WORKSHOP 2, SESSION 1

NEWS ON NEW LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

NOVEL TEACHING –NOVEL LEARNING?

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Summary

This presentation attempts to address some of the challenges which institutions (at national and European level), teachers and learners, face in relation to the creation of New Learning Environments for the 21st century.

We will start from the premise that not everything that is new is novel or innovative. The concept of innovation implies change and transformation in the way humans process, share information, and create knowledge.

In this presentation the focus will be on two areas that have affected change and transformation in our discipline: the development of network-based learning and the emphasis on meaningful interaction in authentic discourse communities. More specifically, language learning theory has been marked by a shift towards a socio-constructivist interpretation of learning whereby language is a tool for individual and societal development. Such socio-constructivist approach focuses on the learning process, emphasises meaningful interaction through collaborative learning and problem solving, encourages the development of language learning strategies and autonomous learning, and highlights the creation of online learning communities as a significant component of communication and learning.

Where such a widened vision has been implemented, we can see the creation of new dynamic learning environments in which language and technology are both tools used by people to explore, shape and influence their micro-worlds. As such they form an integrated new authentic discourse community. This view brings with it major challenges in the way

- ✓ **institutions** (and within them, language departments and language centres) present their role in preparing graduates to the demand of the world of business and knowledge society,
- ✓ **learning spaces** are organised,
- ✓ **language professionals** perceive and develop their role,
- ✓ **language** is modified and **language learning** is adapted,
- ✓ **research** is carried out.

As applied linguists we have an incredible opportunity to position our discipline at the core of educational developments, provided we start looking at our discipline from a wider critical perspective. The latter requires a new interpretation of language teaching and learning, with consequences on the skills required by teachers, learners, and implications on environments syllabus-design and research.

Introduction

"Fifty years after the printing press was invented, we did not have old Europe plus the printing press. We had a different Europe" (N. Postman 1993:18).

Thus, maybe 50 years after the computer has been invented, we shouldn't have old language learning plus the computer; we should have a different language learning.

The computer, like any other technological tool used in teaching (e.g., pencils and paper, whiteboards, overhead projectors, tape recorders, videos etc.), does not in itself bring about improvements in learning and it is not in itself a cause of transformation and innovation. If we want to facilitate our students' development of new electronic literacies, we have to break away from the notion that computers and the Internet are an optional tool to use in the language class, like a tape recorder, or as a surrogate tutor outside the class.

This is possibly one of the main challenges facing us as language educators.

As effectively pointed out by Warschauer (2001), the developments in communication of firstly language; secondly print radically changed how people worked, learned, communicated and produced. Thus, to try to understand the world of 'cyberspace', we need to comprehend how new information and communications technologies are helping to reshape our lives, as online and off line worlds become more intertwined and real to the people who use them. Such an approach affects how we examine the role of NLE in education and has implications on professional development, institutional policies, pedagogy and research.

Q1: Is technology a tool for language learning, or is language learning a tool that gives people access to technology? Or are they both tools for individual and societal development?

For the past twenty years, the educational literature has reported articles about the promising potential of new applications of computers (CALL) in and out of the classroom, to be followed by less positive results years later and a high degree of scepticism. With network-based learning we contribute once again to the rise in claims that online education "*introduces unprecedented options for teaching, learning and knowledge building*" (Harasim 1990a, p. xvii) and can help "create communities'. Proponents of online learning have been attributing to the computer the role of promoting **student-centred communication, collaboration, social interaction and a sense of community.** Yet, many pedagogical frameworks currently practised are often narrowly addressing these themes, and attempt to transfer to the technology the power to transform. Many such frameworks are often driven by institutional accountability, which demands proof that the high investment in equipment (in this case sophisticated digital technology) really works. However, as in the case of autonomous learning and the establishment of self-access centres, and CALL software, the computer is not a methodology, and its effects cannot be researched independently of the particular context and way in which the technology is implemented (e.g. the broad socio-cultural variables, such as the role of universities as an instrument of social control and sorting, the general culture of teaching, and the individual and shared beliefs of teachers and learners). As a result, new media are often introduced in a top-down fashion, and computers have frequently been confined to transmission models of learning, focusing on drill-and-practice activities, self-testing tasks, requiring low level cognitive skills of rote memory and knowledge transmission platforms.

There is therefore an important role to be played by research in informing and forming new learning and teaching paradigms.

Q2 What are the challenges for linguistic research in the field on NLE?

To date, there has been relatively little published research that explores the relationship between the use of computer networks, language learning and social implications. Much of the published literature consists of anecdotal teacher reports with a small number of systematic studies examining narrow slices of data, such as the outcome of particular class sessions, students' use of particular discourse

features, rather than provide a longitudinal, and contextualised account of the overall implementation of the online activities and their broader impact on the students' learning experiences on and offline. Most of this research is also limited to the English language. The nature of research should therefore attempt to mirror the variety of languages and cultures, which Internet use supports.

Yet, language learning is a complex, social and cultural phenomenon, even more so when it involves new technologies that connect the classroom and the individual language learner to the world. Short-term quantitative studies fail to account the complex interaction of social, cultural, and individual factors, which shape the language learning experience.

We ought to look to particular practices of use in particular contexts and attempt to describe as well as evaluate them in terms of their specific social context. *Who were the social players (learners, teachers, members of the community, policymakers etc)? What exactly did they do? For what purpose? In what setting? With what kinds of language? In what patterns of social interaction? What were the particular outcomes in terms of quantity/quality of language use, attitudes, motivation?* *What are the students' and teachers' evolving attitudes or sense of identity in changing circumstances? What kind of communities did they produce, if any? How? with what consequences?* To address these questions, we should call for an interdisciplinary approach combining a variety of methods (e.g., quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis, discourse analysis, interviews, participant-observation, network analysis etc.). At national and European level funding should be identified to support trans-national longitudinal research projects which examine the interrelationship between technology, language and culture learning taking into account impact on community building, identity formation and professional practices.

Q3. Which new skills do language learners need to become competent language users?
The rapid diffusion of information and communication technology is shifting the meaning of the notion of '**a competent language user'**.

Language learners with access to the Internet can now potentially communicate with native speakers (and/or other language learners) all over the world, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, from school, home, or work, on a one-to-one or a many-to-many basis, synchronously or asynchronously. This situation multiplies their opportunities for communicative practice and contributes to transform demands and expectations. Furthermore, the fact that computer-mediated communication occurs in a written, electronically archived form, gives learners additional opportunities to plan their discourse and to notice and reflect on language use in the messages they compose and read. Thus these new technologies do not only serve the new teaching/learning paradigms, they also help shape the new paradigms. Because these new forms of communication are now so present, it is important for language students to be exposed to them in as many forms as possible. Nevertheless, growing up around computers doesn't ensure one can become an effective communicator in online environments.

For example, with the number of e-mail messages sent and received, language teachers should use e-mail not only to promote language learning, but also to help people learn one or more languages to communicate effectively by e-mail. Similarly, with the World Wide Web becoming an essential medium of information exchange in economic, academic, and civic affairs, the literacies of accessing and publishing Web-based information must also become part of language teaching curricula. So a competent language user will be multi-literate: 1.computer literate (fluent in keyboarding and computer use), 2.information literate (able to find and critically evaluate online information), 3. multimedia literate (able to produce and interpret complex documents comprising texts, images, and sounds), 4.computer-mediated communication literate (knowledge of the pragmatics of individual and group online interaction). The importance of these new literacies calls into question a hidden assumption that the computer is an optional tool to assist the language learning process.

The achievement of these expanded goals, whether at the individual or social level, requires a re-consideration of the learning process. Since the technologies are changing and developing so rapidly, mastery of new ones, whether by a student, teacher, or institution, necessitates a capacity for constant innovation and adaptation. The critical element here is autonomy, a concept which must be extended to apply not only to self-directed use of language but also to the ability to develop, explore, evaluate, and adapt new technology as it evolves. This requires the development of meta-skills of critique and innovation beyond the skills of using any particular technology. **Students** should be able to use not only today's search engines, but should have the right analytic framework to select and make use of new search engines as they emerge. They should also possess the underpinning pedagogical criteria to extend their linguistic skills as new challenges arise. **Teachers** should be able not only to use today's hardware and software, they should also have successful strategies for evaluating and adapting to new one and develop new professional skills and approaches to deal with the challenges posed. **Institutions** (in particular universities) should have the capacity not just to invest and make use of technologies, but also to participate in the research and improvement of these technologies, informing and shaping them rather than implementing them.

What new literacies does multimedia computer technology demand, both inside and outside the classroom? How does the development of these new literacies meet with issues of class, race, gender, and identity? How does the sociocultural context of particular educational institutions or communities affect the learning and practice of electronic literacies?

Let us briefly examine some of the specific literacy skills required when for example we read online. The psycholinguistic processes involved in decoding information from a screen and a page differ, and we thus have to change how we think about and teach things like skimming, scanning, and guessing words from context in online environments. We must also think more about how texts are combined with graphics, images, and audio-visual content to communicate a message.

But reading is also a social practice that takes place in particular socio-cultural contexts. And, seen in this context, the shift of reading from the page to the screen is even more significant. Reading from the screen is not only an act linked to the creation of knowledge from a variety of sources, it is also a conscious act to negotiate one's own identity through the identification of norms and practices. Reading well from the screen involves therefore skills such as:

- Being able to find the information to read in the first place (through Internet searches, etc.)
- Being able to rapidly evaluate the source, credibility, and timeliness of information once it has been located.
- Being able to make rapid navigational decisions as to whether to read the current page of information, pursue links internal or external to the page, or revert back to further searching.
- Being able to make on-the-spot decisions about ways to save or catalogue part of the information on the page, or perhaps the complete page
- Being able to find common ground and connect with others

Q 4 What does it take to make the transition from the classroom to 'cyberspace' and to do it successfully?

Often what makes the transition easier and successful is the realisation on the part of the learner of belonging to a supportive learning community. Although technology in itself isn't the most important factor in online community, good developers can do much to get a community off to a good start by making sure that the software has good usability and accessibility and by planning the social structures. Furthermore, the design features of a NLE (presence of synchronous and asynchronous communication) can play a significant role in the development of community.

Teachers, on the other hand, can help construct such sense of community membership through activities which involve shared goals/interests/needs, repeated and active participation, access to shared resources and norms, reciprocity of information, support and services, a shared context of social conventions and use a language which shows genuine concern and interest in the community of learners of which they are part too.

It is not enough to be registered into a NLE to constitute a community. To construct online communities requires skilled work on behalf of all the social players, teachers as well as the learners.

Q 5 What are the challenges for language teachers? What new skills do they need to acquire ?

Flexible, autonomous lifelong learning is essential to success in the age of information. Autonomous learners know how to formulate research questions and devise plans to answer them. They answer their own questions through accessing learning tools and resources online and offline. Moreover, autonomous learners are able to take charge of their own learning through working on individual and collaborative projects that result in communication opportunities in the form of presentations, Web sites, and traditional publications accessible to local and global audiences.

Processes involving autonomous learning, collaborative learning, and the development and practice of language learning strategies are all designed to empower students to continue their own learning and communicative innovation outside the classroom.

Once again the challenge lies with the critical teacher/adviser, innovator, rather than the environment in itself. Language professionals who have access to NLE are in a position to create the conditions for students to learn valuable lifelong learning skills and strategies. For innovation to make sense and create an impact it is essential to reflect and research on our practices (Riley 1996).

For this to happen, teachers need to reflect upon the way they engage in interaction with their students (whether face-to-face or online) and reassess the notion of dialogue as pedagogic tool and skilled work .

Central to the role of the language learning adviser/facilitator is the notion that the learning support given needs to be applicable to situations outside the immediate advising sessions. This means that advisers provide 'a frame', a set of conditions within which learners can have or hold the responsibility of some or all the decisions concerning aspects of their learning. This suggests a highly interactive and organic process, in which the development of capacity for sustainability is of greater interest than short-term results. In the case of NLE it also involves an understanding of principles of social informatics as a complex social system reflecting relations of culture and power, rather than as machines per se. From this perspective, the establishment of NLE is not a one-shot deal of purchasing and installing computers but rather a complex social process involving a lengthy restructuring of incentives, career paths, the development of different social relationships, reconfigurations of power and resources

- Teachers need to develop an online presence that supports learners
- They act as 'mediators' between the environment, the language to be learnt, the participants and their textual interactions
- Such mediation is skilled work is not acquired overnight ad often involves the whole person
- They need to learn effective ways to manage time and resources as online presence can be quite time-consuming
- They need to learn to blend on and offline worlds

- They also need to acquire new literacies to be competent online interactants
- They need to review their practices through systematic research to inform new practice

Q6 What are the challenges for institutions? How are universities responding to these changes and demands?

Today's academic institutions are in transition. Much of the changes we are seeing are due to economic pressures from mounting costs and demands by the business world for graduates with the ability to function well in a knowledge society; from a greater diversity amongst students who are choosing to attend university - with a larger number of so-called non-traditional learners as defined by age and life situation; from an increased internationalisation of our social contexts (the classroom, the workplace, the local community etc.). As a consequence, the establishment of NLE is viewed by many institutions, as a way to attract students who might not otherwise attend classes; or as a way to begin meeting the needs of a new population of students.

HE institutions have, with increasing frequency, turned to the use of self-access and technology, in particular the Internet, to deliver courses which can reflect this diversity of needs, accommodate time and space constraints and, therefore, increase the flexibility of delivery.

To achieve the above, they need to re-consider their role in the preparation of tomorrow's language graduates, the profile of these graduates and the skills of the personnel who prepares them. If computers are no longer an option, then integration requires a revision of syllabus design as well as an inventory of the skills necessary to support learner autonomy and the development of new literacies.

Q 7 What are the challenges for a European education system?

The large and growing number of people throughout the world, who use English as an additional language of daily communication, is slowly shifting the dynamics of the English language. This trend was already occurring before the development of the Internet, but has been intensified by the Internet.

Interestingly, though, the spread of English is not necessarily privileging the native speakers of the language. The more widely English is used around the world, the less special the skill of knowing English becomes. Thus in the 21st century, the monolingual businessman or scholar in England may be at a disadvantage compared to a bilingual/trilingual person in Germany, Italy, Denmark or elsewhere where people are learning two or more languages.

Language diversity is therefore one of the future challenges for the mobility of the workforce.

Concluding remarks

This increasing use of English on a daily basis as a language of additional communication, rather than as an occasional foreign language, is posing some challenges for second language learning and teaching.

Firstly, we will need to develop activities that infuse learners with the understanding that English is their own language, *not somebody else's*, by allowing them to use the language for authentic communication about things important to themselves and their community, beginning at a young age.

Secondly, educated citizens of the 21st century will need to use languages not only for simple communication, but rather for the kinds of complex negotiation, collaboration, analysis, critique, and construction of knowledge required by an information economy and society. In tomorrow's world, the standard language-based syllabi - formed by lists of structures and functions to be mastered - may

not be enough. We will need to practise principles of situated learning - in other words engaging learners in the kinds of authentic tasks and problem-solving activities that they will actually need in the future. Having our students carry out complex project work involving negotiation, collaboration, goal-setting, meaningful communication, and development of challenging 'products' will prepare them for the kinds of language usages which will benefit them. Students will need to develop a whole new range of foreign language literacies, which involve emerging forms of communication, reading, and writing using online technologies.

Thirdly, such results are unlikely without the teachers, and students, having some degree of critical awareness of the socio-cultural influences they bring onto their learning environments. Failing to do this will result in a restrictive, teacher-centred implementation of online learning and the construction of artificial worlds.

Finally, each new technology (film, radio, television) claimed to have the potential to radically transform education, but none ended up altering the fundamental way schooling is carried out. Online learning similarly has been labelled as the key to grand transformation of education. And it may indeed be the case that online learning, when used by teachers committed to a critical perspective, has the potential to "support and enhance learning through a different language learning.

These changes will cause a widespread softening of the demarcations between professionals and disciplines. In this increasingly fluid environment, it is apparent that both old and new professions have to confront change and indeed initiate it on occasion. Where a new profession appears on the scene, a place in the existing hierarchy needs to be found, the role of disciplines evolve.

Our relevance, and survival, as language educators will depend in part on whether we can fully come to grips with these changes.

Food for thought: A few more questions
- **To what extent does the layout/the architecture of the NLE affect the relation learner - tutor, learner-other learners, learner - what is learnt?**
- **What happens when tutors/facilitators and students never meet face-to-face but are connected only through text on a screen?**
- **How does that change the transmission and construction of knowledge, the nature of the learning process, the relationships among people who are interacting online?**
- **To what extent can the notion of learning community contribute to the success of NLE?**
- **What skills development is not accessible without face-to-face contact, if any?**
- **How can cultural differences be supported online?**
- **What is the role of integration in this process of adaptation to NLE?**
- **What new language and culture learning skills should be developed for making use of environment created through mobility?**