

# ILL - INNOVATION IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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## Managing Infinity

Language Teaching in the Post-Digital Age

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# SOME AIMS FOR TODAY

Attempting to reflect on fundamental issues currently affecting language teachers

— *in particular:*

- the problem of choice (the need for principles in the use of new resources)
- increased complexity (in society; in linguistic practices)
- some possible solutions (not just technologically)
- the importance of discernment (a vital life skill)

# Post-digital awareness

Teachers, and language teachers in particular, have to be aware of current socio-technical contexts:

- ✓ technology is always available in class
- ✓ embracing social media is a necessity
- ✓ accepting hybrid learning contexts is an advantage
- ✓ all technological change implies social change
- ✓ the means of motivation are transformed (potentially a positive!)
- ✓ plurilingualism is more likely in the post-digital world

# Primary and secondary threats of technology

*Teachers have to be aware of the complex social realities we are working with, and which students experience constantly. There are two levels of potential danger:*

- **primary threats**: cybercrime, hacking, bullying
- **secondary threats**: social disinhibition, injustice, political misinformation and mental health issues

Language teachers have a special part to play in preparing students for the post-digital world. Linguistic resources and pragmatic awareness will be very significant, and social skills online and on social media (*c.f.* CEFR ‘social agents’) are potential life-savers. It is worth noting government is unable to mitigate the threats to any meaningful extent.

# Choice

- We can suggest that making choices (*i.e.* practical decisions as to materials and devices used in class *etc.*) as language teachers is not adequately theorised
- There is an assumption that a certain method or approach implies technological or practical choices (implicitly, or even axiomatically)
- Actually, the question is more complex, and too important to be neglected – it can make a real difference to the ‘feel’ of a lesson and to our effectiveness

# The infinite choice problem

- ❖ Teachers (and learners) are faced with huge choices as to how to develop language skills
- ❖ The problem is the opposite of 20-30 years ago when students in many countries found it difficult to access ‘real’ language (*i.e.* films/TV shows; songs; even text in the original tongue – the textbook was often the only source)
- ❖ We have many more channels of communication which are available in the language we are teaching/learning
- ❖ There are also technical solutions (translating apps; chatbots; online lessons *etc.*)
- ❖ Feelings of disorientation, disempowerment, or even disengagement are frequent (in learners, but also teachers)
- ❖ As teachers we risk becoming stuck in a repetitive loop: *i.e.* when presented with an excess of choice, we tend to keep to what we know best (the comfort zone)

# Dealing with infinite choice

- ✓ This should be a fundamental element in teacher training (both pre- and in-service)
- ✓ It is actually a life skill (*e.g.* there are so many YouTube videos, so much text, to choose from)
- ✓ Choices are always meaningful – they define us according to Aristotle
- ✓ Feeling confident in our choices grants us power
- ✓ We need to use networks and colleagues, tutorials, and experience (with reflection!)
- ✓ Bear in mind that language can facilitate choice

# But: the complexity of change

The picture for language teaching is much more complex:

- changes in the medium or channels mean communication is **subtly altered**
- the traditional dichotomy in linguistics (and language teaching) of *writing* and *speaking* is being erased
- *e.g.* emails are ‘written as spoken’ and social media are invariably highly multi-modal
- grammar is not always from the centre (*c.f.* ELF)
- students need digital communications skills, and need to appreciate the ***pragmatics of virtual interaction***
- international social change and political events impinge on our classrooms



# Our tasks

- ❖ The skills our students require are changing: *transactional language* will become less important, and *production* is not so useful
- ❖ The ability to communicate skilfully and with the right pragmatic effect is a life skill – and this is largely untaught at school
- ❖ This problem is accentuated by the internet and social media where the possibility for misunderstanding is high and identity issues are paramount: creating and maintaining identity
- ❖ As teachers we must be constantly aware that language teaching is the single most important part of the curriculum for **social development** (social skills, communication and reflection)
- ❖ In tune with the CEFR we should help our students be *social agents* in the classroom, and beyond

# Some solutions?

- ❑ A.I. is here to stay, and we have to embrace it
- ❑ it offers huge possibilities in the classroom and can be time-saving
- ❑ instantaneous text generation offers the opportunity to work with students on assessing slightly different solutions to communicative problems
- ❑ we can become effective artists/cartoonists!
- ❑ don't forget translation (DeepL *etc.*)
- ❑ we can craft our materials to our needs ('the coursebook' becomes 'our coursebook')

# Some solutions? # 2

- A.I. offers great potential for project work
- A.I. offers great scope for CLIL classes
- A.I.-based work must be authentic, and this means having *local significance*
- We are the interface between the mass of generated text and our students' realities
- A.I. will mean a significant change in assessment tools (*e.g.* the classic B2 letter or email is of little practical relevance today)
- What are our aims, when technology can 'get it right' each time and can provide us with accurate text?

# Some solutions? # 3

## Teacher training must fit with this new environment:

- how to benefit from the **range** of **tools** and **text** on offer
- becoming expert **observers** of language change
- sharing the process of **selection** (*i.e.* with students)
- the skill of **navigating choice** (principles/rationale)
- remaining **aware** – of tech developments and possibilities, and of global social issues
- remember, spending on **training** is **much more important** than capital expenditure on **equipment**

# Some solutions? # 4

- Language teaching is the **ideal forum** for the discussion and renegotiation of human values
- It provides us with the **lexical resources** to *reflect*, *understand* and *debate* (the language classroom is the *space*)
- This is all the more important in the era of **fake news**, **short attention spans** and the *information glut*
- Students (and teachers!) need to develop the capacity to *interpret* multi-modal communicative acts with **sensitivity** – and this can be a **rewarding experience**
- The skill we should develop here is *discernment*

# Final thoughts

We have the tools and resources, but

- ✓ we need to be sure to **engage** our learners **deeply**
- ✓ there should be deep **reflection** on the *whys* of decisions made (in class, for homework, projects and tests)
- ✓ the increased choices we have are **additive**, not **subtractive** (candles are still useful!)
- ✓ our **cognitive knowledge** must not be ignored

# Brief bibliography

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