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**The Concept of
Progression in the
Teaching and Learning
of Foreign Languages**



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Introduction

The notion of progression in foreign language learning/teaching is as old as foreign language learning/teaching itself: whoever wants to learn a foreign language has to follow some kind of progression, usually from easier linguistic and grammatical features to more complex ones. Since progression is such an essential and integral part of foreign language learning, it governs pedagogical considerations relating to the content and methodology of teaching and learning the foreign language. However, progression is not something cast in stone; the notion of progression has undergone remarkable changes throughout the history of foreign language teaching/learning methodologies. But whichever perspective is taken in terms of methodology, the basic concept is that learners start at zero and move from there to more advanced levels whose nature and content are determined by the fundamental considerations governing the particular view of language and teaching.

In the earliest foreign language teaching methodology, for example, the Grammar-Translation Method, the notion of progression referred exclusively to grammatical knowledge; it relied to a large extent on the descriptive apparatus for language, which was derived from Latin. Since this methodology mainly relied on translating authentic literary texts from the foreign into the source language, there was no obvious starting-point for a progression. Hence progression usually followed the sequence of the descriptive design of the Latin grammar, e.g. as regards to the introduction of tenses, the sequence was present tense, followed by imperfect, then perfect, pluperfect and the future tenses. Even though the Grammar-Translation Method is nowadays considered to be out-dated, it should be borne in mind that with regard to progression there is a clearly defined movement from the less to the more complex. This might not be of great help in terms

of acquiring an active competence in the foreign language, but starting with *agricola arat* and ending with Sallust's *De conjuratio Catilinae* is by all means progression. The fashionable damning verdicts about Grammar-Translation as a method which abound in literature leave aside the fact that the active mastering of the foreign language was not necessarily the explicit objective. Competent access to foreign literature e.g. in countries which are geographically distant from the target culture may still be a subjectively and objectively more satisfying experience than some inadequate active competence which, due to the lack of real life practice, will soon disappear anyway.

The Direct Method, which was sharply opposed to the grammar-translation approach, emphasised the oral form of language usage. A basic progression from easier to more complex linguistic features was integrated into the sequence of topics covered; it was assumed that learners would understand the grammatical features just by using it so that overt discussion of these could be neglected.

The Audio-Lingual Method had a similar approach to grammatical progression, although it put much more emphasis on practising isolated grammatical features over and over again. Based on behaviourist research in psychology and on the structural paradigm in linguistics, 'pattern drills' were at the core of this methodology. Although the term 'grammar' was avoided (since grammatical issues were not explicitly discussed in class, but rather were acquired by frequent practice) – the term 'structures' was used instead – grammatical features and a grammatical progression dominated this method. Even the dialogues and texts that were used in the course books were not authentic documents of the target culture: they were highly artificial in that they were constructed by textbook authors around specific grammatical features, following the traditional grammatical progression which was still based on Latin grammar. One positive feature, however, lies in the fact that the concentration on oral performance, sometimes aided by language labs, leads indeed to a different kind of progression in certain areas, mainly in fluency. The complex process of speech production, which for adolescent and adult learners is particularly frustrating with regard to control of the speech-organs, does indeed benefit from pattern drills and helps to automatise sensor-motor control.

Only the arrival of the Communicative Approach seemed to end the dominance of a grammatical progression in foreign language teaching/learning. Based on research in pragma-linguistics, it was acknowledged that successful intra- and intercultural communication was not possible by applying linguistic knowledge alone. In order to be communicatively competent, the language user had also to be familiar with non-linguistic features such as the pragmatic context of speech acts. Hence the grammatical progression was now determined by a situational progression, which in turn was governed by the communicative needs of students if they were to visit the target language country. Textbooks, based on the communicative approach, usually start with students introducing each other in the foreign language, followed by chapters set in structured situational contexts such as restaurants, supermarkets, post offices, train stations etc. The requirements of this situational progression had an impact on the grammatical progression which first had been set up by the Grammar-Translation Method. For example, the traditional sequence of tenses – present tense, followed by imperfect and perfect tense, pluperfect – changed to the new order of present tense, perfect and then imperfect and pluperfect tenses (at least for German). These sequential changes were implemented due to the fact that the perfect tense is used much more frequently in oral usage than the imperfect (at least in the case of German). For the same reason, the *subjunctive irrealis* (*Konjunktiv II*), formerly seen as one of the crowning glories of grammatical knowledge in German, became almost irrelevant because it is hardly used at all in communicative usage of the German language. Thus the relevant progression in the Communicative Approach is the situational one, and the grammatical progression is of only secondary importance. However, this is only true to a certain extent. The fact of the matter still is that one cannot be a competent user of the foreign language if one does not know the underlying morpho-syntactical, lexical and grammatical rules. Therefore a grammatical competence still is an integral part of a communicative competence, in whatever sequence grammatical features are to be learned. Hence many practitioners and researchers regard the grammatical progression still to be the real, the 'hidden' curriculum of the Communicative Approach.

This position finds support in the fact that situational progression is impossible to define. The situations assumed to be relevant for the learner in real life and their organisation with regard to moving from the more personal (introducing oneself, talking about one's family etc.) to the more formal (supermarket, invitation etc.) are more often than not extremely unrealistic as possible. Furthermore, in terms of sequencing they do not reflect any realistic experience of a stay in the target language country whatsoever.

While the situational progression was dominant for the Communicative Approach, a broader cultural progression determines progression in the Intercultural Approach. This is rooted in the recognition that the pragmatic context of speech acts relates only to the rather limited immediate situational context. Yet the broader cultural context must be included as well in order to facilitate a deeper (inter-) cultural understanding of meaning, one which includes cultural patterns, assumptions, values and beliefs. The Intercultural Approach is not one-dimensionally aimed at understanding the foreign language, society and culture, but it facilitates in a reciprocal manner a different understanding of the native language, culture, society and self by becoming familiar with foreign conceptual patterns.¹ Whereas the situational progression is based on the pragmatic context, the cultural progression contains both pragmatic aspects of foreign language usage and determining patterns of the underlying broader cultural context. Understanding the immediate situational and the broader socio-cultural context of a human language in general and speech acts in particular is a prerequisite for meaningful and competent usage of any human language. After all, when native speakers communicate, they do so not only with their individual voices but also with collective voices which are transmitted in the conceptual categories of their language, based on the cultural patterns and the metaphorical stock of experience and world-interpretation of their native community. In order to become

1 This reciprocal aspect of a progressive awareness of the cultural patterns and conceptual structures of the native culture and language is particularly relevant for foreign language learners who will never have the chance to visit the target language country or talk to native speakers of the target language (which was the overriding aim of the Communicative Approach).

competent users of any human language – including, of course, foreign languages – the acquisition of pragmatic and socio-cultural knowledge must be part and parcel of the learning process because cultural values are reflected by and carried through language. In the Intercultural Approach the foreign culture is treated not just as a pragmatic backdrop to speech acts – as in the communicative approach – but rather as a meaningful and generative context for the foreign language, society, individuals and their actions. This recognition clearly underlines the importance of a cultural progression for foreign language teaching/learning within this paradigm (cf. Witte's article in this volume).

There are, however, a number of critical voices that have pointed out various flaws within the above outlined concept. One very crucial question concerns the suitability of instructed language acquisition as a scenario for the effective transmission of intercultural information in the widest sense. As it is, classroom activities have a fairly limited scope and even with the best intentions in the world, they remain rather sterile compared to what happens out there in the real world. Furthermore, there is the real danger of overloading the system and/or leave learners with half-baked concepts that create a false sense of security. Another more fundamental aspect is the teachability of intercultural elements. Is it really possible to create the required sensitivity within the confines of languages classes? Or should these processes be left to the subjective experiences of the individual?

So, over the past decades the notion of progression in foreign language teaching/learning has undergone remarkable changes, not only internal changes as to the sequence of grammatical features, but also changes in terms of the scope of progression. The notion of progression does not refer to grammatical progression alone any more, but it has been expanded to a pragmatic and cultural progression as well. However, what we have discussed so far in this introduction refers to only one level, namely the meta-level of progression within and across different foreign language teaching methodologies. But there are also many other levels involved in the learning process,

which in the following will be summarised in two general levels:² the meso-level of the classroom and the micro-level of the individual.

Institutionalised foreign language teaching and learning takes place in the classroom. While the educational institution as such follows an external curriculum with fixed learning contents and targets, and reflects a progression ultimately set by politicians and administrators, the learning process in the classroom is a collective as well as an individual one. The collectivity of the learning process is expressed in the simultaneous concentration of all students on the same phenomenon at the same time. Whereas the content and its progression is usually set by the textbook and is didactically reduced by the teacher, following a general progression from simple reproductive exercises to more complex communicative and socio-cultural tasks, learners do cooperate in the inter-subjective process of negotiation of new linguistic, socio-cultural and conceptual meaning. After all, 'knowledge is neither communicated nor discovered by learners: it is shaped by people's communicative actions' (Mercer 1995: 19). In the framework of the classroom, the teacher, and more importantly peers, provide an important scaffolding for collective and individual learning: collectively constructed support (i.e. scaffolding) provides not only the opportunity for input exchange among learners but also the opportunity to expand the learners' own knowledge. Vygotsky considered collaborative dialogues to be essential tools for knowledge building.³ By actively engaging in this dialogue, learners have an opportunity to discover not only what they can do with language, but also what they cannot do. This newly discovered linguistic inability promotes cognitive learning growth by providing a context for learners to notice their linguistic shortcomings, which in turn require that the learners pay attention to

2 These levels are not to be understood as mutually exclusive: of course they are flexible, porous, strategic and interrelated in many ways.

3 'Hence, we may say that we become ourselves through others and that this rule applies not only to the personality as a whole, but to the history of every individual function' (Vygotsky 1966: 43, quoted in Shotter 2003a: 112). In direct contrast to Piaget, who focused in his research on internal developmental stages of the child, Vygotsky considered knowledge to be socially acquired. Therefore he puts much more emphasis on co-operation and collaboration in the learning process.

form while attending to the construction of meaning (cf. Johnson 2004: 144). This notion of co-constructing knowledge is largely ignored by traditional models of foreign language learning because they focus on a model of sending and receiving linguistic information and interlanguage is seen as a mental process. However, linguistic knowledge is not acquired only by cognitive means but also through the process of social interaction in which the collective scaffolding created by all the participants brings about the developmental changes in the participants' own L2 knowledge (Donato 1998). Collaborative learning does not only help the weaker learner but also the stronger one because his/her understanding will improve through having to explain something to someone who understood it less well. This can be seen as the social or collective dimension of progression.

This meso-level of intersubjective co-construction in the classroom provides the generative context for progression in learning on the individual plane. A rigid progression as to grammar and pragmatics in the foreign language classroom, determined by the textbook and the teacher, does not leave enough room for the learner to renegotiate his or her linguistic and socio-cultural constructs. Constructionist approaches to foreign language learning put emphasis on the individual's creative processes of construction; in their radical form they postulate the exclusive individuality of the learning process. However, more recent approaches of constructionism in a neo-Vygotskian tradition (cf. Shotter 1993, Gillet/Harre 1994, Bruner 1986, Burr 1998, Johnson 2004) stress the social origin of the individual's mind and its workings. Learning is always a process facilitated and channelled by the societal structures and cultural patterns whose most powerful instrument is language in which socio-cultural conceptualisations are inscribed. The individual has to accommodate and appropriate the patterns and conceptualisations inscribed in the language in order to successfully communicate with others, be it within his or her native language and community or beyond. Therefore it would be wrong to present the foreign language learner with a false sense of security regarding the existence of one shared reality such as the post office, the bank, the doctor's office or with a false sense that if they master the grammatical rules and structures of the target language, they would be able to successfully communicate with foreign language native speak-

ers. Rather, a rich learning environment should be created for the individual learner within for the classroom collective. Only a rich and varied learning environment enables the individual learner to progressively explore new voices and conceptualisations of the target language's socio-cultural and institutional settings. These can then be experienced, absorbed, and appropriated by the foreign language learner not for the sake of appropriation, but rather to help her or him to become a potentially active participant in the target language culture. The progressive appropriation of new voices needs to take place in real-life contexts, which may be similar to foreign language learners' native language contexts; but because these contexts are now filled with different people, with different voices, they need to be re-appropriated. This process has been described by Claire Kramsch (1993) as mentally and conceptually transcending the so far unquestioningly assumed securities of the monolingual conceptualisations and its generative world-view. The learner thus embarks on a mental journey towards increasingly discovering and, perhaps, accepting different conceptualisations of the same or at least a similar social and environmental reality. In the process of this journey – which will never be completed in the sense of unambiguously accepting the new foreign categories and simultaneously cutting oneself off from the native conceptualisations – the mind of the learner is located on a continuum between the native and the target cultures. Thus the person who is progressively inhabiting these permanently shifting, unlocatable third spaces in between cultural discourses and linguistically induced conceptualisations has an advantage over the monolingual person in terms of constructing his/her identity. Being neither the one nor the other, s/he must consciously construct his or her place in between cultures, a place that is based on the core concepts, patterns and belief-systems of two or more cultures in the sense of being able to permanently construct and deconstruct attitudes, beliefs and views based on more than one dominant cultural narrative. This progression towards critically questioning the assumed securities of the individual perception of self and other normally facilitates an increasing cognitive openness towards alternative constructions.

This very complex process of mental progression implies first of all the acquisition, construction and permanent re-construction of the

socio-cultural context of foreign language usage, including the habits, discourses, customs and conventions of individual and social interaction with increasingly less interference from the native linguistically induced categories of construction:

We need to know the 'basic preunderstanding' – the internalized or embodied form of life, with its associated *topoi*, into which the person has been socialized [...] – in terms of which the person made sense of his or her own actions, such that, had these 'pre-understandings' been different, the person would not have acted as they did. (Shotter 1993a: 170; italics in original)

This then leads progressively to a deeper – so to speak interference-free – understanding of the contents and structures of dominant and relevant discourses of the foreign society and culture in its own right.

Secondly, it implies the progressive relativisation and deconstruction of the linguistic categories and discourses of the native society and culture. This is to a large extent a by-product of becoming engaged with the different categories of the foreign language and socio-culture since the process of getting increasingly involved with other modes of construction of and discourses on 'reality' automatically implies a decrease in value of the own categories for one's processes of constructing meaning, although this is frequently happening on a subconscious level. Thus one could speak of a dialectically developing dual progression here: the degree of engagement with foreign conceptualisations corresponds with the degree of alienation of the native categories.

The process of developing an increasing distance towards the native linguistically and culturally induced constructional categories and conventions is sometimes perceived as a threat to the apparent safety of one's personal and cultural identity, especially when, due to cultural distance, the foreign constructs cannot be understood. If this happens, essentialist constructs of culture, nation, race, ethnicity etc. are usually emphasised in the mind, providing the individual with a false sense of security (Bredella 1992: 569). Thus it is important for the individual to try to suspend possible prejudices towards the foreign – and native – culture and not see the foreign as a threat to the apparently stable identity.

But like intra-cultural spaces of identity, intercultural spaces are by no means static, monolithic and essential, but rather are highly strategic, porous and procedural. Intercultural spaces are a doubling of spaces 'in-between': the individual already occupies intra-cultural spaces 'in-between' different linguistic signs, dominant discourses and private dispositions of his or her native culture and society. By learning a foreign language, these spaces are progressively put into a new perspective with the new structures, categories and conventions. This process opens up a new dimension of intercultural construction, located on a continuum between the values and norms of discourses of the two (or more) cultures involved. This new dimension transforms meaning based solely on the native linguistic system; it enables constructions of new meaning in engaging with differential linguistic signs, social conventions and cultural patterns. The newly constructed polyphonic meaning does not belong to any of the two (or more) languages; it lies as a multivariable element between the languages, people and cultures involved. And this newly constructed system of meaning also affects the identity of the foreign language learner because it is stabilised and broadened now by a completely different set of constructional options and possibilities. This includes the ability to handle cross-cultural differences in a productive manner and the ability to negotiate the ambiguity of roles or meaning arising from ongoing attempts to emphasise with the foreign constructs and communication partners.

Thus progression in foreign language teaching and learning cannot be restricted to the cognitive plane alone, as the introductory discussions on the notion of progression on the mega-level would imply. Progression is not only a concept relevant for learning grammar, functional-notional sequences of speech acts, pragmatics or socio-culture, it is also relevant for the social and emotional environment of learning on the meso-level. This is because only appropriately rich learning environments can offer the incentives and opportunities for the individuals in the collective of the classroom to bring themselves in cognitively, but also emotionally and socially and thus provide a collaborative scaffolding for the learning process. This implies the necessity of changing these environments in line with the cognitive progression of both the foreign language/culture tasks and the con-

structions of the learners both as a collective and as individuals. Put in other words, the scaffolding for cognitive growth has to progressively develop both with the complexity of the subject-matter and the social, emotional and cognitive developmental stages of the learners.

And on the micro-level of progression, psychological effects of learning a foreign language come into play. Foreign languages are unique in the curricula of educational institutions in that only they – and no other subject, e.g. Mathematics, Geography, History etc. – engage the mind of the learner in alternative conceptualisations of self and other which are inscribed in the foreign language. Although the psychological impact of foreign language learning on the level of the mind of the learner is extremely complex and difficult to analyse, there seems to be a consensus that if foreign language learning is successful (and frequently it is not in school contexts), it progressively changes the perception and ultimately the mind of the learner in the way outlined above. Thus the notion of progression in foreign language learning and teaching has not only undergone many internal changes throughout the history of foreign language learning, but it has also become much more complex in relation to its scope and content. The original idea of a linear progression in the acquisition of morphology, lexis and grammar does not hold any more in view of this complexity. On closer scrutiny, it was never achievable in reality because every progress in foreign language learning entails misunderstandings, forgetfulness and partial regression. Hence the notion of progression, as discussed in this volume, is a porous one, which is more cyclical than linear.

The academic debate, however, as interesting as it might be, is doomed to suffer the fate of so many well intended academic debates: its relevance in real life is practically zero if some aspects of the peculiarities of language learning within institutional contexts are not analysed more rigidly. There is, for example, the question of accountability of the progress made by learners. The necessary quantification leads inevitably to a shift not only in focus but also in method when the instrument of measuring ultimately takes the place of the objective, or rather, when the eventual test result is the ultimate criterion for successful teaching and learning. And measuring elements beyond

lexical and morpho-syntactic structures is an undertaking for which most of those concerned are not suitably trained.

What we find instead is an ever-widening gap between the desiderata identified by research and the limited structures provided by institutions. In other words: it is questionable whether it makes sense to teach languages over a considerable period of time and end up with the disappointing results many of us foreign language teachers have grown accustomed to. Perhaps language teaching should be given a completely different status, with different means of assessment and more focused attention on what is possible within the limits of institutions, thus narrowing the widening abyss between subjective and objective expectations and actual results.

The first section of this volume approaches the topic of progression from a more general angle. Harden questions the adequacy of the concept with regard to the subjective experiences of the learner in the context of institutional foreign language curricula, whereas Barkowski focuses on the notion of grammatical progression with a perspective from within recent research on language acquisition. Hentschel's contribution deals with the seemingly paradoxical observation that in some areas regression is a necessary element of progression in foreign language learning. The last article of this section by Schmenk is a critical discussion of the concept of learner autonomy, a very popular concept in current foreign language learning theory.

Part two of this volume deals with more specific aspects of language learning curricula. Reeves critically scrutinises proficiency scales in general and their pedagogic value in particular. The question of linear progression in Irish language learning as an L2 is the topic of O'Leary's empirically oriented paper. The positive effects of portfolios on progress in language learning are at the centre of Pilkington's article, and Sarter highlights the beneficial impact of multilingualism on foreign language instruction. A completely different perspective is introduced by Zappen's paper which deals with progression in an African linguistic context.

Section three examines pragmatic and socio-cultural aspects of progression in the foreign language classroom. Bredella emphasises the contribution of literary texts towards acquiring an (inter)cultural competence, and Witte expands this approach by attempting to define

the framework of cultural progression which complements grammatical progression. Lysaght applies this concept to the teaching of German in an Irish context, and Köhler investigates pragmatic elements of progression with particular reference to person deixis.

The last section deals with specific and quite diverse aspects of progression. Weydt in his paper looks at the progress made by polyglots who did not follow any institutionally prescribed curriculum. Dealing with the impact of IT on progression in foreign language learning, Rösler gives a critical account of recently developed language learning software. Fluency development, particularly in advanced learners, is empirically examined by Truscott and Morley. A completely different subject matter is at the centre of Gadeanu's article, namely the cross-fertilisation in language learning in multilingual contexts, with particular emphasis on the situation of German in Romania. French, however, is the target language of Howard's empirical study of the acquisition of certain sociolinguistic variations by native speakers of English. Zojer's contribution takes a close look at an alternative concept of progression, i.e. Michel Thomas' foreign language learning material, which is largely based on translation as the main component.

The articles in this volume reflect, in our opinion, vividly the multifaceted phenomenon of progression in foreign language teaching and learning. Although the concept of progression – in whatever form – always has been at the heart of foreign language teaching methodologies, it has hardly occupied a similarly central place in research or in more recent publications. It is our hope that this volume will contribute to change of this situation by stressing the importance and diversity of the concept of progression for foreign language learning/teaching.

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