### I. ARTICLES

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### Past, Present and Future of Language Education

ABSTRACT. The article analyses main issues in the present-day SLA and FLT against the background of those aspects of the past of language education which are not particularly well covered by group memory. Emphasis is given to parts forgotten and reinvented, ideas distorted and fields revisited. An attempt is made to examine the role of past and present in shaping the outline of future trends in language policy, language teaching and teacher education.

KEYWORDS: language education, innovation in foreign language teaching, history of FLT, European language policy.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In the present article I intend

- to look at what is called the information bomb and its consequences for the humanities in general and for applied linguistics and language teaching in particular,
- to present ideas and concepts considered modern and innovative in present day language teaching and learning,
- to critically assess their innovative character looking at them from a historical perspective of the 18th and 19th century Polish language education,
- to draw conclusions for the future of applied linguistics and language education.

#### 2. THE WORLD WE LIVE IN – 'INFORMATION HYSTERICS'

We are increasingly bombarded with information. In what Jean Baudrillard calls 'information hysterics', we get more of it, we learn to need more, therefore we get still more. This 'information bomb' drives us to look for

greater efficiency in every domain of our life (Virillo 1998). For this reason the world we live in today is characterized by a search for extensions, new technical solutions, artificial organs which would prove much more perfect than natural ones and – as Jean Baudrillard says – would be more real than real ones (Baudrillard 1981).

But – in this excessive production of information – is it possible to constantly offer new info-goods? Most of them would be repetitive anyway. Therefore, what becomes more and more important is not the quality of information itself but the quality of information transfer, information carriers and storing techniques.

Information has no longer a distinct form and starts functioning similarly to the work of a virus – a society's defense systems shrink just like the human immune system gets weakened when attacked by a virus. Let us reflect on what this means for language education today.

What seems to be a new phenomenon born at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> and the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a great fascination with recency, a drive to be perceived as modern and a fear of being labeled outdated, has not spared humanities. Considering that the speed of change is constantly growing and that research projects and publications in every field of science and humanities multiply, being up to date often means referring to the knowledge and publications from no more than the last decade.

In this race we have to naturally count not only with more and more common feelings of superiority over the work of the past, but also with a tendency to reinvent the wheel – a phenomenon nicely depicted by the renowned Polish playwright, Sławomir Mrożek, in his drawing entitled 'Lieutenant Kowalski in the Process of Inventing an Electric Bulb' (Mrożek 1957/1998). A lieutenant in the linguistic army reads mostly texts on submitting applications and on project management is bound to end up in a similar situation, while other lieutenants will soon happily quote Kowalski 2012.

What follows from this tendency is the reshaping of the image of history. Educators of the past are presented in the way Lord Byron was described by Lady Caroline Lamb: 'bad, mad and dangerous to know', a quote which made its way to many of his biographies (Grosskurth 1997). Education of the past is depicted as useless, boring or, at best, grammar-translation based. New ideas which as usual have some roots in the past are presented as a fascinating novelty with unprecedented freshness. Is the past really so horrible? Is modernity always so wonderful?

A historical perspective on language learning and teaching might help us to bring things into perspective and to look at what all this means for the present and for the future.

## 3. NEW OR NOT SO NEW IDEAS? A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Concepts constantly surfacing in today's writings in the field of applied linguistics and considered fundamental for innovative trends in language education – to mention just a few – are the following:

- multilingualism,
- intercomprehension,
- valuing languages,
- clarifying aims of language education,
- language exposure and contact with the community where a given language is spoken,
- the socio-cultural component,
- interactive teaching methods and a concept of error as a learning step,
- materials tailored to learners' needs with language for specific purposes,
- the role of self-instruction,
- the significance of a lingua franca.

Are those ideas really new? Let us attempt to answer this question taking the Polish context as an example.

*Multilingualism* was typical of the multinational Jagiellonian state starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> century, therefore various degrees of bilingualism or trilingualism characterized many of its citizens. In truly multilingual regions, however, neither bilingualism nor even trilingualism solved all the problems. Ways of dealing with difficulties arising from this complex situation depended on communicative needs related to family relations, war and trade.

In consequence, very often *intercomprehension* rather than productive plurilingualism proved to be the only realistic survival strategy in this geographical context where several languages were spoken. This approach was not only maintained, but also grew in importance during 150 years of partitions when Poland was wiped off the map of Europe by Russia, Prussia and Austria, and proved useful in the interwar period in which national and linguistic minorities amounted to one third of the population.

The value of language learning was noticed quite early followed by practical curricular solutions. Long before Lisbon and Barcelona the curriculum of the School for Young Knights in the 18th century included not only Polish, but also French, German and Latin as obligatory subjects. At the beginning of the 19th century the famous Polish Krzemieniec Lycee (Liceum Krzemienieckie), the model school of the times, offered systematic teaching of Polish, Latin, Greek, Russian, French and German. The Rabbinical School of Warsaw (1826–1862) offered courses in Polish, English, French, German and Italian.

The variety of language constellations offered by those institutions is worth pointing out as it shows sensitivity to future communicative needs of their graduates and predictable contexts of language use. In the second half of the 19th century and later the value of language learning was treated as indisputable which was manifested in numerous articles, e.g. by Dyniewicz (1880).

Aims and objectives of language learning were in the centre of educational interest. A tension between the learning of other languages for its own sake – now called intrinsic or integrative motivation – and learning them in order to make practical use of the new knowledge and skills – today referred to as instrumental motivation – was noticed as early as the end of the 18th century. Jan Śniadecki, the rector of the then Polish University of Vilnius, encouraged foreign language learning, and especially the learning of English, but stressed what we would today call a critical needs analysis. He encouraged students to benefit from and adopt what is new and valuable in intellectual approaches and in the technological domain, at the same time critically assessing what is and what is not worth the effort: '...korzystać z obcych myśli, postrzeżeń i wynalazków, ale nie przyjmować bez ścisłej rozwagi i bez surowego roztrząśnienia...' (Śniadecki quoted in Schramm 2008: 26).

The need for language exposure was also noticed long ago. In need of contact with authentic language the Vilnius University employed native speakers of English, French and German. Native speakers of these languages were also sought as private teachers not only by aristocratic families such as the Czartoryskis, but also by less affluent ones. Expectations vis-á-vis quality were high. Juliusz Słowacki, our leading 19th century poet, dissatisfied with the quality of the teaching of English by a German university teacher named Haustein, by the way a renowned author of an English coursebook published in 1806, decided to take private lessons with a native speaker named McDonald (Lipoński 1978: 87).

The socio-cultural component was not at all ignored by the teaching profession. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries respected teachers used to visit the country of their language to avoid language attrition and to be aware of changes in the lifestyle of the local population. The awareness of the importance of contact with the language in its community increased quite considerably among teachers and learners in the interwar Poland due to the popularity of the main language teaching methodology book written in 1925 by Juliusz Ippoldt, who promoted this idea.

Teaching methods employed in the Polish context were not as grammartranslation oriented as many writers tend to present them today. The direct method was used in teaching children and even in schools where grammartranslation was employed with adult learners, the modified Ollendorf ques-

tion and answer technique made lessons much more interactive than we often think them to be. Listening comprehension as well as production of communicatively useful structures enabled learners to use the language to get things done, as has been demonstrated in the English-dominated parting scene in Lalka, the great 19th century Polish novel. The protagonist, Stanisław Wokulski, after a series of English lessons with a native speaker, on hearing the English conversation taking place in his presence between his future wife and her cousin - both hoping he does not comprehend it - not only manages to understand the exchange, but also acts on this understanding deciding to part with Izabella and signalling the fact - to her dismay - by bidding her farewell in English (Prus 1935: 173-179). The tendency to teach in a functional, interactive way, now often unfairly accused of grammartranslation tendencies, developed in the 19th century and grew much stronger in the interwar period. The philological method based on texts, but not necessarily on translation, was used in parallel with the direct method and the reading method. Bad teaching as well as inadequate classroom management were immediately noticed not only by specialists, but also by parents and pupils. Ample evidence of this is given also in non-Polish literature, e.g. in Thomas Mann's Buddenbrooks (Mann 1901/1956: 667-672, see also Aleksandrowicz-Pędich 2011).

What is worth stressing is the fact that as early as the first half of the 19th century learners were encouraged to speak in a foreign language without fearing mistakes. M. Suchorowski, the author of a coursebook for the teaching of Polish as a foreign language, includes the following statement in one of the dialogues 'Bądź tylko śmiały i mów, czy źle, czy dobrze' (Be brave and speak, be it correct or incorrect) (Suchorowski 1829: 225–226). The same is suggested by S. Kuryłowicz, 'Mów Pan, tylko śmiało. Kto źle nie mówił, ten i dobrze nigdy mówić nie będzie' (Be brave, dear Sir, and start speaking. Who never spoke badly will never speak correctly) (Kuryłowicz 1833: 109). As plagiarism in FLT materials design was then common, similar suggestions can be found in quite a number of coursebooks published around that time (Dąbrowska 2010: 293).

Great stress was put on *materials tailored to the students' needs* and on the necessity to adjust methods to the age and the intellectual level of the students, as witnessed in the educational practice of language teaching at the Krzemieniec Lycee in the early 19th century. The know-how of coursebook design dates back to the middle of the 19th century and shows the early understanding of learners' communicative needs.

The concept of *language for specific purposes* seems to have been well understood at that time. An insightful analysis of the educational context of the time has been presented by Ewa Schramm in her excellent book on the

history of language teaching in Poland (Schramm 2008). Results of her research show that the first coursebooks published in Poland were those designed specifically for travellers and authored by Kuszel in 1857. Soon coursebooks for those planning emigration appeared as the economic situation in the east and south of Poland was getting more and more difficult (Dyniewicz 1880; Maryański 1905). Professional specialization for multilingual purposes proved useful as well – in 1902 Władysław Kierst published a coursebook of business and trade correspondence in five languages (Kierst 1902).

The value of *self-instruction* was noticed in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so materials of this kind, often based on the principles of the Toussaint-Langenscheidt method, soon gained great popularity. Many Poles learned English, French, German and English from locally published self-instructional coursebooks written by Ciemniewska (1860) and Berger (1889), and especially from a large number of books by Plato von Reussner published between 1881 and 1921, as well as from Polish versions of Anson's books published at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Schramm 2008).

The need for a *lingua franca* was noticed by an outstanding member of the Polish-Jewish community of Białystok, Dr. Ludwik Zamenhof. Brought up in the Polish-Yiddish language constellation and educated to become a medical doctor through Russian in Moscow and through German in Vienna, he saw language problems as the main barrier in communication and the main source of national conflicts. Zamenhof was also aware of the complexity of what we would today call linguistic imperialism. For that reason he came up with the idea of Esperanto as a new lingua franca and a culturally neutral code. Esperanto has never made its way to becoming a global language, a status gained by English, but it is worth remembering that it was Roman Dyboski, a Polish linguist, who first labelled English 'the international language' (Dyboski 1931 quoted in Wysocka in press).

### 4. 'NOTHING NEW UNDER THE SUN'? WHAT NOVELTY DO WE NEED IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION?

The ideas discussed above are not the only ones known in times past. The discovery of difficulties teachers face in their everyday work and attempts to use conversational methods in large-sized classes were both made very early. Even manipulations of marketing were discovered long ago. Over a century ago, in 1899, a Polish methodologist, Herman Benni, uncle of Tytus Benni, our famous linguist, warned learners against methods and coursebooks that promised wonderful results in three months or even in ten lessons (Benni 1899).

Are we therefore doomed to quote Ecclesiastes and his 'Nihil novi sub sole?'
The brief presentation above suggests 'yes' as an answer. In fact, it is 'yes and no', nicely reflected in the German 'Jain'. Most of the ideas now considered fresh and recent were conceived long ago. Yet this is true only when we look at the types of ideas but not at their popularity or ways of implementation.

Valuable concepts and solutions tended to be elitist and, in consequence, there were no attempts to promote them among less privileged strata of the society. No effort was made to precisely formulate the know-how which would enable their implementation on a mass scale. Technologies enabling today's broad and efficient access to information were also unavailable at the time.

How much the world has changed in this respect over the last century can be illustrated by the example of visual information. As Luis Buñuel states in his autobiography, in order to present the first silent movies the cinema of his childhood in the years of 1908–1912 had to employ not only a pianist, but also *el explicador* who stood next to the screen and explained the action to the audience. Today, paradoxically, it is his role that needs to be explained. As Buñuel himself clarifies 'Now we're so used to film language, to the elements of montage, to both simultaneous and successive action, to flashbacks, that our comprehension is automatic; but in the early years, the public had a hard time deciphering this new pictorial grammar. They needed an *explicador* to guide them from scene to scene' (Buñuel 1987: 32).

No more do we need to pretend that all the concepts and ideas are being formulated for the first time. The *novum* consists in two main spheres.

Firstly – we need new strategies which would help us to implement and to promote model solutions on a mass scale. This is a task of primary importance for both formal and informal language education.

Secondly – we need empirical research projects as these were unknown in humanities of the 18th and the 19th centuries when most of the innovative ideas for language education were born. We, however, need to be careful not to enter repetitive investigation of similar issues in similar ways as often reiteration shows minimum progress in formulating constructive conclusions for the teaching profession. Just two examples here which I discuss in detail in another text (Komorowska in press) – the issue of explicit grammar instruction and the concept of Language Awareness. Carefully researched in the struggle of audiolingualism and cognitivism in the 1960s and 1970s, the problem of explicit grammar instruction has constantly been coming back since then – recently in the influx of 'back-to grammar' and 'language awareness' articles as well as in research projects on the role of pedagogical grammar and form-focused instruction with no more than inconclusive or trivially repetitive results. Yet each new attempt is undertaken in the glory of novelty and often with little concern for what had been done before.

A more optimistic view can, however, be adopted. Inconclusiveness may as well be a sign of renewed attempts at arriving at clearer outcomes, though present-day results may seem disappointing. To quote a handful of examples – Language Awareness researched since the early 1980s is at times still treated as conscious and at times as unconscious. Explanations of the relationship between implicit and explicit knowledge range from the Identity Hypothesis through the Fundamental Similarity Hypothesis to the Fundamental Difference Hypothesis (Bley-Vroman 1989; Ellis 1994; VanPatten and Benati 2010), or from no-interface through weak interface to strong interface positions (Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005). It can be expected that this lack of clarity is a stage on our path to more conclusive results in the future.

A possible way to reach conclusions useful for the teaching profession leads through more specific research questions. No longer do we need general questions, e.g. Which is better – explicit grammar instruction or input flooding? What seems to be more useful are questions related to the when and where of particular methods and techniques.

We know by now that culture is important in language teaching, yet we do not know what proportions of 'big C' and 'little C' culture seem to be optimal for the learner.

We know that motivation is one of the most important factors in language learning, yet we do not know how to sustain it in longer stretches of time.

What we need for the future are bridges between theory and practice. Theory tells us a lot about individualized learner needs, yet in practice the learner can either take an international exam across all the basic skills or not take it at all.

We have to be careful to keep our ability to tell useful information from useless messages and new information from tiring repetitions. What is more, for information deemed useful we need efficient information transfer (Baudrillard 1997).

The past shows us directions, the present implements and promotes new solutions, while the future points to the need of precision. It also asks new questions, such as those related to the type of language constellations worth offering or a variety of a language worth learning.

# 5. HOW TO SPOT THE NEW? CHALLENGES OF THE PARADOX OF NOVELTY

Spotting novelty is not an easy task, especially as, irrespective of the discipline, it can be defined in a number of ways according to criteria related to concepts of the known and the unknown, stability and change, tradition and

recency, originality and repetitiveness or even to initiating or following a cycle (Białostocki 1975/2009). Although we are bound to look for novelty, however defined, the process is lengthy and tiring. Hence Kierkegaard's famous statement 'One only becomes weary of what is new' (Kierkegaard 1843 / 1992: 50). Yet we have a natural drive to welcome every new aspect and every new suggestion in the hope that it would answer our questions, solve our problems and satisfy our needs. Nonetheless, what we come across rarely meets our expectations. In consequence, we go on searching for novelty which would be worth finding. Pitfalls on our way are, however, manifold. As demonstrated in section 3 above, it is only too easy to consider certain ideas new only because we do not have sufficient information on what is already in stock. With little knowledge of the past, many ideas strike us as original and innovative, but knowledge is only a sine qua non condition of success here. A sufficient condition is needed consisting in the ability to carefully compare, draw analogies or critically assess what we consider new.

Moreover, there is a paradox involved in the process. The paradox of novelty consists in the fact that the new needs the old to be born. Novelty is not perceived as such in isolation. Things new are seen and labelled new only in comparison and contrast to what has already been encountered. There is no NEW without the OLD. To perceive novelty we need the context of what we know and understand. Therefore, it is the process of partial repetition that opens the way to view solutions, ideas and images as new and for us to actively engage in innovation. Psychology of perception tells us that a new figure can best be perceived against a known background (Arnheim 1969/1997). With each repetition in a recognizable context the unknown aspect gets a chance to reach us and be incorporated in our existing system (Foucault 2002). The Catalan writer and philosopher, Eugeni d'Ors i Rovira, puts it into an aphoristic paradox: 'Todo lo que no es tradición es plagio' – 'All that is not tradition is plagiarism' (Bleiberg et al. 1993).

All this means that today, in the world in which we are constantly exposed to numerous stimuli, the significance of abstract thinking and critical reflection is increasing more than ever. Yet critical reflection is valuable only if it is based on solid knowledge. But with the development of academic disciplines accompanied by massive publishing, it is more and more difficult, if not straightforwardly impossible, for one person to accumulate knowledge indispensable for the purpose. This situation deeply affects the field of education where a general view of many factors at a time is especially important and yet more and more often narrowly specialized experts are called for to tell educators what to accept and what to reject.

As it is exceedingly difficult to depend on general knowledge rooted in external structures, our independence shrinks and we narcissistically turn to ourselves (Doda 2004). In consequence, we want to be heard and carefully

listened to. It does not mean we are equally ready to listen to others. Hence the egocentric messages communicated to wide audience through social media. But when everybody speaks, who will listen? It is only possible to perceive new information and to understand it when one stops speaking and starts listening. Especially that evolutionary psychologists (Gazzaniga 2008; Miller 2000) tell us that listening is a fitness indicator while speaking functions as no more than an attractiveness factor.

### 6. CONCLUSION

As has been demonstrated, most of our concepts and ideas considered modern and innovative were in fact born long ago. Though we cannot boast of having conceived them, we have the possibilities and obligations to promote what used to be elitist solutions and implement them on a mass scale in both formal and informal education. We should also look ahead, formulating more precise research questions and avoiding unnecessarily repetitive research. In this sense the past can serve both the present and the future of language education.

Problems to be solved in the future can be found in the field of syllabus design, in often trivial coursebook content, in a structure of educational materials that is too predictable, in the wide promotion of mediocrity, assessment-oriented at what is easily measurable rather than at what is useful, and in insufficient help to develop learner autonomy. Even more traps can be found in mistaken objectives at the level of curriculum and syllabus – such as the compulsive teaching of idioms, collocations, proverbs, sayings or even local sociocultural norms in a language actually used as a *lingua franca*, while not paying enough attention to the teaching of those aspects if a given language is expected to be used in contacts with native speakers.

What we can hope for is stress on flexibility in curricular scenarios, on modularity, partial competences and intercomprehension, but also on interpersonal skills leading to intercultural competence.

Achieving those aims successfully calls for critical reflection based on the knowledge of past solutions in order to avoid reinventing the wheel and to be able to identify innovative concepts in the information chaos of the present-day.

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