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FOR A COMPLEX DIDACTICS OF LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

Original title: "Pour une didactique comparée des langues-cultures"

Table of contents

Preface dated November 23, 2020	1
Note	2
Abstract	2
1. The comprehensive approach (focus on the actors)	3
2. The environmentalist approach (contextualization)	3
3. The qualitative approach (the internal conceptualization)	4
4. The pragmatist approach (the confrontation with reality)	4
5. The complex approach (the variation of perspectives)	4
6. The constructivist approach (cognition and metacognition)	5
7. The comparative approach	5

PREFACE DATED NOVEMBER 23, 2020

The original title of this article in French (« Pour une didactique comparée des langues-cultures ») is explained by the context of its writing and publication: in the absence of any other didactically oriented laboratory (whether in didactics of languages-cultures, or in didactics of this or that language, or in "general didactics of disciplines" as one can find in Educational Sciences), I had just at that time, at the University of Saint-Etienne where I had arrived shortly before, I had to find my place in this Center, and I had found a way to put forward, in my discipline, the importance of the comparative method.

By changing the title of this article, I do not wish to call into question the interest of the comparative research of the CÉLEC, a laboratory to which I am grateful for having welcomed me at the time, nor to undermine the interest of the comparative approach in research in didactics of languages and cultures, this method being one of the fundamental research methods: comparison between languages, methodologies and didactic traditions, textbooks, historical periods, theories and reference models, specialists, etc. For some epistemologists, the comparative method is the one that supplants the experimental method in sciences that do not allow it, such as geology, archaeology, law, or even sociology, at least if, out of respect for ethical rules, human manipulations are refused.

The experimental method is certainly possible in language-culture didactics, but it requires very heavy devices (recourse to control groups, statistical processing, in particular); its results are always debatable (it is never possible to reproduce exactly the same conditions of experimentation; in everyday practice the factors at stake are always complex: numerous, interrelated, variable, etc.: cf. In everyday practices, the factors at stake are always complex: numerous, interrelated, variable, etc. (se « Les composantes de la complexité »,

www.christianpuren.com/bibliothèque-de-travail/046/), and its results must in any case be compared with those of other methods, including precisely those of the comparative method (see in the online course « Méthodologie de la recherche en didactique des langues-cultures », Chapter 5, part 2.7 pp. 44-45, www.christianpuren.com/cours-méthodologie-de-la-recherche-en-dlc/chapitre-5-mettre-en-oeuvre-ses-méthodes-de-recherche/).

As it was originally written, this article was in fact a real manifesto in favor of the project that I had been pursuing since the end of the writing of my *Essai sur l'éclectisme* (www.christianpuren.com/mes-travaux/1994e/) and that I am still pursuing, that of a complex *didactics of language-cultures*. And if it were not for this circumstantial reason indicated above, it is on the complex approach, and not on the comparative approach, that I would have ended this article, because it is, in fact, that subsumes all the others.

I finally decided to modify the title, in this new version of November 2020 published on my site, so as not to be obliged, each time I quote it to refer my readers to my conception of this "complex didactics", to explain to them the reason for this original title somewhat out of step with its content.

It is with this in mind that one should read the disclaimer below, with which my article began when it was published in 2003.

NOTE

The text below is more of a manifesto than a research article, and that is why it is not accompanied by any bibliographical reference (even if it is indebted to many colleagues and other authors, whom I have often had the opportunity to quote in my previous articles). It is indeed a personal call for the establishment of a collective research structure in comparative language-culture didactics.

The discipline of "didactics of language-cultures" has gradually matured over the last thirty years, in particular thanks to specialists in French as a foreign language, their research centers, their associations, their journals and editorial collections. Its object is the joint process of teaching and learning languages-cultures, and its project –resolutely interventionist– the improvement of this process.

The design of disciplinary research is not yet perfectly shared and stabilized among its specialists (but is such a general and definitive agreement possible and desirable in any field so that an internal dynamic is maintained?) Already, however, it seems to me that a broad consensus has been reached on the following six major approaches, which are very strongly linked to each other as well as to the current scientific paradigms on which they are based. The idea behind the project presented here is that each of these six approaches justifies the development of a seventh, that of comparatism. (The corresponding argumentative parts are italicized.)

ABSTRACT

The design of research in the discipline "didactics of language-cultures" is not yet perfectly shared and stabilized among its French specialists. (But is such a general and definitive agreement possible and desirable in any field so that an internal dynamic is maintained?) Already, however, it seems to me that a broad consensus has been reached on the following six major approaches, which are very strongly linked to each other as well as to the current scientific paradigms on which they are based: 1. The comprehensive approach (focus on the actors). 2. The environmentalist approach (contextualization). 3. The qualitative approach (the internal conceptualization). 4. The pragmatist approach (the confrontation with reality). 5. The complex approach (the variation of perspectives). 6. The constructivist approach (cognition and metacognition). 7. The comparative approach.

1. THE COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH (FOCUS ON THE ACTORS)

The expression "comprehensive approach" is borrowed from the opposition - well known to specialists in the field - between a "critical sociology" à la Bourdieu, in which the researcher proposes to reveal realities of which the majority of actors are not aware (which would allow a minority of them to use them to their advantage), and a "comprehensive sociology" such as that proposed by Max Weber, which focuses on the actors in their environment by valuing their awareness, their experience and their intentionality, that is to say their degree of real "understanding" (hence the name of this approach) of the games they have played, the stakes they are confronted with, the acts they carry out and the projects they construct. This comprehensive approach corresponds to the emergence of a comprehensive paradigm in the social sciences as a whole (to which the epistemology of the didactics of languages and cultures partly corresponds, since its object involves actors in an active relationship within an instituted framework), a paradigm which is based on a rehabilitation of the explicit and reflected part of action, as well as of the competence of the actors to analyze themselves, their environment and the actions that they carry out there.

Until the last few years, the only recognized comparatism within the discipline was chronological (in particular in the form of the history of its constituted methodologies), since a synchronic comparatism could not make sense as long as the idea of a progress that was both linear and universal was imposed. Linearity has long been outdated in the representation of scientific progress, and so has universality from the moment when, in a comprehensive approach to the didactics of languages and cultures, we take into account the different languages and cultures of these full-fledged actors who are researchers, trainers, teachers... and learners.

2. THE ENVIRONMENTALIST APPROACH (CONTEXTUALIZATION)

All the actors act permanently in an environment that both determines them and that they determine in return, in a logic that is well implemented, in language-culture didactics, in the recursive relations that are established between the situations (given) and the devices (constructed) of teaching/learning. In the history of ideas, we have moved from the structuralist paradigm - where the internal functioning of the object of study was emphasized - to the environmentalist paradigm - where, on the contrary, the complex relations between the object of study and its environment are emphasized. Research in language and culture didactics is partly based on the epistemology of the "engineering sciences" because it focuses on the design of a project (the realization of a joint teaching/learning process), and not on the analysis of a teaching/learning object (the language or the culture). This is the reason why, after other human sciences, it has passed from a paradigm of optimization (in which it is a question of searching for the best modes of decision in all contexts - hence its initial recourse to external sciences such as linguistics to provide it with permanent rules based on the rational description of language as a system endowed with its own internal rules -) to a paradigm of adequacy (in which it is a question of searching for the best modes of adaptation of each decision to its particular context).

Comparatism is one of the two indispensable tools for the contextualization operation: the specificity of a context can only be revealed in relation to general issues or in relation to other specific contexts.

Contextualization also applies to the object and the disciplinary project. The human sciences, which have been confronted with the strong influence of complex environments on their object of analysis and their project of intervention, have naturally been led, at a certain stage of their development, to integrate historical and comparative approaches in order to maintain both their theoretical coherence and their pragmatic effectiveness. This is the case, for example, of law, history, literary studies, linguistics or civilization. The didactics of language-cultures shares on this point the epistemological situation of these disciplines.

This is why, after having integrated the historical dimension, the didactics of language-cultures must now, in order to be able to take up the challenges that are now its own, give itself the means of a comparatism that is its own.

3. THE QUALITATIVE APPROACH (THE INTERNAL CONCEPTUALIZATION)

The constitutive project of research in didactics of languages and cultures, the only professional justification of those who claim to be involved in it, is to help teachers become more autonomous, whose mission is to make their students more autonomous. They obviously cannot do this by accepting for themselves the status and function of substitutes for other disciplines, of popularizers of all these constituted external theories (linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, sociology, history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, economics, geopolitics,...: the list can be lengthened at will) which construct very relevant knowledge but in their field and for their field. What the researchers in didactics of languages and cultures are trying to build for their own project are the basic tools that are indispensable for a permanent modeling by the teachers themselves of their own practices. This is the fundamental reason (in the strong sense of the word) why they want a discipline that is itself autonomous.

It is for the same reason that research in didactics of languages-cultures is more of the order of the particular questions that the researcher, the trainer or the teacher asks himself on his own field, than of the order of the "general hypotheses" as they are understood in the so-called "hard" or "exact" sciences; more of a qualitative analysis than a quantitative one, the primary data on which researchers in didactics of languages and cultures work not being mainly numbers but words, which they collect in the field by direct or deferred observation (observed, recorded or videotaped classes), the study of written documents (programs, official texts, didactic materials,...), questionnaires or interviews with actors in the field, analysis of teaching/learning or training experiences, etc.

From the moment we reject any form of applicationism, that is to say that we refrain from resorting to external theories supposedly universal because they are "scientific", common conceptual tools created by and for the comparison between numerous and heterogeneous contexts become indispensable if we want to avoid the splintering of the discipline of "didactics of languages and cultures" into a juxtaposition of multiple contingent descriptions, and to maintain a minimum of overall epistemological consistency.

4. THE PRAGMATIST APPROACH (THE CONFRONTATION WITH REALITY)

The epistemological model best adapted to the specificities of language-culture didactics is close to that of those American pragmatists for whom the criterion of "truth" is not correspondence with the reality, but more modestly relevance and efficiency for the realization of human projects in the environment in which they are situated, and who for this reason renounce the knowledge of truth in itself in favor of the search for a common agreement. Against the positivist conception of knowledge as a representation of reality, language-culture didacticians choose the pragmatist conception of knowledge as a confrontation with reality, "as the fact of dealing with it". The reflective activity in language-culture didactics is thus the responsibility of its actors in the environment in which they find themselves and according to the project that is theirs.

In this pragmatic perspective, comparatism is essential to avoid the juxtaposition of isolated personal discourses referring to the contingency of each environment and to the sole intentionality of each actor. This can be seen in the drifts to which "action-research" or "action-training" sometimes give rise, in which collective reflection does not always prevent the sole evaluation from being limited to the declared satisfaction of the actors and to what they themselves claim to have learned, without achieving precisely what constitutes one of the objectives of the comparative approach, namely, beyond the irreducible specificity of any action in context, the production of a knowledge that can be transferred to other actors and to other environments.

5. THE COMPLEX APPROACH (THE VARIATION OF PERSPECTIVES)

The object of language-culture didactics is by nature complex, that is to say, no matter how finely we divide it up, each of its parts remains composed of plural, heterogeneous, variable, interrelated, partly opposed elements, always likely to enter into contradiction and to be modified both by a random global environment and by the subjectivity of the actors. This is why the reflection in didactics of languages and cultures is based on a paradigm of complexity which obliges us to constantly search for :

a) the multiple relationships (such as those of opposition, evolution, continuum, contact, recursion and instrumentalization) that can be established between opposing elements, for example between the teaching process and the learning process, language and culture, object logic and subject logic, product orientation and process orientation, authenticity and artificiality, form and meaning, etc. ;

b) the multiple perspectives that will allow, failing to reach the impossible "ultimate truth" about its research objects (which would be very worrying in a field where the subjectivity and the intentionality of the actors are decisive parameters...), to give the most complex perception possible by linking different perspectives, as when one examines the various facets of an object by turning it in one's hands

This paradigm of complexity constitutes one of the foundations of comparatism in language and culture didactics: the analysis of a didactic problem is carried out by comparing different perspectives obtained by successively varying the angles of observation.

6. THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH (COGNITION AND METACOGNITION)

It is known that in the research in didactics of languages and cultures, the cognitive paradigm is currently dominant, in which the learning of a language is considered as a cognitive process of permanent construction, deconstruction, reconstruction by each learner of his conscious and unconscious representations concerning the functioning of the foreign language and culture, representations produced in particular by the contact of these with the mother tongue and culture. This constructivist approach in turn calls for the comparatist approach since it leads to the valuing in class not only of reflexive activities of explicit comparison between the two languages and the two cultures, but also of meta-reflexive activities of explicit comparison between the modes and tasks of learning, and the modes and tasks of teaching.

The comparative approach can and must be extended from now on, in the same constructivist perspective, to the study of contact phenomena:

a) *between teaching methodologies and learning methodologies, methodologies produced by the cultures of belonging, the pedagogical and didactic traditions, the teaching/learning environments, the training received, the experiences accumulated, the individual psychological characteristics,... ;*

b) *and between the didactics of foreign languages and cultures, for example those of the different modern foreign languages in France and in Europe, or those of French as a foreign language in the world, with what they suppose of specificity in terms of methodological traditions, of desing of research, of didactic training and of the discipline itself*

7. THE COMPARATIVE APPROACH

In parallel to the comparative traditions in the *above-mentioned* disciplines, there is currently a project for the construction of an interdisciplinary comparative didactics (cf. No. 141 of the *Revue Française de Pédagogie*, Oct.-Nov.-Dec. 2002, entitled "Towards a Comparative Didactics"), in relation to which foreign language-culture didacticians can only be reticent for the following reasons:

a) This interdisciplinary comparative didactics is conceived within the Sciences of Education, which may call into question the hard-won autonomy of the didactics of languages and cultures.

b) This interdisciplinary comparative didactics is very much influenced by the didactics of exact sciences in general and mathematics in particular, with a traditional focus on the notion of "didactic transposition". However, this notion is epistemologically irrelevant in language-culture didactics because the objective is not the learning of a scholastic knowledge in relation to scholarly knowledge, but of social know-how in language-culture.

c) This interdisciplinary comparative didactics refers mainly to the school system of France or at most of the western countries. However, the didactics of French as a foreign language covers teaching in all the countries of the world to very different publics in extremely diverse environments, and it benefits from the corresponding long and rich experience. So it cannot do without an internal comparatism, and it has the means and the materials necessary to make it work efficiently from the start.

From a strategic point of view, it has become urgent, in French as a foreign language, to take into account the fact that from now on, many didacticians initially trained in France have developed or will have to develop in their different countries, in order to implement the different approaches listed above, no longer simple local adaptations of methodologies developed from a unique Center (France...), but real original didactic constructions. This is why an internal comparative approach in the didactics of language-cultures has become indispensable in order to constitute, among all the teaching, research and training fields in French as a foreign language spread throughout the world, a field of common reflection conceived in a modern perspective of egalitarian exchanges and sustainable development.