

Grammar in MFL teaching revisited

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This paper addresses a major issue in foreign language learning, namely the role and status of grammar within the context of recent policy and curriculum developments. An analysis of National Curriculum and GCSE requirements and their impact upon teachers and learners reveals the need for a significant reassessment of the profile of grammar. The stage is therefore set for a reappraisal of this issue, and a consideration of its compatibility with current communicative methods.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar has traditionally been a source of debate in the teaching of foreign languages. Its status has been largely determined by prevailing methodologies, themselves the prey of developments in research and shifting fashions. More significant than this, however, is the impact of policy change upon teaching and learning, which can signal a radical reversal of classroom practice, demanding swift and often inadequately prepared implementation. There can be little doubt that policy and syllabus requirements shape teacher perceptions, which in turn account for changing attitudes towards grammar in the classroom. A consideration of the historical context, current developments in policy and changes in examinations will clear the way for revisiting this fundamental and often misrepresented issue.

THE DECLINE OF GRAMMAR

It is a commonly held view in the foreign language teaching community that the role of grammar has suffered in favour of communicative approaches. The acknowledged deficiency in linguistic accuracy is particularly apparent in post-GCSE students (see Hurman, 1992), making teachers more acutely aware of the need to establish grammatical concepts at an earlier age. In his survey of A level French oral examiners' views Hurman found that 41% had observed a decline in language form (accuracy), while 56% commented on an increase in communicative skill. In their survey of examiners' reports of French A level and GCSE

papers Metcalfe et al. (1995: 47) clearly highlight the need for accuracy to support communication skills; an SEG examiner notes: "The inability to form verb tenses or to choose the correct tense was the principal cause of failure to communicate the required information." Examiners clearly feel that "the move from accuracy has become too pronounced" and state in a report of 1992 that "the emphasis placed on successful communication seems to have encouraged a neglect of accurate writing" (Metcalfe et al. 1995: 47).

On the other hand a WJEC examiners' report of 1992 drew attention to candidates' rote-learning of grammar coupled with an inability to make any sense out of it (cited in Metcalfe et al., 1995: 50), who continue:

...Some candidates had filled their first page with three tense conjugations of regular paradigms (plus *avoir* and *être*) and had listed all the past participles, but were incapable of writing one single verb correctly in the context of a sentence.

This deficiency translates itself ultimately into a worrying lack of linguistic knowledge and grammatical awareness amongst those in Higher Education and those intending to teach. Bloor (1986) (cited in Metcalfe et al., 1995: 47) found "serious gaps in the linguistic knowledge of English of his Modern Languages university students (58% of whom could not identify an infinitive)." Research by Wray (1993) and Williamson and Hardman (1995) found similar deficiencies in linguistic knowledge amongst student teachers, and a QCA report on the teaching of grammar in the National Curriculum (QCA, 1998: 55) noted:

Most young teachers have knowledge of some parts of speech but little overall understanding of syntax or its relation to the development of writing and many lack a framework to assess pupils' syntactic development.

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Reasons for this disconcerting trend are in part attributable to prevailing policy and practice and their development over the past decade. It is therefore important to establish the role of grammar within communicative language teaching by analysing trends in the National Curriculum and GCSE examinations against the background of relevant research over this period.

GRAMMAR IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The teaching of grammar has long been a contentious issue and often the casualty of changing methodologies. The final report of the National Curriculum (DES/WO, 1990) contained many substantial and forward-looking recommendations, the force of which was subsequently much diluted. On the issue of grammar it recognised that 'modern language teaching and learning has suffered in the past from extremes of practice, and nowhere more than in the treatment of grammar' (9.22). In fact, the antithesis between 'grammar' and 'communication' is in many senses a false one, as Pachler and Field (1997:145) suggest: 'the ability to recognise linguistic patterns and to make use of and apply grammatical rules aids communication rather than inhibits it.'

Success in learning a foreign language in the period of the grammar-translation method was largely determined by the ability of the learner to understand and apply grammatical structures. This was achieved through close analysis of language patterns, explanations and rules, and it was assessed predominantly by means of written tasks, constructed to exemplify essential grammatical features of the language, rather than to realise a communicative purpose. Despite moves during the 1970s towards more communicative approaches, and initiatives such as the Graded Objectives movement, the place of grammar was not diminished because of the demand for grammatical accuracy in the O level examination. It was not until 1988 and the introduction of GCSE that the swing away from grammar-translation began to have a major impact. It would appear that the increased emphasis on the four skills in the GCSE was leading to a marginalisation of grammar.

Interestingly, however, in the final report for the National Curriculum (DES/WO, 1990: 9.14) a significant section of chapter 9 ("Sounds, words and structures") is devoted to the importance of grammar. The document stresses that grammar constitutes "the skeleton of any language" and goes on to state that "an increasing awareness of [grammar] can be an important ingredient in learners' progress towards a truly independent use of language." Furthermore it places grammar firmly at the centre of progress in the receptive, as well as the productive, skills by claiming that "...a good understanding of structures is also central to

success in listening and reading."(DES/WO, 1990: 9.21).

By the time the statutory version of the National Curriculum appeared (DES/WO, 1991), the role assigned to grammar became diluted amongst a plethora of other more communicative considerations like "communicating in the target language", "understanding and responding", "developing the ability to work with others". Grammar itself was subsumed in the sub-section "developing language-learning skills and awareness of language"(DES/WO, 1991:25):

Pupils should have regular opportunities to: use knowledge about language (linguistic patterns, structures, grammatical features and relationships and compound words and phrases) to infer meaning and develop their own use of language.

There are also references in the statements of attainment which imply a knowledge of grammar, (DES/WO, 1991), for example:

ask about, describe and narrate *past, present and future* actions and events (AT2, Level 6b);

apply basic elements of *grammar* to new contexts and generally adopt correct word order (AT4, Level 5);

redraft writing tasks, achieving greater *accuracy, precision* and variety of expression (AT4, Level 7) (our italics).

These references to grammar continue, both directly and indirectly, in the revised National Curriculum Programme of Study Part I, (DFE/WO, 1995: 3):

Pupils should be taught to:

2i: describe and discuss *past, present and future* events;

2n: redraft their writing to improve its *accuracy* and presentation;

3f: understand and apply patterns, rules and exceptions in language forms and *structures* (our italics).

Similarly, in the attainment targets, progress to the higher levels can only be achieved through an understanding and application of tense forms, for example:

Pupils show understanding...of familiar material from several topics, including *past, present and future* events (AT1, Level 5)

They are beginning to apply basic elements of *grammar* in new contexts... (AT4, Level 5) (our italics).

As pupils progress through the levels more emphasis is given to the importance of accuracy. Thus, for example, AT2, Level 8 stipulates that language should be "largely *accurate* with few

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mistakes of any significance”, and AT3, Level 6 refers to “using context and *grammatical understanding*” to deduce meaning. AT 4 Level 8 requires that “spelling and *grammar* are generally *accurate*” and the use of reference materials should “extend their range of language and improve *accuracy*” (our italics).

In the 1999 document (DfEE/QCA, 1999) there are more direct references to the term “grammar” itself (which were absent from the 1995 document), both in the margin summaries and in the programme of study. The margin notes (DfEE/QCA, 1999:16) which summarise the main points that pupils will learn during a Key Stage state, at Key Stage 3, that pupils should:

...become familiar with the sounds, written form and *grammar* of the language, and use this knowledge with increasing confidence and competence, to express themselves in role-plays, conversations and writing (our italics).

“In the 1999 document... there are more direct references to the term “grammar””

Although these margin references are condensed into the “focus statement” in the National Curriculum for MFL in Wales (ACCAC, 2000: 6) and could in this form easily be overlooked, they are none the less resonant as a statement of intent: ‘They [pupils] should be taught to pay increasing attention to *accuracy, grammar* and register’ (our italics). At Key Stage 4 (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16) there is a marked progression. Thus, pupils should ‘begin to use a modern foreign language more independently, drawing on *a firmer grasp of grammar*, and a wider and more complex range of expression’ (our italics).

In the additional note on using the target language it is stated that:

Pupils are expected to use and respond to the target language, and to use English only when necessary (for example when *discussing a grammar point* or when comparing English and the target language) (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16) (our italics).

The Programme of Study itself again refers explicitly to the term “grammar”, for example in the section “acquiring knowledge, skills and understanding of the target language” (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16, 1b) and “knowledge of language”: ‘Pupils should be taught... the *grammar* of the target language and how to apply it’ (ACCAC, 2000: 6, 3.4) (our italics).

Other references are equally unambiguous: ‘Pupils should be taught... how to express themselves using a *range of vocabulary and structures*’ (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16, 1c) (our italics).

The sub-section “developing language skills” states that ‘pupils should be taught... how to redraft their writing to improve its *accuracy* and presentation, including the use of ICT’ (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16, 2j) (our italics).

Similarly in the National Curriculum for MFL in

Wales Key Stage 3 Programme of Study (ACCAC, 2000: 7, 5.8):

Pupils should be given opportunities to: produce a variety of types of writing, including the use of ICT, redrafting where necessary, to improve *accuracy* and presentation.

The Attainment Targets contain references to grammar similar to those in the 1995 document, but these have become more substantial and overt. The table below (Fig.1) summarises these more direct references in the 1999/2000 documents, highlighting differences of emphasis and wording between the English and Welsh National Curriculum versions.

Figure 1

	NC for England	NC for MFL in Wales
AT1, Level 6	Pupils show that they understand short narrative and extracts of spoken language, which cover various <i>past, present and future events</i> and include familiar language in unfamiliar contexts	(as in England)
AT2, Level 4	They are beginning to use their <i>knowledge of grammar</i> to adapt and substitute single words and phrases (our italics).	They are beginning to use their <i>knowledge of language</i> to adapt and substitute single words and phrases (our italics).
AT2, Level 6	they apply their <i>knowledge of grammar</i> in new contexts (our italics).	(as in England)
AT 4, Level 4	They are beginning to use their <i>knowledge of grammar</i> to adapt and substitute individual words and set phrases (our italics).	(Same as in 1995, i.e. they adapt a model <i>by</i> substituting individual words and phrases.)
AT 4, Level 6	They apply <i>grammar</i> in new contexts. Although there may be occasional mistakes, the meaning is clear (our italics).	They apply their knowledge of <i>grammar</i> in new contexts. Although there may be a few mistakes, the meaning is usually clear (our italics).
AT 4, Exceptional performance	Pupils write coherently and <i>accurately</i> about a wide range of factual and imaginative topics. (our italics).	(as in England)

As can be seen, therefore, there is a clearly discernible progression from the 1995 revised version of the National Curriculum for MFL to the 1999/2000 documents. Does the use of the actual term “grammar” signal its reinstatement from its marginalised status? The answer to this question must surely lie with the GCSE examination system, which after all to a large extent determines and defines classroom practice.

GRAMMAR AND GCSE

The influence of examination syllabuses and specifications on classroom methodology is indisputable and will inevitably govern practice more than the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4. As Norman (1998: 49) suggests:

[GCSE] assumes the role of methodological intermediary making explicit nationally prescribed proposals (NC) in the development of appropriate test forms, which in turn directly determine classroom method.

The WJEC GCSE examination syllabus itself provides further evidence of the changed status of grammar. In the 1996 syllabus there was no reference to grammar in the assessment objectives, but there was a list of grammatical requirements, which indicated “item required for recognition purposes only” and “item required for productive use” (WJEC, 1996: 19). This was differentiated into two lists: Basic and Higher. Included in the basic level section on “verbs” was productive use of the present, imperfect, *passé composé*, and recognition of the future and the passive. The higher level requires recognition of the conditional perfect, past historic and present subjunctive. The whole list represents a formidable set of grammatical challenges, interestingly not reflected in the assessment objectives.

With the introduction of the revised GCSE (WJEC, 1998) came noteworthy changes to the status of grammar. Direct references to grammar were made in the assessment objectives:

3.3.2 **Speaking.** Candidates entered for Higher Tier will... be expected to:

- use longer sequences of speech and a variety of vocabulary, *structure* and *time references*

3.3.4 **Writing.** Candidates entered for Foundation Tier will be expected to:

- describe events in the *past, present and future*. Candidates entered for Higher Tier will... be expected to:

- write with increasing *accuracy* and an increasingly wide range of language (our italics).

In the 1998 syllabus, grammatical structures that were previously differentiated at higher level have been incorporated into a requirement for all candidates. The distinction between “recognition”

and “production” has disappeared. Instead there is a statement that “candidates entered for the Higher Tier should be able to use the more complex structures with a high degree of accuracy” (WJEC, 1998:13). In the example given for “order of pronouns” in the pre-1998 syllabus (WJEC, 1996:19) the phrase “*Il me l’a dit*” was identified for recognition only at basic level and production at higher level. In the new syllabus, candidates for both tiers should be able to recognise and use the structure. Most noticeable are the increased expectations in the area of verbs, including, for example, future, conditional and conditional perfect, again for recognition and use in both tiers! A number of other syllabus changes reflect a move towards raising the academic standard of the foundation tier. The extent to which these changes find expression in questions in the new GCSE examination papers has not yet been investigated and would be an interesting area of research.

Also the contexts of the newly merged topics require more skilful manipulation of grammatical structures in both foundation and higher tiers. Pre-1998 there was differentiation of tasks within topic areas for the basic and higher tiers, but this significantly changes after 1998. Thus, for example, in the topic area of food *all* candidates are now expected to be able to “comment on different types of restaurant (e.g. national/vegetarian) and say which they prefer and why, comment on food quality, make complaints” (WJEC, 1998: 8). Topics previously designated at higher level only have been subsumed into other categories and required by *all* candidates (“communications and the media”, “emergencies”, “health and welfare”).

The rationale for this merging of topics and structures is to allow for foundation tier candidates to cope with the common questions that occur in both tiers and therefore to be in a position to achieve a grade C. Hence the grade descriptions for grade C (WJEC, 1998: 5) require candidates, for example, to be able to “express personal opinions and write about a variety of topics, including *past, present and future events*” (our italics).

It is interesting that in the 1996 WJEC syllabus there were no grade descriptions and therefore this grammatical hurdle for a grade C was not apparent. Their subsequent inclusion in the 1998 WJEC syllabus links grammar specifically to the assessment process. All of these changes will have an impact directly or indirectly on the role of grammar.

GRAMMAR AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CONFLICT?

In addition to the above there are issues concerning the nature of communicative language teaching and its primary emphasis on functions and notions, rather than grammatical objectives. It is interesting that Canale, quoted by Mitchell

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