THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF LANGUAGE LEARNING CENTRES

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Introduction

Where Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (TELL[(1)]) practice are concerned, it is tempting to see a direct cause-effect relationship between the problematical situation that existed in the late 1980s and substantial changes that took place in the 1990s. There is no doubt that the "Infrastructure of Language Learning" did take a turn for the better in several key universities in the 1990s, and that the changes did have the effect of bringing learning theory and classroom practice closer together. But the role of TELL is still not at all clear in this new environment, in the sense that the new technologies, with their greatly increased capacity to improve communication, have not yet been exploited in any systematic, theoretically well-founded way. Without that link, technology remains an adjunct activity, as can be seen by the varying degrees of infrastructural separation between the New Language Centres and the language 'labs'.

1. The problematics of the late 1980s

1.1 Ties that bind

1.1.1 Traditions in Philology

Most university language programs grew out of the philological tradition of humanism, with reading/writing abilities being given clear priority over speaking/listening skills. Since pattern-recognition and cognitive skills are fundamental to text decoding and accuracy, it is not surprising that the media used to foster these skills consistently focused on speech modelling and the drilling of patterns. Unfortunately, this tendency continued to dominate technologically enhanced language learning (TELL) long after the importance of other, less paradigmatic motivating factors had been recognized in classroom pedagogy. Small wonder that the research literature of mediated learning overwhelmingly discovers "no significant difference" in learning achievements which are attributable to the technology alone (other variables influence the outcome in most cases).[(2)]

1.1.2 Traditions in TELL

Technology in the more modern sense has been used to support language learning for almost a century. From recording native speakers on wire to recording them on tape or CD, not much changed - methodologically speaking - until recently. Technologically, of course, the changes were substantial: the fidelity, volume and speed of the medium, its storage capacity, and convenience of rapid, selective access to a wider array of models and practice exercises. But most of the media that were co-opted to support those skills had been invented for entirely different, far less 'cognitive' purposes -- such as recording or relaying authentic information and entertainment in a linear, uninterrupted, untruncated stream. By contrast, the exercises devised on those media for language learning tended to be overwhelmingly synthetic,

abstracted, repetitive slices of language designed to exemplify and reinforce the recognition/acquisition of structural principles. To that extent, language lab technology was not only at odds with the classroom practice. It consisted of misappropriating media which had a far more stimulating 'other' life. In essence, by the late 1980s, there was a growing dichotomy between the face-to-face classroom, with its mixture of cognitive learning and simulated 'realistic' interactivity on the one hand, and the computer- and tape-based language laboratory on the other.

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1.2 Communicative needs, conservative methods

1.2.1 Methodological change

A new fact of university-level language learning life began to arise in the decades leading up to the 1990s. It contrasted sharply with the philological tradition, so met with varying degrees of welcome in the language/literature departments. Social policy, greater population mobility, and SLA theory itself underpinned a demand, by the mid-1980s at the latest, for more pragmatic, more career-related and more oral language learning skills. University language/literature departments and publishers that did embrace the trend to greater orality, were able to capitalize on the 'communicative approach', to enhance students' acquisition of speaking/listening skills. Quite frequently, however, that clashed with the methods of the philological tradition and the technologies that had been co-opted to support it.

In Europe, the 'communicative' approach originated with the need for greater mobility of students and skilled and service workers, and was often called "contact threshold" learning; it led to a multitude of programs for learning languages for special purposes (LSPs) - some of them very specialized indeed, such as the sophisticated one developed with European funding to train English- and French-speaking Channel Tunnel rail drivers in each others' language.[3]

In North America, Krashen and Terrell's "natural approach" produced similar methodological and pedagogical results -- focusing on socially contextualized, stepped, curriculum goals, or 'learner outcomes'.

One group of learners who added significantly to the 'communicative' pressures of other learners were students of the professional faculties (Nursing, Engineering, Medicine, and Business, for example). These students had highly pragmatic second-language needs, but their programs rarely allowed time for sufficient language electives of the traditional sort. What many students of this group required, in as short a time as possible, were quite specific, professional, 'non-academic', interactive oral skills, so that they could conduct technical discussions, teach, or interview clients or patients. The standard minimum four semesters of the typical 'generic' Lang/Lit department programs did not meet their needs specifically enough.

1.2.2 Structural problems

Many of the professional students wanted to learn to communicate in less commonly taught languages (LCTLs) for work with people who could not be expected to have English or

another major second language. For universities with traditional disciplinary structures, this caused severe administrative problems: instructors in the lang/lit departments generally lacked either the skill or the incentive or the opportunity to concentrate on such specialized courses. Frequently, instructors had to be hired into the respective professional faculties, where there were no comparable colleagues and no technical infrastructure. Often, these instructors were native speakers with some background in the respective professional field, but no training in, or readily-available support for SLA pedagogy.

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As will be seen in Part 2 of this chapter, the needs of language teachers in professional faculties may have been one catalyst for administrative innovation, but it was rarely the only structural and academic or pedagogical problem that Language Centres were intended to resolve.

1.2.3 Where does technology fit?

In 'communicative' curricula, simulations of real-life situations became the preferred classroom activity; but they could not be emulated well with technology -- only stimulated, by video re-enactments, for example. Where the technology was found to be very useful, however, was in making up for class-time formerly dedicated to practicing cognitive skills, usually with pattern-drilling on a computer (early CALL programs). Despite some attempt to motivate further practice at the computer with automated responses, such as right/wrong comments, score-keeping and built-in reference tools (grammatical explanations and paradigms, dictionaries), the 'intelligence' of the technology in no way matched the nuanced quality of a live instructor. Thus, where classroom teaching adapted to both affective and cognitive styles of learning, the technology of the language labs remained firmly in the cognitive camp.

1.2.4 Summary

By the late 1980s, signs of strain in the infrastructure of language learning at the post-secondary level could be roughly summed-up as:

- methodological.The traditional needs of philology students often clashed with the needs of students training in the professions and other students with more interest in the so-called 'communicative' skills; and
- technological. The usage of technology was growing, computer exercises were successful at giving practice in cognitive learning, other media (especially if coordinated through a computer, provided simulations, illustrations and motivation; but overall, TELL was inadequate, both for the communicative aspirations of a growing body of learners and for the methodological and pedagogical needs of the teacher. Having a significant body of poorly-supported, lone instructors scattered across the professional faculties only exacerbated the situation -- at larger institutions in particular. Lack of cohesion and common purpose made the situation ripe for structural change.

1.3 Transition: systemic cracks demand new structures

One benefit of the situation just described was that the infrastructure of language learning came under much closer scrutiny. Many of the weaknesses were found to be systemic, deriving from the traditional role assigned to language teaching in the lang/lit departments. Without structural change, however, there appeared to be little chance to break the cycle.

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Some of the professional shortcomings of the traditional approach to teaching languages were:

- Professional status. The hitherto lowly status of language-teaching in the university reward system (promotion, salary) had discouraged involvement by mainstream academics. One criticism of the practitioners was that they lacked the research connection of the teaching research philologist.
- Contractual. Before the 1990s, and despite actual course assignment patterns, candidates' ability to teach language classes was rarely mentioned as a significant requirement in tenure-track job advertisements for positions involving philological research and teaching.
- Graduate training: methods. The dominant pattern has been that almost all faculty members in lang/lit departments were trained exclusively in philology, but might do two-thirds of their teaching in language classes. Their preparation for this consisted of little more than being (usually untrained) language teaching assistants in their graduate school years.
- Graduate training: language skills. Because of the bias in their own training towards reading/writing skills, the job-candidates who were not native speakers may have been at a disadvantage if they lacked the necessary oral fluency for the new curriculum.

In seeking solutions to this cycle of problems, many universities in the United States and in Europe (although that is largely beyond the scope of this study) examined their support systems and made significant innovations during the 1990s. What follows is a synopsis of the changes as they were instituted at a dozen or so prestigious North American universities. The research underlying this overview was conducted through personal communication and consulting the respective websites (see References). Additional information was gleaned from a survey conducted for a colloquium held at Yale in March 2000:

2. The new Language Centres: A Summary Overview

"There are centers, and there are centers, and as they proliferate, their functions and structures proliferate as well."[4] What follows is an attempt to review the distinctive features of Language Centres at a dozen major North American universities. The names of their centres vary considerably (Center for the Study of Languages, Language Teaching Center, Centre for the Study of Intercultural Language Learning and Research etc.); but they have many features in common. [see the References below for WWW links to sites].

2.1 Common Features

The common denominators of the new Language Centres are that they are usually:

- based on meeting local needs in the spirit of the local academic 'culture';
- dependent on good relations with existing stakeholder departments;
- clearly associated with a research mission;
- allied with technology centres for courseware development and instruction;
- often quite dependent on the diplomatic skills and the academic qualifications of a single 'champion';
- founded (or came into being after being 'on the books' for a few years, as at UPenn) during the period 1994-99. Brown (1987) is the exception.

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2.2 Less Commonly Taught Languages (LCTLs)

Several universities first considered creating a Language Centre to house LCTLs (definitions of these varies. Often it includes Asian languages, Arabic, African, and some European languages, including ESL). The demand for instruction or testing in these languages typically arises either from students wanting to satisfy language requirements, or from professional schools wanting to broaden the options for students entering or graduating from their programs.

Universities with Language Centres administering and offering instruction in LCTLs include Stanford, Johns Hopkins and U. of Pennsylvania. (Queen's University in Canada is considering a similar solution.) This responsibility includes appointing instructors and may involve curriculum design. Some university Language Centres, e.g., Brown and Stanford, teach these subjects face-to-face where demand warrants, but also offer self-study for some LCTLs.

2.3 Teaching Theory, Methods

Increasingly, academic job postings in the humanities mention IT competence as a desirable asset for candidates. Only a minority of graduate schools address this need consistently, with graduate courses involving IT. The demand -- to judge by the position advertisements -- outstrips the supply.

Many of the new Language Centres do give occasional courses, workshops, or lectures in second language acquisition theory, methods and/or pedagogy for TAs and other full and part-time instructors (Brown, Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, Rice, Stanford are some examples). At a few universities, graduate students may also earn credit for such courses (Berkeley or Rice). In some cases this includes courses on computer-assisted language learning (CALL). The instructors of these courses may or may not be employees of the Language Centre, depending on their qualifications. A common alternative is to have applied linguists teach the classes.

In those universities (e.g., U. of Pennsylvania) which developed new Centres as a solution to the isolation of teachers in the professional schools or teachers of LCTLs, the benefits of a Centre devoted to teacher development and SLA research are self-evident.

2.4 Administrative Status and Role of the Centre

2.4.1 Relations with the "Lang/Lit Departments"

Three factors influence the attitude of the language-and-literature departments where establishment of an autonomous Language Centre is concerned. Typical fears are: that it may increase the likelihood (if it has not already occurred) of amalgamation of departments; that student enrolment numbers will be lost to the new Centre, affecting funding and staffing; that the disciplinary hegemony of lang/lit departments in the university's power structure will be (further) diluted. These concerns can not be ignored, obviously.

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Experience in both the US and Europe suggests that a Language Centre is likely to fail where language instruction is structurally divorced from the lang/lit departments, either through re-alignment with other disciplines or by creating a separate Language Centre entity.

- Re-alignment (say, with Linguistics) may separate the languages psychologically, but especially in curriculum, from their literatures and cultures, and unless sufficient (usually new) funds are made available to secure their professional status (through research, conferences or bringing in outside experts, for example), language teachers may continue in the second-class role of the previous structure.
- Independence is not a preferred solution either: to my knowledge, with the possible exception of Middlebury College, no major north American university has successfully created a Language Centre as a separate entity. In Europe, "it is very difficult to make an independent Language Centre work."[5] In order to survive they usually need to generate their own revenue, or offer graduate programmes.

There are many variations in the relationship between lang/lit departments and the Language Centre. At one extreme (so far uniquely conditioned, by strictly local circumstances), the director of a Language Centre at one major American university has the power to hire all language instructors (all languages).

2.4.2 Academic Status and Functions

It is difficult to generalize on the academic status of the Centres. Those which administer credit courses may be considered on paper at least as equivalent to other language-teaching departments. Most derive their base budgets from, and directors report to, the same dean as the lang/lit departments. Most have advisory committees of user groups, which may secure some consistency beyond the tenure of individual deans and directors, and help to ensure that shared interests continue in tandem.

The predominant model is for the Language Centre to have responsibility for LCTLs, including hiring instructors, and for some or all instructor training (often including graduate training, but varying in intensity from a few hours once a year to weekly, scheduled meetings). Most have a coordinating function, with a mandate such as that governing the Yale Center for Language Study: "to support, strengthen, coordinate and equalize, make more efficient, evaluate, develop administrative policies relating to, provide resources for, build up the use of technology in, integrate into the overall curriculum, and save money on [!], the learning of languages…"[6]

2.5 Research Mandate

A common feature of the new Centres is their research mandate. This was usually pre-determined before a director was appointed, and is consistently cited by the directors as the single most important basis for a Centre's academic respectability among its institutional peers. Directors, all of whom have doctorates, were typically hired with a background in philology or applied linguistics and a record of research in areas like language acquisition, CALL, or discipline-specific or interdisciplinary studies. Some directorships are term-limited (Rice), or rotate among full-time faculty (Brown).

2.6 TELL and CALL

All North American first-year textbooks for the 'major' languages and many second-year texts now espouse TELL and routinely include the following media: audio, video, and computer drills. Newer ones include online web access to CALL drills which are automatically scored. The costs of these ancillary items are included in the price of textbooks, so institutions are morally obligated to ensure that students can use them. Technological facilities are not an option, in other words - whether in situ or available online for remote access (if copyright can be protected).

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Those facilities do not always fall under the direct jurisdiction of the new Centres, which - structurally at least - can have the effect of separating the research function of the Centre from the CALL application of the "labs". Technical assistance for courseware development is often allied with the Centre through the labs (Georgetown, Berkeley, Johns Hopkins are typical examples). Some labs fall under the purview of Academic Computing services, or the University Library - usually because they are the operators of other student computing facilities on their respective campuses.

All Centres included in this overview do have a mandate to further the use of computer-assisted language-learning (CALL). Centres may provide or seek funds to import experts, or delegate or share that leadership role with others. These technical activities, or those of the language labs and software development offices with which they are usually linked, are sometimes funded from the same source, or by academic computing, or the library, or a combination of those sources. CALL activities accordingly may be affected considerably by the complexity of the infrastructure and lines of responsibility.

3. Conclusion

The institutions surveyed in this review are primarily larger, wealthier universities in the United States. The Language Centres which sprang up there in the past decade all serve an administrative, coordinating function. The pedagogical mandate - to improve the quality of language teaching - is clearly central to that role; but so too is the research mandate, if the Centres are to achieve parity with other academic departments. American foundations and granting agencies such as Culpeper, Mellon, Luce, Title VI, FIPSE, the Consortium for Language Teaching and Learning reinforce these last two roles with substantial resources.

To the extent that the institutions and the funding reflect elite situations, the findings may not apply in other jurisdictions, particularly where the language-teaching landscape at the post-secondary level is not so strongly determined by language requirements and 'languages across the curriculum' legislation. Nonetheless, I believe that there are broadly similar opportunities for most post-secondary systems with structures and curricula similar to those in the United States.

In the first section of this chapter, I attempted to argue that the premises for innovation are not based on geography or economic power, but on the reaction to a coalescence of a number of inherent inconsistencies in how language learning is conducted at universities that follow the western tradition. Similar tendencies spawned similar measures at a small number of European universities too. The solution in both cases was to start by changing the infrastructure, creating Language Centres with a single, clearly defined disciplinary focus. It is too early to measure the professional and academic impact of these changes, but the potential is considerable.

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Notes

1. TELL refers to all technologies, including analog, that have been or are still being used to support language learning. Since these technologies are rapidly settling onto a computer-based platform, CALL (computer-assisted LL) has become the preferred acronym. CALL will be used in this chapter in the strict sense (i.e. when computers are the sole technology involved).

2. The "No Significant Difference" website, which surveys literature on technology-enhanced learning over eight decades, is, rightly, considered to be misleading, precisely because its citations focus on on the contribution of technology alone, as if that could be divorced from the context of its use and its users. In recent years, the site has a companion list which cites literature that does register a difference. Similar reservations can be made about this site, too.

3. P. Bangs. "En train de Parler". In U. Beck and W. Sommer. (Eds.) (1994). *Learntec '93*. Berlin: Springer Verlag. Also briefly described in: P. Bangs and L. Shield (1999), "Why turn authors into programmers?". *ReCALL, 1 (11),* 20.

4. P. Patrikis in a personal communication.

5. Prof. David Bickerton, former Secretary General of CerleS, present member of the senior UK advisory council on language teaching, the Subject Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies (personal communication).

6. R. Levin, President, Yale University (n.d.). Cited at http://www.yale.edu /cls/centerscolloquium/surveyresponses.html.

References

(Webpages of selected institutions contributing to this review)

Berkeley Language Center

Brown Center for Language Studies

> Brown Language Resource Center (labs etc.) [Der Link existiert leider nicht mehr. Stand: 3. Januar 2005]

CercleS (European Confederation of Language Centres in H. E.)

Cornell Dept. of Modern Languages

Johns Hopkins Language Teaching Center

> Johns Hopkins Language Laboratory

Middlebury College Language Schools [Der Link http://www.middlebury.edu/~ls/general_info /facilities.html existiert leider nicht mehr. Stand: 1. Januar 2004]

University of Pennsylvania Language Center

Rice Center for the Study of Languages

> Rice University Language Resource Center

Stanford Language Center

> Stanford Language Laboratory [Der Link http://acomp.stanford.edu/ll/ existiert leider nicht mehr. Stand: 3. Januar 2005]

Yale Center for Language Study

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