

# Modern languages - beyond Nuffield and into the 21st Century

Michael Grenfell

University of Southampton

This article discusses issues of policy and practice in modern foreign language teaching in the light of recent past experience, OfSTED inspection findings and the concerns raised by the Nuffield Inquiry. Comments about the present state of MFL teaching and learning are made under three principal headings: Methodological Doubts; Curriculum Confusion; and Loss of Purpose. Each of these is considered and suggestions made for positive ways forward.

## INTRODUCTION

If they were to glance back over the last ten to fifteen years, modern languages teachers might be forgiven for feeling rather pleased. Twelve years ago, GCSE had just come on stream. The new-style modern languages exam represented at that time the single biggest shift in modern languages teaching and learning since the audio-lingual revolution. In the late 1980s, the National Curriculum was also in the offing. At last, there was a national framework to guide exam boards, teachers and pupils across the secondary age-range. Diversification was also a watch-word of the times, as local education authorities sought to offer languages besides French to their pupils. Money was available, pilot projects were organised, teachers were trained.

These changes were the culmination of work by teachers, academics, students and researchers directed at finding new ways of thinking about learning languages and designing appropriate syllabuses for contemporary needs (see Hawkins, 1996). Many of these were on a communicative high, spurred on by methodological innovations, advances in technology and growing links with Europe and beyond. The modern languages professional association reconstituted itself early on in the new decade: JCLA (the Joint Council of Language Associations) became ALL (the Association for Language Learning) and most language-specific societies joined the new federation. With such changes came new optimism and confidence about teaching modern languages. Buoyed up by such energy, the policy

of 'languages for all' became an assumption rather than an expectation and was duly implemented as part of curricular reform.

Against this background, it might be expected that teachers are now ready to welcome the new century with policy and practice in place to capitalise on the work of the past. However, dark clouds on the horizon are casting shadows over the achievements of past years. So much so, that the previous spirit of optimism and confidence is being undermined by scepticism, confusion and doubt.

The National Curriculum (DfE, 1995), distilled from an initial advice document of 195 pages to a 10-page outline<sup>1</sup>, has, along the way, lost many of its ideas and ideals in the process of curricular reform. The promise of 'languages for all' has proved to be something of a mirage, especially in Key Stage 4 and beyond. Diversification has all but run aground in many schools, squeezed out by managerial exigencies to fit everything into an overcrowded timetable. HMI reports (see Dobson, 1998) express concern about pupils' linguistic competence, especially the progress achieved in the course of five years' modern language learning in secondary schools. Such matters are giving cause for concern. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising if the Nuffield Inquiry consultative report (Moys, 1998)<sup>2</sup> was reflective in tone, retrospective in manner and anxious in looking to the future. This is reflected in its title: *Where are we going with Languages?* It might also have asked: what are we doing here? The contributors to the inquiry, chaired by Sir Trevor McDonald and Sir John Boyd, took their lead from its section titles: How does Europe promote languages? What does global trade mean for UK languages? Will English be enough? They raise questions concerning modern language teaching and learning in schools, Higher Education and Adult Education. These questions were posed against a background which saw approximately half of the secondary

**"concern  
about... the  
progress  
achieved in  
the course of  
five years'  
modern  
language  
learning"**

school age cohort being entered for GCSE (and half of these achieving A – C grades) and the proportion of MFLs to total entries at A level falling, in French and German at least (TES, August 27 1999, Moys 1998: 47).

This article addresses this situation and the Nuffield questions under three principal headings: Methodological Doubts; Curriculum Confusion; Loss of Purpose.

## METHODOLOGICAL DOUBTS

### COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING

As part of the ‘communicative high’, which gripped methodological and curricular reform in the 1980s, the GCSE, and in its turn the National Curriculum, were designed according to the principles of ‘Communicative Language Teaching’. Traditional precepts of translation, comprehension and accuracy were replaced by the four skills, authenticity of source materials and error tolerance. The concept of the ‘sympathetic native speaker’ appeared along with the notion of pupil as host or tourist. Target language use was the new by-word for modern language teaching. In fact, a high percentage of target language use was perceived as being synonymous with good teaching, so that inspections were prone to judge the quality of lessons in terms of this factor alone. Grammar teaching was often pushed to the sidelines in an attempt ‘to get pupils talking’.

There are good reasons for judging an oral/aural approach to language learning being advantageous for developing linguistic competence. Grammar-translation was too narrowly focused on what is taught to pupils; and a rejection of grammar teaching was strongly advocated by Stephen Krashen (1981, 1982)<sup>3</sup>. Language is the expression of an individual personality, to which sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic conventions apply. It thus makes sense to draw upon these social and psychological conventions as ‘scaffolding’ in expressing personality and identity in another language. Some work in applied linguistics seemed to offer a rationale for a rejection of the grammar-translation method.

It is recognised too that an oral/aural approach to learning fits nicely with fun activities in the early years. Publishers and course book authors need to be congratulated on the wealth of lively, attractive activities now available for use in lessons. Video, ICT and sound recordings also bring the culture of the language alive in the classroom. But to what end? Most pupils start their modern language lessons with enthusiasm and excitement. However, HMI (Dobson *op.cit.*) report on a ‘slowing of progression’ as pupils reach the end of Key Stage 3, after 3 years of secondary school study. Plateauing seems to continue in KS4 for many pupils. OfSTED also note little pupil-

initiated language, and that enthusiasm appears to wane for many pupils. Only a small minority continue to study a second foreign language at advanced level.

Part of the reason for this is the way communicative language teaching has been interpreted for the British context. Materials are often apparently lively and attractive, but beneath the colour and the glitz frequently lie acts of repetition and rote-learning just as monotonous as any language-lab drill. I have described the approach as something of a ‘transactional wolf in interactional sheep’s clothing’ (Grenfell, 1991): pupils order meals they are not going to eat, plan journeys they are not going to make and hear about people there are never going to meet. There is often little of themselves, of their own worlds in much that passes in the name of communicative language teaching these days.

It is known (see Mitchell and Dickson, 1997) that successful learners do start to break down the chunks of language given to them, to analyse component parts and to begin to generate their own language as a result. However, this is painfully slow for most pupils, given the amount of the timetable devoted to languages and the opportunities for encounter with the people and culture of the second language outside of lessons. Others simply continue with their phrase book routines.

What are the implications for ‘communicative’ approaches? Some teachers and researchers, faced with methodological disappointments, have launched a ‘return to grammar’ movement<sup>4</sup>. Others have moved in a different direction, producing a ‘super-communicative approach’ based on a combination of total physical response, neuro-linguistic programming and suggestopaedia<sup>5</sup>. Still others have explored the area of autonomy and independent learning (Gathercole, 1990; Little, 1989). These too have their extremists, but many schools and teachers now experiment with carousels, self-access (especially in the use of IT), and work within more individualised styles of learning for pupils. The ‘to grammar or not to grammar’ question always obscured the crucial issue on these aspects of language learning, which are: what grammar? when grammar? why grammar? how grammar?

The relationship between language learning and communication is far from straightforward. Communication may not be the means *and* the end of language learning but, rather, the end towards which pedagogic activity is orientated. Rethinking the classroom in a goal-directed way implies planning and preparing for communication, not simply mimicking it. Pupils think *about* the foreign language as well as *think* in it. Such an approach aims to process the full scope of linguistic information – vocabulary and grammar – and it also involves thinking about language use and language learning. Greater attention is also given

“Grammar teaching was often pushed to the sidelines in an attempt ‘to get pupils talking’”

to the way the systemic (language) knowledge of the learner maps onto their schematic (conceptual) view of world (cf. Foley, 1991). On this latter point, the social and cultural content of language learning is all-important in terms of the structure and forms needed to access and express it.

### THE GOOD LANGUAGE LEARNER

The notion of the 'good language learner' is useful here (see Naiman *et al.* 1978/1996). What is it that a successful learner does that a less successful one does not do? It is apparent that across skill areas there exists a whole repertoire of ways of thinking in and about language which can be of service to learners: memorisation strategies; ways of inferencing and deduction; resources to be drawn upon; and systems to be constructed in order to process and generate meaning. Perhaps most important are those metacognitive skills, of monitoring, evaluation and planning which allow learners to reflect on their learning as part of their use of language (see O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Grenfell and Harris, 1999). Such strategies are highly individualistic, do seem to have a developmental sequence, and involve different language skills in different ways.

It is common for course books to pay passing attention to language learning strategies, but they need to be developed in a way which allows learners to build up their own knowledge about language. Learning strategies were mentioned in the 1995 National Curriculum but, only as one item in a list of some 40 skills to be acquired in learning and using the target language<sup>6</sup>. Little wonder therefore if not much time was devoted to them, as teachers felt they have more than enough to cover in the Programme of Study and the Attainment Targets for detailing communicative proficiency. Yet, there is evidence to suggest that learners only acquire linguistic competence when they are able to think about and reflect on the processes of their learning. Such reflection requires time to be set aside for personal introspection and retrospection and the means of expressing it. However, it also requires group plenaries where good practice and insight are shared. Both of these may demand the use of English, which has become unfashionable in recent times. It is probably worth remembering also that from September 1999, pupils entering secondary schools come with a National Literacy Strategy background, which includes explicit ways of thinking about and using language. It will be important to explore how modern language teachers can capitalise on pupils' preparation in this area.

In sum, it seems that modern languages have been methodologically in some confusion: in some ways language teachers are fortunate to have at their disposal a wide range of resources and activities. But what do these all add up to? There are also uncertainties about target language use,

grammar and the nature of language learning for individual pupils.

## CURRICULUM CONFUSION

### THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

Recent decades have seen extensive curricular reform. In many ways, producing a National Curriculum in Modern Foreign Languages at all represents an achievement, but much has been lost is the process of redraft upon redraft. The 195-page Initial Advice, which discussed a number of language learning issues in some detail, has, in the course of review and revision, been reduced to brief outline documents to guide teaching and assessment. We have had seven versions.

Many would argue that the National Curriculum as it stands, the minimum version, is enough and offers flexibility and space for teachers and learners to make of it what they will. There is nothing in the National Curriculum which necessitates the type of all-singing, all-dancing course materials sometimes promoted by leading publishers, or by government agencies dealing with modern languages. Yet, the Curriculum is sometimes overly prescriptive where it does not need to be and unhelpfully vague where it would be better to be precise, as the following examples show.

### GRAMMAR AND PROGRESSION

Grammar has been a case in point. On the one hand, there has been a demand for exposure to the foreign language in order to supply lots of comprehensible input from which pupils may induce grammar. On the other, it has been recognised that insight is needed, which may be supplied by explicit technical explanations. Where is the balance to be struck? The message has often been interpreted to be that target language is good, English is bad; induction is best, deduction is limited. In the latest version, however, grammar has been placed at the top of the MFLs curriculum agenda as the second item listed in the new Programme of Study: 'Pupils should be taught the grammar of the target language and how to apply it'.

Of course, past ambiguity on such issues has partly been solved by omission. The discursive tone of the Initial Advice has been reduced by prescription. We read in the 1995 Programme of Study that pupils should be taught to 'understand and apply patterns, rules and exceptions in language forms and structures'. The most explicit reference to grammar in the Levels of Attainment has been at level 5 and 6 where use of past, present and future tenses are required. Besides language complexity, elsewhere in each Attainment Target, strands of progression continue to be embedded. It is possible, for example, to trace strands relating

**"pupils  
entering  
secondary  
schools come  
with a  
National  
Literacy  
Strategy  
background"**