

# BLAME THE TEACHERS

by Anthony Lodge

In the crisis afflicting foreign-language teaching in the UK it now seems to be open season for scapegoats, the latest being language-teachers themselves (see for example John Bald's article in the *Education Guardian* 21 Sept. 2004). Before dreaming up yet another quick fix, and before engaging in yet another bout of teacher bashing, education policy makers should stand back and view with a little detachment the situation of language teachers in the UK today, considering in particular just how adverse is the general intellectual climate in which teachers are now asked to operate. Real improvements in foreign-language teaching require not a quick fix, but some pretty radical shifts in attitude.

First of all, it needs to be more widely appreciated that, from a pedagogic point of view, Modern Languages are among the most difficult subjects to teach. Unlike colleagues teaching 'content' subjects (such as geography, history, physics), whose aim is to modify the learners' *world view*, language-teachers are required to modify learners' *behaviour*, and that in one of the most fundamental parts of their being (their linguistic competence), at one of the most fragile periods of their lives (adolescence). It is important that we distinguish between the different types of knowledge involved here. World-views may be difficult enough to modify, but ingrained mental behaviours are much more so, at any stage of life. Language teaching is hard and resource-intensive.

Secondly, we must come to a clearer understanding of the motivation problem, for it is on motivation that all success in language learning crucially depends. When we look at the history of language teaching in this country, we immediately spot a link between the target-language favoured at any particular time and the economic / cultural prestige currently enjoyed by the speakers of that language. French was the only Modern Language given any space at all in thirteenth-century England, and at precisely that time Paris was the richest city in Europe. Italian became the preferred language in the sixteenth century at the time of the *Rinascimento* in Rome, Florence and Venice. French returned a century or so later with the *gloire* of the *Roi Soleil*, and German came into its own in the nineteenth century with the exploits of German musicians, philosophers and industrialists. The desire to learn these languages was always utilitarian for some – the tiny fraction of the population who sought to travel in Europe, or do business there – but the motivations for most people were rather more diffuse. Speakers of English sought to acquire these different European languages at the particular moments in history when they felt they had something to teach them, when these languages offered a slice of the action, a dollop of valuable cultural capital and prestige.

In our own day, the dominant, high-prestige culture is no longer located in Europe but across the Atlantic. In continental Europe demand for foreign-language teaching is booming, even among adolescents, for the yearning for English - American English - is universal. This has an interesting parallel in patterns of word borrowing: all the languages of Europe are currently borrowing foreign words (American in this case) on a scale not seen since our vocabularies topped up with Latin words in the sixteenth century. The French have put up the staunchest resistance with their campaigns against *franglais* - much to the derision of the English, who have put up the weakest, and whose language (and thought-processes) are being Americanised at a disturbing rate. Given the predilection for things American – more invisible and more pervasive in this country than elsewhere - it is asking a great deal of our language-teachers to re-motivate adolescents into French and German, symbols of 'old Europe'.

In desperation, language teachers resort to the utility argument - 'languages will be very useful for your career' – but the fact that people rarely ask teachers of history or English literature to defend their subjects on similar grounds shows how low the discipline of Modern Languages has slipped. Sadly, our discipline is unlikely to regain the position it once occupied without two things: a radical re-alignment of our society's attitude to Europe and the non-English-speaking world and a radical re-focussing of the discipline itself.

The British population clearly needs to re-discover a respect for people living outside its linguistic territory, in particular its continental neighbours. It needs to become aware that in all spheres of activity - from joiners to caterers to aeronautical engineers - we have probably more to learn from

Europeans than from anywhere else. The easiest, off-the-peg, English-based solutions are not necessarily the best for us. Models of social and economic organisation which have developed in European societies of similar size to our own are almost certainly more appropriate to our needs than models derived from the transatlantic colossus. We must accept that such a paradigm shift in national attitudes will not come about quickly, if at all. However, events in the Middle East might be causing people to think that 'Anglo-Saxon' solutions to the world's problems are not always the most appropriate.

If general national attitudes pose problems beyond the control of language teachers, there are elements in our predicament which are within our control. We in the language-teaching community must accept *some* responsibility for the crisis. Here, however, we should not direct all our fire at teachers labouring at the chalk-face in primary and secondary schools. The universities commonly adopt an attitude of superior aloofness to the collapse of their discipline in schools, as though they themselves had no part in it. The sad fact is that their role in the crisis of Modern Languages has been very considerable. It is they, after all, who train our teachers in this 'all-graduate profession', it is they who define the discipline. Whenever teachers design a language-class, they implicitly activate ideas and assumptions about language - a model of language - derived from their own education and training. This model may be a steam-driven, *ad hoc* one, cobbled together over the years in response to chance linguistic events in their lives. Alternatively, it may be a subtle and interesting one derived from systematic study of the phenomenon 'language'.

Up to a generation ago all undergraduates in Modern Languages received explicit training in language analysis – it came in the guise of 'traditional grammar' and 'philology'/'history of the language'. By the mid-sixties, the scientific basis of these old subjects had been superseded by new ideas generated in linguistics. Modern Languages in the universities used this opportunity to jettison these old, mandarin subjects, but instead of substituting new ideas about language, they chose to diversify into literary studies, area studies, gender studies, film studies and more besides. All very worthwhile activities, but which caused the discipline to fragment, and, more seriously, to lose its connection with language, at anything other than a purely practical, instrumental level.

In the decades since, the universities have produced generations of Modern Language teachers who, at no time in their degree course were induced to read or reflect systematically on the core element of their discipline - language. It would be disreputable to employ a sixth-form teacher of physics with no university training in physics, and yet it is normal to employ teachers in Modern Languages with no theoretical training in language, leaving them highly vulnerable to the seduction of every quick-fix peddler who comes along. The ability to produce fluent French, German, English does not of itself make you a competent French-, German-, English-language teacher. On this score, the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language is full of lessons for teachers of other European languages, the most basic one being that TEFL is steeped in the sort of knowledge about language that linguistics provides.

Change in the universities will be slow in coming: self-regulating bodies tend to be self-replicating. However, there are straws in the wind. This year, the AHRB, which allocates scholarships for postgraduate research in the Arts and Humanities, for the first time instituted a system of 'ring-fenced awards' in order to promote linguistic research in the various Modern Languages. Market forces are failing us and manpower planning is making a bit of a come-back. This step is only a tiny one and will not have a dramatic effect on the anti-linguistic sentiment latent in university language departments, but it's a step in the right direction. The universities' re-engagement with the rest of the Modern Language is long overdue and, if it came, could make a difference. Whether changes in our society's general attitudes to European and other non-Anglophone cultures can be similarly modified is, of course, less certain.

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