Transitioning as a language act

Cathy Hampton[1]

> "The world is but a perpetual see-saw. […] I cannot fix my subject. He is always restless, and reels with a natural intoxication. I catch him here, as he is at the moment when I turn my attention to him. I do not portray his being; I portray his passage; not a passage from one age to another […] but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must suit my story to the hour, for soon I may change, not only by chance but also by intention" (Montaigne, 1588/1958, On Repentance, *Essays* III, 2, p. 235).

This musing on perpetual change from the plague-swept and war-torn France of the late sixteenth century seems to capture, across time, the new mindset that Covid-19 has engendered in all of us. Montaigne (1588/1958) is talking about the very essence of transition: the movement from one state to another. What is encouraging for us is the final line of the quote: "I may change, not only by chance but also by intention". The papers in this volume reflect the positive choice to be in transition, seen as both an engaged approach to being a linguist at a time when the discipline urgently needs re-orientation, and as a fundamental, 'signature' quality of foreign language learning itself, with its see-saw, back-and-forth motion across cultures and forms (Ham & Schueller, 2012). They also tackle the current defining topics in 21st century higher education: technology enhanced learning, employability, wellbeing, engagement, and innovation. This landscape presents its own challenges, as far as facilitating transition is concerned.

Brunila and Lundahl (2020), in *Youth on the move: tendencies and tensions in youth policies and practices*, note that "the discourses on youth transitions do not simply describe young adults but create them, not only as objects but also

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as subjects, due to the way in which they can also influence the individual's sense of self" (p. 3). Let us begin, then, by seeking to understand the varied pictures of transitioning presented to higher education students at the general level. In the run into the new academic year, journalism tends to have recourse to a vocabulary of endurance: how to 'survive' Freshers Week, how to 'cope' with university. At the more positive end of the spectrum, we have the 'how to get the most out of …', 'Top Ten list of things to do in …'. Incoming students have to position themselves emotionally and socially within the higher education experience when they cross its threshold, and we know that the marketised dimension to university education can add pressure to find a productive way through. Wellbeing and resilience feature heavily in the current discourse, as do employability and agency. Indeed, as Brunila and Lundahl observe, these elements can come into conflict, with students depicted as vulnerable and yet also encouraged to be autonomous and self-propelled. In turn, university teachers often feel enjoined to present a somewhat linear picture of the transition process, from secondary school to a degree leading to 'employability' and to a set of attributes that straightforwardly respond to workplace needs.

This big picture of seamless transition is both problematic and insufficient. Meehan and Howells (2019) argue that new students should be taught that transitioning is a process rather than an event, or series of events. Gravett and Winstone (2019), who asked participants to complete stories about imaginary students at various transitional stages in their university lives, report findings suggesting that "a conception of transition as inherently troublesome and uncomfortable", sitting "in direct contrast to notions of seeking smooth, comfortable, transitions […] offers the potential to see the value of emotional destabilisation and indeterminacy, the generative possibilities that risk, uncertainty and change can create, so that transition is viewed as 'a necessary phase of change and becoming'" (p. 9). In preference to a generalising narrative, these researchers stress the importance of bringing the personal and uncertain into the classroom, together with a "relational core" that "may lead to anyone learning anything", including the teacher (Brunila & Lundahl, 2020, p. 177). Replacing an "individual knowledge-minded approach" to progression (Shi-xu, 2001, in Dervin, 2016, p. 72) with something inherently more unstable means

presenting students with real-world scenarios, drawing on personal experience, and making meaning through negotiation and discussion. Our papers recognise and attest to this need. In his keynote paper, **Koglbauer** stresses the negative impact on Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) of past missed opportunities for conversation, causing mismatches between education policy and the experience of MFL teachers. He reminds us that Covid has revealed how much more we need to take account of students' living environments in order to understand how effectively they can learn. **Morel-Lab**'s and **Zaher & Kassem**'s papers show the benefits of projects that make students storytellers (narrators of their own transitions); **Jochum-Critchley**; **Bavendiek**; and **Guidarelli, Moore, & Peligra** emphasise the progress that can take place when students recognise that they occupy a position of uncertainty between languages and are helped to find the confidence to take risks. **Polisca, Stollhans, Bardot, & Rollet**; **Li**; **Toapanta**; and **Rodríguez Oitavén** consider design changes to teaching and learning formats and spaces that will facilitate more holistic metacognitive and discursive approaches to language learning.

1. Transition as a feature of MFL

It is impossible to separate the ambitions and actions to facilitate transitions evidenced in our papers from the fact that MFL study is a discipline that has transition at its heart. Dörnyei and Ryan (2015) describe language learning as "a dynamically evolving relationship between learner and context" (p. 85). Kramsch (1993) notes that "language study [is] an initiation into a kind of social practice that is at the boundary of two or more cultures... a linguistic reality that is born from the L1 speech environment of the learners and the social environment of the L2 native speakers, but is a third culture in its own right" (in Chick, Haynie, & Gurung, 2012, p. 9). So language learners discover, in the process of intensive language learning and working on other aspects of culture, that they occupy a space betwixt and between their own culture and the Target Language (TL) culture. We would like them to understand that this middle space is labile, and that learning requires investment of the self in the process (pragmatically, in terms of organising time, being rigorous, and

so forth, but also in terms of being ready to turn personal experiences into language through task-based learning.) Our papers show this process in action in various ways. With the help of technology, some teachers drop their students into TL cultural contexts, and scaffold activities that allow them to develop linguistic confidence in that space. **Jochum-Critchley**'s German students plan and run a German film evening as a public engagement event. Initially run live, **Jochum-Critchley** describes how the event has been enhanced by capturing a broader online audience. **Guidarelli et al.**'s *Newcastle Calls* project has intermediate students interview the Italian Antarctic survey team and reflect on their findings. In both cases students are given agency to direct the shape and sharing of real, new knowledge, and because they are doing this in the TL, they embrace their positions as multilingual subjects occupying Kramsch's (1993) third space, and are energised when they find that communication can function very well there.

Morel-Lab's French language programme for refugees seeking to access higher level education at the University of Lyon 2 follows Dervin's (2016) process-centred understanding of intercultural learning, whereby "instability [is placed] at the centre of any intercultural activity: instability of identifications, instability of discourses of culture, instability of power relations, instability of feelings towards each other, and so on" (p. 82). **Morel-Lab** shows how vital this non-hierarchical, flexible approach is with students whose confidence has been damaged not simply through a lack of knowledge of French language and culture, but also by the traumas they have suffered. Her programme involves competency-based work and real-world resources, including going out to visit an exhibition together (Morel-Lab, 2022, p. 29, this volume). Having examined objects given meaning by being on public display, students are asked to choose their own artefact and tell the story of why they have selected it. She notes that students feel more liberated to speak in this activity compared to a straightforward linguistic exercise because their focus is on emotion and creativity, rather than language production.

Transitioning between identities is a challenge many of our students encounter through a Residence Abroad (RA), which Ham and Schueller (2012) have called

"a ludic, improvisational space, a theatre where new identities are temporarily assumed" (p. 6). If all goes well, with time students gain "a profound sense of the perplexing interdependence and fluidity of their own identity" (Ham & Schueller, 2012, p. 6). As teachers, we know this experience to be so ripe with transformational potential that we wish to prepare them well for it and to acknowledge their new-found cultural expertise when they return. **Pérez-Nieto & Llop Naya**'s paper, 'Task-based projects for transition from university to placements abroad', gives us a detailed overview of an intermediate (second-year) language programme that gives an explicit RA focus to all key skills covered. All tasks problematise intercultural communication, and are associated with skills labelled academic, sociocultural, or professional, so that students are made metacognitively aware of the different dimensions of knowledge that will boost the RA experience. Via a scaffolded programme introducing concepts of cultural mediation alongside language, they develop skills to reflect actively on these through the creation of a vlog and a questionnaire. If this project leads students towards engaged learning, **Zaher and Kassem**'s project for final-year students of Arabic draws on the fruits of it, by harnessing the local expertise these students acquired on their RA. The Modern Standard Arabic taught in universities is never truly representative of the dialects used in the Arab-speaking world, so these students are tasked with creating country-specific videos on culture and spoken language for outgoing students, in an exercise that endorses the unique value of lived experience and challenges students to apply it empathetically on behalf of others.

This empathetic movement between cultures and languages is also a powerful *textual* experience in the case of translation. Williams (2006) notes that "reading, translating, and writing teach us to know ourselves to be in transition" (p. 36); the term mediation, often used in translation studies, emphasises the importance of cultural contextual knowledge and self-awareness in the act of translating (Liddicoat, 2016). The excitement of translation for students and teachers is that this movement between cultures is tangible, and even a small amount of simple translation theory allows students to think meta-reflexively about how they move between two spaces. As some of our papers note (**Polisca et al.**; **Li**), this excitement has been tempered in our experience of teaching and

assessing online, where the uninformed (and perhaps unacknowledged) use of machine translation by students has presented MFL teachers with problems of academic integrity, but several papers present creative solutions to this issue. **Polisca et al.** suggest that MFL practitioners draw on The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages 2018 mediation objectives, which emphasise the agentic role of the language learner. We see students discover this agency in **Bavendiek**'s paper 'Using machine translation as parallel text to access literature for modern language learning', which shows that even with fairly novice learners, machine translation can be employed critically as a tool for language progression and transcultural awareness. **Bavendiek** provides her intermediate students with machine translations of songs alongside the TL originals, both to speed up the reading process and to engage the students' critical interest: can they spot weaknesses in the machine translations? Where do these weaknesses stem from? Students' confidence is boosted when they discover that their own transcultural understanding trumps the machine, and this makes clear to them the purpose of personal, human interventions in the process. In her paper on the Newcastle 'Real Translation' project, **Uribe de Kellett** describes a longstanding extra-curricular project in which students are engaged to translate for local charities, discovering not only their agency as linguists, but also their social and moral agency (they must become effective practitioners in terms of determining and negotiating roles, establishing deadlines, and responding dynamically to real-world needs). As well as transitioning between cultures themselves, these students experience pivotal issues in the lives of other communities.

2. Building spaces for student agency

While task- and project-based learning features in many papers, other contributions examine broader methodological and systemic changes (at programme or cohort level) that look for ways to capitalise on the learning that emerges when students are given agency to manage transitions. **Toapanta**'s paper reminds us that the skill of listening is often not explicitly taught and sets out a case study of Spanish beginner learners given scaffolded group

tasks promoting meta-reflection on the challenges of listening, leading to enhanced performance and a readiness to manage difficulty through frank collaboration. On a larger scale, the 'Oxford to the world' online programme at the University of Oxford Language Centre, initiated pre-pandemic in 2019, makes use of an 'interactive multi-modal learning environment' in its fully online asynchronous programme of learning for advanced Spanish, French and German learners (entirely replacing previous face-to-face modules). **Rodríguez Oitavén** describes the benefits of a flexible online setting in which language centre students can set their own pace for covering scaffolded key skills activities and are invited to compare notes on their different linguistic backgrounds and consequent learning approaches via the non-threatening space of online fora. Students are further supported by targeted synchronous meetings with teachers. Such is the success of this blended approach that an adapted beginners programme has now been developed.

3. Practitioners in transition?

So far, this introduction has looked at the experience of transition largely from the perspective of the learner, but we teachers are also caught up in the mutability of current circumstances, with major change intensified by the pandemic, but already nascent in our post-Brexit, techno-communicative world. To this context we must add the precarity of UK language education. This volume can, we hope, inspire practitioners to further action, both by way of helpful practical examples of recent changes made to language teaching delivery formats, methods and assessments, and through exploration of the cultural, metacognitive, and affective awareness that our transition-focused discipline engenders in students. **Koglbauer** calls us to work more closely as a community of practitioners to ensure that these attributes are seen in the wider world by turning our curricula to the big questions of our day:

> "would this be also an opportunity to review to what extent the curriculum offer considers or reflects the global megatrends of climate change, technological advancement, accelerating urbanisation, global shifts

> in economic power, demography and social change (PWC, 2021), or the United Nations Global Goals for Sustainable Development (United Nations, 2020)? Is there also a wider institutional or sector-wide call for collaborations between universities that could lead to new innovative cross-disciplinary offers involving future employers on a consistent basis rather than just in small-scale pilot projects?" (Koglbauer, 2022, p. 19, this volume)

Our volume is a window onto a range of small-scale projects revealing a 21st century MFL landscape that has "wider and more complex aims than simple language acquisition, including criticality, intercultural communication and empathy, creativity and innovation, independence, team working, ethics and emotional intelligence" (Hall, 2020, quoted by Bavendiek, 2022, p. 60, this volume). It is hoped that it will provide inspiration for broader conversations that could help us transition our sector onto a more stable footing.

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