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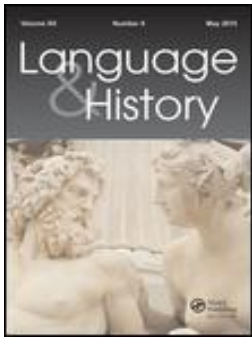
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An Interview with John Trim (1924–2013) on the History of Modern Language Learning and Teaching

RICHARD SMITH and NICOLA MCLELLAND

This text is the lightly edited transcript of the last interview with John Trim before his death in early 2013. John Trim was a Director of CILT, the UK's national Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, and was Director of the Modern Languages Projects of the Council of Europe for over a quarter of a century (from 1971 to 1997). In the interview, John reflects on his own history of shaping the direction of language teaching and learning in Britain and Europe (with a legacy lasting well into the twenty-first century via the Common European Framework of Reference, now used world-wide), and on the importance of the history of language learning and teaching for reflecting on current policy and practice. The full video-recording of the interview is available here: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive/resources/johntrim>.

KEYWORDS John Trim, modern languages education, CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), Graded Objectives Movement, history of education, language learning, language teaching, history of language learning and teaching (HoLLT)

Introduction

As coordinators of the AHRC (Arts and Humanities Research Council) research network project 'Towards a History of Modern Foreign Language Teaching and Learning' (2012–14), we had invited John Trim to open our first, 7–8 December 2012, workshop in Nottingham with a talk provisionally titled 'History of modern foreign language education in the UK: a personal narrative'. John had previously been generous with his time in helping us both with independent historical research projects and he seemed to us clearly the most appropriate person possible for us to invite to 'headline' our first workshop. When it became clear that illness would prevent him from attending in person, he agreed to our request for a video-recorded interview, and agreed also that excerpts could be shown at the workshop and subsequently

transcribed and published. We visited John at his daughter's home in Suffolk on 19 September 2012 for what was to prove his last interview (see Saville, 2005; 2011; and Little & King, 2013; 2014, for previous interviews). We reproduce most of the transcript below, with only light editing for purposes of clarity, and we have additionally made the full video-recording available here: <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive/resources/johntrim>.

Born in 1924, John Trim grew up in East London, where he went to primary school and attended the local grammar school, Leyton High School. There he developed a strong interest in both French and German, and — following military service during World War II — gained a place to study German further at University College London. Graduating with a first class Honours degree in 1949, he accepted the offer of a lectureship in Daniel Jones' Department of Phonetics. In 1958, he moved to Cambridge to become University Lecturer in Phonetics and then a Fellow of Selwyn College (in 1962). When the Cambridge Department of Linguistics was founded in 1966, John became its first Director, retaining this position until 1978 when he left to become Director of CILT, the national Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research. While at Cambridge he had been appointed Director of the Modern Languages Projects of the Council of Europe, a prestigious part-time role he was to fulfil for a quarter of a century (from 1971 to 1997, beyond his retirement from CILT in 1989). In this role he was responsible for the development of influential innovations including the Threshold Level and — up until the publication of its first draft in 1997 — the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Those who knew him will recall the 'intellectual rigour, clarity of vision and quiet authority' which Holmes (2013) has described as 'hallmarks of his illustrious career', and these qualities were all in evidence in his final interview, transcribed below. As Esch (2013) has remarked, he was 'A man of conviction who truly believed that modern languages were fundamental to education and that language learning had far-reaching cognitive and social benefits'. John passed away peacefully, four months after our interview, on 19 January 2013.

On historical research

John, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us. The context is the series of workshops that we're organizing on the history of language teaching — trying to stimulate interest in the UK in historical research and bring UK academics together with experts from the Continent of Europe in this area. And we wondered if you could say a few words about [this] topic and what you think about [it] as an area?

Well, I think it's an extremely welcome development. I think we've gone through a period where — after a period where historicism was very strong — it has become very weak. And I've found particularly people are so keen to show that their work is on the cutting edge of new developments that they are reluctant to really see to what extent and in what ways the current problems and also possible solutions are grounded in the experience of the past, even to the extent that people don't like to

have references in their bibliographies to works published earlier than the beginning of this century — and if something is published in 1960 it's regarded as being so archaic that it may be of interest [for that reason] but [...] it's not seen that the experience and findings of past generations are relevant to the problems which we now face and have to try to solve. And so, [it is good] to have a programme of research [whereby periods are opened up] which, even though they are quite recent, are now 'Dark Ages' to us, [and which] are then properly explored. And, of course, I like myself to feel that there is a continuity of development taking many different forms, from the earliest times [...]. To follow this process through is fascinating, and I'm very glad to see its proper investigation stimulated and a framework provided for it in this project.

The legacy of Comenius

You've written recently [Trim, 2012] about the Common European Framework and [...] its roots in a long tradition going back to Comenius and the Reform Movement. I wondered if you could say a few words about that in particular.

Yes, well, the figure of Comenius is one which is of great interest to me. I went to the celebrations of his 400th anniversary in Prague and then read *The Great Didactic* and of course the *Orbis Pictus* and *Janua Linguarum* and these are the works devoted particularly to language teaching, and found, which I hadn't known before, how close his way of thinking was to that which had guided the work of the Council of Europe that I'd been involved in and attempted to shape. Particularly his views that language teaching is life-long; that it is for all, irrespective of sex, [...] class, nationality; that a good model of language learning can be applied to all languages. And, of course, the great humanity and warmth of his views. He lived at a time, as you know, when the Counter-Reformation was in full flow. He was hunted from one part of Europe to another. Eric Hawkins, in his contribution to *30 Years of Language Teaching* [Hawkins 1996] — the thirty years since the foundation of CILT — produced at the end of the '90s of the last century — points out that the history of language teaching in this country might have been very different had the proposals of Comenius, placed before Parliament and more or less agreed at the time of the Civil War — if that had actually been realized, but in fact the disruption of the Civil War sent him, alas, on his ways once more, and of course he finished up in Amsterdam.

For quite some time his legacy seemed to be lost. But it was never quite lost and the *Orbis Pictus*, particularly, was in use in schools for a good century or more after his death, and it figures in Goethe's *Dichtung und Wahrheit* as the one illustrated children's book that he had accessible to him. And I think that something of the philosophical approach of Comenius is to be found in Goethe's own beliefs and thinking. You see, the visual material of the *Orbis Pictus* is arranged in order to give people, as they learn the language, an ordered view of an ordered universe. Starting with the divine, coming then to the mineral, vegetable, animal, and then to humanity,

seen first as a biological organism, and then as a social organism, and then back through that — through the world of sensual experience and intellectual reflection, moral issues, and through that back to the religious and to the divine. So there is this picture, which goes I think quite a long way in its educational influences to influence the ideas of the Enlightenment. And, if I look at, for example, Goethe's *Vermächtnis* [lit. 'legacy'; the title of a poem by Goethe] and what he felt he himself felt he had to bequeath to future generations, it is very close to what Comenius felt that he needed to communicate to future generations. But he could never really implement what he saw to be in principle necessary because he was always being hunted from one place to another and never was able to establish the schools on a permanent basis which would incorporate the principles in which he believed. For example, he accepted the Aristotelian view that sensual experience must precede reflection. Hence people should first *experience* the things which they then learn to talk about. And if they can't experience them directly, then they must experience them through representations — pictures — which then gives the basis for the *Orbis Pictus*. So, anyway, his views — particularly on language teaching — are set out in the *Magna Didactica*, which I think everybody should read. And I was very glad to be honoured by a Doctorate from the Charles University in Prague and the Comenius Medal of the Czech Republic, so Comenius is quite an important figure for me.

And his views, his legacy was not lost, but it has taken a long, long time to be able to bring it to life again in all its richness. And some of his last works on the emendation of affairs — of human affairs — were really [...] only republished in the 1950s. But it is his *motto* which I have certainly tried to adopt, that is, if you recall it: 'Omnia sponte fluant, absit violentia rebus' — 'Let all things flow with spontaneity and let violence be absent from human affairs'.

The Reform Movement

I think you've written that the Reform Movement was [also] important ...

Yes, I mean the next really critical development-time I feel to have come with the application of the knowledge and understanding which the Neogrammarians brought to linguistic studies — the application of that knowledge and understanding to the teaching of languages. So, of course, unforgettably associated with Wilhelm Viëtor's *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren* — which he called *Ein Beitrag zur Überbürdungsfrage* [Viëtor, 1882] — but it's more than that. It isn't just a question of the over-loading of the curriculum, it is the basis on which and the *purposes* for which we should be learning languages. There is Lytton Strachey's no doubt satirical account of Arnold's introduction of language teaching into Rugby School in the middle of the nineteenth century [Strachey, 1918]. [...] I would like to see somebody research in some detail the nature of his introduction of modern languages alongside the classics, and the reasons for it, and its nature. Because I don't think we can rely upon Lytton Strachey to give a straightforward factual account of that. But, if you remember, he says — if I remember correctly — that Arnold's motivation was that

the development of the classical literatures of the modern period were now at the same level and [had] the same value for education as those inherited from the classical period, but [...] the methods which should be used were those that had already proved themselves in the study of the classical languages. So that the earlier stages are derived from the medieval trivium of the knowledge of the grammar, rhetoric, and logic, leading to access to the great works of philosophy and literature of the society concerned [and these] could now be taken over as they stood and applied to the knowledge of the foreign language. But the foreign language is not introduced into the educational system because of its usefulness but because of its giving access to the higher culture. Of course [...] the cultural values, the knowledge, and understanding which we find incorporated in the great literature of the European peoples can be made available [...] through the process of translation, but translation [is also seen] as a way of bringing strict control and accuracy into the understanding and expression of language. Now, this was taking place when the linguistic studies at university level had very largely taken a historical or, even more, prehistorical form. That is to say, [there was an interest] in the older languages in order to go back to a proto-language — Indo-European — which lay behind in history and developmentally [...] the various languages of Europe and Asia that belonged to the same group, which can be shown by scholarly methods to do so. And that was of course of *explosive* interest at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

But the Neogrammarians, then, largely because of their phonetic studies, saw that the carriers of language development are the infinite number of speech acts taking place in a community in the course of communication over space and time and that writing was a secondary development and obscured rather than illuminated the development of the spoken language, which was the language of the people and the real focus of our scientific interest. And so attention [was] changed in linguistics from the reconstruction of the remote past to the understanding of the present condition, and so it is the present condition in [...] terms of the everyday use of the spoken language by the general population, which was the basis of scientific work in language. And this, of course, was not an isolated development but closely associated with the development of naturalism in the literary field or the general positivism and the mechanistic scientific outlook of the late nineteenth century. Now, when these people looked at the way that languages were taught it seemed then that they were being taught in a way which was *divorced* from everyday reality and so then they advocated and practised themselves the turnover from the translation of literary and philosophical texts to the learning of the language — the spoken language — of everyday life.

I was in the National Pedagogical Library in Copenhagen and saw exactly how strong the revolutionary contrast was between the textbooks for the teaching of English in Denmark before the Reform Movement and then the works of [Otto] Jespersen himself. [...] The basis for the teaching of English in the earlier period, earlier in the nineteenth century, were translations into Danish of the English translation of the texts of the Roman classical period: so, Caesar and Cicero, translated into English

and now to be translated into Danish, or the other way round. With Jespersen, you get representations of everyday dialogues and the extraction of grammatical and phonetic, morphological structures from the dialogues — the dialogues to be learnt — and then new language built on the basis of these dialogues. And the English dialogues that I saw of his were realistic and would be more or less contemporary now.

Own experience of language learning at school

Can I ask you — thinking back to your own school days, when you were learning French and German [...] — about the situation, in England, of modern language learning in the 1930s?

Well, I started school in 1929 and went through six years of the infant school and junior school. At that time there was no actual teaching of foreign languages in the primary school but we were encouraged to take an interest in other countries — I remember the third verse to the national anthem which *we* learnt, which I've heard only once since, which was in the run-up to the Olympic Games, and that is the third verse *we* learnt — not about 'frustrating knavish tricks' — but:

Not in this land alone
But be God's mercies known
From shore to shore.
God, make the nations see
That men should brothers be,
And form one family
The wide world o'er.

So these were the values which were being communicated to us by — in my case — a very sympathetic band of devoted teachers. And we were invited to collect objects which had foreign languages on them. Stamps, of course, and also orange wrappers! And of course the use of English as a more or less universal lingua franca was not at all the case in the 1930s when Czechoslovakia was 'a foreign land of which we know very little'.¹ If you travelled you had to expect to encounter and to make use of the languages which you found. So, in my own case, and I think it was quite widespread, there was considerable inner excitement at being able to take up a foreign language on going from the primary to the secondary level — [excitement] that it was part of growing up and that it was opening horizons, allowing particularly people with quite humble everyday lives to escape from the enclosing claustrophobia of the immediate situation and to feel one's way outwards into a wider world. And part of coping with

¹ An allusion to part of a BBC radio broadcast by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain on 27 September 1938 before he flew to Germany to sign the Munich Agreement with Hitler: 'How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing'.

that wider world was being able to cope with its languages. And you've got to start somewhere, and you start with the language of our nearest neighbours — and also, of course, the international role of French in the 1930s was different from what it has since become. It was the language of diplomacy. It was the language of international organizations, and if you were going to expand into this international world then French was the best introduction to it.

But people didn't travel very much. My parents took me on a holiday to Switzerland — and I went with school to Switzerland on two subsequent occasions. It was the German-speaking part, where we encountered a kind of German that was rather different from what we had encountered in the classroom. But the status of foreign languages was very different then from what it is now. The recent survey which was done on a European scale on language competences [European Commission, 2012], which to their credit, the British government participated in, showed that we were bottom of the league [...]. And that has gone together, I think, with a widespread feeling in the public that you can get anywhere in English, but that did not exist — that feeling — in the 1930s.

In fact you were so interested in languages [that you] studied German at university [...] with a focus on literature. At the same time you were getting interested in phonetics, so, the modern spoken language. So [there were] these two aspects which you referred to earlier coming together in your own career — the focus on the contemporary spoken language but also the focus on German for its cultural value. When you later became a lecturer in phonetics can you describe a little bit how you became interested in — shall we say — progressive ideas on language teaching?

Yes. Well, I would go back to the first year of French at school — the first term that we had was conducted entirely in phonetic transcription. And this was really quite important — certainly to me. I was ill at the beginning of term and so only came in in the middle of term and found this strange form of writing in use, but the effect of that was I concentrated very much more on the *sound* of the spoken language. At the end of term we were shown the complexity of French spelling, which was something of an eye-opener! But the problem for us was — given the relatively straightforward spoken language — [...] a writing system that doesn't reflect that but is based on a number of other things like classical antecedents and goodness knows what! And [letters are important] which are in the spelling but which don't correspond with sounds in the spoken language for the most part. But the problem was in the spelling system and not in the speech. [In] addition to that — [...] another important thing was that one absorbed a certain number of ideas. One is that the speech sounds themselves form an understandable and learnable system and that distinguishing the words which are different from each other in the spoken language is a straightforward business which can be applied not only to French but also to any other language. And so the general phonetic framework which came across with that was then of considerable use when you were up against the spelling systems of other languages, some of which are fairly straightforward, and German by comparison with

French is relatively straightforward. Our German teacher said he wouldn't use phonetic transcription because he didn't feel it to be necessary in view of the fact that, although you can't always tell how a word is going to be spelt if you hear it, you can always tell how it's going to be pronounced if you see it, except in one or two cases, which we will learn. So a kind of — which I think is progressive — and certainly more *rational* approach to language learning was given to me at a very early stage. The teacher who taught us the phonetics of French went to another school very shortly afterwards. And I met him later at an athletics contest and said how much I'd appreciated the phonetic approach. And he said, 'Oh, we don't do that anymore — things have changed at the Institute of Education'. So, anyway that's a sideline [but] I think the Chair of Modern Languages at the London Institute of Education had changed and Daniel Jones' influence had faded away.

I see, so you yourself were quite satisfied with the way you were taught languages at school [...]?

Reasonably, yes, and I don't think we were unduly dominated by structural exercises. I think the strong belief in structural drilling came later than my time. We did very little translation in German. Partly, I think, because the teacher didn't want to mark it, but also because he said 'You'll have to do translations in this examination at the end of your five years but if you know the language there's no problem in that — but I'll give you one or two classes towards the end to give you the techniques'. But it was certainly not dominant.

But my own attitude towards some of the traditional methods of teaching and testing is more complicated than simply to reject them. I think that translation has a great deal going for it as a method of testing and of higher education. I don't think it's a good way of approaching the early stages of language learning. Because what is really fascinating about translation is the judgement on choice from word fields, particularly. And you've got to *have* that in order for the choices to be relevant. And I have certainly seen Professor Forster² conduct translation classes which have been very exciting and very illuminating. But I wouldn't recommend it as the way of getting to know the meanings in the first place. I'd be closer to Comenius in that.

Beginnings of professional engagement with language teaching

[During] your time as a lecturer in phonetics, first at UCL then at Cambridge, [how] did you become more engaged with language teaching more broadly, in England?

When I think about it, it's impinged on my life at all stages. [...] I don't think it's ever been absent. Certainly, although I was a university lecturer in phonetics at

² Leonard Wilson Forster (1913–97), Fellow of Selwyn College, Cambridge 1938–50, 1961–97; University Lecturer in German, Cambridge University 1947–50; Professor of German, University College London 1950–61; Schröder Professor of German, Cambridge University 1961–79.

Cambridge there wasn't very much demand for supervision [in phonetics or linguistics] — and so the colleges were interested in my work as a supervisor [only] in so far as I could teach German, at any rate at Part I level. But I also undertook work as an oral examiner for the Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate in the East Anglian area, and, due to a catenation of circumstances, had a significant part to play in the development of the BBC language teaching operation. First of all I was able to advise them on the actual methods to use, which I thought were interesting and innovative, particularly in Italian and German. In German, I had already undertaken the general editorship of a series of compact grammars of the language printed out on two sides of plasticized card and so I provided then the structural planning for a number of the BBC series. Lastly, *Deutsch Direkt* and *Ganz Spontan* [Trim & BBC, 1985; 1987].

They were very popular series, I believe . . .

Yes, and what I tried to insist upon was that the television programmes, which were attracting people, had to be good television, they had got to be *interesting*, not just fun, but interesting as an introduction into the homes of people using the language concerned, in a natural, everyday way. And so I saw no reason to interrupt that with didactic teaching, and no need at all to have the English language used in any way in the television component. So people would just get used to accepting these people speaking another language in the intimate atmosphere of the home. And of course one can only do that if the teaching is multimedia and the actual teaching itself is carried out through other media. [. . .] So it was a new situation calling for quite new methodology — [. . .] I enormously enjoyed being involved in that.

Initial Council of Europe involvement

When you came to the Council of Europe work, which you're of course very well known for leading from [. . .] the early '70s, what were your motivations for taking on that work?

Well, partly, if people ask me to do something, I tend to do it! I'm very compliant in that sort of way. I got involved in it partly [because], I didn't know it at the time, it turned out the Council of Europe was sponsoring the Congress of Applied Linguistics which I organized in Cambridge in 1969, and they gave us a small subsidy, and I wrote them a report on the Congress, which drew me then into their orbit. At that time, they were engaged in a ten-year major project on language learning, which spread across all their educational committees. The last to take it up was the Committee on Out-of-School Education and Cultural Development. They were interested in a system of giving qualifications by a unit-credit system, modularized, which people could take according to the conditions of adult life over a period of time and through a succession of modules. And they asked me to chair a committee on developing such a system for languages — a unit-credit system for adult education across

Europe. In tackling that, I was interested in it particularly as a result of my experience in multimedia operation in the TV field, and also my exposure to the views of Tony Becher,³ the Director of the Nuffield foundation, and his ideas on educational technology, which he said was a matter of applying the principles of systems engineering to education rather than any particular technological devices; and I wanted then to have the opportunity of applying that in this particular field. David Wilkins and I attended the meeting to launch this idea and we were not satisfied with the situational approach which was developed by people within the Eurocentres and which was presented to us, because a situation is not an event — a situation is a class of events characterized by having a particular structure. So we were then trying to get away from learning dialogues and doing structural exercises and instead, as a framework, to provide an analysis of situations, i.e. classes of event, and the various elements that figured in these structures. And so we rapidly developed an overall model and then large strings of categories that would figure as elements within these structures, and then the particular elements in particular languages which would then realize these categories. And so it was that *interest* which really motivated me in putting in the amount of effort which was necessary into the chairmanship of this committee.

It was partially at least an intellectual interest — in the sense of an interest in system and in making a system — a linguistic interest?

Yes.

Sources of the Threshold Level

Of course, it's become a very important development in the recent history — the move from a focus on structures — or situations in the way you describe — to notions, to functions. Do you remember the actual moment when you came up with this idea or the sources of this move, this change?

I had been working with a doctoral student, Klaus Bung. He was concerned in his thesis with the development of a model. He'd already got the outline of the model in his mind and he then developed it considerably for his doctorate. And of course, as I say, the notion of systems thinking [was there] in any case. But the critical time was at the beginning of January in a very cold spell in an unheated room in Selwyn College, where I brought together all the literature that I could find on speech acts and the notional and functional categories. I took some things from *Vorwärts* that Anthony Peck had developed for German in the Nuffield projects [Nuffield Foundation, 1974] and some from a Swedish programme, *In the Air*, which was produced by the University of Linköping, and also of course the Palmer and Blandford book

³ Roy Anthony Becher (1930–2009), assistant director at the Nuffield Foundation and then director of the Nuffield Higher Education group, 1961–75.

Everyday Sentences in Spoken English, which had a categorization of these things, and the work of (J. L.) Austin. And then, on the basis of this, we took the categories within the overall systematic model that we wanted to present, and then drew up large lists — long lists of categories and exponents. That was then put out by the Council of Europe as an internal document and also sent to interested parties such as the German *Volkshochschulverein*,⁴ particularly for the certificate system they developed as part of the international Certificate Commission. And they were very excited by it and took it up. To keep control over it and to take it from the stage of being unordered lists to a more systematic presentation, we asked Jan van Ek, who had a very systematic mind and had written a grammar of English and was advising the *Volkshochschulverein* on the structural side of English. We asked him to systematize the materials and the Dutch government gave him a six-month study leave to do that work and so the ‘Threshold Level’ was then produced. We called it the Threshold Level because, although we were sceptical about the use of levels in language generally, we felt that there might be a point which could be regarded as crossing a threshold, where the bits and pieces of language that you learn in the very early stages of language learning cohere into a generally usable communicative competence. Whether we identified that point or not, I don’t know, but that was the reason for the term. And the publication itself turned out to be very influential.

Work as Director of CILT

Can I bring us back to the UK — England and Wales, perhaps, specifically? You became director of CILT in 1978. The Threshold Level and Council of Europe work was focused on adults specifically, at that time, and your work prior to that on television programmes was also for an adult language learning audience. And there is this paradox, perhaps in the British situation, it seems to me anyway, where programmes like the ones you produced were very popular and adults often show a lot of interest in learning languages but, as everybody knows, schools do not produce very fluent speakers of languages and, when you came to CILT — correct me if I’m wrong — I suppose that you had to take more of an interest in school language learning ...

Yes, well, of course, as soon as the Council of Europe were aware of the *reception* of the Threshold Level, they commissioned Van Ek to produce the Threshold Level for Schools, which was very largely identical with the Threshold Level because in fact [...] the school and adult audiences are not so different when it comes to the notions and functions, and so on. But he of course tried to take account of the centres of interest of children rather than the centres of interest of adults. Some parts of adult life [...] are not of concern to children, and certainly there are parts of children’s

⁴ *Deutscher Volkshochschul-Verband* [German Association of Adult Education Colleges].

lives that become considerably less significant when people get older. So, the school interest was there already.

The main impact of the Threshold Level work was on the teaching of English as a foreign language and it was taken up wholeheartedly by publishers and testing authorities generally, across the profession. We had laid particular importance, as part of systems thinking, on having the various different providers — that were independent agents — working together in the same direction. If they were working to produce the same kind of terminal competence then the work would not be self-contradictory. I mean, there is no point in having a [. . .] functional-notional approach based upon everyday language use when people are going to be prepared for examinations which are concerned with translation and writing essays in English, or in the mother tongue more generally. The adult field is much freer and, particularly since the British government decided to intervene in curricular matters, which it used not to, [schools are] very much more subject to central administrative decisions. So the take-up in other languages was reduced, particularly perhaps because our French colleagues were worried that the Threshold Level, which was *one* possible objective for language learners of a particular level, might be taken as being *the* European standard for language learning. They wanted people, in accordance with our basic principles, to respond to learner needs and motivations, characteristics and resources, and the people *planning* courses had got to take these factors into account and not have that work done for them. They produced *Un Niveau Seuil* — which is *Un Niveau Seuil* and not *Le Niveau Seuil* — and that was a *survey* of the resources of French at an elementary level. [The] designers of courses, or examinations or textbooks, had got then to provide courses or tests appropriate to a particular defined audience that would be different in almost every case. So, *highly diverse*. And they feared the influence of the Threshold Level as a centralizing and unifying [phenomenon]. In fact, of course, the situation of competition in the *English* language field is such that people must innovate. Nobody is going to take the Threshold Level or anything else exactly as it stands because everybody else is doing so, too — they have an inbuilt diversification which will protect them against that. But the result of that was we had strong impact on the teaching of *English* as a foreign language, and within schools that influence was of course in countries other than the UK and Ireland. So, what I did as Director of CILT was to do my best to support and encourage the Graded Objectives movement, which was very similar in its objectives, with Ann Harding and Brian Page, who were developing that in conjunction with the University of York and an increasing number of departments of education, particularly in Leicester (Roy Dunning). And so we welcomed it partly because it was an application of the ideas of the Council of Europe project and of the Threshold Level, but particularly because it was bottom-up — it was teachers who came to the conclusion that the public examinations were not doing the job which became necessary with the introduction of comprehensive education. Methods of teaching and testing which were appropriate to a selective system were not appropriate to a non-selective system, and there was a general feeling growing among a lot of children, particularly the

children for whom foreign languages were something quite outside their normal existence, the feeling among such children that languages were difficult, they were rather boring, that they were irrelevant to their future working needs and also in any case to their everyday lives. And so the teachers then tried to answer those questions: ‘What is it that will interest the children?’ ‘What is it that will be within their compass and where they can be persuaded of [. . .] relevance?’ And [there was the insight] that the progression of language competence can then be placed on a series of levels and people can present themselves for qualifications at those levels when they are ready to do so. So that the possession of a qualification means that you have reached this point in your learning process rather than that you have done better than other people taking the same examination at the same time. But we did not want to interfere with the fact that it was an autonomous development of voluntarily cooperating teachers. So, whatever our knowledge and views might be, we did not attempt to influence the decisions they came to, but we did try to strongly support them logistically. And [the] transactional elements in the Threshold Level tended to be emphasized — that is to say, [for example] getting a cup of tea, being able to do things that you could see could be relevant to you in your everyday life particularly if you went to the country concerned. But the system was developing, particularly upwards. And then, of course, in the higher grades it escapes from this concentration on the transactional and, with later teenagers, the *interpersonal* becomes of increasing importance and replaces the transactional.

The trouble came when the government intervened further in curricular matters and wanted to set up a national curriculum for language learning. And they were then, I think, convinced that the way to go was along the lines that the Graded Objectives movement had produced. And so it immediately *ossified* the movement. It removed its basis as a ‘bottom-up’, teacher-controlled, teacher-directed movement and it fixated the transactional approach. And this of course failed to satisfy the requirements particularly of the more motivated, more intelligent, more sensitive children, and so that was rather sad. But at the time we were supporting it for those reasons.

The Common European Framework

Is ossification or reification a process which is almost inevitable? I’m thinking about the Common European Framework as well, which, to my understanding, was not designed to be something static but something continually under discussion [. . .] and similar processes seem to have happened, in this case with testing agencies — and you mentioned publishers earlier.

Yes, certainly Frau Schwerdtfeger in Germany said that if the Common European Framework were adopted, it will mean the *end* of any research in applied linguistics.⁵

⁵ Presumably, the reference here is to Schwerdtfeger (2003).

But we were not trying to produce something which was set in stone. Largely, again, it was a question that we were asked to do it — and so I did it. The Swiss government had internal difficulties over the recognition of qualifications in various fields, but including languages, across the cantons. There is no Ministry of Education in Switzerland: decisions are taken at the cantonal level. There are, of course, coordinating bodies which can influence this, but essentially the decision-making is at cantonal level. They found it easier to have internationally recognized standards against which what was being taught and tested in different cantons could be calibrated, rather than trying to produce a national instrument. But it turned out that the desire to have internationally recognized standards of calibration was not confined to that situation. Because of increasing vocational and educational mobility — globally, but certainly within the European Union — people were being called upon to appoint employees or to admit students on the basis of the qualifications which they had obtained in a wide variety of situations and circumstances, where the administrators taking the decisions could not be expected to inform themselves in detail about the basis on which those qualifications were awarded. And so it came at a time when there was this practical interest from administrators of various kinds in an international system [...]. We felt that the system of six levels would be sufficiently robust to allow the major decisions on admissions to higher education and the first employment of employees to be taken. And the Swiss government then financed the research work to produce the basis for a system of that sort. At the same time, Daniel Coste and I, who were not concerned with that problem, were then interested, he in providing a rational basis for curricular reform, and myself, out of my general phonetic and linguistic knowledge, to provide a descriptive framework of what it is that constitutes the full communicative ability — communicative competence — of an adult learner. So it was then up to individual users to decide how much of that was worth making a priority within their teaching and testing structure. But we did not wish, in any way, to *pre-empt* the decisions that people might make, but only to provide a calibrating instrument and to provide an overall model of communicative competence which was sufficiently detailed for people to make detailed decisions. But, of course, the world is a complicated place and, when confronted with such an instrument, people can use it in various different ways, which they have done.

Final words

Finally, perhaps, you've been kind enough at the beginning to say how important you feel research into the history of language teaching is, and then gave a fascinating description of Comenius and the Reform Movement, and we came then to something of your own career in language teaching. And I suppose that in some ways — with the Council of Europe work particularly — you have been centrally involved in a sort of Reform [Movement] — well, in attempts to reform language teaching. I just wonder if finally there are any lessons from that experience that you would like to share — lessons from history, if you like — from your own history — or from the [wider] history, looking towards the future, or any other final words?

Yes . . . I don't want to try or claim to put forward a solution to the problems that language teaching faces in the widest possible variety of circumstances. I do think, clearly, that a series of central decisions which have been taken with regard to modern languages have not had their consequences properly thought through. And I think that the situation which language teachers face can be very difficult in this country at the present time. I have a very, very high opinion of the language teaching profession. I think they are wonderful people and I think that *many* can produce remarkable results in difficult circumstances, but of course, for many others it is a way of earning a living, and if it can be done without the necessity for innovation, so much the better. So I don't want to propose solutions, mainly because I lack the knowledge and really penetrative insight into the situations people face in order to be able to claim to be able to provide solutions to their problems. What I want is to get people used to a certain way of *approaching* the problems, of analysing the situations they're in, what degrees of freedom they have and how these can be best exploited for the benefit of the children sitting in front of them that they're responsible for. I have to acknowledge that their primary responsibility is to get them the qualifications that they need to go further in their educational experience, certainly at school level, right up to the top of the school. I think people probably have more freedom of action than they often realize they do and if they understand — if they can get a clear idea of the objective that they're working to in response to the analysis of the teaching-learning situation that they're involved in — then they can, as individuals, do much more than they sometimes think they can. But, you know, the profession as a whole can be very conservative, and continuing to do what you've found works becomes more attractive in middle life. . . . And if you're going to innovate, you want to be sure that the innovation is going to make things better and not worse.

I would like to see a reduction in the directiveness of government action. I think the role of government is to answer the questions 'Why?', and then to a more limited extent 'What?'. I don't think that they should concern themselves too much with 'How?'. I think that the ability of teachers to innovate or to find the right solution for them is likely to lead to better results than making centralized decisions which are then imposed upon everybody, whether it is appropriate to them or not. But I want to provide then the machinery — or see the machinery provided, and I've done what I can to help along that way — to assist people's *thinking* to make intelligent decisions as close to the point of learning as possible. And I think that [. . .] people who are academic linguists in its various branches should, as part of their responsibility, be prepared to provide information and insight and understanding which will help practitioners to make sensible decisions in their professional lives. And I do think still that it is necessary for the whole cluster of independent agents to be working coherently rather than in ways that can be impossibly divergent or self-contradictory. So, yes, so *empowerment* is what I think the research world and the academic world can provide to language learning practitioners.

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