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Language acquisition in the classroom: from tasks to enaction

From instructing to creating spaces for emergence in a translator education program

1. Genesis of a foreign language instructional development project

This article offers a glimpse into the genesis and unanticipated evolution of a project to bring innovation to foreign language teaching at the School of Translation Studies, Linguistics and Cultural Studies (FTSK) of the University of Mainz in Germersheim. Particular emphasis will be placed on showing how the task-based instructional approach (as depicted by Bleyhl 2005), upon which the project was originally based, took on a distinct *emergent* quality thanks to a shift from a constructivist to a post-constructivist epistemology of *emergence*.

Emergence here is used in the sense that has been adopted in the field of complexity theory to designate the *autopoietic* (unpredictable and self-organizing) nature of complex dynamic systems (Haggis 2008). An epistemology of emergence in this article refers to a view of knowledge and learning that rejects the reductionist, linear and deterministic positivism that has served as the philosophical foundation of both scientific enquiry and much of our contemporary educational practice (Mörçöl 1986). A number of scholars in the field of second language acquisition have contributed a theoretical framework for considering language and language learning in terms of complex dynamic systems including Ellis (1998), Finch (2001, 2004), Larsen-Freeman (1997, 2007) and van Lier (1996). The project reported on in this article eventually turned into an action-research attempt to investigate that framework empirically by actually creating and implementing a complexity-based approach to facilitating, on the one hand, and acquiring, on the other, the non-instructed

development of elementary communicative competence by translation students in a variety of foreign languages.

In 2007, the School's Language Center obtained University funding for an instructional design project to create and implement a common elementary language teaching approach for the many languages not taught in German secondary schools but for which the FTSK offers degree programmes in translation and/or interpreting. The project was designed around the specific objective of helping complete beginners to reach the TELC B1 level of communicative competence in their chosen foreign language within nine months. Funding was obtained from the University for a two-year period, which made it possible to run through two iterations of the nine-month courses. The teaching staff were to be almost exclusively students of translation enrolled at the School and native speakers of the languages they would be teaching. Only a few departments took full advantage of the project and in the end, *B1 in 9 months* courses were offered in Spanish, Russian, Hungarian, and Dutch. Shorter intensive courses with most targets were run in Modern Greek, Korean, Farsi, Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, Italian and German.¹

Questionnaires were distributed to all of the students on a regular basis and the analysis of the results revealed an extremely high rate of student satisfaction with the teaching approach and the pedagogical competence of the teachers – regardless of the language. The vast majority of students who attended the B1 courses did in fact pass the corresponding TELC or TELC-equivalent exams upon completion of their course. Nevertheless, despite the apparently overwhelming didactic success of the project, only the Dutch Division chose to continue to use the teaching approach once the initial funding ran out – and it is still being used seven years later.

While this apparent rejection of the approach might appear puzzling at first glance, particularly given the overwhelmingly positive student evaluations, it is noteworthy that only in the case of the Italian, Dutch and Chinese courses did FTSK faculty members participate in the course design and teaching activities – or even sit in on classes to find out what was going on in them. All of the other teachers were students in the translation or interpreting degree programmes at the FTSK, who of course had no say in curricular matters at the School. The project did, however, have lasting, and in many cases unpredict-

¹ The School does not actually offer degree programmes in Farsi or Korean, but the approach was applied to courses in these languages because there was significant interest on the part of students to have an introduction to these languages, and because there was teaching staff available for them.

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