

Graz Conference

Quality education and language competences for 21st century society: traditions, challenges and visions.

Rethinking language education: a challenge to tradition

To begin with tradition. The objective of foreign language education has generally been understood to be the acquisition of competence in one or more L2s - languages other than one's own L1 –competence being defined by reference to native speaker norms of linguistic knowledge and behaviour. The closer learners approximate to these norms, the more successful they are assessed to be.

Next the challenge. This traditional view of language education as an accumulation of such competences in different languages has not of course gone unchallenged. The Council of Europe has for many years recognised the need to rethink the objectives of language education to bring them more realistically in line with current

economic and socio-political realities and have proposed an alternative based on the concept of plurilingualism whereby -to quote from the CEFR document:

... the aim of language education is profoundly modified. It is no longer seen as simply to achieve ‘mastery’ of one or two, or even three languages, each taken in isolation, with the ‘ideal native speaker’ as the ultimate model. Instead, the aim is to develop a linguistic repertory, in which all linguistic abilities have a place.

Here there is a shift in principle away from the absolute notion of ‘mastery’ to the relative notion of variable ability, from what learners ideally **should** do to what they actually **can** do.

But how profoundly, in practice, is the aim of language education actually modified?

The CEFR grades of A1, A2, and so on may be intended to give credit to different abilities in a language and put a positive spin on achievement that would traditionally be

negatively assessed as failure. Learners who can do things with a language at different levels can, in principle, all be equally commended – what **can** be done is always **well** done. To quote from Alice in Wonderland - ‘Everybody has won and all shall have prizes’.

Except that the prizes vary considerably in the worth attached to them. For there is no escaping the fact that these scales are also prescriptive grades of proficiency measured against a native speaker ideal, and the more precise the descriptors of these grades, the more prescriptive they are likely to be. A particular level may be entirely satisfactory for what learners need to be able to do with a particular foreign language. But this level is still a point on a grading scale and the likelihood is that achievement will still be assessed relative to the C2 end point rather than relative to what learners need to use the language for.

Although one may accept as a matter of principle that the lower levels of ability are to be recognized as ends in themselves so that ‘all linguistic abilities have a place’ in

reality they are still defined as interim stages of learning and the place they are assigned to is accordingly a lowly one. In this respect, the traditional aim of ‘mastery’ is still presupposed.

So one traditional assumption that still seems to persist is that ability in a language can only be measured against the bench mark of native speaker competence. Even if we accept that such measurement is necessary, we run up against the problem that this competence is never actually defined. So the descriptors that are proposed for measuring the extent to which this competence is achieved, though having the appearance of objective assessment are in effect impressionistic, and ultimately arbitrary.

Proposals have been made recently in publications of the English Profile as to how these descriptors can be specified in more precise linguistic terms. Apart from the fact that this in effect equates what users can do with their linguistic competence and conflates accuracy and

fluency, the precision is only apparent since it depends on the indeterminate concept of competence.

A second traditional assumption that still seems to persist is that the languages which learners are required to be competent are, in **being** foreign, all alike. But foreignness is always relative and can only be identified in reference to the language of one's own community. Languages are foreign in very different ways depending on how their role, status, socio-cultural proximity and so on are perceived. Within Europe, intra-community languages like Basque, or Finnish, are not foreign in the same way as inter-community languages like French or German. They differ radically in respect to what we might call their communicative capital, and this is, of course reflected in the status they are assigned in the EU.

Again the foreignness of a neighbour language, for example, is very different from the foreignness of a non-neighbour language. This is not only a matter of geographical proximity but of attitude, which is likely to be a function of all manner of socio-political and

historical factors. To take a topical example, the way a Ukrainian speaker perceives Russian as foreign is likely to be very different from the way it is perceived as foreign by, say, an Italian.

So foreign languages are not all alike. Nor are they all equal. Although official policy may assert that all languages are equal, language users themselves know full well that, to adapt the words of George Orwell, some languages are more equal than others.

And this variability in foreignness is not only a matter of attitude, which will inevitably have an effect on learner motivation, but it will also determine the learning objective and regulate what of a particular foreign language it is worthwhile to learn. Local perceptions of how a particular language is foreign, and how particular outsiders want or need to engage with it will, of course, determine what kind of ability is appropriate and this may not correspond with the descriptors at different levels on the CEFR scale.

These local factors would suggest that appropriate abilities in different languages would and should vary considerably in kind and cannot all be evaluated by applying the same set of criteria.

Europe is linguistically diverse not just because it has a lot of different languages but more crucially because the languages themselves are so diverse in their very foreignness. I think it is how to cope with **this** diversity that is the main challenge in language education. And it cannot be met if this diversity is denied by treating all foreign languages in the same way and imposing a common set of criteria for successful learning.

So although redefining the aim of language education as the development of a plurilinguistic repertoire of variable competences is a departure from traditional ways of thinking, traces of tradition remain.

Such a redefinition still implies that the objective is to acquire different levels of ‘competence’ in a plurality of different languages. A further problem with this is that

the resulting linguistic repertoire is necessarily quite narrowly restricted. Although allowance is made for the acquisition of partial competence in several languages, the number of languages concerned can only be relatively small. This of course means that the repertoire of abilities that a particular group of learners acquire may be irrelevant to their subsequent needs for communication with speakers of languages other than those represented in their repertoire. If, for example, German learners have acquired a repertoire of abilities at some level in, say, Croatian, Czech, Slovenian, Hungarian and Turkish, what do they do when confronted with the need to communicate in Italian or Greek or any of the other diverse languages that it is the policy of the EU to protect and promote?

It is hard to see how the acquisition of a necessarily restricted range of partial ‘competences’ can prepare learners to communicate beyond them.

So what **would** prepare them? What learners need, it seems to me, is a more generalized strategic ability to cope with unpredictable communicative demands. This would suggest that language education should be primarily concerned not with teaching competences in particular languages as such, but with developing a more general capability in language.

Different languages, including the learners' own L1s, would necessarily be drawn upon in the process. The selection would vary in different educational contexts and would depend on local factors of feasibility, relevance and perceptions of foreignness. All that would matter is that the language sources should activate communicative capability: their function would be to exemplify, to provide particular realizations of the communicative and cultural aspects of language in general. Explicit reference to the L1 would relate the other languages to the learners' own experience, establish thereby some degree of continuity, and would thus make it easier to associate linguistic form,

communicative function and cultural significance in the other resource languages.

The objective would be not for learners to add to their linguistic repertoire as such but for them to be aware of the nature of linguistic resources and to learn how to put them to strategic use. In so doing they would naturally in consequence and as a by-product extend their linguistic repertoire and learn something of other languages in the process.

The traditional aim of language education is to teach *bi* or *multi-lingualism*, an accumulation of monolingual competences as a kind of rehearsal for the learners' encounters with those native speakers whose competences they have been required to aspire to, thereby, of course, restricting the scope of their interlingual communication to this chosen few. This would also be the case even with a shift of emphasis to *pluri-lingualism* which is still concerned with abilities in different languages and the extension of a linguistic repertoire.

The alternative would be to focus attention on *lingualism*, a capability for languaging, which would draw on a range of linguistic resources. This would serve as an investment in strategies for further use and learning. Defining the objective of language education in this way in terms of lingual capability would, in my view, provide for the subsequent acquisition of competences in different languages as and when the need arises. It would also, I would suggest, provide a more realistic and achievable basis for the kind of inter-cultural understanding that it is sometimes claimed is automatically promoted by the learning of particular foreign languages

But it would also, of course, profoundly modify the aim of language education and the question of course arises as to its feasibility in practice. Obviously a good deal of research would be needed to critically explore the implications of this aim for language teaching and testing. But this is not in itself a reason for rejection. After all we are told that it took the combined efforts of

experts from 41 countries over 10 years to produce the CEFR.

In reference to the title of this conference, this proposal is a departure from **tradition** and it might be dismissed as simply a delusionary **vision**. But I hope it can also be taken as a **challenge** in that at least it raises issues that, if not burning, are worth critically thinking about.