
ELT Courses for Primary Schools Fear New Boston Tea Party: the communicative approach for young learners in French schools revisited.

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Abstract

The aim of this article is not so much to explore the possible causes of this concern as to suggest how the pedagogy and methodology involved in current primary language courses could be adapted, completed, if not improved to fit in the realities of the classroom in this country.

L'objet de cet article n'est pas tant d'analyser les causes éventuelles de l'inquiétude que suscite l'inadaptation des documents pédagogiques d'origine étrangère aux classes de l'école primaire en France mais d'indiquer comment la pédagogie et la méthodologie mises en oeuvre dans les cours de langue existants à ce niveau peuvent être adaptées, complétées et même améliorées pour correspondre aux réalités de la classe en France.

English is now taught as part of the national curriculum in a growing number of primary schools in France. As a result of the 1989-1992 national experiment, pupils aged 9 to 11 at *Cours Moyen* level, already spend two hours a week learning a foreign language. Yet, from September '95, according to the Minister of Education's New Contract for Schools, pupils aged 6 to 9 will have daily foreign language lessons in 15 minute periods.

New methods are now needed not only for young learners, but for very young learners as well. The demand from teachers for a new approach and new materials is greater than ever. There is also a growing concern about the adequacy for French classes of foreign-made materials or courses aimed at the global ELT market.

ELT productions have certainly helped many teachers, native or non-native, expert or unspecialised, offer their young pupils a stimulating first contact with

English. But, in the long run, more and more teachers said they resented the lack of adaptability of some foreign-made courses or standard ELT methodology offered in training sessions.

French EFL teachers and the cultural gap with the world of ELT

Indeed, the French have a strong national identity and are often reluctant to adopt what comes from abroad. This does not simply apply to life styles or food, but has also been observed in several other fields. And this attitude is even more obvious when they deal with the English-speaking world. Sub-consciously, a number of French EFL teachers refuse to be melted into a kind of British ELT Empire.

At the same time, there was a rush for ELT products during the national experiment, simply because very few people here had experience in teaching young learners. A dangerous compromise was adopted by many who refused to submit to one method but adopted a supermarket-style of consuming, choosing here and there among the materials offered. It is considered very French to do your own thing.

Others raised the right question: are all these courses and material for young learners meant to work as a teacher's resource kit or do they provide a complete tool for the learner? It is true that, compared with many French produced courses for 11 to 15 year old students, materials for young learners offer only a part of what the learner needs in continuity and do not really fit in the long slow race to learn English. It is then important to know who the teacher teaches, what the teacher's working conditions are, and most of all, what the educational system is like in the target country.

Some aspects of ELT methodology are definitely not French

The concept of the teacher-dominated classroom is still typical of our culture, even though there have been efforts to introduce interactive methods in language teaching.

The French teacher, whatever the subject, mostly acts as controller and assessor of the activities of the pupils and is encouraged to do so by:

- The headmaster who thinks it is the best way to maintain discipline.
- The parents, who share the headmaster's views.
- Many teacher-trainers who carry on the tradition.

- The pupils who attend classes in other subjects where the lockstep type is the only way.

In other words, the teacher likes being in control, if not he or she feels guilty and awkward. Besides, the number of pupils in classes is a reality which few ELT teachers for adults or foreign language teachers in English-speaking countries experience.

As a result, most of the activities suggested in foreign-made courses which make it difficult for the teacher to handle a large group are likely to be considered as inadequate.

Everybody Wants to Learn English

Despite all the efforts of our schools to offer courses in a wide range of languages, English is the most commonly taught language in France. Which means that teachers work with large groups ranging from 12 to 29, even at primary level.

From one child to another, the motivation varies considerably. The heterogeneity of the group is even greater when learning starts at an early age: Secondary school teachers are at the moment trying to adapt their syllabus to both beginners and non-beginners.

Soon, the language teacher will no longer be the new person on the stage and will have to assess where the pupils stand and where to go from there. Consequently, a redefinition of levels is needed, from young learners 1 to elementary 2, for instance.

Which means one syllabus for young learners is no longer sufficient and that the types of activities for each level have to be carefully listed, according to the age as well as the proficiency of the learners.

Teachers of many kinds

Teacher heterogeneity should not be underestimated either. Beside the few native speakers or bilingual teachers working in our institutions, many have a degree in English or in another language, and many of them have a good command of the language. Yet, many who admit they are not fluent at all will soon have to help their children learn English, using audio-visual materials. Can the course material help the teacher of the second type improve his or her skill?

Or should the teacher make do with it? Should a course include a common core for the moderately skilled one and supplements for the fluent one?

The course's linguistic and cultural contents should not be limited to English for communication in today's global village. Many teachers, including the college-trained, need a bulk of tales and songs from the English oral tradition and briefs on life in English-speaking countries. With comparison the pupils will find pleasure in rediscovering the lore of their native country, which media culture is gradually erasing from their memories.

Coherence and continuity:

The choice of a course or a set of materials should not be left to one teacher only, but should be made by the whole school team, instead, if not by all the schools whose pupils will attend the same "*collège*".

It would be wise to define the syllabus for primary level with the objectives of our *classe de sixième* in perspective. The better way is probably to move downward, with fewer objectives and an emphasis on the sounds of the foreign language.

A message from secondary school teachers

The attitude of secondary school teachers to primary language teaching has long been considered both negative and conservative. The unspoken message was often: "the only way you can learn English is the way my pupils learn it, not just that English for fun thing". Indeed, a sweet bunch of absolute beginners is easier to tackle.

Yet, more constructive remarks have to be heard: studying is something serious and a language teacher, whatever the methods, should mean business. Careful attention, correcting one's mistakes and memorizing pay when you embark on the long journey of learning a foreign language at school. Should it not be expected from any pupil at an earlier stage of learning English?

Many also feel that the methodology involved in primary classes, although it develops the listening skill and the learner's fluency, dangerously plays down accuracy and often aims at skill using without considering the essential phase of skill getting.

To correct this drawback, the exercises provided in a course for young learners should encourage the pupil to become aware of the formal or morpho-

logical characteristics of English and invite the pupil to produce correct and authentic English.

The misunderstanding about the communicative approach

Very often, the foreign language is approached and practised as if the pupils were immersed in a stimulating foreign environment. And yet, the learners are well aware that this is artificial. The mother tongue still works as an obstacle to thinking and acting in English, even to hearing the real sounds of the language. Social pressure may also be terribly inhibiting.

The result may be very disappointing for both teacher and pupils. There is even a risk that the pupils will lose their confidence or interest in the so-called communicative activities. The unspoken prejudice against the foreign culture may be reinforced. Besides, in the long run, the pupils may also feel ill-prepared for the type of evaluation that is prevalent in secondary school.

In fact, there is an area of misinterpretation surrounding the notion of communicative approach. You learn English to be able to communicate, yet you do not really learn to speak English only by communicating with your fellow students who are not native speakers.

At any level, including primary level, communicative activities must be understood as involving all types of activities, including listening, reading, or solving a problem in English, even repeating or reading aloud. At primary level, reading aloud should be considered as something very close to singing, with very clear rules.

The French learner's needs revisited

Primary language work often give emphasis to the attitude goals in the curriculum. It should not lose sight of the content goals. To restore the balance between learning and skill getting on one side, and skill using which gives the pupil more autonomy on the other side, a wider range of activities should be offered, even at such an early stage.

1. The sounds of English make it a very difficult language for French learners, even young or very young ones. Attention should be paid to the following:
 - Sentence patterns: stresses as well as weak forms, high pitch, low pitch.
 - Contrasts: Long and short vowels, diphthongs.

- The sounds that do not exist in French and can be identified graphically: th- r- h, etc...
- 2. Reading should not be considered simply as an activity which follows listening. It is also a good help for pronunciation and is indeed communication. In other words, reading should appear early in the course and should always aim at improving the quality of the learner's speech. A visual code should help the child spot the stressed syllables or sentence pattern.
- 3. Writing needs also to be considered as a way of helping the memory.
- 4. Verbal and non-verbal guidelines for listening activities.
- 5. Verbal and non-verbal prompts for oral production.

Only one thing cannot be put in a course book or learner's kit: the positive and stimulating relationship between the teacher and the student.

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