

NOTES FROM THE BROOM CUPBOARD

(BAAL News autumn 08)

Dear Julie

Thanks for your letter – lovely to hear from you. I'm glad things are going well at Lower Heyford. You never know with these new places, do you? Did LH keep on the old Dance Academy when they got University College status? I have this vision of you tangoing over the Cotswolds ...

Not much has happened since you left. The main news, I guess, is that we've been restructured again. The original system where we had three departments with six schools in each wasn't felt to be 'fit for purpose', so now we have six departments with three schools in each. Richard and I have been promoted, we think, but we appear to have ended up on a lower salary scale, so it's not all that clear just where we stand. Paul is the only one who understands exactly what's happening, but he's off sick having a nervous realignment, so for the moment it's all a muddle – i.e. business as usual.

We had one of our subgroup meetings in the broom cupboard yesterday. (I know, it's silly to keep calling it that, it's been the Coffee Recess for two years now, but old habits die hard. Though I mustn't let Peter the Chomskyan hear me saying that, must I?) We talked a lot about the status of models in these ELF days, and about the notion of a Fully Competent and Knowledgeable Speaker of English as a Lingua Franca – a cumbersome label, but nobody's yet come up with a universally acceptable acronym. Ramona insisted that the model-target dichotomy can be resolved by applying insights from modern physics, in particular current views on quantum uncertainty and the collapse of the wave function, but we weren't totally convinced. She's always going on about that kind of thing; it's just a question of what book she's picked up off the popular science shelf this week. Last time it was the big bang and inflation as a metaphor for acquisition, and UG was the cosmic microwave background. Next time, the relevance of string theory to the negotiation of meaning? Who knows?

Plagiarism is getting everybody worked up. It's even worse than in your day. They used to put in spelling mistakes to make it look as if they'd written the stuff themselves, but now they don't even bother. Mary got an assignment last week that simply consisted of the entire text of one of her own papers, unattributed. I try to give them the benefit of the doubt, but when you get 3000 words of high-level argument in elegant flawless English on the scope of Applied Linguistics, concluding '© H Widdowson 1998', you do begin to wonder.

The thing that really got us all going, though, was Maggie's notes from a seminar she went to at UCL on Tuesday. This was given by a chap called Krszysztof Grgorczech, from one of those Eastern European places with Acute Vowel Deficiency Syndrome. Vowel trouble or not, it seems this guy was red hot. To summarise Maggie's account: Grgorczech and his colleagues have been working within a sociocognitive framework developed by Anopheles Fairfax and his team at Reykjavik, but they've taken the paradigm a whole lot further. Broadly speaking, they see all of human communication as falling into four categories: natural, transgressive, reversative and accommodatory.

SLA, in this view, involves the acquisition of the target language's rhetorical perspectives and associated rhetorical macro-, meso- and microstrategies up to a point where an adequate level of interdiscursivity is achieved. An absolute prerequisite for an appropriate pedagogy is therefore a prior analysis of the relevant socio-political contexts, and in particular of the role of hegemonic positioning in determining speakers' and hearers' appraisal systems and the reflection of these in discourse commodification. Well, of course, once it's put in those terms the logic is pretty well inescapable. When Maggie had finished we were all wildly excited, and in no doubt at all about what direction we need to take. (Apart from Richard, who kept saying 'What about grammar?' He's a lovely guy, but that sort of thing mustn't be encouraged.) So the big question in all our minds now is: how can we best put all this across to the 45 Mexican secondary-school teachers who are coming for a two-week intensive on methodology next Monday? An interesting challenge! I'll keep you posted.

Love, and happy tangoing.

Pauline

© Michael Swan 2017