

Rethinking the concept of progression in the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages: a research perspective

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This paper reviews problems with the model of linguistic progression which underpins the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages in England, and argues that the curriculum in its present form has been a missed opportunity for "languages for all". Among other difficulties, the model is poorly informed by current research-based understandings of the nature of classroom-based interlanguage development. Current levels of learner motivation and learner achievement are known to be problematic, and UK society is sceptical about the need for languages as a compulsory curriculum component. In this difficult situation, it is argued, curriculum renewal must draw on research-based theory and data much more systematically, if a more successful language learning experience is to be provided for the majority of school age learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

This special issue of the *LLJ* on "FL teaching as an evidence-based profession" is appearing at a time of significant policy change and reorientation in foreign language education in English schools. The broad direction of recent policy, towards increasing entitlement and access to languages for all learners in maintained secondary schools, which has characterised the last 30 years, has been halted at least for the moment. The 11-16 National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages (NCMFL), introduced with such fanfare in the early 1990s, has lasted in meaningful form for just over a decade. The *National Languages Strategy for England* now proposes that foreign language study will be compulsory in key stage 3 only, and will once again become optional in key stage 4 (DfES, 2002a), except in the case of 200 or so specialist language colleges. A new style English Baccalaureat may eventually reinstate a coherent cycle of language learning in a newly unified 14-19 educational stage, but this is likely to be only for some learners, our future language specialists, rather than a new manifestation of "languages for all". In compensation, access to some form of foreign language learning is to be introduced for all primary school children; but many questions remain to be answered about objectives, resources, staffing, timetabling, continuity...

before this proposal gains credibility as offering a valid curriculum experience to all our children.

Those of us who believe in the continuing educational value of "languages for all" as a core element of compulsory schooling have therefore got some thinking and explaining to do. We need first of all to understand why the NCMFL has apparently not been deemed a success by society in general, or at least by central educational policy-makers. We need to contribute actively to debates about the values and rationales which should underpin general education in the twenty-first century and to those about the most effective educational preparation for the world of work. Most obviously this will involve further clarification of the goals of foreign language education in an English-speaking environment, and consolidation of the work of language professionals around an agreed development agenda. And finally we should identify and argue for pedagogy, curriculum and assessment models which we believe will be more effective in achieving our agreed goals.

Foreign language education researchers do not have any very privileged position in much of this necessary activity, and research by itself cannot provide answers to the broader questions about rationales and goals. The whole of society needs to agree the broad goals of its education systems, and in debates about values and objectives, researchers are simply interested citizens, as are teachers, parents, employers, the learners themselves... However, where goals and values have been agreed, the theoretical and empirical work of foreign language education researchers can make a distinctive professional contribution. Research can contribute distinctively to the evaluation and analysis of existing patterns of curriculum, learning and teaching, in terms of their usefulness in achieving desired educational objectives. It can also contribute vitally to the development and trialling of alternative models.

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This particular paper will start with a brief review of the difficulties which have overtaken the National Curriculum for MFL – many of them deriving from developments in the wider social and educational context, rather than from within the domain of MFL professional activity. Thereafter, however, the paper will centre on a central aspect of foreign education where research evidence has the potential to make a vital contribution – the concept of learner progression which underpins curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment. From a research perspective, we will review mounting evidence that the concept of progression which drives the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages has been less than helpful, and explore theoretical and empirical findings from second language research which explain why this might be so. We will argue for an alternative model of learner progression which is related more closely to empirical research, and review its implications for MFL curriculum design.

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2. THE RISE OF NCMFL: NEW PUBLICS, NEW CENTRALISATION

In the postwar period, and especially with the comprehensivisation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, foreign languages steadily gained ground in the secondary school curriculum for England and Wales. This history is well told in the CILT anniversary volume *Thirty Years of Language Teaching* (ed. Hawkins, 1996). The Graded Objectives in Modern Languages movement (GOML: Page, 1996) involved many teachers in local, LEA-led curriculum development schemes with defined FL syllabuses and objectives, plus assessment systems designed to boost learners’ sense of achievement in the early secondary years. These were superseded by the introduction of the GCSE in 1988, as a unified national qualification for 16-year-olds at the end of compulsory schooling. The general evolution of language learning and language achievement is reflected in the fact that in 1977, just one child in ten achieved a foreign language pass in the old style GCE or CSE Grade 1 (HMI, 1977 cited in Hawkins, 1981: 17). By 2001, 78 per cent of the age cohort attempted at least one foreign language at GCSE, and 40 per cent of the cohort achieved an A*-C grade (DfES, 2001; see also Bell and Forster, 2001 for a more detailed review of trends in examination entries).

In the late 1980s, however, the distinctive bottom-up development of foreign languages as a curriculum subject through the grassroots GOML movement was absorbed into centralised national changes. The introduction of GCSE at national level was the first of these, and was likely in any case to supersede much local GOML activity. But hard on the heels of GCSE came the movement for a National Curriculum, arising out of an apparently generalised public dissatisfaction with educational standards and a political will to centralise more and more aspects of educational provision. The

overall National Curriculum framework, with its attainment targets and ladder-like levels of attainment, was devised primarily with the core subjects of English, mathematics and science in view, and presented as a *fait accompli* to the remaining ‘foundation’ subjects, of which MFL found itself to be one. A special complication for MFL was the fact that all other subjects were taught in some form from key stage 1 onwards, and the 10 Levels of Attainment originally specified were expected to provide meaningful targets for 12 years of schooling. In the case of MFL, of course, the non-negotiable ladder of 10 Levels had to be devised so as to be ‘climbable’ over five years rather than 12.

The inclusion of MFL as a foundation subject in the mainstream curriculum for all students can arguably be seen as a resoundingly successful outcome from the work of foreign language educators over the previous decades (DES/WO 1991). It seemed they had elaborated accessible curriculum content and ways of working in the MFL classroom which were inclusive of all learners. However, in a number of ways the timing and nature of the National Curriculum development caused problems for the subject. These are briefly summarised in the next section.

3. DESIGN PROBLEMS FOR NCMFL

This section reviews a number of “design problems” in respect of the NCMFL for England and Wales, partly relating to the context within which it was developed, and partly to the views about the nature of language learning which underpin the model (further critical discussion can be found in e.g. Norman, 1998; Mitchell, 2002). The sense of political urgency prevailing for the entire National Curriculum project precluded the undertaking of significant concurrent research regarding MFL which might have alleviated these problems. It is clear also that many decisions were made which neglected available information from existing language learning research.

3.1 UNCERTAINTY ABOUT ACHIEVABLE STANDARDS

In a context where “languages for all” were a relatively recent and incomplete development, there was uncertainty about standards and expectations for MFL. How far could the entire age cohort be reasonably expected to progress, given current levels of available time and resources, and what kind of expectations regarding learning outcomes could therefore be built into the new Attainment Targets? Comparison of early drafts with the final, officially adopted NCMFL make this uncertainty clear (compare e.g. NCMFLWG, 1990 with DES/WO, 1991). This is an obvious area where a programme of research could have helped (and indeed limited data were available from 1980s Assessment of Performance Unit surveys, regarding typical patterns of MFL achievement in lower secondary school: Dickson

et al., 1987.) However, standards were finally set as a result of professional consultations not apparently supported by any solid research inputs. Up to today, there is continuing lack of clarity about the suitability of the proposed standards. There is evidence from some stakeholders that the framework has turned out to be insufficiently challenging in some respects (see e.g. overview in Chambers, 2001: 16-7). On the other hand, available achievement data suggest that while measured attainment in MFL has been broadly rising, very large numbers of learners are not (yet) actually achieving the expected NCMFL levels (see section 4 below).

3.2 AN UNDERSPECIFIED MODEL OF PROGRESSION

The generic National Curriculum progression framework with its discrete levels and targets was externally imposed on MFL without regard to its suitability for the special concerns of foreign language classroom learning. A number of criticisms can be levelled at this framework as it was operationalised for languages:

- Firstly, it has locked thinking about learning outcomes for languages into an outmoded ‘four skills’ pattern, which predates the communicative era and is in some ways in opposition to it. In performing real world tasks, skills are typically integrated for the achievement of some non-language goal, e.g. we commonly read in order to write, we listen in order to speak etc. Thus, the ‘discrete skills’ framework was already problematic as a means of defining communicative objectives. From a learning theory perspective also, it is hard to defend the treatment of language skills as separate learning strands. The precise relationship between the processing of L2 input (listening and reading), the generation of L2 output (speaking and writing), and the development of an internal target language system, has been disputed by language learning researchers. However, the existence of such a relationship is not in doubt. A curriculum framework which isolates the discrete ‘language skills’ may be expected to favour compartmentalised training over more integrated learning activity which capitalises on known interconnections. (The work of e.g. VanPatten and associates on ‘input processing’, or of Swain and associates on ‘comprehensible output’, are examples of current classroom research which is exploring the interconnections of the skills for learning: e.g. VanPatten and Cadierno, 1993; Swain, 2000.)
- Secondly, it has failed to conceptualise progression with any detail or specificity,

in terms of linguistic development. The original NCMFL working party proposals offered an entire chapter on ‘Sounds, words and structures’, which could have formed the basis for a much fuller specification of how learners’ underlying language system was expected to develop (NCMFLWG, 1990). This is also an obvious area where increasing understanding among second language learning researchers about developmental routes could have made some useful input (as e.g. in the ‘teachability’ hypothesis of Pienemann, 1989). However, no such strand found its way into the final set of defined Attainment Targets. Perhaps ‘language system attainment targets’ could only have been written for named individual languages, but their absence has, as Norman notes, served “to leave the matter of grammatical continuity and progression to the individual teacher” (1998: 53).

- Thirdly, the NCMFL with its apparently systematic Levels of Attainment offers a stepwise ‘ladder’ metaphor of language development. Research into language development has clearly shown that L2 learning is a much more complex and recursive process, with multiple interconnections and backslidings, and complex tradeoffs between advances in accuracy, fluency and complexity. (See e.g. Mitchell and Myles, 1998 for an overview of current research-based accounts of the overall course of second language acquisition.)
- Finally, though this argument cannot be developed here, the Attainment Targets of the NCMFL also have problems when viewed strictly as an assessment tool. The various level descriptors are written in such general terms that it is difficult to relate them systematically to the language knowledge which underlies actual performances by real learners. (See e.g. Bachman and Palmer, 1996 for an outline of the difficulties involved in trying to use holistic descriptors such as the NCMFL Levels of Attainment in order to make valid judgements about learners’ capabilities.)

3.3 AN OVEREMPHASIS ON ACCURACY

While the NCMFL gives very limited guidance on grammar progression, there is a clear preoccupation throughout the Levels of Attainment with accuracy of performance. The way conversational interaction is described in some of the Level Descriptors for Attainment Target 2 (speaking) shows this clearly (DEE/QCA, 1999):

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Level 3	“Pupils take part in brief prepared tasks of at least two or three exchanges... They use short phrases to express personal responses... Although they use mainly memorised language they occasionally substitute items of vocabulary...”
Level 4	“Pupils take part in simple structured conversations of at least three or four exchanges... They are beginning to use their knowledge of grammar to adapt and substitute single words and phrases...”
Level 5	“Pupils take part in short conversations seeking and conveying information and opinions in simple terms. They refer to recent experiences or future plans, as well as everyday activities and interests...”
Level 6	“Pupils take part in conversations that include past, present and future actions and events...”

At first reading these level descriptors seem puzzlingly restrictive. There seems no reason in principle why learners even at the lowest levels should not be engaging in much longer conversational exchanges than this, and indeed referring from the very beginning to “past, present and future actions and events”. There is plenty of research evidence that even untutored beginning learners can successfully do all of these things, with extremely limited language resources (see e.g. the European Science Foundation research on how adult migrants make their way and cope with the demands of everyday life in totally new linguistic surroundings! Klein and Perdue, 1992). The answer is of course that early beginners can do all these things but only by using an undeveloped language system which looks bizarre when compared with conventional norms of the target language (what Klein and Perdue call a “basic variety”). The only way early beginners can meet the standard norms of the target language (i.e. appear accurate in terms of grammar and inflections) is under heavily controlled conditions.

The restrictions included in the NCMFL level descriptors, which limit learner production to “two or three exchanges”, “mainly memorised language” etc., thus clearly reflect a central preoccupation with accuracy in learner production. For example, expectations that learners will refer to non-present time are delayed until Levels 5 and 6, presumably because it is a requirement that they will use appropriately inflected verb tenses for this communicative purpose. The risk is, of course, that in training learners to produce these accurate performances, teachers may neglect other, more developmental aspects of oral interaction, which researchers have consistently argued are needed for growth of the interlanguage system. In particular they may neglect the conversational risk taking and scaffolded exchanges which seem to threaten accuracy in the short term, but in the longer term are central to promoting fluency and increased complexity.

3.4 A MISSING METHODOLOGY?

The subject specialists responsible for fleshing out and operationalising the NCMFL were also caught at a ‘crossroads’ point of debate within the subject itself, regarding the nature of communicative competence and the most effective means for developing it within the classroom. The GOML movement in the main had promoted a situational, phrasebook approach to the early

stages of language learning. In its anxiety to avoid dry, decontextualised grammar instruction, parts of the GOML movement had arguably neglected development of the learners’ underlying creative language system. In other education systems internationally, the well known ‘communicative approach’ has matured and successfully integrated development of learners’ understanding of target language systems with their developing capability for target language use. Indeed there is significant international research evidence that an element of ‘focus on form’, within an overall communicative approach, is needed to maximise classroom learners’ developing control of the target language system (see e.g. the recent major survey by Norris and Ortega, 2000).

The Programme of Study associated with NCMFL clearly encourages maximising learners’ involvement in meaningful target language use and also refers to the need for metalinguistic understanding and explicit grammar study (see e.g. DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16-7). But, as noted by many commentators, the balance to be struck between these two strands is not clarified in NCMFL documentation, neither of them receives explicit recognition as Attainment Targets, and the overall issue has remained unresolved in the UK in the era of both GCSE and NCMFL (see e.g. Pachler and Field, 2001: 126-8). Norman (1998) asks with some justification whether there is a “missing methodology” as far as NCMFL was concerned.

Overall then, it can be seen that a number of tensions were built in from the beginning to the NCMFL model adopted during the 1990s. There were few links with current learning theory, and little guidance was given regarding how the learners’ underlying language system might be expected to develop, alongside training in the discrete language skills, or how classroom teaching could most effectively promote this. The early stages of development (i.e. Levels of Attainment) were conceptualised largely in terms of rote learning and use of fixed phrases; increasingly creative and increasingly accurate performance was quite properly expected at the later Levels, but the inbuilt developmental tensions between accuracy and creativity were not clearly acknowledged. This presented the teaching profession with a number of unsolved puzzles, most notably what to do about the role of explicit grammar instruction on the one hand, and on the other hand, how actively to encourage creative/risk taking uses of the target language as a core

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element of classroom learning. In the next section we review briefly some of the available 1990s evidence regarding NCMFL learning outcomes, teachers' implementation of the framework, and their learners' reactions.

4. THE IMPLEMENTATION OF NCMFL

4.1 HOW WELL ARE ENGLISH SCHOOLCHILDREN PROGRESSING IN LEARNING FOREIGN LANGUAGES WITHIN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK?

As a first answer for this question, summative measures using national yardsticks are available in the form of GCSE examination results at the end of key stage 4, and Teacher Assessments using the National Curriculum assessment framework at the end of key stage 3. Both measures have known weaknesses, but data is available for the total population of school age learners, which gives a credible broad-brush picture of overall learning outcomes.

At key stage 4, as we have seen, there have clearly been significant gains in the numbers of children attempting at least one GCSE in a foreign language (78 per cent of the age cohort in 2001), and also achieving an A*-C grade (40 per cent of the 2001 age cohort: DfES, 2001). This does not yet constitute real success for a majority of our key stage 4 learners (what was the learning experience of the 60 per cent who did not achieve a GCSE pass?). However, it was actually the best showing of any subject after English (where 54 per cent achieved an A*-C grade), maths (48 per cent) and science (48 per cent). Clearly, getting a majority of learners to succeed at this level remains a challenge for all subjects across the secondary education curriculum.

At key stage 3, Teacher Assessments for 2002 show 47 per cent of 14-year-olds achieving a National Curriculum Level 5 or above (the "expected" level for MFL DfES, 2002b). In contrast to key stage 4, where MFL results are broadly comparable with other subjects, the key stage 3 results are well behind. They are well below the proportion of students achieving Level 5 in English (67 per cent), mathematics (70 per cent) or science (67 per cent) – or indeed in any other National Curriculum subject. There is also a striking gender gap, with just 39 per cent of boys achieving Level 5 or better, compared with 55 per cent of girls.

Of course, MFLs are the only National Curriculum subject which start from scratch at the beginning of key stage 3, and Level 5 has only recently been redefined so as to become the "expected" level for the subject. Nonetheless, we have already noted that Level 5 is the first Level in the NC scheme where the defined assessment criteria require some meaningful control of a creative target language system. The fact that teachers themselves apparently judge only a minority of the age cohort to be reaching this level, after three years of language learning, must give

us serious concern.

Other evidence is available which contributes to the picture of uneven learner development during key stage 3. OFSTED have pointed out consistently that learners make a good start in Year 7, but that significant numbers appear to plateau in Years 8 and 9. Dobson (2002) gives a recent overview from an OFSTED perspective of key issues relating to progression (in speaking and in writing) in both KS3 and KS4. His general conclusion is that "attainment in MFL is rising over the five years of secondary education, but slowly and unevenly... underachievement is usually most marked in the productive skills of speaking and writing." (p. 2) Drawing on inspection evidence from 1999-2001, Dobson describes key stage 3 underachievement in the following terms:

Many pupils have an insufficient basis for further progression through key stage 4 and beyond. This is particularly the case where pupils' understanding of how language works, grasp of basic grammar, and powers of recall are weak. Examples include a narrow range of adjectives and limited ability to manipulate the tenses of common verbs. In such cases pupils struggle to cope with more demanding tasks particularly where these involve taking the initiative or coping with the unpredictable (2002: 3-4).

While some parts of this description seem debatable (are adjectives really the weakest area of KS3 learners' vocabulary development?), the overall OFSTED message is clear (and in line with the KS3 teacher assessments for MFL). It seems that there is a significant proportion of 14-year-olds who have failed to internalise enough target language material to develop and control any stable language system, and who consequently cannot themselves engage in meaningful target language use.

4.2 HOW ARE TEACHERS INTERPRETING AND IMPLEMENTING THE NCMFL FRAMEWORK?

OFSTED is also a main source of commentaries on the ongoing quality of teaching for MFL. In their view, there has in recent years been a "gradual improvement in the quality of teaching" for MFL, with "fewer unsatisfactory lessons and more good lessons" (Dobson, 2002). As a professional judgement this is good news in principle, though such generalisations can be problematic to unpack and hard to relate in detail to evidence about language learning outcomes.

However, Dobson also makes a number of more specific points deriving from OFSTED observations of MFL lessons during the 1990s, which can be related to aspects of the critique of NCMFL presented in section 3 above. Dobson reports that in many MFL classrooms, very limited opportunities are available to learners to do the following:

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- a) to acquire understanding of the grammatical structures of the language;
- b) to expand their vocabulary beyond the basics;
- c) to marshal and re-use existing language knowledge in new and wider-ranging situations;
- d) to take the initiative, ask questions, offer comments and justify opinions;
- e) more generally, to develop independence in tackling and completing learning tasks (paraphrased from Dobson, 2002: 1-2).

These OFSTED observations are compatible with other research derived findings concerning MFL classroom practice during the 1990s. For example, Mitchell and Martin (1997) analysed a corpus of French key stage 3 lessons taught during the mid 1990s. They reported that grammar pedagogy was idiosyncratic, with considerable variation in the attention paid to grammar, and also in the grammar topics taught. They also showed that the lessons observed were in general very strongly teacher-centred and teacher-led. Pair- and group-work were rare, as was differentiation by task. Teachers used considerable amounts of the target language, and learners were actively involved in whole-class language practice of various kinds, with a strong focus on speaking and listening. However, they had only limited opportunities for taking the conversational initiative or developing independence in tackling tasks, and hardly any opportunity to reflect explicitly on learning styles and strategies.

Dobson (2002) attributes some of these problems to teachers' failure to pay sufficient attention to the Programme of Study which forms part of NCMFL (p. 2). However, as we have seen, the Programme of Study offers very little guidance regarding the first issue on the list – grammar pedagogy and grammar progression. A good deal more is said in the POS regarding the development of learning strategies, learner initiative and learner independence, and the need for regular opportunities for meaningful target language use. However, in our present educational climate, where teachers and schools are held to account primarily through National Curriculum assessment systems, we must expect MFL teachers, like others, to take most seriously those parts of NCMFL which are actually assessed. As seen already, the assessment framework for NCMFL is written so as to reward highly controlled performance, at least at the lower levels. If this powerful framework does not itself reward learner independence, risk taking and creativity, then it is unsurprising if the classroom practices of MFL teachers follow suit (Mitchell, 2000).

4.3 HOW ARE LEARNERS RESPONDING TO NCMFL?

Finally we need to consider briefly the impact on learners' attitudes and motivation of the NCMFL framework. This is hard to disentangle from

learners' views about foreign language learning more generally. However, student attitudes and motivation for FL learning have been quite well studied, with numerous questionnaire and interview surveys taking place during the 1990s, i.e. the NCMFL decade (e.g. Clark and Trafford, 1996; Lee *et al.*, 1998; Chambers, 1999; McPake *et al.*, 1999; Stables and Wikeley, 1999; Graham, 2002).

These studies generally show Year 7 learners starting MFL study with a positive disposition toward a new National Curriculum subject. Motivation declines over the next couple of years (Chambers, 1999), and the subject is commonly rated relatively unfavourably compared with others (Chambers, 1999; Stables and Wikeley, 1999; Rawlinson, 2001). Some studies show that children have internalised a weak instrumental rationale for FL learning, so that FLs are seen as somehow connected with eventual jobs and employment chances, probably unrealistically so (Lee *et al.*, 1998). However, UK students see themselves as less likely to travel/have international contacts than comparator groups in mainland Europe (Chambers, 1999). Stables and Wikeley (1999) report a survey of 14- and 15-year-olds conducted in 1996, which replicated an earlier survey (1984) long pre-dating NCMFL. The learners in both these surveys saw languages as lacking in career value, difficult, and not particularly enjoyable to learn. These seem to be robust effects linked primarily to the broader social context and learners' general awareness of their special situation as speakers of the world language, English, rather than to the detail of the MFL curriculum.

However, even in the broad-brush survey of Stables and Wikeley, there are some suggestions that individual schools/MFL departments could 'make a difference' to learner attitudes and preparedness to opt for languages. There is evidence from other surveys that learners' perceptions of their actual language learning experience is significant for attitudes and motivation. For example, learners surveyed by Clark and Trafford (1996) expressed frustration about the repetitive nature of their learning experience (p. 43). Older students surveyed by McPake and colleagues commented that the curriculum content during the compulsory phase was narrow and too centred on mundane everyday life (McPake *et al.*, 1999). Learners also regularly express frustration with their own attainment, in that they cannot express themselves and say what they would like to (Graham, 2002). The London children surveyed by Lee *et al.* (1998) had no clear view of their own linguistic progression, i.e. were not able to articulate ways in which their FL skills were developing or to perceive/report on any increasing linguistic challenge in the programme they were following. All they had noted was a rotation of topics (hobbies, travel and transport, shopping...). More positively, for the minority of Year 11 learners in Graham's study who were planning to continue the study of French post-16,

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intrinsic enjoyment of the subject was the most important reason. Similarly, projects giving learners greater choice of topics, more opportunity to reflect on learning strategies and learning outcomes and more varied and more learner-directed activities have been shown to improve motivation as well as promoting learning in key stage 3, at least in the short term (e.g. Ashley, 2001; Rawlinson, 2001).

These studies suggest that any MFL curriculum in the special UK setting faces real challenges in convincing learners of the value of sustained MFL study. We cannot attribute all our learners' current ambivalence to particular features of NCMFL! However, we can reasonably ask whether a curriculum/assessment model focussing on direct skills training and controlled FL performances is likely to maximise intrinsic motivation, a sense of purposeful linguistic progress and lessons which maximise learners' feelings of communicative relevance and enjoyment. The research literature on motivation clearly suggests otherwise (Dörnyei, 2001a; 2001b).

5. RENEWING THE 'LANGUAGES FOR ALL' CURRICULUM: THE RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

The new thinking by government regarding 14-19 education has implications for the National Curriculum way beyond the changes entailed for MFL (DfES, 2003). In effect, the whole notion of a unified programme of study for all children will now end at age 14 instead of age 16. Only English, mathematics and science will continue to be compulsory subjects post-14 – and even compulsory science survives only in a remodelled, less 'academic' form. In this environment, languages post-14 will have to attract a volunteer public with a strong set of rationales, educational, intercultural and vocational (Mitchell, 2002).

The challenges for MFL, as laid out in the 14-19 proposals and in the *National Languages Strategy for England*, are clear. "Languages for all" will once again be a phenomenon centring on key stage 3, though hopefully underpinned increasingly by developing MFL capacity in primary schools. It is vital that the identified shortcomings of NCMFL are addressed if we are to maximise learners' achievement and make an appropriately positive contribution to the general education of all children, during this redefined phase of universal language learning.

As indicated in the critique above, there are numerous points of development for MFL education where research can make a distinctive contribution of at least two kinds. Firstly, we can draw more fully on existing international bodies of knowledge regarding language learning and effective FL classroom practice than was possible when NCMFL was first drawn up. Secondly, we can devise new research programmes to support and evaluate new classroom initiatives as these are put into practice. The rest of this paper

presents a specific example of how this could be done, focussing on the central underlying concept of linguistic progression.

5.1 A REVITALISED CONCEPT OF PROGRESSION

a) Learner progression

There is plenty of research evidence already available regarding the course of development followed by typical classroom language learners. For example, at the University of Southampton we have been gathering a corpus of spoken learner French from a significant number of learners in key stages 3 and 4 (60 learners in key stage 3: Mitchell and Dickson, 1997; followed by 40 learners in key stage 4: Myles, 2002). The data was gathered by audiorecording a range of semi-spontaneous oral activities, including individual interviews, picture description and story telling, plus a variety of problem-solving activities carried out collaboratively by pairs of learners. This kind of unrehearsed oral data is taken by many researchers to give the best picture of learners' underlying language system (better than e.g. written tests, where monitoring and checking can complicate the picture). Analysis of the combined corpus is currently being undertaken using the computer software devised by the internationally known CHILDES project (MacWhinney, 2001). When complete, this work will provide a full picture of children's developing command of French sentence structure and vocabulary, as well as insights into the acquisition of more 'micro' features such as verb inflections, gender concord etc. Because of the interactive nature of much of the corpus, the material can also provide vital evidence regarding the contribution made by scaffolding and feedback to target-language processing and to the adoption by learners of more advanced/correct language forms.

Analyses carried out so far on the Southampton corpus show that in some respects early classroom learners resemble the untutored adult migrants studied by the ESF project. From a very early stage they can engage in quite extensive conversational interaction, but they need a good deal of scaffolded help to achieve this, and their language use is distant from the target norms of standard French. The very earliest utterances are verbless, and even when sentences start to be built around verbs these are commonly uninflected. Inflection e.g. for gender and number is also typically absent, and intermediate forms are used for 'le'/'la', 'un'/'une', 'je'/'j'ai' and similar items.

However, in other ways, classroom learners are very different from untutored learners. Firstly, from the beginning they make use in conversational interaction of rote-learned 'chunks' of language which may reflect quite complex grammar patterns – e.g. often their first questions are produced in this way ('comment t'appelles-tu?'). Indeed the Southampton corpus suggests that learners who are good at memorising a store of such expressions early on are also likely to make good progress later

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“A language-specific grammar ‘spine’ is needed – alongside rote-learned expressions with immediate communicative value”

in developing a more creative control of the target system. It seems that these ‘chunks’ may form a valuable and portable collection of sentence patterns and models, which are gradually analysed and unpacked as the learner tries to make more varied use of them. Secondly, it is also clear that at least some classroom learners can monitor and correct their own speech productions, using metalinguistic knowledge studied in class. Thus, some classroom learners seem able to speed up e.g. the acquisition of verb inflections or gender concord, by integrating ‘learned’ and ‘acquired’ knowledge. (There was also some suggestion that teachers could move these processes along best by consistent target language use, combined with active correction strategies.)

One striking feature of the Southampton learner French corpus is the relatively uniform ‘progression route’ along which many classroom learners seem to travel – put crudely, from jumbled words and phrases, to chunks, to control of sentence patterns. Effective teaching seemed to speed up this progression, but could not significantly bypass its various stages. One of the main ‘blocks’ to progression in our corpus seemed to be the very limited range of verbs which learners generally knew (verbs are central to sentence building, and where few of them are known, clearly sentence-building opportunities are greatly restricted). A second issue is the apparent rate of ‘forgetting’ of all types of language material (words, chunks and sentence patterns), perhaps due to inadequate opportunities to recycle and re-use new language, in meaningful activities, once introduced. Finally, there is some evidence of learners’ over-reliance on chunks for communication, even when other language seemed potentially available for more creative use.

b) Syllabus progression

What are the implications for design of any revised version of NCMFL, of the outline sketched above of what is known of learner development?

1. A language-specific grammar ‘spine’ is needed – alongside rote-learned expressions with immediate communicative value, learners need to be ‘pushed’ to encounter and manipulate new grammar patterns with a wider range of e.g. verb vocabulary and to use them creatively to make meaning;
2. Metalinguistic understanding needs to be developed, along with learners’ strategies for planning, reflection, monitoring and evaluation of their own performance;
3. Interaction is central to learning, especially opportunities to re-use and re-structure memorised expressions, grammar patterns and vocabulary and apply them in new contexts;
4. Scaffolding is central to learning, and is also a significant indicator of progression, as learners move from great dependence on their interlocutor, to show increasing independence and initiative;
5. Creativity and risk-taking are also central, and should be developed through tasks and

projects, and clearly rewarded in assessment systems, from the earliest stages.

Clearly, principles such as these deriving from the existing evidence base regarding the course and nature of classroom learning could be built into a redesigned curriculum, with strands for ‘grammar’, ‘interaction’, ‘learning how to learn’ replacing the current ‘four skills’ model. Such a curriculum could then be trialled and fine-tuned through an action research process. Alongside, appropriate assessment procedures could similarly be developed and evaluated through ‘partnership’ research, involving teams of teachers, professional researchers and other stakeholders, from the new primary MFL arena as well as from the traditional secondary school arena.

Revitalising linguistic progression within NCMFL is not the whole story to the revitalisation of “languages for all” in the current UK context. Much else needs to be done, e.g. regarding the revitalisation of curriculum themes and topics, and developing relationships with other subjects (such as citizenship, ICT, the humanities...). Clearly MFL is also being asked to rethink its relationship with major cross-curricular themes such as mother tongue literacy, via the new Key Stage 3 Foundation Strategy currently under pilot. But a future agenda for MFL must centre on ensuring that most learners are making meaningful progress with mastery and use of the target language system itself. Without this focus, the place of MFL in a foundation curriculum at any stage becomes very hard to defend – as current events are sharply reminding us. In working towards this central objective, the contribution of research has up to now been under-used; hopefully, this special issue is a small step towards redressing this balance.

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