

The prospect, it seems, of a 'new millennium' has captured our imagination. In Britain, as elsewhere, there have been great discussions about how we should celebrate this historically significant event. Like the onset of a new year, however, a new millennium also marks a moment when it is appropriate to think about what we have done in the

If we look back at our recent past, we can identify trends which are likely to characterise the nature of future society. Social scientists working in this area have identified a number of aspects which they suggest will typify future 'post modern' society ('post modern' being what comes after 'modern' times). These characteristics refer principally to the West, but with the advent of

# Language teaching for the millennium

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discusses the role of language teachers in a 'futures curriculum'.

past, where we are now, and how we should plan for the future. By all accounts, we are in a period of rapid change, socially, politically, technologically, environmentally and culturally. It is likely, for example, that people who are now in their twenties, thirties or forties will experience significant changes in their working lives in the years ahead. Younger people who will be around sixty by the middle of the next century will grow up into a world quite unlike the one we inhabit now. The significance of these changes has led many educationalists to call for a 'futures curriculum', a curriculum which actively discusses the future and prepares students for their lives ahead. So what is our role as language teachers in all this? What might it mean to talk of 'language teaching for the future'? My aim is to stimulate discussion, even to be provocative, by discussing two related questions:

- *What will the future be like?*
- *What should we be doing now to prepare our students for the future?*

## Future trends

Predicting the future is always a hazardous business. Natural occurrences, catastrophes, sudden unexpected events, all make it impossible to reliably describe what the future will be like. But we can make reasonable predictions. The future won't just suddenly happen. The nature of the future exists in our present. It is here that history can help us.

'globalisation' they will be increasingly relevant everywhere. Some of the more significant aspects are:

### • a fragmented society

A society divided into smaller communities which extend across national borders. The notion of a culture (shared by all) will be replaced by cultures in which meanings, customs, habits, and references will vary considerably, even within the same geographical area.

### • decline of national governments

Globalisation as a dominant feature, limiting the power and relevance of national governments. Supranational governments and businesses will exercise greater influence.

### • rapid (dis)appearance of jobs

Technology will cause the disappearance of many types of jobs and the emergence of new ones. In a lifetime, an individual may expect to have ten or more different occupations. Learning to adapt and make choices and decisions will become more and more essential.

### • spread of the market

The force of 'the market' (advertising, consumer products, cost/profit analysis, etc) will be evident in all spheres of life: education, health care, religion, the family, and so on. Globalisation will lead to standardisation in the market; all the same products will be available everywhere.

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## ►►► • influence of electronic media

Electronic media (television, computers, interactive video) will dominate as the principal means by which people receive information and spend their leisure time. Electronic media will far outweigh the influence that school may have. Already estimates suggest that by the time most students have finished high school in the USA, they have spent 11,000 hours in class, but over 22,000 in front of a television.

## • endlessly eclectic

An emerging characteristic of many societies now is the manner in which the elements from very different areas of life are combined. Images from traditional life in Africa are used to advertise fashion clothes. Individuals can decorate their homes to look like houses from hundreds of years ago. Pop stars sing and politicians speak at the funerals of royalty. At the same time, the limits on what is expected are breaking down, with the result that it is becoming increasingly difficult to be really shocked. 'Expect anything' is the best advice.

## Preparing students for the future

The description of emerging characteristics of a future society may seem very remote from the day to day moments of language teaching. In reality, however, language teaching is a part of society as much as anything else. It is not difficult to see signs of a post modern society already present in contemporary language teaching practices. A review of published coursebooks for school-aged students can expose some significant characteristics. You may or may not agree with the following which are based on my own observations.

### Language learner as consumer

The language exercises are often centred around performing commercial transactions (e.g. ordering hamburgers and cola in a restaurant) or expressing preferences about consumer items (fashion clothes, pop music, popstars, and videos).

### Fragmented, eclectic content

A unit of materials may be composed of seemingly random content linked perhaps by an underlying grammatical

potentially one of the most significant events in modern history, may be the focus of classwork simply for the form it exemplifies: *What were the journalists doing when the bomb exploded?* Similarly, a storyline about a boy stealing cigarettes from a shop may be used to practise language forms: *What was the boy doing when the girl saw him?* without questioning the morality of the action.

### Standardised lessons

Although teaching practices and materials have become much more interesting for the learner in recent times, this has been accompanied by the growth in standardisation of teaching practices. Superficially, part of the cause of this has been the emergence of global coursebooks which propose similar classroom work in diverse situations and cultures. Additionally, global teaching qualifications are potentially leading to a standardised definition of 'good teaching'. I say 'superficially' because it is not the fact of globalisation that is important here, but what global coursebooks and global teaching qualifications actually propose. My own view is that there is an increasing tendency towards the scripting of lessons – standard lessons and lesson formats that are re-enacted all over the world. Students and teachers on opposite sides of the planet, in widely differing contexts, end up working on exactly the same language, through the same standard closed tasks, producing more or less the same outcome.

## *Economic efficiency may not always be compatible with educational goals*

Each of these trends, social scientists suggest, are likely to become more evident in the years ahead. Whether they are good or bad depends, of course, upon your point of view. What is clear, however, is that there are dangers. The increasing dominance of electronic media, globalisation and multinational organisations all pose dangers for democracy and individual freedom. Similarly, the growing importance of market forces may threaten the integrity of social services such as education, where economic efficiency may not always be compatible with educational goals. We need to be aware of what is happening, so that instead of simply drifting forward, we can make the future as we would like it to be.

thread. A newspaper article about a protest may be followed by a listening passage on UFOs, which may in turn be followed by a role play to solve a murder – all intended to present examples of the Past Simple tense. 'Expect anything' is also suitable advice to a language student.

### Significance

Meaning has long been important in language teaching, but beyond this there is also the matter of *significance*. On the one hand, much of the content of language teaching appears to focus on what is essentially trivial. On the other hand, the true significance of something may be disregarded in the pursuit of a syllabus item. A text about the first tests of a nuclear bomb,

## A futures curriculum in language teaching

A futures curriculum for language teaching, then, will be based not only on what our students are likely to need, but also on a vision of how we would like the future to be – how we need to guard against dangers and shape the way we wish to live. This is of course a subjective matter which will vary from individual to individual and culture to culture, but I have set out six principles that I think could underpin developments in language teaching. As a set of desirable characteristics, they may also function as a means of evaluating what we are doing now, so I have added questions which we can use to review our present practices.

## Some characteristics of a 'futures curriculum'

### 1. Coherence

The use of themes, topics and projects to bind lessons together and provide coherence and a deeper focus and understanding.

**Ask: Is there a coherent topic over a lesson or series of lessons?**

### 2. Significant content

The selection of content that is worth learning and thinking about, dealt with in appropriate ways, which does not, on the one hand, trivialise significant issues or, on the other hand, make trivial things seem important. A key topic could itself be 'the future' in an attempt to raise students' awareness of future developments and discuss their own hopes, aspirations, worries and personal action.

**Ask: Is the lesson content worth knowing or thinking about?  
Is significant content treated appropriately?**

### 3. Decision-making in the classroom

A structured plan for actively involving students in making decisions in the classroom and taking on more responsibility for what happens in their lessons.

**Ask: What decisions are students required to make? How do they help to shape lessons to make each lesson unique?**

### 4. Use of students' intelligence

The use of types of exercises which require thinking, beyond memory retrieval or repetition, and which involve students in hypothesising, negotiating, planning, and evaluating.

**Ask: Do classroom tasks require thought?**

### 5. Cultural understanding

Tasks and texts which require students to look through the eyes of others, to learn the relative nature of values, to understand why people in different contexts think and do different things.

**Ask: Do texts and tasks promote cultural understanding?**

### 6. Critical language awareness

To view all language critically, that is, to look beyond the surface meaning and ask oneself questions such as, *Why are they saying that? What is not being said?* and *Who benefits from what is being said?* We might for example ask students to think about deeper reasons for why the passive voice is used in a newspaper headline or why particular adjectives are used to describe a consumer product and what effect they have.

**Ask: Are students asked to think about why language is used in particular ways?**

As an educational activity, language teaching bears a particular responsibility. On the one hand, we need to think about how we can help prepare our students for the very different demands the future will make, the need to make rapid decisions and adapt, for instance. On the other hand, we need to look beyond the concerns of the language syllabus, and not simply drift with the flow of post-modern

development. We need to think about the content and significance of our materials, the values and attitudes we project, the kinds of mental states we are fostering in our classrooms – how, indeed, we contribute to the way that people see themselves.

Now is the time to be shaping the future. **P**

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