

A telling tale of a tail and language teaching and/or learning

Bernard Haezwindt
Open University

“for students, the biggest obstacle to speaking in a foreign language class is their teacher!”

ABSTRACT

Language teaching has traditionally been a task for teachers to teach vocabulary items and grammatical rules and to explain to students how a foreign language works in reference to their mother tongue. For a long time, language teaching was a means to the end of understanding a written culture. This had two practical corollaries: to grade the students on the acquisition of discrete segments of learning and to sort them according to their marks, with a view to preparing them for the world of work in that it helped employers select candidates on their school or university grades. The result of this approach is plain to see: less than a third of the British population can use a foreign language successfully. Findings from research and academic thinking have hinted at different ways to ensure that students learn successfully what is on offer in the world around them. However, for a long time, there was no way of facilitating this concept, until ICT came on the scene. I believe that, with the use of ICT and positive help from facilitators, language learning will exceed our expectations. However, we shall have first to review all our ‘common-sense’ notions on teaching and learning.

As I was facilitating a group of practising modern language teachers at a CILT conference focusing on adult learning in 2004, I was quite surprised by the candid assumption made by some participants that “for students, the biggest obstacle to speaking in a foreign language class is their teacher!”

The title of my presentation was “Facilitating oral communication in distance or face-to-face foreign language learning”, and I was hoping to hear the above criticism of teachers from, at most, one participant with a view to sparking off a controversy and holding a productive workshop. However, I was not prepared for the tacit agreement which greeted what I hoped to be a controversial view. This preamble gave rise to a lively discussion on whether, how and to what extent students should be “corrected” during a “conversation” class. Needless to say, no consensus was reached and this may be a satisfactory conclusion in itself, since each teacher/facilitator, like every one of his/her students, is different and has a unique relationship with his/her students.

Working at the Open University, I facilitate at the annual French residential summer school, a rich environment for testing one’s stamina and current

pedagogical theories. After ten years of observations, I believe that correcting *most* students’ mistakes yields very little improvement, despite the fact that most students will beg their tutors to correct their mistakes. Polishing my best homophones, I shall tell my tale about a tail.

The French students of the Open University spend a week mainly practising their oral skills in a collaborative environment and in a mixed-ability setting. They take part in a simulation¹ which requires the setting up of a block of flats, an apartment building in Caen, inventing some characters who will inhabit the flats and creating some interactions between them. The week’s experience culminates in simulating a municipal event where the inhabitants of each block of flats – i.e. each group of students – show the others a programme of activities designed so as to foster a better life for everyone where they live. These activities range from the creation of parks, cultural festivals and the unavoidable three-hour French-style banquets. In order to achieve their objectives, students draw from their own experience of life² and their own very personal store of linguistic expressions on an ad-hoc basis. There is no room for rehearsing one’s language stockpile of clever idiomatic expressions when one is constantly called upon to contribute to the collective reaching of an objective. All activities are backed up by posters displayed on the walls which constitute a written record of the completed work. This allows staff and students to constantly remind themselves how much work has been accomplished. The posters are closely scrutinized and corrected by the tutors to ensure that no mistake is left on display. And the facilitators possibly believe that the students, having seen their individual mistakes corrected, will never make them again!

One of my pet hates, as an individual teacher is the direct translation of ‘perhaps’ into ‘peut-être’ as in: “**Peut-être nous allons créer un petit jardin pour les enfants des locataires*”. Consequently, at the beginning of the workshop, I explain the rule

Address for correspondence:
Bernard Haezwindt
Dept of Languages
Faculty of Education and
Language Studies
The Open University
Email:
bph4@tutor.open.ac.uk

governing the use of 'peut-être' by indicating that it must be followed by 'que'. (I do not see much point in complicating matters, at level two³, in introducing the idea of using 'peut-être' with the inversion of the following verb!) As the work in progress during the simulation is based on a lot of speculation, I am guaranteed to 'suffer' the ignominy of hearing almost instantly the mistake I thought I had pre-empted for ever!

There must be some reasons why my students continue making the same mistake⁴ after my explanation:

1. they are not listening
2. they can't easily remember syntactical rules
3. they don't care whether there should be a 'que' or not!⁵

In order to make sure that I have covered points (1) and (2), I use a little 'off-the-wall' scenario to make sure that I have the students' undivided attention and their memorisation ability firing on all synapses during my *lecturette*. I draw a large picture of an animal on the board with an extremely long tail. I then declare that the animal in question lives in the local river and figures on the list of endangered species, which might explain why they are very seldom seen. Because of its large tail ('queue' in French) and its uncertain future, the animal is called a '*peut-être QUE*'. I also specify that the animal dies if one cuts off its tail. I end up warning my students that if they don't use the word 'que' after 'peut-être' they must face the ghastly fact that they have killed another innocent '*Peut-être que*'.

This ridiculous explanation guarantees that the students:

1. listen to me
2. think that I am slightly or completely deranged

But, it ought also to guarantee that they have memorized the rule. Unfortunately, during the week, the population of *Peut-être que* continues to dwindle dramatically.

The answer to why students make the same mistakes over and over again⁶ could be that, instead of giving a surreal explanation for the use of the expression, I should provide students with one or more exercises, drills, which will make sure that they internalize the structure of *Peut-être que*. Unfortunately, our students already spend eight months of the year mostly practising their reading, writing and listening skills and, therefore, they desperately need to maximize practising their speaking skills at the summer school. Moreover, if they already spend all this time reading, writing, listening and doing grammar exercises, why do they still make mistakes when they speak, given all their investment in memorizing grammatical and syntactical rules? And let us not forget that students produce a number of assignments which are marked by first-class tutors. Finally, my own experience as a French national being grammatically abused throughout my childhood by well-meaning teachers, who made me do hundreds and hundreds of

Exercices Bled, has clearly empirically demonstrated to me that one can take the student to the grammar but that one cannot force him/her to internalise it. Of course, *some* of us managed to have *some* of these rules rub off us in the end, but the problem is that *most* of us who proved to be permeable to grammatical rules ended up being teachers who cannot see further than our collective bubble since, with time, we tended to drift socially away from our school friends who had to make a quick exit from the educational system. Would compulsory viewing of Match of the Day turn the football-phobes amongst us into the 'game of two halves' experts? The football-challenged ones amongst us might strongly disagree while the game's fans may accept this assumption quite enthusiastically.

It appears that *learning* a modern foreign language in order to communicate effectively, if *need* be, may be quite different from being on the receiving end of the *teaching* of a modern foreign language for the purpose of providing grades for an educational system designed to separate the wheat from the 'chavs' amongst the students. If the purpose of foreign modern language teaching is dictated by society as a means to separate students who have retained a finite knowledge of grammatical rules and vocabulary items from those who have not, then the process achieves these objectives fairly well. If, however, the aim of foreign modern language learning is to provide *every member of society* with a useful personal tool, the vast numbers of *monolingualists* populating the UK prove that foreign modern language learning, as it exists at present, does not work for most people⁷.

Some educationists justify the failure to teach everyone a foreign language by stating that some can and others cannot acquire another language. However, paradoxically, most teachers will argue that, since everyone can learn their own language, everyone should have a 'taste' of a foreign language in case they might develop a liking for it. What happens to those who have not developed such a liking? Are they left with a useless corpus of foreign words which clogs up their memories? Are they left with a feeling of failure which could eventually make them xenophobic? Advocates of the 'give them a taste' philosophy should be forced to take two lessons of sky diving as a taste of their own medicine or have their teeth drilled by a pupil on work experience at a dental practice of their choice! In addition, foreign language teaching, prior to the National Literacy Strategy, was seen as a useful means to teach students about the grammar of their own language. "In Spanish they say this ... and in English we say that". Since English is used as the language reference for the foreign language teaching, it does not take students long to realise how irrational foreign languages are in comparison with their own...What about the thousands who decide each year that they have little liking for telling their classmates in German that they belong to the school's soccer team, something everyone knows anyway? Why are they not allowed, they ask, to turn their attention to 'more useful' educational pursuits instead of spending two or three years *being taught*

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(note the passive form) a ‘boring’ subject like modern languages?

Would the small numbers of students who study a language to level two and beyond indicate that not everyone can do so? Or is the present shortage of able linguists a result of the way language learning and teaching are perceived by both students and teachers?

To illustrate this last point, it seems useful to consult the work conducted by Joseph Rézeau from the University de Rennes 2, in Haute Bretagne.

In an article presented at EuroCALL in 1999⁸, Rézeau studied the relationships which existed between students’ attitudes towards learning, the students’ prior knowledge and assumptions about learning, and finally the learning process itself. He gave a questionnaire twice to two different types of students: a group of students reading art history, who took English as a minor option, and a group of students who studied English as a major subject. The objectives of the first group were utilitarian in that the students needed to read and write on art history in English. The linguists, on the other hand put the emphasis of their learning on communication. And these objectives were reflected in their perception of language learning. Some felt that studying English would provide them with a necessary tool for their particular field of studies in so far as it would allow them to access a different set of cultural values, while the others – the linguists – believed that learning English was a means to communicate with a larger number of people.

The students’ initial assumptions translated themselves into two different attitudes towards learning English. The art historians insisted on being corrected, as the credibility of their future publications could be undermined by their mistakes, or their understanding of articles could be hampered by poor reading comprehension. The ‘linguists’ behaved exactly like my students of French in that they were not too concerned about the correctness of their production, provided they got their messages across to other English speakers.

One student in Rézeau’s group found learning English ‘rather boring’. When presented with the same questionnaire a year later, he was able to articulate his initial impression more explicitly and stated that learning English ‘was hard when one did not see an immediate use for it’ (p. 107).

The student in question felt that there was a chasm between what he learnt with difficulty and what he could do with it at a practical level. The learning difficulty was part of a vicious circle as it was caused by the mismatch between his expectations and the concrete application of his efforts. This may be the issue which affects the learning of a foreign language from the start for the overwhelming majority of learners.

The answer to the poor take-up of languages at GCSE and later on in universities or adult education classes could be a collective and communicative approach which would demonstrate unequivocally to the students that the memorisation of grammatical rules and of vocabulary items is not an end in itself but a series of tools one uses, when the need arises,

to perform a meaningful linguistic task. No two children born on the same day and living in the same street will possess exactly the same vocabulary in their mother tongue. Why then expect a whole year group to acquire a finite set of vocabulary items and grammatical structures nation-wide simply to invent a *level playing field* for the sole purpose of examining the students in the end?

With the advent of the Internet, students can now acquire grammatical and syntactical rules on a “just-in-time” basis without having to wait for the teacher to give them a formal lecture and two practice exercises on a particular topic at a particular time during the school year. Another way to use information and communication technology could be to set up an exchange with a school in another country by means of emails. Small groups of students could practise a particular skill in class and apply it in the real world to perform a meaningful collaborative task. This way, they would get instant feedback on their language learning – in that their correspondents would, or would not, understand them and would respond accordingly – and thus the students would acquire a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language as a means to an enjoyable and useful end. Moreover, students of French, for example, need not correspond only with French nationals. They could just as easily have “French email pals” in Germany, Italy, Romania or anywhere where some pupils learn French, like the school down the road...

But what about correcting their inevitable mistakes? Can one let students loose on a foreign language without checking their work? You definitely cannot do so if you belong to a behaviourist educational system where students’ progress is marked negatively by penalising their grammatical and syntactical mistakes. In an authoritarian environment based on ‘correction’, ‘discipline’, ‘uniforms’, ‘norms’, ‘assessments’ and ‘national curriculum’, you can’t.

To conclude this reflection, one may wonder if the poor performance of students in modern languages, at a time when there are fewer specialist linguists at university and higher education departments of modern languages close throughout the United Kingdom, is the result of beliefs about what language teaching and/or learning is. Some of our students at the Open University are desperate to be ‘corrected’ as they were a long time ago at school. What they fail to realise is that if their ‘corrections’ had worked at the time, they would not still be trying to learn a foreign language so many years later...

Should students be pitted daily against each other in a competitive environment by virtue of a normative system which highlights mistakes⁹ instead of being praised for individual achievement? Moreover, can a skill really be assessed and marked as a percentage of some unclear perfection? When in Germany, do you get an automatic discount at a supermarket if your command of the language is deemed, by some arbitrary criteria, to be excellent? You may get a funny look from the sales person if your message is not very clear, and this will provide you with all the linguistic feedback you need to make sure you are better understood next time. Are we so

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obsessed with correction that we forget that only a few of the native speakers we try to emulate are graduates, and that even they make copious mistakes in their own language?¹⁰ Who are we choosing as a prospective target audience for our students, the eminent members of the French Academy or the local butcher in a small village in Provence? And what type of French, German or Spanish, for example, should we teach and why? Is middle-class Roman Italian absolutely necessary for a Dutch plumber who wants to buy and do up a house in Sicily? Are we not guilty of cloning ourselves by vainly trying to turn our students into chips off our old block? Is this not yet another form of control? To take one example, it is quite possible to drive a nail into a wall using the handle of a screwdriver as a hammer, and by the same token, students can use double negatives and still get served in a restaurant.

To sum up, one can say that, given the way modern foreign languages **are taught**, for the great majority of students, foreign language learning is:

- rather pointless (What's in it for me? Nothing terribly practical)
- punitive (Whenever I say or write something someone always highlights my mistakes and never the points I have got right)
- yet another instrument to place students into graded pigeon holes for the benefits of employers through the practice of testing which represent three sources of power: state, discourse, and ideology.

How then can we ensure that our students learn a foreign language? One answer is to make sure that they work in a spirit of collaboration which engages everyone in meaningful communicative language tasks. Too bad for the survival of the 'peut-être Que'! But can this ever be possible in an educational environment where each person's grade matters? How about facilitating each student's personal curriculum, however painful it can be for us teachers, repositories of an infinitesimal fraction of the knowledge available on the web? That would be a different matter all together as it would involve the student-consumers taking pride of place in the classroom.

Finally, since I contend that in modern languages, one does not learn from one's mistakes, but rather from one's personal achievements, I would be interested to know what the 'language police' have to say about their contribution to modern language learning. Would the tale of the *knights of the red pen* be a glorious or a sad one?

NOTES

- ¹ The week's course is based loosely on Francis Debyser's *L'Immeuble*.
- ² Prior to the course, students are sent a 'taster pack' which, without telling them precisely what the course will consist of, asks them to make some observations in their own locality which they can transfer to the course in Caen.
- ³ Somewhere between A level and first year university level.
- ⁴ And, this is not due to poor discipline in the classroom, nor the fact that students do not wear a uniform. These two

seem to be prerequisites in the speeches made by conservative (with a small 'c') experts and right-wing politicians: discipline for its own sake, reinforced by the wearing of a uniform. The Hitler youths and members of the communist youth organization under Stalin must have been high flyers in their respective education systems! By the same token, the political right advocates the use of the syllabic method in France and 'phonics' in the UK as this does away with the unfashionable individual's holistic perception of the word (and, who knows, the world?). What is more enchanting than to hear children shouting syllables together, apart from watching a well-oiled squad of soldiers square bashing? Hweoevr, the asbloute ipmrtieave and domagtic neecessity to use wrod coponenmts to peicerve a wohle word is porevn rtaehr ftuile if you hvae been abe to dehciper this snentece... In modern language teaching, we have their counterparts, those who believe that mastering a language consists in assimilating small units taken out of two distinct sources: vocabulary items and grammatical rules.* Is the future tense more difficult to teach than the subjunctive and which should come first, adjectives or pronouns? And which is the most 'difficult' language on this planet? These questions are overwhelmingly important for whoever wants to talk about language learning as an academic discipline. And to think that somewhere on the planet, some children are learning their mother tongue, oblivious that it could be the most difficult one in the world!

- * Célestin Freinet had an interesting observation on what the teaching of bicycle riding by *educationalists* would look like. Before reading this passage, let us remind ourselves that practising a foreign language, taking photographs and riding a bicycle, for example, are skills:

« Let us be frank: if we left with the educationalists the exclusive right to teach children how to ride a bicycle, we would not have many cyclists around. Before sitting on the bicycle, one would have to know it, wouldn't one? This is elementary: make a list of all its components and do successfully a number of exercises on the principles of mechanics of transmission and balance. Then, but only then, the child would be allowed to climb on the bicycle. Oh! Do not worry! One would not leave the child loose on the road where s/he would run the risk of endangering passers-by. The educationalist would have conceived some good educational bicycles, fixed on blocks on which the children would learn without any risk how to sit on a saddle and how to use the pedals. It would be only when the pupil knew how to ride a bicycle that one would let him/her loose on the contraption. » (My translation) Freinet, C. *Les dits de Mathieu*. Delachaux et Niestlé:1978. (Pp.102-103) Cited in Ph. Meirieu:
[Http://www.meirieu.com/COURS/listedescours.htm](http://www.meirieu.com/COURS/listedescours.htm)

- ⁵ A cry of anguish from a despondent teacher!
- ⁶ In fact, we shall see later on that some students do not share our [the teachers'] terror of mistakes because they see modern foreign language learning in a different light.
- ⁷ But then, when in Holland, why is it so hard to find anyone who does not speak English fluently? Are the Dutch and Scandinavian endowed with a superior linguistic brain to those of the British? According to CILT, the National Centre for Languages:

"In countries like the Netherlands and Malta, where large proportions of the population are able to communicate in English (87% and 89% respectively), there are also very high proportions able to speak other languages too: 66% of Dutch people say they can hold a conversation in German and 60% of Maltese speak Italian too."
http://www.cilt.org.uk/news/latest/1105_eurobarometer.htm

Also:

"The UK is no longer bottom on the chart: it has risen to second-to-last place in front of Hungary. However, the proportion of our population saying we can speak another language has actually declined: from 34% in 2001 to 30% in 2005."

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http://www.cilt.org.uk/news/latest/1105_eurobarometer.htm

- ⁸ *Évolution des attitudes et des représentations dans l'apprentissage des langues dans un environnement multimedia.* **ReCall**, Vol 11, Number 1, May 1999. pp93-111.
- ⁹ It is also the case that foreign language teachers who are unsure about their own command of the language they teach tend to stick like 'grim death' to the few rules and expressions they know themselves and keep their students from experimenting outside their own comfort zone. Consequently, they impose a straitjacket which constrains their students' language creativity and sense of discovery and fun.
- ¹⁰ The following sign is only one example of *confusing* English found in a university toilet the UK: "In the interest of safety, please put the plastic ends of toilet paper rolls in the bin provided by the sinks". One has to be thankful there are such helpful sinks around!

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