

First publication in French: « L'épistémologie de la didactique des langues-cultures, une épistémologie complexe pour une discipline complexe », chap. 6 pp. 187-195 in : O'CONNELL Anne-Marie & CHAPLIER Claire (coord.), *Épistémologie à usage didactique, Langues de spécialité (secteur LANSAD)*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2019, 266 p.

## THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE DIDACTICS OF LANGUAGES-CULTURES, A COMPLEX EPISTEMOLOGY FOR A COMPLEX DISCIPLINE

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### Abstract

Epistemological questioning in a discipline is a sign of disciplinary maturity. The didactics of French as a foreign language has thus moved from (1) an initial perspective, until the 1960s, of a "methodological" type, in which "methodologists" thought they could find the right answers to the problems they had identified; (2) to a "didactic" or meta-methodological perspective, in the 1970s, in which methodological problems become problematic because "didacticians" have become aware that the answers can only be contextual, i.e., plural, local, partial and temporary; (3) finally, in the 1980s, to the "didactological" or meta-didactic perspective, in which didacticians question their own discipline from the ideological, ethical or, as the coordinators of this book invite, epistemological point of view. After presenting the main characteristics of an epistemology adapted to the didactics of languages and cultures, i.e., a complex one, and its consequences for teacher training and teaching-learning practices, the author shows that they are particularly interesting in the didactics of languages for specific purposes, because they make it possible to allow the language class to function as an incubator of professional skills.

That a field such as language didactics, or a specific part of this field, such as here the "LANSAD<sup>1</sup> sector" questions its epistemology, is certainly a sign of disciplinary maturity. It is at the beginning of the 1980s that this type of questioning emerged in the didactics of French as a foreign language (FFL), along with two others, concerning deontology and ideology. It is not by chance: these three types of questioning are indeed "meta-didactic" in the sense that they provide distanced positions from which it is possible to take a reflective look at one's entire field. Robert Galisson, who was one of the first and most ardent promoters of this new perspective<sup>2</sup> considered that this was a new discipline, and he proposed at the time to replace the name "didactics (of languages)" with "didactology (of languages-cultures)". I think I have shown, in research on the evolution of formative conceptions in FLE from the years 1925 to 1975 (Puren 1994a), that it is in fact the same discipline that had added to an initial methodological perspective (dominant until the 1960s) a meta-methodological or didactic perspective (in the 1970s); that the epistemological, deontological and epistemological questions that emerged in the specialized journals of the 1980s constituted, in reality, the new addition of a "meta" perspective, this time meta-didactic; and that it is, in fact, these three perspectives, linked together in a dialogical way, which are constitutive of a unique discipline that we continue to call

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<sup>1</sup> LANSAD, "LANGues pour Spécialistes d'Autres disciplines", "Languages for Students Specializing in Other Disciplines, i.e. Languages for Specific Purposes.

<sup>2</sup> See in Bibliography Galisson 1985 & 1986 for his first two articles on the subject.

"language didactics" because it was initially asserted under this name, in the 1970s, both against "language pedagogy" and against "applied linguistics".

It seems that many teachers, in the first years of their careers, go through the same three perspectives through which their discipline has historically passed, focusing successively on the "how?" question, then the "what?" question, and finally the "why/for what?" question... before finally realizing that the complexity of their profession requires that they ask themselves all of these questions at the same time, constantly linking them to each other.

I think that the same path, which goes from the simplest to the most complex, from the most concrete to the most abstract, from the most practical to the most theoretical, is also the most relevant for initial teacher training: A few years ago, I proposed on this model a "general architecture of a university training in the didactics of languages-cultures" (2010) where the training starts with the methodological perspective (by means of classroom observations, textbook analyses, class preparations and accompanying practices followed by reflective feedback), continues with the didactic perspective, and ends with the didactological perspective. This model of formative progression goes against the idea, which is still so deeply rooted in the university mentality that it seems rational, that one must begin with the "principles", the "basics", in short with what "founds" practice, and that this foundation can only be theoretical. But teaching, whether one welcomes it or regrets it, is a field that is first and foremost an "empirical art", for which, according to the formula of Richard Rorty –one of the best-known representatives of the Anglo-Saxon "pragmatist" current, who presents the project in this way in his 1995 *Introduction to pragmatism*– it is advisable to "treat theory as an auxiliary of practice, instead of seeing in practice the product of a degradation of theory." (p. 23)

What has driven the historical evolution of language didactics, what drives the professional maturation of its teachers in the field and what should drive initial training in the discipline, is the same mechanism of progressive awareness of complexity<sup>3</sup>. This is why, along with Richard Rorty's pragmatism, Edgar Morin's "complex thinking", which he develops among other things in his 1990 *Introduction à la pensée complexe [Introduction to Complex Thinking]*, appears to be one of the essential epistemological references for the discipline<sup>4</sup>. This progressive awareness of complexity leads in particular to a shift from a conception of action in terms of problems to be solved to a conception of action in terms of problematics to be managed: when we think "problem", we assume that there is a unique, universal, global and permanent solution that we do not yet know; when we think "problematic", we know that we will only find plural, local, partial and temporary solutions<sup>5</sup>. The heart of the discipline, like the heart of an expert teacher's competence, is not the stock of answers it proposes or that it has at its disposal, answers that are always closely dependent on varied and unstable environments, but the ability to question oneself in order to generate multiple answers in the field, from which one can choose the one that will be the most effective *hic et nunc* (here and now) because it is the most adequate. In other words, the essential competence of a teacher, which is his capacity to adapt in real time, depends first of all on the number of questions he can ask himself immediately, and not on the number of answers he has already prepared.

The "field of language didactics" –or, if one prefers, its "conceptual framework"– has been constituted precisely, since the 1970s, as a meta-methodological questioning device. See the model I propose for this field in document 044, with two mental experiments that make this model "run" like a questioning mechanism, or "problematization", of all methodological questions. This operation illustrates the difference between the methodological perspective and the didactic perspective: a methodologist seeks a maximum of good answers for a given environment, a didactician seeks a maximum of questions for maximum diversity of environments. The two perspectives are both opposed and complementary: an expert teacher

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<sup>3</sup> On the notion of "complexity" defined by its different components, each illustrated by examples borrowed from the collective teaching situation, see Puren 046.

<sup>4</sup> In my *Essay on Eclecticism* of 1994 (Puren 1994b), I devoted an entire 16-page chapter to him (chap. 2.2.2. "The Complex Epistemology of Edgar Morin", pp. 133-148).

<sup>5</sup> See "'Problème' versus 'problematique'" (Puren 023) for a complete table of oppositions between the two concepts.

is both a didactician and a methodologist; he asks himself questions and he seeks answers, but he maintains the two perspectives in a permanent dialogical relationship: he gives answers to the questions he asks himself, but he also constantly asks himself questions about the answers he gives. In other words, this time in the form of the statement of a mathematical law: the level of didactic competence of a teacher or trainer is inversely proportional to the number of his methodological certainties.

To feed his methodological questioning mechanics, the teacher will use the different meta-methodological positionings of the didactic field by crossing them with the different "inputs" of the didactic research system, namely the empirical, methodological, technological, social and theoretical inputs. I refer, on this point, which it is not possible to develop here, to my 2015 essay (2015a in French, 2015b in Spanish), in particular to the diagram on page 50 ("The general system of research in language and culture didactics"), which this text presents and comments on at great length. This system of research also functions in the same way when it is implemented by the discipline itself throughout its historical evolution, by didactic researchers or by teachers during their careers, and the question also arises as to how to combine and/or articulate these different inputs into initial teacher education. I titled this 2015 essay "General *Theory* of Research in Language-Culture Didactics" for a simple strategic reason (of credibility in language and humanities universities...), but it is in fact a systemic *modeling*: like any system, disciplinary research has inputs –those listed above– and outputs, which are the books, articles and other conferences of didacticians, textbooks and other didactic materials, as well as the teaching devices and practices<sup>6</sup>.

With a theory, one seeks to describe reality as it exists in itself, so that its validation criteria are adequacy to reality and predictive power; with a model, one proposes to act on reality, so that its validation criteria are relevance and effectiveness in context<sup>7</sup>. The complex management of language didactics, which is essentially an intervention discipline, as well as the complex management of research, teaching and teacher training in this discipline, cannot be carried out with reference to *theories*, but only with reference to *models*; especially since it is necessary to have, in order to manage complexity, a plurality of management modes is required, and theories exclude each other, whereas models can be both opposed and complementary. The evolution of cognitive models of teaching-learning, which I present in document 016, seems to me to be a good illustration of this fundamental epistemological requirement: in terms of theories, a researcher cannot be both a behaviourist and a constructivist at the same time; but a teacher will not see any contradiction, but on the contrary a necessity, in asking his learners at certain times to train intensively in order to acquire automatisms, and at other times to reflect on their mistakes in order to discover the unconscious rules that they have put into play.

Each of the great historical methodological systems –the direct methodology of the 1900s, the active methodology of the 1920s-1960s, the audio-oral and audiovisual methodologies of the 1950s-1970s, the communicative approach of the 1980s-1990s– proposed a coherent set of predetermined methodological responses that were intended to be exhaustive. Some experienced teachers build their own methodology, but if they use only their professional experience to do so, they build up a necessarily limited stock of personal answers that they tend to reproduce indefinitely and more or less mechanically: experience alone, even over a long period of time, does not necessarily produce expertise, but can, on the contrary, have the opposite effect, that of a reduction and fossilization of professional practices. Finally, it is the risk of initial training, when it is intended to be purely practical in order to quickly give beginning teachers the means to start teaching without too many difficulties and mistakes, that it trains them for the rest of their careers to apply given answers rather than to ask themselves their own questions.

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<sup>6</sup> On the subject of models and their functions, one can be satisfied, at least initially, with the synthesis that I propose in document 014, or consult Walliser B. 1977, as well as two other references that I believe are essential in the epistemology of language-culture didactics: Simon H. 1969 and Le Moigne J.-L. 2006.

<sup>7</sup> I propose in document 015 a synthesis of the ideas of E. Morin and R. Rorty on the opposition between these two concepts.

During the half-century of historical evolution of the didactics of FFL as presented above, the conception of this initial training has changed as awareness of the complexity:

-From a methodological perspective, we consider that there are teaching problems with their methodological solutions: initial training is not a problem, since it consists of training in the implementation of known correct answers.

-From the didactic perspective, teaching is not confronted with problems, but with problematics, so that initial teacher training becomes a problem, which we seek to solve by training teachers in didactics, *i.e.* in methodological questioning.

-In the didactological perspective, initial training itself becomes a problematic: how to train beginner teachers who have not yet mastered any management mode in the complex management of the classroom? How can we provide them with a few management methods that will allow them to begin their practice with a minimum of security, while opening them up to the necessary complexity of management methods? This is where epistemological, deontological and ideological considerations would be most useful, but they would then contradict all the criteria of formative progression mentioned above: from the simplest to the most complex, from the most concrete to the most abstract, from the most practical to the most theoretical. There can never be a single, universal, global and permanent answer to these questions, since it is a problematic. But there is at least one certainty, and that is that the strategy of disseminating "good practices" ("*de bonnes pratiques*"), which the French Ministry of Education has been promoting for years, is doomed to failure, since these practices -which are in fact, in the idea of their promoters as in the original English expression, *the "best practices"*- do not exist in the field of education.

It seems that business management theorists, who in the 1980s celebrated the virtues of *benchmarking*, a technique that apparently inspires French national education officials, have abandoned this idea. In an article published in 2016 on the website *Theconversation.com*, Alain-Charles Martinet, Professor Emeritus of Management Sciences and Strategic Management at the University Jean-Moulin of Lyon 3, puts "situational intelligence" at the forefront, which according to him implies "first and foremost the primacy of context, places and moments, singularity and tailoring against the ideology of 'management off the ground', of universal rules of strategy, of the ready-to-think of 'best practices' that it would be enough to apply to succeed". The same is true of language and culture didactics, where another law can be stated as follows: "The more concrete it is, the more situated it is, and therefore the less transferable it is". I have always been surprised, and actually worried, to note that for decades, and until now, the most successful interventions in colloquiums, congresses and other pedagogical days for teachers are those that present concrete examples of classroom practices. We can be glad that the OECD, in its recent publication (Paniagua A. & Istance D. 2018), criticizes this ideology of "best practices", which is not yet the case for all international organizations. I only hope that its experts are well aware of the fact that so-called "standardized" assessments such as the one incorporated in the PISA surveys, which they disseminate throughout the world, are likely to produce massive effects of the standardization of teaching practices, according to the mechanism, well known for a long time in Anglo-Saxon countries, of "*teaching to the test*".

The necessary complexity of teaching-learning practices in the language classroom has strong similarities with that of professional life, so that the LANSAD language teacher, if he/she organizes his/her teaching and asks his/her learners to organize their learning accordingly, can claim to be a trainer in his/her own right, in the same way as a teacher of Management in a Business School, of Urban Design in a School of Architecture, or of Product Design in a School of Graphic Design. Exactly twenty years ago, during a conference at a UPLEGESS Congress in 1998, I proposed that, for certain groups such as those involved in teaching languages for specific purposes, collective learning of a foreign language should be seen as a kind of "cultural gymnastics": the foreign language classroom is indeed a place and a time where teachers can accompany, guide and help learners to train, in an environment that is both demanding and benevolent, intensive and secure (as are "business incubators"), in cultural components that are particularly solicited in the professional world, such as a taste for and competence in collaborative work, and a spirit of initiative mastery of information, openness to difference and

novelty, creativity, collective debate, tolerance of uncertainty, mastery of different types and modes of evaluation, the ability to benefit from one's own mistakes and those of others, and, *last but not least*, the ability to manage complexity, in particular through a proactive attitude, a reflective approach and mastery of project management.

These training objectives, which correspond to what are often called "transversal competences", are naturally part of the teaching-learning of modern languages in schools, but they were hidden during the whole period of the communicative approach. This approach tended to keep the teaching of languages in vocational schools in an inferior status, since it was not a question of training for the profession, but for a language that would be used later by the student, when he or she would be in a professional environment, and in any case outside the language class. Moreover, because its aim is to train a social actor both in the educational field (the language class, the vocational school) and in the professional field (the company), and because its action is the pedagogical project, the actional perspective opens up possibilities for the organization of professional projects, where the foreign language will be from the outset a tool for action, and no longer just for communication, possibilities which are all the more extensive as vocational schools are now themselves largely open to the international scene.

The epistemology of language didactics thus conceived as participating directly and fully in professional training is very far from that of the school didactics of exact sciences as developed mainly by mathematics didacticians, and as it is generally taken up by specialists in education sciences. The proof is that "native" language didacticians –i.e. initially trained in language didactics, and not in educational sciences– have never felt the need to import the key concepts of this didactics of mathematics, borrowed from or inspired by Bachelardian epistemology and socioconstructivist theory, such as those of "epistemological obstacle", "socio-cognitive conflict" and "didactic transposition". I must say that the efforts to acclimatize these concepts to language didactics have always seemed to me as laborious as useless.<sup>8</sup>

The epistemology of language didactics should not be considered, as some mathematics didacticians sometimes seem to consider theirs, as a kind of "super-theory", comparable to the "epistemology of the policeman" that Edgar Morin denounces in his *Introduction à la pensée complexe* (1990), which some people use for their own benefit as a "strategic point to occupy in order to sovereignly control all knowledge, to reject all opposing theories, and to give themselves a monopoly on verification, and thus on truth" (p. 67). The "complex epistemology" that he promotes, on the other hand, is "the place of both uncertainty and dialogue" (*ibid.*), and it is the one that is appropriate to language didactics. The complex epistemology of a complex language didactics does not have to look elsewhere for models. It does not risk being locked into a narrow disciplinary specificity, because it is quite naturally open to all the problematics of personal, civic and professional training.

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Puren 2018.

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