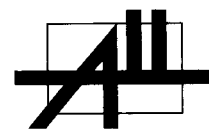

Teaching in the Target Language: Problems and Prospects



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Introduction

This article concerns the teacher's use of the target language as the medium of instruction in Scottish secondary school French language classrooms. Using new data, it attempts to discover why teachers find it so difficult to employ French as the medium of instruction, and suggests some possible solutions to the 'problems' identified.

Teaching through the medium of the target language

It is generally agreed by theoreticians and empiricists alike that irrespective of teaching methodology it is extremely important that the medium of instruction in the language classroom be the target language (Jakobovits, 1972; Burstall *et al*, 1974; Carroll, 1975; Canale and Swain, 1979; Johnstone, 1979; Clark, 1981).

Commonsense tells us that to learn a foreign language one must be exposed to it, and that although it is possible to learn a foreign language through the medium of the mother tongue (as did most contemporary British teachers of Modern Languages), such teaching does not generally prepare the learner for face-to-face communication. We know that where the teacher shares a mother tongue with his pupils there is a strong temptation to break into that language in order to deal with the management of the classroom, but as Clark (1981:153) says, when the teacher resorts to speaking the shared native language the message that is being given to the pupils is: 'use English when you have something real to say. Use the foreign language when we are doing exercises, question-and-answer work, and other *unreal* (non-communicative) things'.

Despite the general agreement on the desirability of using French as the medium of instruction, Parkinson (1983) in a study evaluating the use of a communicative language course (*Tour de France*) reveals that, in as many as 60% of the classrooms he observed, the use of French for managerial purposes was restricted to 'bonjour' and 'au revoir' and that even in 10% of classes where French was used extensively, English was still used for detailed explanations.

Reporting on the Scottish Education Department funded Communicative Interaction Project conducted between 1980 and 1983, Mitchell (1988) states that, while teachers were aware of the desirability of teaching through the medium of the target language, only a very small percentage of the 59 interviewed believed that it could be used exclusively in the classroom. Most teachers felt that a mix of the two languages was appropriate. Indeed, there was a general consensus of opinion that the only activity that could be easily conducted in French was the giving of classroom organisational instructions and that, at the other end of the scale, activities such as teaching grammar, disciplining pupils, or teaching background, were best dealt with in English.

These findings, which are replicated in the study which is the subject of this article, are not restricted to the teaching of French as a foreign language. Teaching through the medium of the target language is also a problem for non-native teachers of English as a foreign language. Sprengel (1984) in Germany and Medgyes (1986) in Hungary both identify this as being a major problem in their schools. The same may be true in other countries.

The teacher's use of the target language in Strathclyde secondary schools

The data for this article were gathered by means of a postal questionnaire which forms part of a study to investigate the relation-

ship between the presence of a co-operative teacher in the language classroom and certain aspects of communicative language teaching methodology.¹ The Co-operative Teaching Survey was sent to 267 teachers of French at 65 secondary schools in Strathclyde. The tables are based on the responses of 201 teachers: 33 in Lanarkshire, 28 in Dumbarton and 140 in Glasgow. The respondents, of whom 6 are native speakers of French, break down into 67 men and 132 women.

In the Co-operative Teaching Survey teachers were first asked whether or not they thought it important to teach through the medium of the target language. Then they were asked in a closed question to judge whether or not ten language activities (drawn from an open question in Mitchell's Communicative Interaction Project) could be performed in French, in French with difficulties, or were best dealt with in English. Examination of the resulting figures show that things have not changed very much since Mitchell's study (See Table 1).

While most teachers (90% of respondents) recognise the inherent importance of teaching in the target language, they nevertheless identify a hierarchy of difficulty among classroom management tasks, placing them in three broad categories (within each of which a further hierarchy exists). These are:

1. tasks which are relatively easy to perform in French (organising the classroom, giving activity instructions and chatting with pupils);
2. tasks which are relatively difficult to perform in French (disciplining, running tests, correcting written work, and explaining meanings);
3. tasks which are extremely difficult to perform in French (discussing language objectives, teaching background, and teaching grammar).

Reasons for teachers' inability to use the target language

Why are teachers unable to conduct their lessons in French? In another closed question respondents were asked to rate on a four point scale how important a number of situations are in terms of their contribution to success in using French in the classroom. The reasons presented in the question were chosen partly on the basis of comments made by teachers in an informal discussion at one of the schools in Lanarkshire, and partly on the basis of the author's own experience of trying to maintain the use of the target language in Strathclyde secondary schools. The findings in order of importance are shown in Table 2.

In an open question which followed, respondents were asked to suggest any further impediments to using the target language as the medium of instruction. Three main issues were identified. These were (a) preparing learners for a public examination many of whose questions are couched in English (SCE Ordinary Grade examination), (b) working with other teachers who are not comfortable with communicative methodology, and (c) the realities of mixed ability teaching.²

Problems or excuses?

To what extent can we view the reasons given by teachers for not maintaining the use of the target language as true impediments to doing so rather than excuses for not attempting something which is evidently very difficult? The 'problems' identified by teachers breakdown into four broad categories:

1. The nature of the class (number of pupils, ability mix, grouping, whether taught in French last year, and so on);
2. The reaction of the class (behaviour);

Table 1. Choice of language for classroom management tasks in response to question: in what language do you think the following classroom activities can easily be conducted?

N = 201 except where mentioned Boxes enclose relatively high percentages

Proposed activity	in French	in French with difficulties	in English
Organising the classroom	68%	28%	3%
Giving activity instructions	53%	38%	8%
Chatting informally with pupils	53%	31%	15%
Disciplining	15%	38%	45%
Running tests	13%	35%	51%
Correcting written work	9%	34%	56%
Explaining meanings	8%	53%	39%
Teaching background N = 168	5%	33%	62%
Discussing language objectives	1%	12%	87%
Explaining grammar	0%	11%	88%

3. The teacher's confidence in using the target language (tiredness may contribute to this;)

4. External factors (departmental ethos, type of examination).

The remainder of this article will focus on the issues of ability mix, class size and pupil behaviour in an attempt to establish whether or not they can be seen as true impediments to teaching through the medium of the target language.³

Table 2. Reasons for not using the target language

Rank	Situation	Percentage of teachers rating situation as important
1	the behaviour of the pupils	95%
2	your confidence in speaking French	83%
3	the size of the class	81%
4	the reaction of the pupils when you speak French all the time	80%
5	the presence of many low ability pupils in the class	79%
6	how tired you are on a given day	79%
7	whether the pupils you are teaching were taught in French last year	8%
8	which year group you are teaching	59%
9	how the class is grouped (e.g. whole classgroups)	43%

The presence of low ability pupils (mixed ability)⁴

The Co-operative Teaching Survey data cannot tell us what 'mixed-ability' means to each of the teachers who identify it as being an impediment to teaching through the medium of the target language. In principle, it could mean having illiterate pupils seated next to academically gifted, but in practice in Strathclyde such a wide range of ability will probably exist only in a small handful of schools. The real 'problem' of mixed ability may have less to do with the exact nature of the ability mix in the classroom, than with the teachers' expectations of what low ability pupils are capable of achieving, and these expectations may in turn depend on the teaching and learning experience of the teachers themselves.

Many foreign language teachers currently employed in Strathclyde still remember (in some cases with considerable nostalgia) the elitist school system that existed before comprehensivisation, when only academically able pupils were allowed to study a foreign language beyond second year and the least able did not study languages at all.

Although comprehensivisation officially began in the early 1970s, the changeover did not take place in all schools until very much later, so although only the older teachers (those over 40) will have had first-hand experience of the grammar school system both as pupils and as teachers, and most teachers in their thirties will have experienced it as pupils, only the very youngest will have had experience of neither. However, with respect to the latter, we should not overlook the influence that older teachers may have on their younger colleagues. Principal teachers (such as the one quoted below) who have a negative attitude to low ability pupils might well affect the beliefs of members of their departments.

... the realities of mixed-ability classes makes the use of the target language as the medium of instruction impossible. Teacher 361

The notion that attitude to mixed ability is age-related is supported by the Co-operative Teaching Survey data (table 3). Eighty-eight per cent of teachers over 40 see mixed ability as a problem, and the percentage decreases according to the youth of the teacher.

Table 3. Problems with mixed ability according to age

Age	% of teachers within each age group judging mixed ability to be a problem
40+	88%
36-40	74%
31-35	70%
26-30	63%
20-25	only one case

If the 'problem' of low ability pupils concerns teachers' low expectations of what such learners can achieve, based on nostalgia for the past and a feeling that such pupils have no place in foreign language departments, then it is likely that teachers will not be prepared to give such pupils sufficient attention, and will aim their lessons towards the middle ability range and above. Pupils with learning difficulties, thus neglected, will certainly fulfil the prophecy that they cannot learn and cannot understand the foreign language when it is spoken to them, and may well react by misbehaving. It is surely no coincidence that 95% of all respondents identify indiscipline as a reason for not maintaining the use of the target language as the medium of instruction.

That the issue of mixed ability may be largely a matter of indiscipline is supported by one principal teacher in a predominantly middle class school, which organised its classes on a system of broad-banding which results in 'ghetto' classes of almost entirely less-able pupils. He says that

the vast majority in these classes (with large numbers of low ability pupils) cannot be trusted to work with a partner in paired activities ... Teacher 341

The implication of the words 'cannot be trusted' is that pupils will behave badly if asked to work in pairs, rather than that they are somehow mentally incapable of handling the tasks set them.

It seems that there is a need for a teaching methodology which treats all pupils as equally capable of learning a foreign language. In theory, the communicative approach (which currently holds sway in secondary school modern language departments in Great Britain), with its emphasis on paired and group activities, if properly implemented, might help to supply solutions to the problem of low ability pupils in the classroom. Group work allows the teacher (a) to place poorer pupils with better ones for peer help, and (b) to give individual help to those in need while the other pupils are gainfully occupied in groups.

The value of group work as a solution to the difficulties of mixed ability teaching appears to be supported by the survey data (table 4). In departments whose principal teacher has identified group work as an integral part of the departmental teaching methodology, 26% of teachers do not consider the presence of low ability pupils to be a problem. By contrast, only 17% of teachers in departments without group work judge mixed ability to be unimportant. This suggests that group work may have a positive contribution to make in dealing with mixed ability classes. Moreover, departments with group work methodology have just as many problems of indiscipline as elsewhere.

These figures may be misleading, based as they are on what principal teachers said (in a separate questionnaire) is normal-practice in their departments. Since teachers themselves were not asked about the incidence of group work, there is no way of establishing to what extent it forms part of the teaching strategy of individual teachers in these departments. Nevertheless, the nine per cent difference represents an increase of more than half in the small number of those without experience of group work (see table 4), which is enough for us to reach a tentative conclusion that group work may be of value in dealing with the 'problems' of mixed ability classes.

Table 4. Effect of group work on thinking mixed ability unimportant as an impediment to the use of the target language.

	% of teachers considering mixed ability to be unimportant
with experience of group work	26%
without experience of group work	17%

However, before we propose group work as being the perfect means of overcoming the problems of mixed ability, we should not forget that the management problems of organising group work in secondary school language classrooms can be considerable. Firstly, the physical dimensions of some classrooms may require that desks be arranged in rows rather than in groups. In such circumstances the setting up of group activities can result in considerable noise and disruption, and this may lead to indiscipline. Secondly, a class of pupils divided into four or five groups is difficult to monitor. The teacher needs to be able to spend time with every group, listening to spoken interaction, correcting exercises, extending pupils who finish work quickly, supplying remedial help for slow learners and so on. In these circumstances, when the teacher's attention is elsewhere it is quite probable that some pupils who are waiting for the teacher's help will behave badly, and such indiscipline may cause the teacher to cease using the foreign language.

It is not insignificant that Nolasco and Arthur (1988), in the first few chapters of their book on the implementation of the Communicative Approach with large classes, concentrate on aspects of classroom management and control as the essential basis for implementing communicative language teaching. Good classroom control is essential for the teacher who wishes to make group work a regular part of his teaching strategy. Once he is able to do so without major problems of indiscipline, he can concentrate his attention on teaching through the medium of the target language. We have already shown that more than half of the respondents feel that minor behavioural problems can be dealt with in the foreign language (Table 1).

Class size

Eighty-two per cent of respondents in the Co-operative Teaching Survey identify class size as an important reason for not maintaining the use of the target language as the medium of instruction. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many teachers believe, because of the practical nature of present-day foreign language teaching, that class sizes in modern language departments should be cut to 20, which is the standard size (in Scotland) of a science class. However, although schools in the survey have class sizes ranging from 17 to 32 pupils in first and second year, the data show that teachers who identify class size as being a problem are just as likely to work in schools with the smallest classes as the largest classes in the range, so cutting class size would not necessarily help teachers to maintain the use of the target language. The finding is fortunate because the likelihood of class size being cut is very remote, given the current government's enthusiasm for educational economies.

If class size is not a true impediment to the maintenance of target language use, why do teachers think that it is? The classroom management problems outlined in the previous section on mixed ability may hold the key. The demands of implementing the communicative approach are clearly considerable. Classroom activities have to be planned so that the learners are constantly and fruitfully occupied. This is most difficult when teaching ceases to be a whole class activity and pupils are expected to work on their own, demanding a degree of self-discipline which few adolescents possess. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the learners are expected to use the foreign language to complete their tasks. When they resort to speaking English the work of the group breaks down, and this in turn may lead to indiscipline. If, in consequence, the work of the class is interrupted, the teacher may feel obliged to resort to