**Language learning in the year 2026**

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*This prediction of the future was written as a development of impromptu comments I made in an article published in the IATEFL Newsletter (Issue Nº 138, 1987) and reworked for the LAURELS Newsletter (Brazil) in 1996.*

The increasing trend towards specialisation in language teaching is likely to make the general, non-specific course book redundant or at least relegated to a few TENOR (Teaching English for No Obvious Reason) situations. The idea of a one-size-fits-all course book, to be sold globally with no regard to the language difficulties - syntactic, semantic, lexical, morphological and phonological - brought to the learning process from the structure of the learner's first language will long have been abandoned in favour of a learner-specific approach, customised for each and every learner.

Most ESP situations have in common that they need to match a profile - consisting of an analysis of the learner's needs and an assessment of his current language ability in different skill areas - with a methodology and set of materials that will best service these requirements.

The conventional way of doing this is very time consuming as there is often a large number of variables to take into account and many teachers are unable to find the time or to handle the enormous volume of data involved. This is where we turn to man's faithful and patient friend, the computer.

Journey with me, not into the dim and distant past but twenty-five years into the bright and beckoning future. Sit with me as I ask my terminal to download the latest version of OLFIETS, the *Oxmann and Longbridge Fully Integrated English Teaching System*. I say 'ask', because VR (Voice Recognition) software is now an everyday reality and the 'computer' of the year 2031 is far from the primitive box we knew back at the Millennium.

OLFIETS boots in nanoseconds (it resides of course on the Net, to which we are permanently hardwired, and not in our computer's hard disk) and asks us what kind of service we require. We ask for a standard needs analysis form which we can either print, save to disk or work on in real time. Cost is no longer a factor here - hook-up time has long been free - but it may be convenient to download the form template to our local net - it can always be uploaded again when complete.

This Needs Analysis form can be as simple or as complex as we require, covering every language situation imaginable (and many unimaginable back in 1999).  The one we have just downloaded comes with three sets of questions: for the student, for the teacher and in this case for the student's employers who are underwriting the cost of his classes. By analysing these questions and posing a few more the computer gets together a fairly comprehensive profile of why the student wants to learn, which skills he requires, what expectations his employers have of him, etc. (For 'he' please read 's/he' all through if required).

The student is then required to perform a series of aptitude tests. Language learning psychologists in 2026 not only recognise that there are many different kinds of learner but have successfully isolated strategies that are particularly suitable for these learner types and this information will also be useful in assembling the 'course'.

Now the student's current language ability needs to be assessed. Through downloaded audio and video clips we can test his/her listening comprehension and discrimination. Because we have already given the computer information about his/her L1 background the computer can provide questions suitable for a speaker of River Plate Spanish (merely a question of phonetic parameters after all) which will quickly highlight any problems of phonetic discrimination and the computer's advanced VR abilities also enable it to isolate problems in the production of sounds and prosodic features which will later be taken into account when designing the course.

Reading skills, grammar and vocabulary can be evaluated by multiple matching, multiple choice and cloze tests, etc., and the teacher can assess oral communication skills and writing skills by reference to a series of standardised templates (although many claim that the computer is more reliable than the teacher nowadays for these diagnoses).

All this information on present language ability is keyboarded or dictated into our desktop terminal and uploaded to OLFIETS and after the hint of a pensive hum we are asked a few more questions of a more practical nature, dealing with timetables, duration, frequencies, acceptable subject areas and those deemed unsuitable, examination requirements, equipment available, etc. These are quickly punched back in and we have time for a brief stretch

while our server digs deep across the networks, trawling the relevant data bases and item banks where every bit of teaching material ever produced is stored and classified, and comes back with a healthy 'ping' asking if we want to burn out the 'course' onto CD ROM, view it on screen, store it or send it (electronically) anywhere else.

We decide to keep it on a 200 Gb Jazz side bay on our own local network, immediately accessible to our user terminals, where it is naturally kept under close watch from the Net which constantly monitors work done and produces regular reports. We also request OLFIETS to factor in a programmed learning option to interact with the practice material. This is a branching add-on which, on a wrong answer, gives the options of: 'another try', a grammar review or more examples. This works with reading, speaking and listening skills and handles translation impeccably - that nut has long been cracked - assessing writing is still proving problematic, however. *Plus ça change,* ... The programme also remembers 'errors' of all kinds for each individual user and recycles them systematically through subsequent practice material and progress evaluation.

And so on. The above outline is skimpy enough but it will serve to give the idea. And 2025 is probably a long guess for this. Except for Voice Recognition software - not generally available at present in a useable way - all the technology exists now on a smaller scale - the only difference is in the speed and volume of data transmission and the development of efficient user-friendly interfaces. Oh, yes, and a Net that doesn't act quite so precariously and capriciously !

It is easy to forget just how tight the exponential curve of white heat technology really is. My first computer (Spectrum 1982) had 32K RAM, all volatile. I replaced it in 1984 with the original Apple Mac, with 128K RAM and a 400K disk drive; Apple could have given it more but could not conceive of anyone needing more memory. I type this today (1999) on a Macintosh G3/275 with 128 Megabytes of RAM and a 4 Gigabyte Hard Disk, linked up to a local network with countless peripheral storage devices and other exotica. I have had it for two months and it is already obsolete, discontinued by its manufacturers. There is absolutely no reason to believe that the curve will not continue to tighten on itself.

In fact at home or in the school the move within a few years will probably - if it is not already - be away from computers that have vast storage capabilities. More likely, as the Internet becomes less unpredictable and precarious - and it will - all we shall need is a reasonably small keyboard box and a Net interface hooked up through a modem. A simple cable will connect this to various periphera (high resolution TV monitors, Jazz or ZIP transportable units, a mouse or joystick, a printer, a scanner, a feelie control unit, etc.) but all our software and unlimited storage will be where we can't do any harm to it, safe in cyberspace.

We may not even need to download software or files in the conventional sense, but will use the net as one big hard disk (and just how big is perhaps hard to imagine today). Future Systems (like Apple's much vaunted but non-appearing Copland) will be developed with twin or multi parallel processing units. Imagine the power of millions of CPUs scattered around cyberspace, sharing out the work in the most rational way possible.

And how do the teacher and the course writer fit in with all this ? With regard to teachers, let's remember one thing: computers and other multimedia devices in 2031 will still be unable to see that puzzled look on the student's face. Or will they ? As for course writers, someone has to produce all that material. The difference will be more with regard to what is written. Writers may not be producing 'courses' as such, rather they may produce modules to precise specifications, and possibly they will be working closer to technology than they can at present imagine.

Me, I'm unlikely to be around, so I guess I'll never know.