Preface

The pages which follow have two distinct functions. They encapsulate my thoughts about foreign language teaching as they have developed in the last decade and more whilst I have been teaching French and German to English comprehensive school pupils and subsequently training others to do so. In this respect these pages are retrospective and reflect my dissatisfaction with some changes in emphasis in foreign language teaching in what have nonetheless been twenty years of genuine progress. Foreign language teaching is, both in my experience as learner and teacher and in my pedagogic philosophy, as education, an emancipation from the confines of one’s native habitat and culture; the current emphasis on language teaching as skill training is apt to lose that from sight.

This book is also exploratory and prospective. It includes some of my efforts to clarify how the educational value of foreign language teaching can be made more available and accessible to learners and teachers alike. It explores some theoretical avenues and reports some empirical investigation of how learners can be given the opportunity and encouragement to escape from their own habitat and culture, however briefly and in full acceptance that they will return to it—but with a new perception of it and themselves. For the cultural emancipation of language learning is an experience whose complexity is far from exhausted by reference to grammar, semantics, visits to foreign countries, reading foreign literature, studying foreign political systems, social issues and historical events. It is all these intellectual endeavours and much more. It is the emotional experience of abandoning one’s language in the first few lessons of foreign language learning, of saying goodbye to home and country on the first visit abroad, of becoming enamoured of exotic places, food, people—and perhaps one special person—however near or distant the destination might be from one’s native frontiers. I believe that insufficient attention is paid by teachers and researchers to all of this and have written this book as part of my efforts to examine foreign language learning as education in its many-faceted complexity.
The book has been written contemporaneously and, in many of its aspects, integrally with an empirical research project financed by the Economic and Social Research Council. One chapter is written jointly with two of my colleagues on that project, Dr Veronica Esarte-Sarries and Ms Susan Taylor, who have both contributed more to this book than the chapter which bears their names; I am grateful to them both for listening and commenting in many conversations. The project, ‘The effects of language teaching on young people’s perceptions of other cultures’, was planned by Dr Patricia Allatt and myself. To Dr Allatt, who worked on the project for one year full-time and as consultant for the following two years, I owe a great debt of intellectual gratitude.

In addition to this theoretical and empirical work within our national and regional confines, I believe that work on language learning should itself break through the paradoxical tendency of language teachers and researchers—particularly in Britain—to concern themselves only with their own national scene. To this end I have sought to establish co-operative work with other researchers in Western Europe, initially through an international symposium on cultural studies in language teaching in Durham in 1986 (financed by the Economic and Social Research Council and the Deutsche Forschungsgesellschaft). Through this I have of course benefited intellectually and personally and owe much to all the members of that symposium, but particularly to Dieter Buttjes who was joint organiser. The papers from that symposium are part of the context for this book. A final piece in the contextual jigsaw is an as yet pilot project of research into the experience of residence abroad for university-level students of foreign languages. These are the most advanced learners for whom the emancipatory value of language learning might be supposed most developed and complex. Residence abroad as part of their study—in the vast majority of cases an obligatory part of their course—might be assumed to be the apogee of that education, which many will pass on to other learners when they themselves become teachers. This research is being carried out by Dr Geof Aired and myself at Durham University.

With all this I want simply to say that a complex issue demands complex investigation and the following pages are simply one aspect to be seen in a larger context.

No book is written without a secretary, an editor and a publisher. All three—Mrs Doreen Wilson, Mr Derrick Sharp and Mr Mike Grover—have contributed not only their professional expertise but also their personal interest, and I am particularly grateful to my editor and publisher for accepting a manuscript which treads none of the beaten tracks of language teaching literature.
No book is written without its being an expression of the writer's self, whether it be an academic thesis or a collection of lyric poetry. This one is no exception. The reader will guess that my concern with foreign language learning as education reflects my own education in school, college, among friends in foreign countries and in my own bilingual family. The journey from a council estate in Dewsbury to the university in Durham was further than the 100 miles which separate them.

Michael Byram
Cosse en Champagne
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