

ETHICS AND SCHOOL LANGUAGE DIDACTICS

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Summary

In school education, teachers in general, and language-culture teachers in particular, are always individually aware of their moral duties towards their students, and of the values they have to train them in. The thesis I defend in this 1994 article is that the discipline of language didactics now has several reasons to develop its own professional ethics, to make them known and to assert them. This article was written and published in the same year as my *Essay on Eclecticism* (1994e): not surprisingly, I emphasize here the consequences of the disappearance of methodologies on the need for teachers to constantly evaluate the effects of their teaching methods on their students: "Eclecticism mechanically confronts the ethical problematic because the methodological choices have become personal choices." This disappearance of methodologies, which until now have been both the tools and the reference objectives of language teacher training, also obliges trainers to develop their own ethics of professional training.

Introduction

If reflection on ethics in language teaching is beginning to emerge at the level of collective debate –and the present issue of *Modern Languages* is an illustration of this as well as an incentive– it is because the established (if not yet universally recognized) discipline of language didactics feels capable of taking charge of it and has an interest in doing so: this is, in any case, the thesis that I will defend here. I will therefore situate myself in a strictly **disciplinary** perspective (school language teaching). It is not that I consider this approach to be privileged: those chosen by other authors in this issue are of course just as relevant and legitimate. The breadth of the subject and its novelty will excuse me if I do no more than trace a few avenues of reflection which I hope will find a continuation in this place or in others.

1. Ethics and disciplinary legitimization

Jean-Max Thompson rightly notes in this issue that ethics is fashionable, driven by the media echo of the reflections carried out in the public arena by specialists in fields as diverse as biology, business and sport. However, upstream of the fashion effect, there is a societal effect¹: the search for social recognition no longer simply requires that one avail oneself of a hard "scientificity" or a cold "professionalism" (blind confidence in development in all its aspects -scientific, technological, industrial, commercial, informative?- has disappeared), but first of all that the pursuit of goals and the respect of moral rules are displayed². And this new social requirement is not only taken into account at the level of public communication strategy; it has already been integrated into the perception of professional identity, as Gilles Lipovetsky³ notes in the case of journalism: "It is a desire for professional **identity** and legitimacy that feeds the updating of the ethics of information" (p. 244, emphasis added)⁴. Other authors have noted the same phenomenon for other professions in the process of legitimization or in concern of relegitimization, such as Pierre Lévy⁵ for computer science and Serge Christophe Kolm⁶ for economics.

What Gilles Lipovetsky says about information could be taken up verbatim about language teaching: the emergence of the ethical debate among teachers, trainers, material designers and language educators is (or at least should be) a direct effect of their awareness:

- on the one hand, the social expectations specific to this teaching (and therefore the need to define their particular responsibilities towards students and society)

- and on the other hand of the specific way in which the ethical problem is posed in their discipline (and thus of the need to construct a particular ethics).

Some sociologists have noted how students and parents tend more and more to apply to the school the same consumerist logic they use elsewhere⁷: they now expect any professional to provide efficient services adapted to individual and specific needs, they judge on the basis of evidence and protest in case of dissatisfaction. This is why teachers often have the impression that many parents of students tend more and more to behave towards the National Education System as towards the SNCF or the Public Administration: as users. Everyone obviously has the right to judge this evolution of public attitudes and behaviors as he or she wishes, but, unless one invents a second profession that could be defined as "the intensive culture of bitterness in an ivory tower", one must take it into account and deal with it.

Now language teachers, like all other teachers, have always had a very strong awareness of their moral duties, but on the one hand they had it as educators rather than as specialists in this or that discipline, and on the other hand they did not feel the need to say it among themselves and to make it known, because they considered –and indeed it was the case– that it was self-evident for everyone. The change in the social environment of school language teaching now requires a parallel change in our strategy: we need, as do all professionals, a reassuring collective consciousness (for ourselves) and a reassuring collective image (for our "users"), and

1. To say, for example, that "humanitarianism is fashionable" does not take away from the reality of the rise of ethical concerns and demands in international relations, nor from the need to analyze the phenomenon.

2. The advertising campaigns against racism and AIDS of a company such as Benetton have never been anything but a particularly cynical use of these new requirements. In a more sympathetic genre (but we are in the same logic of the integration of the ethical dimension in the strategies of company communication), cf. the recent announcement by the Post Office of the free delivery by the letter carriers, in the mountain and rural zones, of medicines intended for the people known as "with reduced mobility".

3. Gilles Lipovetsky, *Le crépuscule du devoir. L'éthique indolore des nouveaux temps démocratiques*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. "NRF-Essais", 1992, 297 p.

4. One could say, playing on its ambivalence, that the expression "professional conscience" now includes both awareness of one's professional identity and respect for professional ethics.

5. Pierre LÉVY, *Les technologies de l'intelligence. The future of thought in the computer age*. Paris, Éditions La Découverte, 1990, 234 p., pp. 62-63.

6. Serge Christophe Kolm: *Philosophie de l'économie*. Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1986, 330 p., p. 67.

7. The same phenomenon has been noted with regard to the expectations of the Church on the part of believers.

this requires us to reflect explicitly on the ethics of our discipline, to make them known to each other and to others. This is a challenge and an issue that requires awareness-raising among teachers and public communication in which the specialist interlanguage associations, such as the APLV or ACEDLE⁸, have an irreplaceable role to play.

2. Ethics and methodology

The very particular situation in which the methodological problematic in language didactics currently finds itself seems to me to reinforce this requirement and this urgency of ethical reflection in our discipline. In order not to make this article too long (the moral duty of an Editor-in-Chief being to set an example...), I will content myself with briefly analyzing the two components of this current situation: on the one hand, the point of arrival of the past evolution eclecticism-, and on the other hand, the evolutionary trends.

2.1 Methodological eclecticism⁹

I will define eclecticism here by stating its central postulate: there can be no satisfactory "system", because any system is constituted in a process of search for maximum coherence and to do so must simplify reality and systematize its few principles, and consequently the best one can do is to pragmatically borrow from all present or past systems all that seems adapted to one's own problems and proves to be efficient on one's own ground¹⁰.

In the past, there has always been a strong spontaneous eclecticism in language didactics –and especially in **school language** didactics– at the level of teaching practices, due to the very high complexity of school teaching/learning situations¹¹; complexity due in particular to the heterogeneity and variability of students' levels, motivations, styles, rhythms, methods and learning habits, as well as to the multiple double constraints¹² of teaching situations.

In recent years, it can also be observed that most authors of English and German textbooks have tended to adopt this eclecticism, the analysis of textbooks of recent years showing how, on a structuring of the didactic unit still generally of audiovisualist origin¹³, simultaneous borrowings from the cognitive approach, the communicative approach, the audio-oral methodology, the active and direct methodology and sometimes even the traditional methodology¹⁴ are grafted more or less harmoniously.

This movement of taking into account eclecticism as a way of dealing with complexity is now beginning to affect, it seems to me, the didacticians themselves, who until now have behaved

⁸. Association des Chercheurs et Enseignants en Didactique des Langues Étrangères (headquarters in the APLV offices in Paris).

⁹. For more details on this eclecticism and its consequences in language didactics, I refer interested colleagues to my last book: *La didactique des langues à la croisée des méthodes. Essai sur l'éclectisme*, Paris, Didier-CRÉDIF, 1994, 212 p. Available on my website in French ([1994e](#)) and in Spanish ([1994e-es](#)).

¹⁰. Let us note in passing the similarity of the eclectic logic and consumerism in terms of their effects on behavior: I will come back to this later.

¹¹. This eclecticism would certainly have been stronger without the constant harmonizing pressure of the inspection. One can therefore think that the authoritarian tradition characteristic of the latter is in part a direct effect of this complexity. Other systemic effects are also clearly involved, such as the confusion, often needlessly denounced in the past (in particular in a famous report by A. de Péretti) between the training and inspection functions assigned to these personnel.

¹². Such as the need to make people talk (to practice language) and to make them shut up (to enforce a minimal discipline), to make people talk about language and to make them talk about language (because of the need for metalinguistic reflection in an extensive teaching situation), to take into account learning -which is only individual- while maintaining collective teaching, to pursue institutional goals and to respect official instructions which turn out to be unrealistic, etc., etc.

¹³. It is a didactic integration around a basic audio or scriptovisual dialogue: this dialogue presents the forms to be taught/learned, and a maximum of teaching/learning activities is done concentrically from this support.

¹⁴. The order adopted in this enumeration is the reverse order of the historical appearance of these methodological systems in France. I will not speak here of the teaching of Spanish, whose methodology -inherited from the active methodology of the 1920s-1960s- is a highly paradoxical object since it is both eclectic and dogmatic (it is imposed by the Spanish inspectorate). It would deserve developments too long for the framework of this article.

mainly as **methodologists**, *i.e.* as developers and propagators of the latest methodological system ("methodology" or "approach") in force. The reasons for this recent evolution are complex, but two can be highlighted:

- an epistemological reason: like other specialists in Human Sciences, language didacticians tend to abandon positivism and to emphasize the perverse effects of any globalizing system (this is their version of "anti-totalitarianism" in an intellectual context marked by the so-called "crisis of ideologies");

- a reason of didactic type. Since the birth of school didactics, at the end of the 19th century, the¹⁵ paradigm that commanded all methodological reflection and construction was the direct paradigm. This paradigm was made up of the following three very strongly interrelated postulates:

1) the best methodology for teaching languages is the one that is closest to the model of learning their language by native speakers: this is the "natural" or "mother tongue" method;

2) to learn to speak a foreign language well, one must simultaneously learn to speak and think in that language: this is the "direct method";

3) it is by speaking the language that one learns to speak it: this is the ends-means homology.

However, this paradigm has been questioned for several years without a new paradigm appearing, which means that there is no longer a model of global coherence in language didactics and consequently no single methodology that can be imposed.

We see that the two reasons strongly reinforce each other: there is no longer a model of global coherence, and we do not look for a new one because we no longer believe in the interest of such global coherences.

We can now return to ethics. As long as there was a dominant methodology that was supposed to be the best because it was the most recent and the most "scientific", teachers, material designers, trainers and didacticians could convince themselves that they were doing their best and that they were as efficient as possible by the very fact that they were applying, implementing, disseminating or developing this methodology. As soon as this reassuring certainty no longer exists, each person is returned to his or her individual responsibility and to the intimate feeling, which André Pons mentions in his article, of having done what he or she could even if the results do not meet expectations. In other words, eclecticism mechanically confronts the ethical problem because methodological choices have become personal choices.

We can go further in the reflection on this structural link between eclecticism and ethics: in the absence of a global methodological coherence (a constituted methodology such as audiovisual or direct methodology), the application of which **to all students would** guarantee the best possible results **for each one**, the maximum variation of the teaching and learning modes proposed becomes a moral obligation, since we know that the choice and the systematization of certain modes will automatically favor some students and will fatally disadvantage others¹⁶.

2.2 Evolutionary trends

It is very difficult to play the prophet in a situation as complex and labile as the one in which language didactics finds itself today. I will therefore cautiously limit myself here to two points for which the ethical implications seem to me the most obvious.

1. It is likely that the consumerist logic I mentioned earlier –and from which it is hard to see how teachers alone can escape– will tend in the future to reinforce a pragmatic eclecticism

¹⁵. I take the term paradigm in the sense in which Thomas S. Kuhn understands it (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, trans. fr. 1983 [1^e éd. 1962], Paris, Flammarion, 288 p.): a restricted set of fundamental postulates controlling the whole orientation of a given science (and thus its whole theoretical coherence). Cf., in astronomy, the succession of Ptolemaic (the earth is the center of the universe), Copernican (the earth revolves around the sun) and Hubblean (the universe has no center) paradigms.

¹⁶. Even if the methodology we use is meant to be eclectic, since as a constituted methodology –and what is more if it is imposed it necessarily functions, whether we like it or not, as a machine to simplify the problem and to limit the variability of practices (note intended especially for the Spanish inspection).

among them: in the future, there will undoubtedly be less "visceral" attachment to this or that principle supposed to embody a timeless didactic or pedagogical "truth", less *a priori* respect for this or that official dogma, more sensitivity to all the dysfunctions of the system with which they will identify less, more interest in diversified personal experimentation. Their current and increasingly acute perception of a growing gap between official objectives and instructions on the one hand, and their practical realities on the other, is undoubtedly one of the strongest indications of this.

We can see that this evolution will have to be accompanied by a greater sensitivity to the results actually obtained by each person: when collective certainties *a priori* concerning the means to be used disappear, the personal evaluation *a posteriori* of the means that one has personally chosen becomes an ethical requirement. As Maurice Sachot says in this same issue, freedom implies responsibility, and I believe that it is not by chance that in his text, as in that of Danièle Menès, the theme of the personal responsibility of teachers in the selection process appears.

It should be noted that awareness of this responsibility does not in itself imply any kind of guilt-tripping¹⁷, and that if this has often taken hold among teachers, it is only as a perverse effect of an unduly hierarchical relationship between trainers and trainees, as Jacques Roux has rightly denounced in his article. The best remedy for the guilt that has ever been found is the sharing of responsibilities: in this case, those of the trainers, the designers of materials and the didacticians have been as strong as those of the teachers, are still strong and will remain so in the future; not to mention –unless the word has lost all its meaning– those who are still called "responsible" for the teaching of languages in schools...

2. There are others who are also responsible, at their level and to their extent: the students themselves. One of the major trends in current language didactics is the search for ways of "empowering" learners by means of a progressive assumption of responsibility for their own learning. This tendency is linked to a psychological hypothesis concerning the existence of "individual learning strategies", a precious hypothesis from our point of view (even if it is still very difficult to "operationalize") since it justifies in some way didactically one of the ethical objectives of school teaching, namely the training of autonomy.

The simultaneous management of the teacher's responsibility and that of each learner necessarily involves something similar to what some have called the "pedagogy of the contract" or "the pedagogy of negotiation"¹⁸. Now, it is clear that such a pedagogy places at the center the moral principle of respect: respect (by the teacher) for the other (the student) and respect (by the student and the teacher) for the commitment made (by the student and the teacher). And it directs very precisely –it is of course not a coincidence– towards a new ethics very similar to the one that Gilles Lipovetsky sees emerging at present in society, which he calls "the ethics of responsibility", and which he defines as follows: "a "reasonable" ethics, animated not by the imperative of uprooting oneself from one's own ends, but by an effort to conciliate values and interests, between the principle of the rights of the individual and the constraints of social life?" (*op. cit.*, p. 215). Such a negotiation, inevitably, will have to deal in particular with the reconciliation between collective teaching methods and individual learning methods¹⁹, which can only produce their diversification. We see that here it is no longer methodological eclecticism that implies the implementation of a particular ethic, but conversely the implementation of ethics that implies a certain type of methodological eclecticism: I have already spoken earlier of a "structural link" between ethics and eclecticism.

¹⁷. The distinction between responsibility and guilt is essential in philosophy as well as in law, and it is wrong that some journalists have objected to the reminder made some time ago by a former Minister of Health.

¹⁸. The latter term is used, for example, by René Richerich in *Besoins langagiers et objectifs d'apprentissage*, Paris, Hachette, coll. "F-Recherches/Applications", 1985, 176 p.

¹⁹. I have put forward some concrete proposals for the implementation of these methodological conciliation activities in an article published here ("Méthodes d'enseignement, méthodes d'apprentissage et activités métaméthodologiques en classe de langue", *Les Langues Modernes*, n° 1/1990, pp. 57-70) (on line on my site: [1990a](#))

3. Ethics and training

I will conclude with a subject that I will only skim over, not out of disinterest but because it is too close to my heart and my strong personal involvement in the matter would risk making me overly aggressive. I therefore prefer to refer my readers to the terrible lines that Jacques Roux devoted in his article to teacher training. And to affirm here solemnly, on my own behalf but also on behalf of all those who have suffered and still suffer in silence, that the responsibility (or the irresponsibility, if they are not aware of it) of certain inspectors is enormous, who continue to make people believe that there are intangible didactic or pedagogical "truths", and who authoritatively maintain, against all evidence and against all wisdom, limiting instructions which do not allow teachers to manage –and to manage in a truly professional way– the complexity of their teaching situations, thus leading them to make themselves alone and personally responsible for their problems and their failures (i.e. to feel guilty).

I say to myself that fortunately the current rise of eclecticism should gradually make the position of these "trainers" more and more untenable: there is indeed no rational management (or, if one prefers, there can only be an irrational management) of methodological eclecticism from a position of authority, since what defines the "good" teacher in an eclectic perspective is very precisely his capacity to distance himself from dogmas, doctrines, imperative instructions and prefabricated models, and to create instead constantly new partial, temporary and plural coherences. The problem is that no one knows yet how this capacity is acquired and how it is transmitted, and this is what should make it one of the absolute priorities of didactic research in the years to come. However, nothing prevents from now on –and it is even a moral duty of the trainers, as Jacques Roux writes– to show very clearly to their trainees the limits and uncertainties of their training project and of their didactic proposals. Even more than in the classroom, since we are dealing here with adults, it is hard to see how honest training could do without a systematic use of negotiation and contract between responsible persons²⁰.

I have chosen to end this article by quoting a few lines from Jacques Roux in this same issue, not only as a tribute to this departed colleague, but also because he provides the best conclusion to my article that I could have dreamed of:

But, paradoxically, this is probably the fundamental reason why I love this profession: it is precisely insofar as there are no ready-made answers, no infallible recipes, no technical or psycho-technical solutions, that the profession of educator retains an ethical dimension. [It is for this reason that our profession implies a real freedom and that we cannot claim it enough. This is why it gives us a real dignity...

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²⁰. A feeling of infantilisation felt by trainees is therefore a particularly clear and serious warning signal.