strongly problematized**, offers the decisive advantage of responding to the complexity of teaching practices demanded by the complexity of the school teaching-learning situations.

But whatever the strategy adopted in training, it seems impossible to me, in current didactic research, not to take note of the fact that CA, like other methodologies that in the past sought to build a strong coherence around a single center, is now epistemologically outdated. The time has come for didacticians, having twice in the last three decades asked teachers to radically question themselves²¹, to lead by example and make their own revolution, this time no longer Copernican, but post-Copernican: no more than the universe, as Hubble showed, does DLC have a single center, and the learner has no more future than previous pretenders to a place that doesn't exist.

As for the refocusing on linguistics that a number of didacticians, particularly in France, have been visibly trying to achieve in recent years, it represents nothing more than a new flight –backwards this time!...– and you don't have to be a soothsayer to predict failure at every level. At the level of didactic research, since any refocusing is based on an epistemological model that is no longer credible. At the level of didactic material development, since methodological coherence, no more today than in the past, can be conceived around an application of linguistics. At the level of new teachers, finally, because the values they share with the young people of their generation –in particular individualism, realism and pragmatism– protect them far better

¹⁹. I had begun preparing this article with the idea of concluding by proposing the abandonment of the concept of learner-centeredness...

²⁰. Learner-centered, adolescent-centered, learner-centered, communication-centered, content-centered, language-centered, teacher-centered, material-centered, methodology-centered, group-centered, institution-centered.

²¹. In the early 60s, with audiovisual methodology, and in the mid-70s, with the communicative approach.

than did those of my age against what Jean-René LADMIRAL firmly denounced in 1975 as a "generalized terrorism" of linguists. We've known for over twenty years that applied linguistics doesn't work in language didactics. A word to the wise: language teachers don't work anymore.

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