THE FAILURE OF AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES AS LANGUAGE TEACHING INSTITUTIONS[1]

T.J. Quinn
Monash University

What I have to say is intended to be very pragmatic. I begin from an assumption that the standards of language achievement of students in university language departments are pretty low. Specifically, I have the impression that, of the students who come from 5-6 years of language study in high school, and who continue language study in a university department for 2-3 years, very few can, at the end of their studies, handle the foreign language with ease. The practical outcome of the 8-9 years of language study is minimal. To be quite blunt, I don't think that we do a very good job teaching foreign languages; or perhaps I should say that the students in our departments don't do a good job learning them.

Let me immediately stress three points, by way of preliminary cautions.

1) I cannot prove that levels of linguistic achievement are as low as I think they are, because we have no data on the essential factors one would need to analyze. To say something scientifically certain about this question, one would need data on such matters as the comparability of intake from one year to the next in a department; on how much the students actually learn in each year; and on what their real level of achievement is at any stage. It is typical of our scandalous neglect of educational research that we have no such data, and hence no reliable indication of whether we do our job effectively or not. Even if we wanted to set about collecting such data, it is virtually impossible to do so, because there are no suitable tests for which any evidence of reliability and validity is available. In my assumption of low levels of achievement, I am therefore relying on the informal evidence of unscientific test results, on my own personal impressions, and on those of students and colleagues.

2) My impressions are obviously derived principally from what I see at Monash University but my informal enquiries lead me to believe that the situation is much the same elsewhere. I can see no reason to suspect that the situation is likely to be substantially different in other comparable Australian universities.

3) I want to consider solely languages studied in the secondary school and then continued at university level. Let's call these continuing language courses. I do NOT want to consider the situation with languages begun at the university. For reasons that I do not understand at all, beginning language courses seem to achieve far better results than continuing language courses. In terms of practical language achievement, departments of Russian, Indonesian, Japanese and Spanish seem to do a better job than we do in departments of French.

I am assuming, then, that the standards of language achievement in continuing university language courses are typically quite low, and I want to try to explore why this is so. To characterize my reading of the situation, I shall put five propositions, five claims setting out possible reasons for the present inadequacies I have pointed to. My five propositions are these:

a) The academic tradition which we have inherited has no place for language teaching.

b) We are confronted with a largely remedial task.

c) There is a vast gulf between our aspirations and those of our students.

d) Success in any of our exams does not represent acquisition of any fixed standard of competence.

e) In the present state of human knowledge, it is not possible to advance a sound theory or technology of second language learning.

I think that these five propositions spell out some basic home truths that we usually prefer not to face, and I suggest that it's about time we brought these matters out into the open for realistic discussion. Let me expand on each of the propositions in turn.

The academic tradition which we have inherited has no place for language teaching. Language teaching has not traditionally been a university occupation, except in the form of "prose composition," which was conceived of as quite high-level, sophisticated practice in the refined and challenging art of translation. Language teaching is not a field of traditional scholarship, nor does it attract the intellectual heavies. This is quite understandable, since the business of acquiring the low-level practical language skills, the business of imparting the ability to put a sentence together correctly, are largely devoid of intellectual content or challenge. Teaching the present tense of -ir verbs to students who have been learning this regularly each year for seven years, and who still manage to get it wrong, is not a source of

great intellectual excitement. Language learning is a dull and tedious business, demanding long hours of patient practice. Hence the familiar reference to the Berlitz schools as the proper place for practical language study, and the claim that such language courses have no place in a university, that language work should be offered in universities only as a tool for work in literary criticism or historical philology. Traditionally, there has not been any professional training for academics engaged in language teaching: the classic preparation has always been a thesis in literature or philology, which presumably equipped you to "take prose class." This is the sort of tradition which we have inherited, and which is still implicitly present in many of our attitudes and decisions. This traditional approach, of course, worked very well indeed with the very special minority clientele that typically made up the students in a department of French: students who were gifted, highly motivated, unquestioning, obedient, diligent, persevering, and equipped with sound basic preparation in high school. The trouble is that our students are not usually like that anymore, and our inherited academic tradition does not equip us to deal with them.

We are confronted with a largely remedial task. Most of our students have been very badly taught in secondary school. They come to us with all sorts of gaps in their basic knowledge of the language. Many of them have very low pass marks at their school terminal exam, e.g., 60%, indicating that they got 40% of the exam paper wrong, a percentage which is extraordinarily high for something like language. Secondary school courses do not guarantee anything: to have "passed" HSC French does not represent any solid achievement such as knowledge of basic grammar, an ability to understand spoken French etc., because such exams in most places are an extraordinary hodge-podge of just about every imaginable type of test, including such unhappy bed-fellows as prose, version, multiple-choice comprehension, grammar completion tests, and so on. Such exam papers usually represent an unhappy compromise between those who want drastic change and those who don't. This means that a tiny minority of students come to us armed with a solid high school training, and this stands them in good stead throughout their stay with us, so that we teach them virtually nothing in language; but the vast majority come to us with a motley array of huge gaps in their basic language training, and their confusion seems to increase the longer they stay with us. These are the ones we seem not to reach at all. If they are to learn the language, then we must accept the job of patching up the inadequacies left by their poor secondary school training. This is what I mean by a remedial task, and I don't think we are geared to cope with it.

There is a vast gulf between our aspirations and those of our students. I think we make a lot of assumptions about the shape of the intellectual universe, and tend to think that these are shared by our students. Most of us largely accept traditional academic and intellectual values; it is not clear that our students do, for they are the product of the democratization process in education. The undergraduate population no longer represents a highly-motivated, highly intelligent elite with some aspirations towards intellectual distinction, but a very ordinary group of young people after a job ticket. We take it for granted that accuracy, rigour, perseverance and diligence are "good things" : I suspect our students do not. And this expresses itself in what they want to get out of "doing French" as opposed to what we think we are giving them. A concrete example might clarify this. Imagine a student coming out of a department of French able to talk to a young French person of his own age, able to understand a French film or a programme on France-Inter, able to read France-Soir, able to correspond in French with a penfriend, but totally unable to do explication de texte or literary analysis, unaware of French literary history and the "big names," and quite unexposed to any intellectually serious analysis of French institutions. I don't think many academics would be happy to parade such a student as a fine product of their department. Yet I suspect that the set of abilities which I have tried to describe is just what most of our students would like to get out of their course. This emerged quite clearly from Dr Rado's survey of trainee foreign language teachers (Marta Rado, "A Profile of Future Modern Language Teachers," Babel 8 (1972), 3-7), where students indicated that what they think is most important for a language teacher is "ability to speak a language fluently." This same group indicated that what they most strongly favoured of all the things offered in their undergraduate courses was "everyday conversation in the foreign language." These student aspirations seem to me to be pretty low-level, and quite far removed from the more respectable academic aspirations we prefer to project as part of our image. I think an attempt to project a scholarly image accounts for the extraordinary amount of academic window-dressing that goes on in things like handbooks and course outlines. I refer to such things as putting an impressive-looking and solid reading list in the handbook for your subject, even though you know very well that it is far beyond the capacities of your students, and that few will attempt to cope with even half of it. When I ask academics why they do this - and I fear that quite a lot do do it - their replies make it pretty obvious that they are trying to impress people: they're concerned about what their colleagues in other departments and other universities will think; they want their courses to look good, to suggest solid scholarship and rigour and so on. I'm not suggesting

that there is anything terribly wrong with this sort of rather childish window-dressing. I refer to it simply as a symptom of the academic values and aspirations which we prize, but which many of our students do not.

Success in any of our exams does not represent acquisition of any fixed standard of competence. In university language departments, tests and exams are usually set in a quite unprincipled way, because we do not set down precise objectives at any level. (Of course it may well be that it is impossible to define such objectives in any meaningful way.) The format and content of tests is determined quite arbitrarily, with no consideration whatever of the basic scientific facts about validity and reliability in testing. The marking of the tests and the weighting of sections are done in a similarly arbitrary way. So, at examiners' meetings, we are confronted with sets of meaningless figures, and we arbitrarily determine cut-off points to separate "pass" from "fail," again in a quite unprincipled way. Marks from year to year and even from semester to semester represent quite different things, and, on the basis of such unsophisticated testing techniques, examination success at any level cannot possibly indicate anything firm about the state of a student's knowledge of the language. Furthermore, students get "pushed through" from level to level despite profound ignorance of the language, because they have supposed strengths in other areas. Unsophisticated, haphazard and arbitrary programmes of assessment are typical of university language departments, and this means that adequate competence in the language is never really assessed or certified in any meaningful way.

In the present state of human knowledge, it is not possible to advance a sound theory or technology of second language learning. A few years ago, some brave souls claimed to be able to explain how people learned languages, but few would undertake such a task today. We may not even know what factors are important in the learning process. It may well be that large-scale social factors (e.g., the massive monolingual tradition of the Australian community, the fact that we possess the world's most important language, the view of Europe as "the old world that failed") exercise a telling influence on the individual's approach to a learning task. There are many dimensions in the human organism that may affect the learning situation in unpredictable ways: a child may fail to learn to read because he is unloved, or because he feels firmly rooted in the working class, and sees the teacher - in some unconscious way - as representing the alien values and aspirations of a middle class world.

Successful learning may be linked to quite unknown, unpredictable, and therefore uncontrollable factors: for example, what I call a feeling of cultural insecurity, the feeling that it is desirable to pass for a foreigner, may well be a most telling factor in leading a student towards success in foreign language learning. The personal relationship between the teacher and the student, or the general atmosphere of a department, may similarly be the most important factors in successful learning. These factors and others like them might far outweigh in importance the controllable technological factors. The great error of the American audio-lingual movement, the French audio-visual movement, and any other similar technological or methodological approach was to reduce foreign language learning to a cause and effect situation, assuming that the postulated causes did indeed produce the observed effects, and ignoring all the unsuspected and unmeasurable factors which might be present, and which might be far more important. It was easy, for example, to assume that structure drills should produce easy fluency in the use of a language pattern, until it became clear that such exercises were largely counter-productive because of their "inhuman" quality, their artificiality that made them totally unrelated to the essence of human language, which is people interacting with people. Quite simply, we do not understand how people learn languages, and Chomsky was led to remark in 1966 that no scientific body of knowledge is sufficiently advanced to support a technology of language teaching. I think that remark is just as valid today. Our practical decisions must therefore be made very carefully indeed, in the full knowledge that they are being taken on a quite pragmatic basis. We must adopt policies because they work, not because they are theoretically justifiable.

So much for my five propositions. They are an attempt to set out the reasons for what I regard as pretty poor performance in language teaching. The next logical step, of course, would be to ask what can be done about this situation, and to try to find out how we can do better. However, I want to suggest that you cannot answer those questions without making up your mind on certain other logically prior issues. For this reason, I now want to ask five questions, which I think need to be answered before any decisions on practical policy can be made. I offer these questions for your consideration.

Question 1. Does it really matter if our students don't successfully master the practical language?

If we are principally in the business of transmitting a cultural heritage, then it probably doesn't. I know many first-year students, for instance, who read their Gide and Malraux in

translation, and manage to follow lectures and tutes. They probably manage to take away the essential of whatever we are trying to impart in our teaching of literature. Even if it is not successful in teaching practical language use, a department may well be able to justify its existence in other ways, by doing other things very well. The department where I work, for example, offers a superbly rich acculturation programme, a wide range of exciting and relevant courses related to French studies, which allow the student to explore the French reality in a way that is meaningful to him in terms of his own tastes and interests. In addition, the department offers a thoroughly professional graduate programme. Perhaps it's not possible to do these things very well, and also teach practical language use in any effective way. Incidentally, I have tried to guage student opinion on a choice between devoting their time to the rather hum-drum business of reaching language proficiency, or following the culture courses. Even though they say they want to learn the language, when the crunch comes they choose the culture every time. So I think the question must be asked: does it really matter if practical language standards remain low?

Question 2. Do we accept any responsibility for the certification of future teachers?

It is pretty clear that many future teachers leave departments of French woefully under-equipped to teach the language, because their own command of the language is so weak. Is this any of our business? Given the essentially remedial situation outlined above, should we simply say that we are not equipped to do the job of patching up earlier inadequate teaching of the language, and go on with the "real" business of teaching literature, linguistics and civilization?

Question 3. Is some marriage between practical language teaching and intellectual challenge possible?

We are a shrinking discipline, and our position in the universities is already threatened. Can we continue to justify our position if we start emphasizing such clearly non-intellectual pursuits as remedial language teaching? If we are wedded to purely intellectual pursuits, and consider the practical business of language skill unimportant, then we should say so openly, and not implicitly, as we do now by pushing virtually everybody through, despite lamentable, and frequently demonstrable gaps in language skill.

Question 4. Are we ready to accept the consequences of raising standards?

By being quite mercilessly ruthless, we could certainly raise out standards. But we would stop being the "nice guys" that most of us are right now. We wouldn't listen to all the touching pleas for special consideration, we wouldn't give extensions and exemptions for romantic and family problems, we would ignore the fact that most of our students are the victims of inadequate secondary schools. We would simply become coldly ruthless in our dealings with the students. I personally am not convinced that "learning French" is worth that particular kind of inhumanity. And, of course, such a "scare-them-away" approach would be very bad PR: it would entail large numbers of failures, great unpopularity, and an acceleration of the downward trend in enrolment numbers. That would mean we would lose jobs, money, EFTS's, prestige. And those who see undergraduate courses as little more than a means of providing financial support for the real business of honours and graduate studies would have to look elsewhere for such support. This all sounds rather dramatic, but I am convinced that it is quite realistic, and we should be aware of these implications in any move to raise standards.

Question 5. Should the first year of a continuing language course be conceived as a valuable educational experience in itself, or as essentially a preparation for what is to come later?

This is a vital question. Planning the first year as a self-contained educational experience implies emphasizing the intellectual and cultural content, which conflicts with the need to do the difficult remedial job with language work. Yet, in view of the number who do first year only, we surely should design it as a self-contained unit. On the other hand, if we postpone rigorous language work till second year, it's probably too late.

These, then, are the problems as I see them at this moment of profound change in the development of university language teaching. They are serious problems, and there are no panaceas for them any more. The 60's taught us that, if nothing else. We must each try to frame a coherent language teaching policy on the basis of a realistic assessment of a specific situation. I hope the questions I have raised might help you to make such a realistic assessment.

FOOTNOTE

1. This paper was presented at the Ninth AULLA Workshop on Language Laboratories and Language Teaching, August 22, 1973, at the University of New South Wales.