The Dynamics of the Language Classroom

Ian Tudor
Université Libre de Bruxelles
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## Abbreviations

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<tr>
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<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AKL</td>
<td>American Kernel Lessons</td>
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<tr>
<td>ESOL</td>
<td>English as a second or other language</td>
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<td>EFL</td>
<td>English as a foreign language</td>
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<td>ESL</td>
<td>English as a second language</td>
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<td>CLL</td>
<td>Community Language Learning</td>
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<td>CLT</td>
<td>communicative language teaching</td>
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<td>LSP</td>
<td>languages for specific purposes</td>
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<td>TL</td>
<td>target language</td>
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Introduction

This is a book about language teaching which is meant for teachers and other language educators involved in the practical realisation of language teaching programmes or in organising teacher education courses. It rests on the belief that language teaching is a complex, dynamic activity, and that this complexity is frequently underestimated both in the popular imagination and in much of the official discourse of language teaching. The goal of the book is to explore the complexity of language teaching as it is lived out in classrooms and, in this way, to provide teachers and other language educators with guidelines for exploring the dynamics of their own teaching situations, and, thus, of developing what Elliott (1993a) refers to as ’situational understandings’.

Few practising teachers would consider as particularly remarkable the suggestion that language teaching is a complex activity: many, in fact, would see it as a statement of the obvious. I feel, however, that this point deserves to be made for at least two reasons. First, although practising language teachers are well aware of the complexity of their task, the same cannot always be said for the other actors who, in one way or another, play a role in the endeavour of language education; these are, for example, political and educational authorities, the management or administration of teaching institutions, clients, sponsors, parents, and many others. This may result from ignorance in the sense that these actors may simply be unaware of the precise details of what teaching entails. It may also, however, result from a more or less conscious will not to see or acknowledge the realities of teaching: the elegance of clear, rationally formulated curricula or the confident claims of current ’best practice’ having a greater attraction than the complex and often untidy nature of teaching as it is lived out in real classrooms. And yet, it is often within frameworks set up by these actors that teachers have to live out their tasks in the classroom. If only for this reason, then, there is a good justification for recalling the complex nature of language teaching. Second, and more fundamentally, there is the question of whether the complexity of language teaching is
something incidental – grit in the machine of pedagogical efficiency – or whether it is an inherent feature of the activity itself. This book suggests that the latter is the case, and that acknowledging and working openly with this complexity is fundamental to any honest attempt to understand language teaching as it really is.

Fortunately, there is a growing trend in thinking on language teaching which explicitly acknowledges and seeks to work constructively with the complexity of language teaching as it really is, as opposed to how we might like it to be or feel it should be according to one idealised schema or another. This trend is discussed in Chapter 1 in terms of what is referred to as the ecological perspective on language teaching. This perspective involves a fairly substantial shift in approach from that which has dominated (and in many ways still dominates) much thinking on language teaching. The ecological perspective offers an alternative to a positivistic and hierarchically based approach to the conceptualisation and planning of teaching programmes. It portrays language teaching as an emergent phenomenon, i.e. a reality which emerges dynamically from the actions and interactions of very many individuals working within specific contexts which operate according to rules that are proper to each as a reality in its own right. The ecological perspective on language teaching has parallels with the concept of sustainable development in economics, and with the call for more local forms of democracy and decision-making in the political field. It also shares a good deal of common ground with insights which have been developed in recent years in many fields of science and which have found expression in complexity theory, or the study of complex adaptive systems.

Viewed from this perspective, if we wish to understand language teaching as it is lived out in real classrooms, we need to explore the meaning which teaching and learning procedures have for individuals in their own terms and not against a template of abstract, situation-external precept and generalisation. We then need to explore the dynamics which arise out of the interaction between the individuals present in each specific situation. This can, of course, vary considerably from one context to another, but the totality of language teaching emerges from this vast kaleidoscope of detail and diversity. The elegant plans of educational planners and the generalisations of theorists can and do influence the reality of teaching as it is lived out in classrooms. However, they are not the full reality, nor can it be assumed that they represent a canonical view of what this reality should be. They are simply elements of the complex dynamics of teaching and learning, i.e. elements that reflect the perspectives on language teaching of certain groups of participants, but that interact dynamically with the perspec-
tives of many other participants. In this view, language teaching is less a matter of the hierarchical, top-down realisation of ideal curricular structures and methodological principle than the emergent product of a very large number of local, dynamically self-organising systems.

This book works within this perspective on language teaching and has the goal of providing teachers and other language educators with guidelines for exploring the dynamics of their own teaching situations and of their own interaction with these situations. The book is organised as follows.

Chapters 1 and 2 establish the theoretical background within which the book is placed. Chapter 1 briefly surveys trends in language teaching over the last few decades in terms of the shift in emphasis from a technological to an ecological perspective on language teaching. Chapter 2 introduces the dynamic perspective on language teaching which will underpin the subsequent chapters.

Chapters 3 to 5 examine some of the more frequent visions of language (Chapter 3), of learning (Chapter 4), and of the classroom (Chapter 5) which teachers are likely to encounter among their students, in teaching materials, in educational programmes, and in their own individual conception of teaching. These chapters do not argue for any one vision of language, of learning, or of the classroom. The goal is rather to evaluate a variety of perspectives not only in terms of their own inner logic, but also and crucially with respect to their interaction with various aspects of context. These chapters argue for an inclusive acknowledgement of diversity in pedagogical decision-making and seek to highlight the dynamic interaction between methodology and context.

Chapters 6 to 8 build on Chapters 3–5 to study the dynamics of classroom teaching from a number of perspectives. Chapter 6 focuses on the interaction between methodology and context, Chapter 7 on the exploitation of local traditions of learning and Chapter 8 on the concept of ‘negotiation’ in the creation of classroom realities. These chapters make use of the categories of methodological choice discussed in Chapters 3–5, but do this with reference to a number of case studies (two in each chapter). Not all of these studies could be considered to have happy endings; nor are they intended to be seen as exemplars of ‘best practice’ to be put in a display cabinet for admiration. They are simply slices of the complex, dynamic reality of language teaching as lived out by flesh and blood people working together in one particular setting or another. These chapters explore the dynamic nature of classroom interaction between students and teachers as lived out in specific contexts, with the goal of providing teachers with insights which they can then use to explore these realities in their own classrooms.

Finally, Chapter 9 briefly sums up the main points made in the
previous chapters and provides a number of guidelines for methodological decision-making and for teacher education.

As already stated, this book rests on the hypothesis that language teaching is an activity whose complexity is often underestimated, and that a key factor in understanding language teaching as it really is involves exploring the dynamics of teaching and learning as they are lived out in the specifics of individual settings. On this basis, it seeks to provide teachers with guidelines for exploring their own teaching context and the ‘local’ meaning which methodological choices can assume for their students in the specifics of this context. The book therefore questions the idea that pedagogical choices can be made on the basis of situation-external criteria or notions of ‘best practice’. Specifically, it suggests that pedagogical decision-making needs to rest on a critical analysis of methodological principles in the light of their local meaning, and on the exploration of the dynamic interaction of students and teachers with the teaching–learning process in the full context of their lives within but also beyond the classroom.

This book is first and foremost a ‘teacher reflection’ text whose goal is to help teachers explore and respond to the dynamics of their own situations in an open and realistic manner. The book pursues this goal in two ways. First, the main text seeks to establish a framework of reference and to provide stimulus for thought. Second, the tasks (which are boxed in the text) invite readers to use this input as a basis for reflection on their personal interaction with aspects of language teaching and for the exploration of their own teaching situation. If teachers are following a professional development course at the time of reading, they may wish to relate these tasks to one or more situations in which they have worked previously. In the case of novice teachers, these tasks may be used projectively as a guide to their interaction with concrete teaching situations and to their personal development as teachers. Some tasks, to be approached systematically, call for a degree of data collection, and may thus provide a starting point for action research projects. These tasks can also, however, be used more lightly as input to the ongoing type of curiosity and observation which is so important in the teacher’s professional life.