OBSOLESCENCE AND THE E-LEARNING ELEMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHING AND ACQUIRING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract: *The "lifespan" of a textbooks is dependent on a wide range of factors-of linguistic, social, psychological, technological and even political nature. These factors have implications in the selling process, in the socio-cultural impact, as well as in the erosion of a textbook.*
The e-learning element is the latest feature added to the process of teaching and acquiring foreign languages. However, it seems to be the subject of high-speed changes and reshaping. These complex phenomena are in connection with the rapid technological progress and evolution of the society itself. Hence some challenging questions arise: how should traditional way of learning blend with these new trends and how could the obsolescence factor affecting both textbooks and e-learning be best estimated and dealt with?

Keywords: *e-learning, ELT,textbook analysis*

1. Any textbook comes into being, lives for some time and finally passes away

1.1. The lifespan of any textbook is limited to some extent. Both contents and graphics are perishable. Designed for teaching and learning purposes, any textbook is bound to become obsolete in the end. The viability of a textbook is in close connection with its usage - after this it becomes outdated. Quality is a dynamic feature constantly affected by the passage of time.

1.2. Language textbooks tailored for teaching and learning purposes are, in our opinion, a special kind of educational outcome. The market provides at least two types of products: school textbooks and independent methods, which are not restricted in any way by official curricula. Despite the fact that both these products are vulnerable and subject to change, school textbooks are the ones primarily altered by educational policies.

1.2.1. We will focus solely on those textbooks addressed to a public that is willing (not forced) to learn foreign languages. Regardless of the age group it targets (for instance, children, teenagers, adults) or their degree of proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced), such a textbook has to be accepted; it cannot be imposed. Consequently, its potential beneficiary can be extrapolated beyond borders, but not beyond time.

1.2.2. Also, we should specify that by foreign language textbook (called FLT from this point forward) we mean the entire educational package published under the same title. It usually includes several printed volumes for class use (and it usually covers the entire range of proficiency degrees:

beginner / intermediate / advanced), accompanied by corresponding student books, as well as by audio / video / multimedia support, and, more recently, by an e-learning segment (offline / online).

1.3. Nowadays, the evolution of the e-learning component in the domain of foreign languages is a highly widespread trend. Consequently, popular publishing houses as well as foreign languages institutes have invested in developing their educational software. Controversies have arisen, nonetheless, as regards the cost-efficiency ratio in using the e-learning element within the field of languages.

1.3.1. Computer assisted learning is not habitually used as a single method, but in combination with traditional courses. This symbiosis is still largely embraced. Linguists and researchers have so far concluded that in the process of learning a foreign language, the teacher and face-to-face interaction are essential- especially when it comes to developing speaking skills. The e-learning component has fully proved its viability, however, with respect to improving reading, listening and writing skills.

1.3.2. It seems that trends from the 2000s –when different trials of entirely replacing traditional methods with e-learning were carried out –have lately been cast aside.(Probably the peak of this trend was reached in 2005 when the majority of students expressed their desire for distance-learning courses. Statistics show that subsequently face-to-face learning has regained popularity).

1.3.3. At present most methodologists acknowledge the importance of the e-learning component in the field of teaching and learning languages. Some even claim that we are witnessing a real *e-offensive*, which should be rationally managed and smoothly blended in the educational process.

1.4. Books are goods and thus subject to market laws.
The need to publish a new FLT is dictated by circumstance, by both linguistic and social factors.

2. The quality of a FLT is appreciated according to shape and content, its profitability is judged based on its market success, and its feasibility – based on the time of usage. A good FLT corresponds to a scientific and practical assessment at the time of its publishing.

2.1. An analysis of the quality parameters focuses chiefly on content. The content-related elements can be summarized as follows:

2.1.1. Delimitation of the public. (The adaptation of content based on age group / language level / and/or geographic region).

2.1.2. Definition of objectives (Finding the right balance between content and applications with the purpose of supporting the learning process. For instance: the promotion of a foreign language exam organized according to current standards and methodologies: TOEFL, DELF ZDaF or ALCPT, CEF; STANAG 6001 etc. – or, for higher levels, the focus on a professional sector).

2.1.3. The quantity and the quality of the mediated information. The information has to be relevant and sufficient both lexically and in terms of language facts. Thus, a FLT has to display a current language stage, as close as possible to authentic speech.

2.1.3.1. For this purpose, the selected texts should dwell on topics from today's world, both modern and interesting

2.1.3.2. The language facts (morphology and syntax) will present the current stage of the language and, possibly, its trends (for instance: simplification, abbreviation, omission, acceptance etc.).

2.1.4. Organizing the displayed information.

The criteria according to which the didactic material is structured are applied to several levels:

- to the method in its entirety
- to the volume – so it would make up a whole, with a beginning and an end
- to the didactic unit – that would correlate as natural as possible the vocabulary and the grammar with the purpose of transmitting enough knowledge
- to the learning sequences – focusing on correlating the theory with the practice

2.1.5. Keeping the activities in balance.

- Various types of exercises that would develop both the adequate usage of vocabulary and the application of grammar rules
- Various types of exercises that would equally develop the receptive and productive skills

2.1.6. The consistency of the didactic method.

- The coherence of a communication-based, intercultural etc. approach
- The activation of convergent learning strategies meant to reach the objective set forth
- The coherence of language production. (Avoiding redundancies and omissions in the method as a whole)
- Keeping an adequate language progression rate (it is recommended that abruptness and lingering should be avoided. This is easier to do in the case of a FLT built on contrasts and designed for a restricted mono-linguistic public. However this is hardly achievable when the targeted audience is multinational, because the rate of language progression is perceived subjectively, especially depending on the difference between the native language and the foreign language, but also on the subject's language experience, education and abilities etc.).

2.1.7. These factors have been considered to be of major importance in appreciating the quality of an FLT; however, this does not rule out the existence of other pertinent criteria from the FLT analysis.

2.2. It should be noted that these are formulated especially from the beneficiary's perspective (i.e. the individual who wants to learn a foreign language). By contrast, we shall present the form parameters which are mainly linguistic. Briefly, a FLT has to be appealing and easy to use.

2.2.1. A FLT should remain within a decent price range, so it would be available for as many people as possible.

2.2.1.1. Here we believe it is necessary to suggest that a student willing (and not obliged) to learn a foreign language will choose and buy the textbook (after gathering information beforehand). Consequently, the specific situations in which the institution organizing the course makes available the didactic material for the student, are not the topic of this discussion, because, in this case, they are given (and not freely chosen).

2.2.1.2. Let us not forget that buying a FLT means buying the entire educational package, corresponding to a course module. (As we have already mentioned, it includes: the student's textbook / the student's activity book / an audio CD / a multimedia CD / and/or an e-learning portal account / and/or a book with drills and standard tests).

2.2.1.3. Presently, a language course cannot be designed without taking into consideration the e-learning component, which gives flexibility and individuality to the process. Integrating the on-line element in the creation of a course requires a new way of thinking and organizing the curricula in order to match the new methods applied. To effectively use the e-learning tools, a previous analysis is required with respect to both individual needs and educational objectives. By developing the e-learning component in the above mentioned field, producers attempt to meet the market demands. This new approach impacts profoundly upon the evolution of FLT's and cannot be considered as a mere fleeting trend.

2.2.2. A FLT should be appealing.

A book's aesthetics plays an important psychological part from two viewpoints: it favours the sales and eases access to the information it contains.

Usually, a FLT is designed and drafted according to high-quality graphic standards

- The layout has to be pleasant and ease learning
- The font and background colors are meant to help the eyes focus on some specific information, depending on its importance and its relation with the whole.
- The choice of font enhances the impact of the text. (For instance: different fonts for different types of text: reading, explanation, example, instruction, application, model etc.)
- The choice, size and position of images supports the linguistic information (For instance: the adequate usage of various types of images: photos, drawings, sketches, diagrams etc.)
- Using distinctive symbols (or other visual marks) for distinct activities structures the learning process. (for instance: the distinct marking of pronunciation / listening / dictation / directed writing activities etc.)

2.2.3. By analogy with the printed materials (used as reference), we will review some parameters of the "technological" segment.

- For the audio materials: Text relevance / Text length / Recording quality / Recording rate / Voice tone and accent etc.
- For multimedia materials: The relevance of applications / Available and autonomous applications / Inter-reference structure / Program quality / The type of correction/explanation / The method of assessing/monitoring/counting etc.
- For e-learning materials: Available and complex platforms/ Interactivity/ The relevance of applications/ Efficient monitoring/ The type of internal and external links/ Updating content/ methods

2.2.4. This discussion will not take into account the aspects that depend on the editorial policy regarding information protection and copyright, such as:

- A publishing house will print several pages in color font on a color background to prevent unauthorized black and white copying
- The producer will apply copy protection on the audio/video
- The online resources provider will restrict access based on password-protected accounts, with limited availability

3. Assuming that a FLT fulfills all these criteria upon its publishing and that it reaches the expected commercial and didactic performance, it will nevertheless become obsolete. Almost all the mentioned factors contribute to limiting its life duration. Should we rank them by their impact on the FLT's quality of being up-to-date / modern, we would notice that it is not the language-related aspects which form the majority.

3.1. The novelty brought by a FLT is endangered mainly by technological progress. It can be visible in a FLT under two aspects.

3.1.1. The way a FLT looks is updated based on the latest developments in the society with an impact on the production of didactic material. A marketable FLT has to keep up with technology. This way it will be more efficient in meeting the expectations of a public who makes use (and savours) technological progress in daily life. (The trend is extending to teenagers and other age groups.)

3.1.2. The content of a FLT has to include information that would reflect new realities. Thus the themes of the texts will be replaced by up-to-date topics. Since the surrounding reality is changing at an astounding pace, the lifespan of such texts is getting shorter and shorter. (For instance: No more than a few years ago, CRT monitors, floppy disks and pagers used to be state-of-the-art products).

3.1.3.   Of course, describing a new reality means using specific vocabulary that would designate new objects and activities. Just like the gadgets, the words used to nominate them appear and disappear from the vocabulary of a language and from textbooks, if they have been included in texts.

3.1.4.   As a partial conclusion: Technological progress determines mainly lexical changes in the language (e.g. the emerging of new words / syntagms /expressions/ specializations of meaning/changes of meaning, etc.) but it does not affect the profound structure of a language.

3.2.   A FLT is also vulnerable to certain social changes originating from politics.

3.2.1.   Those texts containing information on facts which have become historical will be considered anachronistic. Geopolitics influences the replacement of texts with up-to-date information. A FLT will have to take into account the appearance of new states on the world map, the changes inside alliances, changes of political regimes, areas and types of armed conflicts etc.

3.2.2. This should also include the changes in attitude towards certain sensitive issues or taboos – the so-called political correctness, acceptance, tolerance or interculturality.

3.2.3. Of course, from this viewpoint, the degree of perishability of a FLT is directly proportional with the linguistic level, thus the occurrence of wide interest topics, with long-term validity, is more frequent at an incipient level and decreases as the relevant texts for language facts are becoming more diverse and specialized. Nevertheless, the perishability of this kind of information cannot be ignored at the elementary level either. (e.g. the introduction of the Euro, the breakup of Yugoslavia, the unification of Germany, the relocation of the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany etc.)

3.2.4. The vulnerabilities of a FLT are more evident at the level of the information provided and less at the linguistic level.

3.2.5. A relevant example of high perishability is represented by that segment of FLT's specialized in a certain restrictive professional domain (belonging of course to the high proficiency level in a foreign language). The closer to politics the approached topic, the more susceptible to change it is, and, consequently, more limited in time.

3.2.6. Now time has come for a short digression into the military domain. Teaching military terms during the foreign language classes organized by military educational institutions implies the constant updating of information with the purpose of supporting the students. The domain's wide scope requires extensive research, so the teachers should be up to date as much as possible with the regulations and terms in use, as well as with recent realities and events. The rapid dynamics of changes often calls for the spontaneous insertion in a course of texts about the latest news or press releases when the textbooks cannot keep up with the events.

3.3.   Another important aspect which influences the structure of a FLT is the didactical method which defines the type of learning.

3.3.1.   Without going into historical details on the development of foreign language teaching, we would like to mention the transition from the traditional learning process, centered on the teacher, to the interactive one, centered on the student and characterized by communication techniques.
This trend of the mediation and learning method has profoundly changed the FLT's.

3.3.2. Thus the objectives have been reformulated and the focus was shifted towards the development of productive skills

3.3.3. Translation skills have been ignored to the state of almost sinking into oblivion

3.3.4. The presentation of grammar is less dense, having gone from bulky, exhaustive lessons to language tips which present the language facts in a nutshell, without pretentious metalanguage, but with immediate applicability. (Naturally, this "impressionistic" way of presenting grammar still gets much criticism from both teachers and students – advocates of more rigorous methods of learning foreign languages. There is also criticism from languages with a rich system of word inflexion, which cannot be learned without knowing some complex paradigms.)

3.3.5. The application activities are now more diverse, having evolved from drills to interactive exercises which require initiative and creativity, stimulating the freedom of expression.

3.3.6. The "technological" component brought along new types of applications which improved learning strategies. The "tools and products" widely known as e-learning add to the flexibility and individuality of the learning process. By integrating this element in the development of a FLT, every beneficiary will ultimately reach a high level of freedom as regards learning techniques and time management, to best fit individual objectives and preferences.

3.4. Also, a FLT becomes obsolete when it depends too much on a certain assessment procedure.

3.4.1. As a guarantee of its market value, currently, most FLT's publishers ostentatiously display on the cover the level correspondence with an assessment standard in use. Thus, currently, the CEF descriptors are in fashion, and many FLT's feature on their cover: A1 / A2 /B1 /B2 / C1, and even sub-levels: A1.1 / A1.2, etc.

It's extremely useful for a student to be able to assess his language learning process based on a defined, widely accepted scale of detailed descriptors. His progress is undoubtedly confirmed by his advancing to a higher level.

3.4.2. The shortcoming of this strict structuring does not lie in the theoretic discourse, based on science, but in the practice of some FLT's publishers who adapt the themes and the applications to the types of items found in assessment tests from well-known examining institutions. More precisely, they turn the learning methods into practice textbooks, substituting the objective of knowing how to communicate in a foreign language with the pseudo-objective of promoting the foreign language exam.

In such a FLT the types of applications are strictly formulated and calibrated following the pattern of tests applied in various institutions, often ignoring the criteria of usefulness and relevance. (e.g.: Since the MC ¼ exercises are quite frequent in tests, they are included by the respective FLT in the learning and not in the review stage, risking a low complexity level or the occurrence of elements which have not been introduced.)

3.4.3. We should mention that this discussion does not refer to the FLT's which display impressive logos for marketing reasons, most of them unjustified, nor to the FLT's which in fact only represent an embellishment of older concepts in a bid to keep up with the trends.

3.5. Empirically it can be stated that the linguistic factor in a FLT is the most resilient to change compared to the whole package, which determines its presentation. Language is without a doubt a living organism, undergoing perpetual change. However, at the level of the basic word stock the changes are not that obvious as they are in the jargon or slang categories – optionally included in the FLT's at higher levels.

3.5.1. Thus, the vocabulary has to be revised from the viewpoint of the topics. The direction and way in which it evolves has been discussed in the chapter on the perishability of information. Another aspect would be the introduction of neologisms and/or recent loanwords in the FLT's.

3.52. Grammar, which constitutes the basis of a language, turns out to be the most inertial element of the above mentioned factors.

3.5.3. Indeed all live languages tend towards simplification and the regularization of paradigms.

It is well-known that a language learned from books (especially in an external environment of the aquarium type) will only partially resemble live, authentic street talk. A dose of artificiality (and, often, of obsolete pedantry) will almost always distinguish the foreign from the native speaker.

3.5.4. Probably dreading hypercorrectness, textbook authors have introduced in FLT's colloquial forms which used to be considered grammatically incorrect. (The Romanian language textbook for foreigners introduced the popular future forms: "o să scriu".)
When it comes to grammar, it can be safely stated that its prevalence and the way it is presented in the FLT's have changed, a phenomenon conditioned by the trend of the foreign language didactics (as it has already been mentioned).

3.6. From the viewpoint of the FLT designer, these would probably be the order of the factors determining him to come up with a new product on the market. On the contrary, from the user's point of view, the factors should be mentioned in the reversed order. For a student, the language-related aspect is certainly the most important. Only at declamatory level , because in reality none of those who want to learn a foreign language would pay for an unappealing and old-fashioned textbook. Finally, a student generally uses only one FLT for a certain level because after completing the textbook, he is supposed to have acquired the respective level of proficiency. Without modesty, the only one who can make pertinent diachronic judgments on this issue is the experienced language teacher who can judge why the textbooks become obsolete.

4. Instead of a conclusion, we should say that the obsolescence of FLT's is a natural and unavoidable phenomenon. And not a new one either. However, its rate seems to have accelerated lately.

4.1. In this paper we have argued in favour of the e-learning element within the domain of teaching and acquiring languages, but also pointed to its built-in obsolescence. We have refrained from drastic assumptions such as whether on-line learning will become the exclusive method in learning a foreign language or it will succefully accompany the traditional modus operandi- considering such conclusions beyond the scope of our analysis.

A FLT is a perishable merchandise. A FLT is a book of knowledge. A book is born, lives and dies.

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