Real World Language Teaching

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Abstract
Inspired by an increasing level of social awareness amongst economists which
has promoted a movement for 'Real World Economics', this paper considers
what is required for 'Real World Language Teaching'. It first discusses issues in
the specification of syllabus content, focussing in particular on problems with
the proposal for a core English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) syllabus, and possible
learner perceptions of this. Next, it considers the 'real world' applicability of
major theories (or 'faiths') of language acquisition processes and argues that
they fail to take account of learners' views of the relative value of task types or
teachers' aims. The suggestion advanced in the paper is that contemporary
syllabus design and theory is thus characterised by an asocial view of language
teaching. Detailed knowledge about the social psychology of the context is vital
for Real World Language Teaching.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on our thinking about the two main dimensions of
language teaching: the *what* and the *how*. I recognise that a distinction between *syllabus*
('what') and *methodology* ('how'), although well established, is by no means an uncontested
one, as, for example, the various discussions related to process syllabuses have demonstrated
(see, for example, Breen and Littlejohn, 2000). However, for the purposes of this paper I do
not wish to go into the distinction itself but to consider underlying conceptualisations of what
should be the focus of work in language teaching and, indeed, language teaching research. In
particular, in looking at recent developments in thinking about language teaching, I want to
raise the question of whether we have considered the social psychology of classroom learning
sufficiently.

I want first to begin by drawing on insights that have come to the fore in a field very far from
our own – that is, the study of economics. This digression will, I believe, signal some
significant lessons that we can learn from, lessons which will form the main body of this
paper as I then turn to a discussion of recent innovations in syllabus design and in
methodological research in language teaching.

Insights from the study of economics
In the messy, ill-defined world of the social sciences, the study of economics has achieved
some considerable success in establishing a reputation as a positive, exact discipline. Along
with physics, chemistry and medicine, there is after all, a Nobel prize for economics –
something we will have to wait a long time for in language teaching. Part of economics' claim
to this status is its reliance on mathematical modelling and the role of theory in predicting
outcomes. It was a considerable shock therefore, when, in June 2000, significant challenges
were mounted against these very foundations of economic thought. Initially begun as a
localised protest by students at the Sorbonne in Paris against their own economics teaching,
this challenge labelled 'classical economics' as 'autistic', in the sense that (according to the
rebels) it displayed a startling lack of social awareness, an *asocial* view of reality and an
inability to grasp the fact that economic actions are *human* actions. Concepts such as 'value'

the rebels argued, cannot simply be defined as market prices on a supply/demand graph, for humans see value in very complex terms. Nor, they argued, can projections be based solely on statistical data, for such projections can take no account of how people perceive their world, the 'zeitgeist' of the time, or what people may aspire to. Most significantly, the rebels rejected the belief that economics can be viewed in the same way as physics with its (apparently) immutable laws, and charged that there is no possibility of a 'social physics'.

In the years since the initial rebellion of June 2000, thousands of economists have lent their support to a redefinition of the subject (paecon.net, undated.) establishing a significant movement for change in the teaching of economics and its frameworks for research and thinking. This movement, has led to the establishment of an alternative paradigm, now known as 'Real World Economics' which draws more fully on insights from social psychology (Fullbrook, 2007), and is now the subject of numerous books, edited collections and papers, particularly in the wake of economists' widespread failure to predict the recent collapses.

Thinking in language teaching: social or asocial?
The purpose of the foregoing narrative is to raise what I believe is a salutary question for ourselves: how far are we, in mainstream language teaching, guilty of thinking in largely *asocial* terms about our own discipline? How far are we led by models (whether of syllabus or of acquisition theory) that ignore the substantial social, human element in teaching and learning? It is certainly true that, just as economics has endeavoured to establish itself as a discipline it its own right, with its own models, concepts and theories, so too has language teaching. Indeed, it was a desire to assert the distinctive nature of our work, which led Richards (2001) to make this claim:

> "TESOL is an autonomous discipline. L2 learning and teaching needs to be understood in its own terms rather than approached via something else. While much can be learned by applying to TESOL insights gained from such fields as first language acquisition, educational theory, the psychology of learning and so on, increasingly TESOL seeks to establish its own theoretical foundations and research agenda rather than being seen as an opportunity to test out theories developed elsewhere for different purposes."

While few would recommend using language classrooms as places to "test out theories developed elsewhere for different purposes", I feel a certain sense of unease with a strident tone of distinctiveness in the nature of our work, and a claim that language teaching should be seen as an "autonomous discipline". Classrooms are social places (Breen, 2001), lessons are 'social events' as well as 'pedagogic events' (Senior, 2002; Allwright, 1996), and language itself is inextricably linked to our own social identity (see, inter alia, Block, 2009). There will be many, many aspects of language teaching and learning which have substantial overlap with thinking in other areas of research, not least of which will be education, psychology, cognitive science, cultural studies and so on. The question posed by my example from the world of economics, then, is, do we sufficiently take account of these overlaps in our work in language teaching?

I want to discuss this now by taking in turn each of the two dimensions I referred to earlier, the *what* and the *how* of language teaching, focussing in particular on recent developments.

What?

Over its long and varied history, the mainstay of language teaching has been a linguistic analysis of the object of learning - that is, the foreign language itself. Grammar, of course, has provided the most common organising principle for syllabuses, most usually arranged according notions of simple to complex (present tenses to past tenses, simple to progressive, etc.), coupled with selections of vocabulary, sometimes related to frequency lists. Until the mid 1970s, however, this was largely a cottage industry in which individual writers or course designers used their own intuition to make selections. The situation changed significantly with the advent of functional-notional language teaching and the arrival of seemingly exhaustive descriptors of language use, most notably in the *Threshold Level* (1977*),* and Munby's *Communicative Syllabus Design* (1978). The advent of the 'technologisation' of syllabus design has since continued unabated, with the incorporation of discourse analysis into the stock of knowledge that syllabus and course writers may draw on, and the use of computer corpora to give greater detail on contexts in which specific language items are used. Most recently, statistical analyses now provide putatively 'reliable' matchings of 'can do' statements to levels of language competence (as in, for example, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe. 2001.)

While the analysis of language form and use has become increasingly sophisticated, with direct consequences for the selection of language presented to learners, it would also be fair to say, however, that the underlying asocial mythology in syllabus design remains unchanged. Although it has long been recognised that a significant gap may exist between what teachers teach and what learners learn (Allwright, 1984), the faith in detailed syllabus design is based on the notion that we can exercise control over what gets learned. Language teaching, however, is not simply a matter of transmission, in which prescribed language items are transferred to the students, unhindered. As Slimani (2001) and others have argued, the outcomes of language lessons are always negotiated implicitly or explicitly by the interaction that takes place in classroom. Learning outcomes are thus idiosyncratic, shaped by the interplay of the personal learning agendas of participants as they unfold in the classroom.

It is precisely this interaction of personal learning agendas which is particularly relevant to a consideration of a recent development in syllabus design, the 'ELF' or English as a Lingua Franca movement, which I would now like to discuss in detail. The EFL proposal aims to set out a 'core' of language features (particularly in pronunciation) to be taught to learners, and a listing of 'non-core' areas which may safely be dropped. At the heart of this discussion is the realisation that there is today no accepted 'standard', if ever there was one, and that native speakers have no legitimate claim to 'owning' the language. Widdowson (2003) aptly summarises the situation:

> It is a matter of considerable pride and satisfaction for native speakers of English that their language is an international means of communication. But the point is that it is only international to the extent that it is not their language. It is not a possession which they lease out to others, while still retaining the freehold. Other people actually own it.

> (Widdowson, 2003:43)

In these circumstances, where non-native speaker use of English is far more common than native speaker use, it is argued that the conventional distinction between English as a foreign language and English as a second language is largely irrelevant. So, too, are native speaker norms as a reference for determining error. As Jenkins (2003) argues:

> We have a new international English speaking community for whom it is no longer relevant to look at how NSs speak English with other NSs and then transmit this NS-use to NNSs. Instead, we need to find out what NNSs do and need to be able to do when they speak English to each other in international contexts.

To this end, Jenkins and others have sought to determine what constitutes 'Lingua Franca English' and have proposed a 'core' of pronunciations and grammar which should guide standards and models presented to learners. This provides for a good degree of tolerance in what is deemed acceptable. Jenkins (2003) concludes that:

> outside the Lingua Franca Core, any pronunciation showing mother tongue influence should no longer be regarded as an error, but as an instance of regional accent.

In a similar vein, Seidlhofer (2004:220) has found lexicogrammatical features such as the non-use of the third person present tense–s ("She look very sad"), use of an all-purpose question tag such as *isn't it?* or *no?,* and pluralisation of nouns which are considered uncountable in native speaker English ("informations," "advices") as features of English as a Lingua Franca in Europe (ELFE). Jenkins and Seidlhofer (2001) draw two general suggestions from this work:

> First, teachers and students need to be encouraged to adjust their attitudes towards ELFE and to accord it a status similar to that given to "native" varieties. Second, it is crucial for English language teaching in Europe to focus on contexts of use that are relevant to European speakers of English. In particular, descriptions of spoken English offered to these learners should not be grounded in British or American uses of English but in ELFE or other non-native contexts (depending on where the particular learners intend to use their English in future).

Although the ELF proposals have been challenged by writers for problems with the data itself, the basis for assuming intelligibility, teachability, and the logic of the argument (see, inter alia, Scheuer (2005) and van den Doel (2007)), it seems likely that the ELF movement will continue to gain considerable momentum in the near future. It is not unrealistic to suggest that we may see, for example, published teaching materials in the near future which proclaim their compatibility to an ELF core syllabus, much as we now see materials which declare their conformity to the Common European Framework (Council of Europe, 2001).

As a definition of content for the classroom based exclusively on linguistic analyses, the ELF core proposals suffer from the same problems I discussed earlier, concerning the true nature of what gets learned in the classroom as it is explicitly or implicitly negotiated. A further interesting complexity here, however, is the fact that it seems quite likely that many learners will actually have their own view on the desirability of an ELF syllabus. Language use is more than simply a code for communication. It embodies in it the expression of a personal identity and a cultural reference point. In a very real sense, a language *needs* to belong to people, and to represent certain ways of thinking and being - in short, *cultures*. Thus, a foreign accent marks who we are in relation to the native community of the language we are learning. If I, an Englishman speak French, I will have an accent. I will have an accent because it reflects who I am – *an Englishman speaking French*. My foreign accent is a statement of my identity, in much the same way as my native speaker English identifies who I am – the region I come from, my socio-economic background, and so on. A struggle to develop a native-like accent in a foreign language may be a struggle to see myself as I am not.

From this perspective, the ELF movement makes sense in offering recognition of the status of a non-native accent. However, the mistake that the movement makes is to take the *product* of a non-native accent and assume that a description of this can form the basis for a variety of English to be taught. It is important to understand how a non-native accent emerges. It emerges from, amongst other things, my *personal* decision (consciously or subconsciously) as to how far I want to depart from the identity I have. Hearing myself *an Englishman* speak *as a Frenchman* entails a redefinition of my own view of myself. It will thus be up to me to decide how far *I* wish to go in approximating my naturally occurring foreign accent to the native speaker accent, as an indication of how far I wish to go in changing *who I am (*an *Englishman speaking French)*. A curriculum designed around standards that result from an analysis of non-native speaker accents, then, will make unavailable to me decisions about establishing a new identity for myself.

There are further issues in relation to learners' views of an ELF variety, itself. Just as different native speaker varieties of English may be perceived in different ways, it is quite reasonable to assume that many learners will have their own views (or prejudices) on the status of an ELF variety. They may, for example, see it as a 'degraded form', in as much as it is based on tolerances in deviations from native speaker English. While an ELF variety may be the most common variety of English in a particular region, it may nevertheless be the case that a native speaker variety commands greater status, perhaps as an indicator of social class or level of education, and thus constitute a more desirable goal.

The major irony in the ELF movement, then, is in the fact that a seemingly *social* analysis of a problem (that is how English is actually being used) has led to an *asocial* formulation of a solution. By focussing on a definition of the object to be learned – the language – and by basing syllabus plans on an analysis of how that language appears to be used, the decisions which learners individually may make about their own standards of achievement have effectively been bypassed. Issues in relation to personal identity and a personal perception of a variety of English are locked out by prior decisions over what will be made available to the learners.

So what would recognition of these issues entail for the syllabus designer/teacher? Just as the 'Real World Economics' movement focuses on how people see things and what they personally value, so too would a 'Real World' approach to the specification of content for a language course need to do this. Breen, Allwright, Slimani and others have suggested that a serious approach to the fact of learner views and interpretation of classroom goals is to incorporate those views into classroom decision-making. We can anticipate that this will be equally true in relation to a syllabus based on an ELF core, as learners will need to be involved in decisions about how far *they* individually wish to go towards developing a native-speaker-like accent and conforming to a native speaker grammar. We need to recognise that language use is a socially constructed phenomena which is not fixed once it is generalised, but one which is recreated and interpreted by each individual learner during the process of building a new identity.

How?
My assertion throughout the previous discussion is that syllabus designers cannot simply hope to specify content for learning and assume that that is what will get learned. Although commonplace, such a top-down approach is essentially *asocial* in that it ignores the views that learners themselves inevitably have about what is being offered to them for learning. In this

section, I want to turn to the other major aspect of language teaching, methodology, and consider how far our conceptualisation of this may similarly share this difficulty.

In very broad terms, most contemporary research and thinking about methodology can be related to one of what we may term the three 'big faiths' in second language acquisition theory. The first of these was inspired initially by Krashen's (1981) work in extending Chomsky's innatist views on language to the case of second language acquisition. This sees the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) as alive and well beyond puberty, and determining success in second language acquisition. In this model, second language acquisition is a subconscious process, in which a focus on meaning will naturally take care of the learner's parallel development of accuracy in form. The second 'big faith', generally termed the interaction hypothesis, recognises that although the process is essentially one in which 'comprehensible input' is responsible for acquisition, consciousness, particularly in the form of 'noticing' formal properties of the input, does have a facilitating role to play (see, inter alia, Long, 1997). The third faith, probably the dominant one in the practice of language teaching but substantially underexplored in research, sees language acquisition as essentially the same as learning any skill (see, inter alia, Johnson 1996). This sees conscious attention as crucially important, with 'practice' responsible for transforming the 'declarative knowledge' of language (i.e. knowledge *about* the language) into 'procedural knowledge' (i.e. the ability to actually use the language automatically).

To a greater or lesser extent, these three views of how language acquisition *actually happens* dominate our thinking today. Yet, their conspicuous failure to substantially account for success or otherwise in language learning, and their inability to actually guide programme design and implementation towards effective outcomes signals a problem in how they each conceptualise the process of language acquisition. I mentioned earlier the need to see language learning as a social process, one in which learners will have their own perception of what they need or do not need to learn, intimately related to the development of a new identity. Underlying each of the three 'big faiths', however, is an almost behaviourist conception of the learner. Language learners are conceived of as essentially anonymous, who will respond to a certain 'treatment' (whether it is simply exposure to the language or a call to 'notice' language form or a requirement to practise until automaticity results). The metaphor of a 'social physics' thus seems apt. To get a sense of the scale of theoretical neglect here, I would like to focus on a few examples to show just how far we are from understanding what makes for success or failure in language teaching.

Nowhere is the mismatch between contemporary theories of the process of language acquisition and the reality of it more marked than in school-based language teaching. Despite the fact that the vast majority of the world's language teaching takes place in primary and secondary schools, with learners under 16 years of age, none of the 'big faiths' offer any recognition of the dynamic, social context of school learning or how that may affect success or failure. Yet, it is in the school context that we can most clearly see factors which are at work in any classroom, usually less obviously. Failure or success in schools cannot be ascribed to adherence to a 'good theory' of language acquisition, with its reductionist view of the learner and the teacher. We need, instead, to be able to explain why some students do their homework while others regularly skip it, why some sit eagerly at the front of the class while others hide in the back, why some use language classes as an opportunity to be disruptive while others remain focussed, and so on.

As an example of this kind of investigation, Littlejohn (2008) discusses why learner training with school-aged students often fails to achieve any noticeable impact. Drawing on data from some small-scale research into how students, aged 13-14, worked to complete a self-assessment form in which their teacher asked them to reflect 'metacognitively' on their goals and achievements, I show how the students effectively sabotaged the teacher's aims as they worked:

Mike: What goals did you write? I can't remember what I put. You got any goals I can use?

Dan: You can have some of mine and some of Yusuf's.

Yusuf: Here's one. 'I want to improve my spelling'. Use that. It's all crap anyway.

Dan: For number 2, just write you didn't achieve them, then you can write the same ones again next semester.

Mike: What about this? 'Why didn't you achieve them?'

Yusuf: You didn't work hard enough.

Mike: Yeah. I'll put that.

Dan: Hurry up, Mike. The others are waiting. We'll be late for the cinema.

More revealingly, the boys' later comments showed their reasoning in their approach to completing the form:
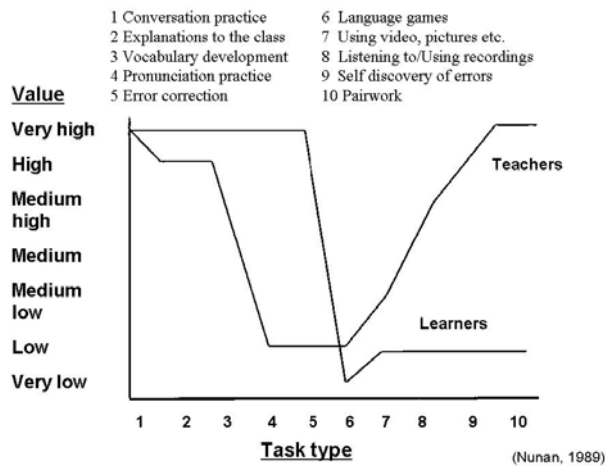
'It's all crap'

'What's the point? We have to do what they tell us anyway.'

'My goal was to get into the basketball team. I can't write that.'

'It's not natural to write about it.' 'It's nerd stuff.'

Most teachers of students of this age will readily recognise the 'real world' nature of this data. It clearly indicates two distinct realities – that of the teacher and that of the students, and the substantial gap that exists between them. While the teacher saw the self-assessment form as simply a means to encourage reflection, the students appeared to have seen it as an expansion of 'school space' (homework, exercises, tasks, etc.) into 'personal space' (personal attitudes and views about school, shared only with peers) and thus rejected the teaching goal. No matter how well designed the self-evaluation form was, no theory of learning strategies would be able to account for its dismal failure in this particular school context.

While school based teaching often throws these issues of social psychology into sharp relief, Nunan (1989) presents data which similarly shows how adult learner perspectives matter. In this, learners and teachers were asked to rate different types of exercises according to how useful they felt they were. The results revealed a stark discrepancy between the learners' and teachers' views, with the former showing a preference for 'traditional' teaching in contrast to the teachers.

1 Conversation practice   6 Language games
2 Explanations to the class   7 Using video, pictures etc.
3 Vocabulary development   8 Listening to/Using recordings
4 Pronunciation practice   9 Self discovery of errors
5 Error correction   10 Pairwork

(Nunan, 1989)

In a revealing extension of Nunan's original study, Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh (2004) surveyed 603 Iranian EFL university language learners and their teachers to ascertain how far the teachers were aware of the learners' preferences in classroom activities. Their research found a significant mismatch between learners' favoured activities and the teachers' perceptions of favoured activities. In a reversal of Nunan's findings, learners in the Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh study rated communicative activities significantly higher than their teachers estimated.

An interesting aspect of both the Nunan and the Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh research is that the content clearly enters into the realm of discussion occupied by the three 'big faiths', in that it concerns the efficacy or otherwise of task types. Yet, the important point here is not how far these task types concur or otherwise with theories of language acquisition, but how far the learners themselves trust them as offering any value. Eslami-Rasekh and Valizadeh, for example, conclude that "Iranian learners may have realized that the traditional methods of language instruction cannot help much to develop their communicative competence". In the case of the Nunan research, the gap between teacher and learner ratings of the task types, makes it likely that the teachers would find the students 'hard work' to teach, and probably encounter resistance, while the students may well see the teachers as not actually 'teaching' them much at all, time wasting with frivolous activities. Clearly, if learners do not perceive a classroom activity as being worth doing, they are unlikely to gain much from it, regardless of its justification from the point of view of any one of the 'big faiths'.

Conclusion
My main purpose in this brief paper has been to argue that if language teaching is to become 'Real World Language Teaching', much like 'Real World Economics', then it must urgently recognise that learning is a social process, and that classrooms, as Dick Allwright has maintained, are the site of both pedagogic and social events. This will have major implications for our faith in both syllabus planning and methodology. Certainly, while teachers' and learners' differing perceptions of the purpose, value and necessity of classroom content and activities remain hidden from each other, success will be a hit or miss affair. It is, therefore, always incumbent on teachers to communicate the logic behind the selection and design of classroom activities and content to learners and, simultaneously, to work to reveal learners' own perspectives.

Yet, in considering methodology and content in language teaching, we are faced with a dilemma. Language learning is both a psycholinguistic process *and* a social process. Without doubt, the major thrust in language teaching research has been to emphasise the former ('the

three big faiths'), and largely skate over the issues of the latter. At the same time, while there has been increasing attention to 'life in the classroom' this has generally left to one side any consideration of how language actually gets learned. As a longer-range goal, therefore, we need to start the work of incorporating a social psychological perspective of the classroom into a unified view that includes our knowledge of the psycholinguistic processes of language acquisition and our knowledge of what language is and how it works. Perhaps a way forward on this is to start with what we know about language acquisition and about the nature of language, but to always consider course design in real world contexts. For this, we probably need to start building a framework to collect information, not as in the familiar ways of needs analysis, but to paint a coherent picture of such things as levels of learner motivation, attitudes to the foreign language, to the target language culture, to the teaching institution, to the value of classroom activities, and so on. With these insights, we may then be able to revisit our plans for syllabus and methodology and hone them to social reality. Then, and only then, will we be able to design programmes fit for 'Real World Language Teaching'.

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