

# Supported access to modern foreign language lessons

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**“simply increasing the adult/pupil ratio in a classroom does not automatically lead to more effective provision”**

Teaching assistants (TAs) have become increasingly common in modern foreign language (MFL) classrooms. For some more experienced teachers of MFL, having the support of a TA may be a relatively new experience. For some TAs, supporting pupils and teachers in an MFL lesson may be an experience which poses challenges which they do not face in English or maths or geography, for example. The use of the target language by the teacher and pupils, and the TA's perceived level of competence in the target language are issues which do not arise in the same way in other subjects.

This article reports on a small-scale research project, based in West Yorkshire, which examined issues relating to good, collaborative practice between the MFL teacher and the TA. Lessons were observed and video-recorded, questionnaires were issued to teachers and TAs, and group interviews were conducted with pupils to provide as full a picture as was feasible.

It was found that collaborative practices between the teacher and TA had not been consciously developed but had evolved over the years in an *ad hoc* manner. Little or no time was available for joint and separate training, for joint pre-lesson preparation, discussion of the topic for today or agreement on an appropriate *modus operandi*. Is not this collaboration too important to be left to chance?

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years it has become increasingly common for teaching assistants (TAs)<sup>1</sup> to be present in schools. In 1997 there were 90000 support assistants working in mainstream schools (DfEE, 1997). Five years on, Howson (2002) reported a doubling in the numbers of Special Needs Support Staff since the Government's first year in office. This rise in numbers coincides with the move towards inclusion, with their contribution seen by some as playing a pivotal role in this development.

This increase in the numbers of TAs has been accompanied by modifications in the ways in which they are deployed. Historically, they most often provided support in the core subject areas or were linked to individual pupils. Current patterns of deployment of TAs vary, with many schools operating a 'mixed economy'. Common approaches include TAs attached to an individual learner, others linked to one or more departments or others to a year group with each of these associated with slightly different working practices. The range of

subjects that they support is much wider than previously when their work centred on English and maths. It is now more common to find them supporting in other curriculum areas, including modern foreign languages (MFL).

It is widely accepted, however, that simply increasing the adult/pupil ratio in a classroom does not automatically lead to more effective provision (De Vault *et al.*, 1977 cited in Lorenz, 1998). Jerwood suggests that teachers may feel

threatened by the presence of an additional adult; anxious about the possibility of their own competence being questioned; unsure of how to manage them in a positive way for the benefit of the pupils. (Jerwood, 1999: 127)

The subject knowledge of the TA may also be an important issue. MFL in particular offer a range of challenges, which may not be encountered in other subjects, such as use of the target language in classroom interaction or the managing of group- and pair-work. An effective TA is a confident TA and confidence has much to do with competence. TAs with foreign language competence are less easily found than those with knowledge of other subject areas. Is learning on the job or learning alongside the pupils enough?

The DfEE in *Working with Teaching Assistants: A good practice guide* (2000) also identified the management issues for both primary and secondary schools, commenting that:

The essence of the successful deployment of the TAs lies in understanding the nature of the support that they can provide. This can be divided into four strands:

- Support for the pupil – i.e. for all pupils – pupils with special educational needs (SEN) should be helped to work in the company of the others and often in tandem with them;
- Support for the teacher – i.e. routine tasks and assessment/group work;
- Support for the curriculum;
- Support for the school.

(DfEE, 2000: 8)

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The publication builds on this philosophy in chapters on Translating Policies into Practice; Professional Development for TAs; Effective Practice; The TA as Role Model; and Planning and the Sharing of Views.

Research on effective teacher-TA collaboration has identified a number of significant factors:

#### **Shared understanding of roles**

Parkin (2002: 20) reporting on the work of TAs in east London notes:

If your support staff have ill-defined duties such as ‘just another pair of hands’, resentment and lack of satisfaction could be building up.

Jerwood (1999) also sees the clarification of roles as the key to the effective deployment of TAs but linked this to the need for the enhancement in teachers’ classroom management skills.

#### **Teacher training**

Hastings (2001) suggests that teachers knowing, or not knowing, how best to deploy TAs is an issue for Initial Teacher Training. This remains an under-addressed aspect on PGCE and other courses of ITT:

Many teachers, particularly those new to the profession, don’t understand how best to use these extra adults. Some have only a sketchy idea of how to begin building support into the structure of their lessons. (Hastings, 2001: 25)

This view is shared by the NQTs, as illustrated by this comment:

Throughout four years of training, I was never given a single word of advice on how to handle teaching assistants or how to incorporate them into my work. It took me eighteen months before I was making really good use of them. (*op.cit.*)

The management of TAs has been the focus of several publications (Farrell *et al.*, 1999; Fox, 1998) though evidence provided in the course of the research reported in this article suggests that whilst the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO) may be familiar with these books, other colleagues are not.

#### **Training for teaching assistants**

Hancock *et al.* (2002), reporting on the primary school context, found that whilst training for TAs exists, it varies in its range and availability between local education authorities and schools. The financial implications for TAs, given their low pay and absence of payment for non-contact activities, were disturbing:

Many assistants were not paid for attending staff meetings or school training sessions. One in ten assistants had themselves paid for recent training. (Hancock *et al.*, 2002: 3)

#### **Career development**

Hancock *et al.* (2002) found that only one in five TAs is offered career development or is included in the school’s appraisal structure. They articulate

the need “for an appraisal system to review assistants’ performance and training requirements” (*op. cit.*, 8). Hancock reports that 93% of TAs confirmed their interest in participating in continuing professional development.

#### **Pupils’ perceptions of the roles**

In recent years, increased attention has been paid to the views of the learners with the revised *Code of Practice* (DFES, 2001), significantly strengthening their role. They will have their own experiences and perceptions of support provided by TAs. For example, Taylor (2002: 128), writing from the perspective of the pupil, states that:

A problem I have always found is that on many occasions an LSA (*learning support assistant*) becomes more like a teacher, making sure you do your work all the time, when sometimes not doing your work, but relaxing, chatting and messing around with your fellow students might be more productive in the long run.

Whilst the above factors apply to all settings and curriculum areas, it is arguable that some additional factors are specific to MFL teaching.

#### **Increased diversity amongst teaching groups**

Prior to the introduction of the National Curriculum in the early 90s, there was no statutory requirement for secondary-aged pupils with SEN to take a MFL. 1992 marked the beginning of the implementation of the statutory ‘Languages for All’ policy for pupils in the 11-16 age range. This requirement is no longer in place in light of the publication of *National Languages Strategy: Languages for All: Languages for Life* (DfES, 2003). Modern foreign languages are now optional at key stage 4. Nevertheless, schools have had to consider how to provide access to MFLs to a broader constituency of pupils than prior to 1992. As the Government’s Inclusion Policy progresses the diversity of pupils is likely to widen.

#### **MFL teaching and learning**

Languages tend to be taught in a more teacher-centred way than many other subjects, and the medium of communication, at least for part of the time, is a language other than the pupils’ mother tongue. Many pupils perceive foreign language learning as difficult and irrelevant (Chambers, 1999: 103). Teaching assistants themselves may share these perceptions, based on their own experiences of education.

#### **Subject expertise**

OFSTED (1996) drew attention to the difficulties presented when the curriculum the TAs are supporting is beyond the experience and knowledge of the supporter. Within the groups of adults working as TAs, there is likely to be great variation in their language knowledge and skills. Some TAs may not be confident or competent in the target language.

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Given these particular factors, the deployment of TAs in MFL lessons may be problematic and, therefore, worthy of investigation.

## PURPOSES OF THE RESEARCH

Using a school-based focus, the research project aimed to:

- analyse and evaluate the access of pupils with SEN to MFL lessons by focusing specifically on the interactions between the teacher, the TA and the pupils;
- identify factors related to good collaborative practice between the teacher and the TA;
- exploit the outcomes to inform and influence the practice of MFL teaching and the training of TAs.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The project was located in two co-educational secondary schools in West Yorkshire, each with approximately 1500 pupils. Each has about twenty TAs, who work with pupils with a wide range of SEN, but not all the TAs work in the MFL area. There were four stages to the research:

### Stage 1

Preliminary meetings were held with the Heads of MFL, the Special Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) and the TAs to outline the purpose, nature and intended outcomes of the research and to invite their collaboration.

### Stage 2

Meetings were held with the Heads of MFL and the SENCOs in order to gather preliminary background information and to identify appropriate classes to observe. Copies of policy documents and Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were requested.

### Stage 3

Data collection in the schools. This included classroom observation, questionnaires to teachers and TAs<sup>2</sup>, structured group interviews with the pupils. Six lessons were recorded with two video cameras, one focusing on the teacher and one on the TA, to facilitate the examination of the relationship between the activity of the teacher, the TA and the supported and unsupported pupils.

### Stage 4

Data were reviewed with the teachers and TAs, so as to provide feedback and clarify the issues that arose. The staff watched the videos and discussed the lessons. These discussions of their perceptions of teacher-TA collaboration and suggestions for improvement were tape-recorded for analysis.

A wealth of data was collected and this article refers only to those most pertinent to the understanding of roles and responsibilities: questionnaire data from teachers and TAs; pupil

interviews; the tape-recorded discussion. Other findings are presented elsewhere. (Chambers *et al.*, 2002; Pearson *et al.*, 2003).

## QUESTIONNAIRES

The structure and content of the questionnaires were based on items from the audit provided by the DfEE (2000). Two versions of the questionnaire were developed for the two groups of adults, i.e. the teachers and TAs. These were distributed within the school, completed confidentially and returned to the researchers.

## INTERVIEWS WITH THE PUPILS

As noted earlier, the significance of pupils' perceptions, particularly in relation to inclusive practices, is increasingly being recognised (CYPU, 2001). Whilst eliciting pupils' views is valuable and illuminating, it is not without its challenges (Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). Careful consideration was given to:

- ensuring that permission was sought from pupils;
- guaranteeing confidentiality to the pupils;
- structuring the activity in such a way as to facilitate their participation;
- acknowledging their special educational needs.

Using an external interviewer was seen as increasing the chances of pupils being open, honest and providing accurate information (Altrichter *et al.*, 1993), given that neither their teacher nor the TA would be present at the interview. It is also acknowledged, however, that the presence of a stranger could be the cause of some anxiety and therefore impede the willingness of some pupils to speak.

The teachers of selected classes spoke to the pupils about the purpose and nature of the research, its confidential nature and ways that they could participate. The pupils indicated to the teachers their willingness to be involved. All individuals were assured about their right to decline to be interviewed.

The presence of TAs in the classroom is significant for both the pupils identified as being in need of support and their 'unsupported' classmates. Therefore, the views of both supported and unsupported pupils were sought. In total, twelve group interviews were conducted, in each of the six classes, one for supported pupils and one for their peers. The group size varied between four and six pupils. Interviews were conducted in an office in the school away from any other distractions. A total of 54 pupils were interviewed: 28 supported pupils and 26 unsupported pupils.

The decision was made to use group interviews since they may be less threatening and present the opportunity to develop discussion (Lewis, 1992). It was recognised that there are inherent difficulties with group interviews (Watt and Ebbut,

“group interviews ... may be less threatening and present the opportunity to develop discussion”

1987; Lewis, 1992), such as whether each individual feels able to express her/his views or is constrained by peer pressure, or whether the strongest member of the group dominates the group's discussion. In order to capitalise on the strengths of group interviewing, a task was developed that would stimulate debate.

Based on the DfEE model, a range of school- and classroom-based tasks and situations were listed on one side of a grid (Fig. 1), e.g. Who would lend you a pen? Who checks your spelling? Who marks your work? Who talks to your parents? Along the other axis was listed a range of people who might be in the classroom and available to perform the tasks in the situations cited (e.g. teacher; TA; another pupil; another teacher). The respondents were asked to code, for every activity, whether each of the named people:

- could/should be involved;
  - could not/should not be involved;
- or whether it depended on circumstances.

Prior to the start of the interview proper, pupils were reminded of the purpose of the research. They were offered the option of completing grids as individuals or working as a group. All opted for the latter. Any additional comments or discussion were recorded in note form by the interviewer, so that the research included both nominal data and discursive data. Any comments that were written by the interviewer were read back to the interviewees to confirm their accuracy.

## TAPE-RECORDED DISCUSSIONS

The researchers viewed all the video material and identified some key issues for further investigation. The recordings were given back to the schools. The staff involved had the opportunity to view themselves in private before deciding whether to allow others to view the material.

All the participating staff consented to sharing the material with the teachers and TAs in their school. They watched it as a group and, supported by a prompt sheet devised by the researchers, discussed their reactions and impressions. Findings specific to this area are reported elsewhere (Pearson, Chambers and Hall, 2003).

## THE FINDINGS

Availability of TAs and teachers on the day of data collection resulted in the number of responses from each category being comparatively low, i.e. eight TAs and seven teachers.

The findings are presented in six main areas, replicating headings provided by *Working with Teaching Assistants: A good practice guide* (DfEE, 2000):

- Translating policies into practice
- Professional development for TAs
- Effective practice
- The TA as role model

- Planning
- The sharing of views.

## TRANSLATING POLICIES INTO PRACTICE

TAs are not just part of the staff, but are part of a team, and as such their remit includes translating policies into practice and furthering the ethos of the school (DfEE, 2000: 8).

Feeling part of the team and having a shared understanding of who is responsible for implementing policies and how, is closely related to the knowledge of roles and responsibilities shared by team members. Responses relating to roles and responsibilities confirmed that each of the TAs had a job description and was aware of its contents. Teachers were aware that TAs had a job description but they were all ignorant of its contents. The following quotation is representative of the teachers' responses: "I have never seen a TA job description, but I know they must have them".

TAs seemed to think that some teachers at least would have some knowledge of a TA's job description. Based on this small sample, there appears to be little evidence to support this assumption. If teachers have not seen a TA's job description, it is difficult for them to know with any certainty where the TA's responsibilities begin and end. In the absence of this knowledge, they are ill-placed to make decisions on how they can collaborate most effectively with the TA. This also leaves scope for TAs to be asked to support in ways that are outside their formal remit or, at the worst extreme, to be exploited. One TA commented: "Sometimes they want us to do more than we should".

Teachers believed that TAs had time allocated for preparation, meetings, administrative tasks and training. TAs generally contradicted this view. Three out of eight believed that this was only partly true and five that it was false: "No TA staff have any free periods to do with admin tasks and are not generally involved in preparation".

This difference in response suggests that there was little real discussion between teachers and TAs and little real planning as a team. An *ad hoc* approach to classroom collaboration seemed to be the norm.

In the group interviews, pupils clearly demonstrated a shared understanding of the roles and responsibilities of teachers and TAs. Teachers were seen as the trained experts in their subjects whilst the TAs played a supporting role (e.g., 'praising pupils', 'chatting to pupils' and 'dealing with naughty pupils'). Year 8 supported pupils explained "Mr E (teacher) has the whole class – Mrs X (TA) is for a group."

TAs were seen as being very approachable; their role complemented that of the teacher. A Year 11 unsupported pupil said: "TAs are generally helpful – they are going to be talking to you. They can tell you if you haven't been listening when a

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teacher might be cross”.

Supported pupils were more likely to ask TAs for help, not because of their perceived role but rather because of their physical proximity. Unsupported pupils were much more likely to approach a classmate, again simply because of accessibility. A minority of the pupils also made comments about how ‘safe’ they felt approaching the two adults. If clarification was needed by a pupil, their perception was that TAs were less likely than the teacher to admonish them for not listening, for example. “They (the TAs) just tell you and then you can get on with it. Teachers might want to tell you off”.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR TAs

Management support should enable them (TAs) to perform the job to the best of their abilities, and they should be encouraged to develop their skills and potential. (DfEE, 2000: 8)

Six TAs had had induction training on joining the school. This varied between a half-day programme and two full days. Only two said that they had not received any: “I was given my timetable and had to get on with it”.

Only one TA reported any MFL-specific induction. The others thought this would have been useful.

Teachers were also aware that MFL-specific induction did not exist but agreed that it should. One respondent indicated that this had been made a priority for the following academic year. Such training might help overcome the problem of TAs feeling ill-equipped to support in MFL lessons and, when given the choice, opting out of this:

My experiences have been that new support assistants, unfamiliar with foreign languages, tend to shy away from supporting students in these subjects. This is to their detriment, as it can be very rewarding, as myself and colleagues have found.

How are TAs ‘to perform the job to the best of their abilities’ (DfEE, 2000: 8) if appropriate induction and training are not provided? TAs’ responses suggest that most were provided with just about enough training, in the form of a half-day’s induction, to help them get by. Given the challenges posed by MFL, however, which are not encountered in core subjects, especially those related to target language issues, more subject-specific induction followed by continuing professional development would do much to help TAs.

School Development Plans articulate the schools’ priorities, including those related to professional development. When asked about the School Development Plan, teachers had little knowledge of it and, therefore, were unable to judge its implications for managing TAs. This may be a reflection of the pressure under which teachers are working or a suggestion, perhaps, that this important document is not shared meaningfully

with teachers. Surprisingly, perhaps, all eight TAs were aware of the School Development Plan and five of them seemed confident that it included their development needs: “Opportunities for training have increased and the need for training is more recognised”.

The others, however, felt less well served: “There does not seem to be an awful lot of courses for us to do”.

All TAs stated that the responsibilities of relevant managers were clear to them. In four cases this clarification had not formed part of their induction or training programme; they had learnt by experience. Although TAs would have appreciated appropriate training, they had experienced a ‘learning by doing’ approach. This does not, however, guarantee the transmission of important knowledge. TAs should have a clear understanding of the place of the teacher, the Head of Department and the Special Needs Co-ordinator (SENCO), the Head of Year and form teacher. This is equally important for the teachers in relation to the TAs with whom they work. The teachers saw the SENCO as the only manager with responsibility for TAs. A ‘let’s leave it all to the SENCO’ attitude gives grounds for concern.

Teachers and TAs agreed that there was little reflection or discussion about the TAs’ own learning and development needs. TAs: “I don’t get any feedback on the support I provide or how I could do it better”.

The teachers appreciated the value in reciprocal feedback and discussion on how collaboration could be improved but failed to see how or where it could be fitted into an already overfilled working day: “It would be great to have the time for this”.

The absence of post-lesson reflection gives grounds for concern, not only with regard to improved collaboration and, therefore, an enhanced learning experience for the pupils, but also in terms of TAs feeling valued as a real part of the teaching team.

### EFFECTIVE PRACTICE

Effective practice:

seeks to enable pupils to become more independent learners.

However, this assistance needs to be balanced. Letting or, worse, encouraging a child to ‘cling’, even if the child has a statement and the TA has been employed specifically to work with him or her, is ultimately stultifying and demeaning for the pupil. It can also mean that the child gets insufficient input from the teacher. The TA also needs to know when to stand back and enable the child to work with other pupils in a group. (DfEE, 2000: 11)

All eight TAs were confident that they encouraged pupil independence but provided support when this was needed. Teachers were split on this issue. Four felt that TAs generally got the balance right, but three were more ambivalent, as reflected in this quotation: “Some pupils’ independence is

“Given the challenges posed by MFL ... more subject-specific induction followed by continuing professional development would do much to help TAs”

fostered, others rely on TAs a lot and become more dependent”.

The understandings of independence were left implicit and it may well be that the TAs and teachers had differing views about its nature. Indeed, it might also be that for individuals there is a difference between their intentions and their practice. There was some evidence of this in the responses to watching themselves on video. For example, one TA commented: “I never knew I mothered them so much”.

An indicator of effective practice is the ability of the TA and teacher to facilitate pupil-pupil interaction, thus ensuring that supported pupils do not feel isolated from the others. All eight TAs were very confident that they ensured pupil-pupil interaction, but teachers were less confident that TAs succeeded in this. Sometimes such interaction was facilitated, sometimes not. Teachers felt that much depended on the nature of activities and whether it was known in advance that the TA was going to be in the class. Effective planning can take place only if the teacher can be sure of this but it appears that she<sup>3</sup> seldom can be.

Similarly, the TAs provided an interesting view on the effectiveness of teachers in giving attention to all pupils, including those supported by TAs. Whilst all seven teachers were confident that they supported all pupils, the TAs thought that this was only partly true:

Some teachers leave you to get on with it (working with the pupils with SEN), which is OK in some lessons, but in others they need to provide more input for the pupils working with the TA.

Pupils appear generally satisfied with the presence of TAs in the room and the way they collaborate with teachers. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, supported pupils appreciate their assistance: “It is generally more helpful if they are around”. Unsupported pupils too value their help:

If Mrs B (teacher) is busy you can rely on them. They are always there to check if you are OK and if you understand.

She (TA) helps anyone. She is always there when you need help.

The only area of concern was raised by one group of unsupported pupils whose lessons sometimes were supported by two TAs: “It can be distracting if all three get together and talk”.

### THE TA AS ROLE MODEL

TAs can provide good models for children both in behaviour and in learning. For example, reading to children for whom English is an additional language can provide a model of good English. (DfEE, 2000: 11)

The above quotation relates closely to the role of the TA as a model for foreign language learning. Not all TAs supporting pupils in MFL classes have

MFL competence. What they do bring to the classroom context, however, is competence as learners and this competence can be modelled for, and shared by, the pupils in their charge and indeed other pupils in the class.

Four out of seven teachers felt that TAs were confident and interested in MFLs; 1/7 felt that this was partly true; only 2/7 thought that this was untrue: “They are interested but not confident. They are most useful when they have some competence”.

Data provided by pupils in this sample suggest that they have an awareness of the subject knowledge of the TAs in line with the TA’s own judgement. The pupils know those TAs who are in a position to ‘teach you how to pronounce a new word’ and those who are not. Only in the case of one class was there some difference of opinion regarding the TA’s competence to help. The unsupported pupils said: “Not sure – she hasn’t done it [German] since she was a kid at school. But she might. My grandma did it at school and she can help me. She (TA) might be OK”.

The supported pupils, however, were unanimous in their view that she was not adequately qualified to offer subject-specific support.

Teachers reported that the TA’s influence was not only determined by competence, however, but also by their enthusiasm and approach to learning: “When the pupils are aware that the TA is learning with them, it has a very positive impact on their attitudes”.

Care has to be taken, however, to ensure that the TA remembers her<sup>3</sup> role in the classroom, as suggested by this teacher: “The TA often wants to learn the language more than assist in class”.

It seems to be the case that some TAs struggle to strike a balance between, on the one hand, providing a model for a good language learner as part of the role of supporting pupils and, on the other, learning the target language.

The reaction of TAs was mixed; some (2/8) felt rather ill-qualified to offer the support needed:

Sometimes I feel I don’t have enough knowledge of a subject to give support confidently.

Sometimes you feel thrown in at the deep end; it’s very frustrating especially when the pupils expect you to know as much as the teacher.

Others (3/8) have picked up qualifications and/or target language competence in the course of their work as TAs and/or part of their life experience and, as a result, feel more confident in providing support:

French GCSE. No German qualifications – pick it up along the way.

No formal qualifications but lived in Germany for three years.

In spite of evidence of subject expertise, however, TAs did not feel that this was taken into account when they were allocated to particular subjects: “It should be. Sometimes we ask to swap amongst ourselves if we want to be in certain subjects. But

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**“competence as learners ... can be modelled for, and shared by, the pupils in their charge and ... other pupils”**

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I think it's frowned upon".

Why this reluctance to allocate TAs to subject areas where they feel more competent and therefore more confident? Surely this can only enhance the quality of the support they provide both to the pupils and the teacher. There was even some evidence to suggest that the onus was on the TA to be proactive in informing the school about any particular competence rather than the school making the effort to identify (Parkin, 2002: 20.) One TA responded: "Subject expertise unknown unless you let the teacher know – then decisions can be made".

Some TAs (3/8) thought that subject knowledge was irrelevant, given that they were required to support all subjects. This raises the question of whether this should be the case. It might be argued that teacher-TA collaboration would be enhanced, were particular TAs to be allocated to particular subject areas, a pattern which already exists in some secondary schools (Jerwood, 1999). This might well facilitate more collaborative planning and discussion. At conferences and in-service events<sup>4</sup> this question received a mixed response. Some teachers thought it would be extremely useful for particular TAs to be attached to an individual department. This would facilitate planning and meaningful collaboration and provide some semblance of stability and continuity. Others, however, usually TAs, were less keen. TAs are usually attached to a particular pupil and are therefore required to move with the pupil from subject to subject.

Another constituency of TAs (3/8) were not qualified, but adopted a very positive attitude: "I am learning the subject at the same time as the pupils. I am lucky to be in a Year 7 group".

The researchers have found that this is an area that stimulates interesting and even heated debate at conferences and in-service events<sup>4</sup>. Is it a good or a bad thing for the TA to learn alongside the pupils? Is this distracting her from what she is employed to do? Or does she act as a role model for the pupils? Does this encourage the pupils to have a go? Or, when she is reading aloud, for example, is she denying a pupil the time and opportunity to read aloud? In our experience, audiences are very divided and polarised on this issue; sitting on the fence appears not to be an option (see Chambers, Hall and Pearson, 2002).

Pupils recognised the dual role of some of the TAs: "They like to be part of the lesson and not just a helper".

Pupils described picking up ideas from observing the TAs who were modelling language learning, though some recognised that they may not be able to implement these at this stage. They commented on the strategies that they had observed, for example regarding vocabulary:

She's at the same level as us but always writes them down (i.e. new items of vocabulary).

She does things in colour – German blue, English red. We all know which is which.

They also talked about the way in which the TAs engaged with a range of learning activities during lessons and took this for granted as normal, acceptable practice. For example, when talking about games played in lessons they said, "Of course she [the TA] joins in. She's a part of it."

The pupils see the TA in the role of learner as something positive. They appreciated the enthusiasm for learning and, at least some, availed themselves of the opportunity to observe and share learning strategies with a more experienced learner.

## PLANNING

Assistants who are fully engaged with the aims, content, strategies and intended outcomes for a lesson are likely to be more effective than those who are required only to concentrate on individual pupils and their learning plans. (DfEE, 2000: 12)

TAs and teachers were agreed on how little sharing of long- and medium-term planning went on. The TAs responded in the following ways:

I do not get involved with lesson planning at all.

No time allocated, even if I wanted to.

All teachers found themselves constrained by circumstances to do the planning independently: "No opportunities for this. Often I don't know which TA will attend lesson".

Two out of the seven teachers did not really see the need for TAs to be intimately involved in the planning phase as they were able to find out what was happening in the lesson from another source: "Some really use the scheme of work so they know what to expect".

With regard to short-term planning and the planning of specific lessons, the response was broadly the same. TAs: "No. Again we would all love to be in on it all. It would make our job better and help the pupils access the lesson more effectively".

An additional comment from a TA provided a picture of the sort of conversation which might go on between a TA and a teacher on an additional and important reason why team planning did not take place:

It would help our job if we were privy to lesson planning so we would know what was going on in the lesson before it started and we could prepare work accordingly but we are always told we don't get paid for this, so we should not be expected to do it. Despite the fact that some of us want to.

One TA suggested that some consultation, albeit fairly last minute, did sometimes take place: "With some teachers I am asked if a plan for the lesson will work with my pupils or do I want to alter it".

All seven teachers maintained that time is the key factor in preventing meaningful consultation:

**"TAs and teachers were agreed on how little sharing of long- and medium-term planning went on"**

“Not enough contact with TAs out of lesson”.

The totality of teachers’ and TAs’ responses leaves one with the impression of a shared appreciation that ‘planning as a team’ should happen but both parties feel there is no time for this.

In spite of the absence of involvement in planning or any clarification on the lesson content or teaching methodology, TAs appeared confident that they understood the purpose of lesson activities: “I can usually pick things up as we go through the lesson”.

The teachers were positive, but less confident (3/7 true; 4/7 partly true) than TAs, that a shared understanding of the lesson was quickly established.

Teachers and TAs provided a mixture of responses on the question of flexible decision-making during lessons. Some clearly collaborated in an *ad hoc* way:

TAs work with teachers during lessons, i.e. instant decisions, no chance for planning before lesson.

In other cases it depended on the teacher or the TA:

In most subjects – German – yes.

Again, likely with different TAs.

The responses provide evidence that TAs were willing to be involved in consultation and saw considerable value in this. Teachers would be happy to consult with TAs in the planning phase but felt constrained by pressure of time and a concern that the TAs were not paid for such involvement. If the problem relating to planning is to be resolved, as clearly it must, and if TAs, teachers and, most importantly, pupils are to make the most of the support provided, there is a need for clarification and a common understanding of roles and responsibilities. (See section on professional development for TAs above.)

## THE SHARING OF VIEWS – ASSESSMENT

As a member of a team, a TA is in a good position to observe pupil performance, and to provide the teacher with valuable thoughts on what works for pupils, what obstacles to learning they encounter, and the effectiveness of classroom processes and organisation. (Centre for Educational Needs, University of Manchester, *The Management, Role and Training of Learning Support Assistants*, DfEE, 1999, in DfEE, 2000: 13)

Questionnaire responses revealed considerable differences in opinion on the keeping and collecting of evidence for formal assessment. TAs were very confident of their contribution:

I feed back any major changes, good or bad, to the SENCO.

There is a behavioural database which I feed data into.

They provided some evidence to suggest that their role is not as helpfully inclusive as it might be:

It would be beneficial to sit in on some reviews as some of us find we are not told relevant information.

The majority of teachers, however, did not think the TAs played a role in assessment.

Why did TAs not play a fuller role in assessment? It may well be a training issue. It suggests, perhaps, a lack of trust in the TA’s ability to make a contribution to the assessment of an individual pupil’s progress. This may represent a missed opportunity in terms of completing the jigsaw of information about, and support for, the pupil’s development.

TAs and teachers are unanimously positive about having relevant documentation on pupils who have SEN. TAs report this in the following terms:

All the pupils I help I have a report on.

Statements are given out – I also have access to the child’s personal file.

Is documentation enough? The data suggest that most teachers and TAs were fairly clear on the exchange of information on pupils and an agreed plan for TAs to respond to individual pupil needs. TA: “Any difficult or unusual cases we are informed about”.

There were some signs, however, that this did not apply in all cases. Some information was not always as forthcoming as it might have been: “If I don’t make personal enquiries, then I’m unlikely to be told”.

There is a suggestion that teachers thought that the availability of the IEPs to the TA should suffice.

It comes as little surprise that TAs’ liaison with the SENCO to review pupils’ progress was much more regular than with teachers: “We meet regularly each week and her door is always open”.

Four out of seven teachers acknowledged that more liaison with the TA to review pupils’ progress should take place than was currently the norm: “We don’t meet often enough”.

Given that teacher-TA liaison is infrequent, this may be an indicator that teachers are dependent on the IEP and may be missing important information from other potential sources that could influence required changes to it.

Pupils had clear views about the roles of TAs and teachers in regard to assessment and rewards. The Year 8 unsupported pupils discussing marking said, “She (the TA) looks to check – she can’t tick.” The Year 10 supported pupils confirmed this view: “The teacher marks – but the TA can check it for you. If it is only a test with just ticks and crosses, they (the TAs) can do that”.

However, there were also areas where the views

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**“This may represent a missed opportunity in ... information about, and support for, the pupil’s development”**

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**“The TAs were modelling learning activities ... were perceived to be enthusiastic language learners”**

of the supported and unsupported pupils differed. The Year 8 supported pupils felt that any of the adults could award merit slips. The unsupported pupils in the same class were less confident about this and eventually came to the conclusion that the TA could not award the merit unilaterally but had to consult with the teacher (Mr E) first: “She does a bit – not really sure though. She asks Mr E then he might (i.e. award the merit)”.

## CONCLUSION

One of the stimuli for this research was ‘Inclusion’. The readiness of all parties to be involved in this research, including sharing the video material with each other, testifies to a collaborative culture where people learn together. As Balshaw and Farrell (2002) commented in their concluding remarks on their work with TAs and teachers:

Where the assistants feel as included as these, the likelihood is that the pupils they support will also feel that they are fully included in the classroom and the learning environment. (Balshaw & Farrell, 2002: 101)

The findings appear to support the view that all parties perceived the presence of additional adults in these lessons positively and that there were many successful features in the way in which support operates. The views of the pupils largely corroborated those of the adults but also provided some valuable insights into their perceptions.

A key to the positive relationships appeared to be the shared view that support should not be narrowly conceived as relating to those pupils with SEN but, more broadly, in terms of establishing and maintaining a supportive climate for all. The support was universally viewed as existing for all pupils, shared between the adults and associated with teaching and learning. This is comparable with the DfEE (2000: 8) view that there are four strands to the support a TA provides: support for the pupil; support for the curriculum; support of the teachers; and support for the school.

In the context of MFL learning, the lack of competence and confidence in the target language may appear to TAs to be a barrier to them providing support in MFL lessons. However, these teachers and TAs rejected this view and had found ways to turn this to the advantage of the pupils. The TAs were modelling learning activities for the pupils, were perceived to be enthusiastic language learners and were demonstrating their own success in the target language. Acting as a ‘pseudo-pupil’ was not, in these two schools, a negative or distracting activity but rather adopted as an effective teaching strategy.

Whilst the position described has many strengths, there are also areas of shared concern. Time for planning, joint assessment and evaluation was, at best, in short supply and in many instances non-existent. If maximum benefit is to be gained from support in lessons, mechanisms need to be found that improve this communication. Firm

foundations for this could be established at school level by auditing the skills of the support staff, supporting them in new curriculum areas and explicitly addressing with the teaching staff the management of support staff. At a departmental level, induction into the MFL department and joint training would foster effective working arrangements.

The productive practices described have evolved over the years largely in an *ad hoc* way. It was unclear how new teachers and TAs would acquire knowledge and skill. Even for these experienced staff, the research provided a unique opportunity to reflect on, and share, practices and experiences. Their view, fully supported by the researchers, was that maximising the impact of in-class support is dependent upon, and merits an investment in, time and training, both joint and separate. One of the pupils talking about the TA commented ‘She likes me to do it – because I am capable.’ Teachers and TAs need to feel confident within their working relationship and that cannot be left solely to chance.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This group of people do not exclusively work with pupils with SEN although that is frequently their role. Funding for them comes from a range of sources including the SEN statementing procedure. The backgrounds of TAs are extremely varied, ranging from few formal qualifications to qualified teacher status.
- <sup>2</sup> The two schools involved used the term ‘Learning Support Assistant’ for this group of adults.
- <sup>3</sup> As the majority of MFL teachers and TAs are women, the pronoun ‘she’ is used.
- <sup>4</sup> Conferences and In-service events
  - 12.4.02 ‘Supported Access to Modern Foreign Languages’ Language World (Association for Language Learning), York
  - 21.1.02 ‘Supported Access to Modern Foreign Languages’ INSET event, School of Education, University of Leeds
  - 21.1.03 ‘Supported Access to Modern Foreign Languages’ INSET event, School of Education, University of Leeds
  - 1.11.01 ‘Supported Access to Modern Foreign Languages’ NASEN Special Needs, London
  - 28.9.01 ‘Supported Access to Modern Foreign Languages’ SERA (Scottish Education Research Association), Dundee

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Figure 1

	German teacher	LSA	Another pupil	Another teacher
Lend you a pen				
Check your spelling				
Suggest an idea				
Mark your work				
Write down your homework				
Teach you new words				
Teach you how to pronounce words				
Praise you				
Deal with naughty pupils				
Give you merit marks				
Talk to your form tutor about you				
Help you find a page in your book				
Look up words with you				
Join in class games				
Pack away your things at the end of the lesson				
Give detentions				
Chat to you				