

# Promoting use of the target language in the classroom



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The very latest recommendations from the DES on good practice in teaching and learning of foreign languages state clearly that:

*The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good language course. Learners are enabled to see that the language is not only the object of study but also an effective medium for conducting the normal business of the classroom.*<sup>1</sup> (My emphasis)

These recommendations are by no means new. The very fact that this aspect of good practice needs to be reiterated points to the fact that the carrying out of this recommendation may not be as simple as making the statement. The theoretical basis for this statement does not seem to be controversial, and yet when practising teachers discuss such matters, questions frequently arise as to the feasibility or the practicability of using the foreign language for certain classroom activities. The belief that the foreign language should be used as the teaching and learning medium appears to be shared by many teachers and yet, despite this commonality of intent, practice varies greatly.

For many years the difficulties encountered daily by teachers in the classroom trying to use the foreign language have been ignored, so that the profession is divided between the teachers who claim success and those who are overawed by such confidence. It is unfair to pretend that problems do not exist and until teachers can exchange opinions frankly without being made to feel guilty and inadequate, progress cannot be made.

The context in which we teach foreign languages in schools is radically different from that of teaching English as a foreign language in one fundamental respect; teachers and pupils share a common language, English, which is their natural means of communication as a mother tongue. In an EFL class, the need to communicate in the language being learnt in order to be understood by others who do not share the same mother tongue is evident. This fact has to be acknowledged but not used as an excuse. It does require constant vigilance and determination from the teacher not to succumb to the ease of communicating in English. Pupils have an even more difficult task given the limited amount of language at their command in the early stages. They need to be given encouragement constantly. Most of them are prepared to accept the rules of the game provided the teacher's expectations are realistic and the tasks within their linguistic scope.

The development of the communicative approach has focused the attention on learning a language through its use so that content and process are not separable. In this context, the use of the target language, by no means a new issue within the profession, is given renewed importance. It seems a contradiction to prepare on the one hand, activities whose main aim is to make the pupils use the foreign language communicatively (some of these may indeed be quite contrived) and on the other hand not to exploit the genuine need for communication in the classroom, in particular when the language required is used frequently.

The purpose of this article is to suggest some practical ways of increasing the use of the foreign language (FL) for both teachers and pupils at the secondary school level (11 to 16 age range). Too often the meaning of the phrase 'the use of FL in the language classroom' is interpreted narrowly as 'teacher talk in the foreign language'; although this aspect is indeed very important, there are other aspects of the problem which are part of a whole strategy favouring the use of the foreign language, in its spoken and written forms, consciously avoiding or reducing to a minimum situations and activities which require pupils and teacher to use English as the working language. Conscious decisions must be made concerning:

- the language required to conduct and manage the learning activities in the target language
- the choice or design of speaking activities which allow pupils to speak to each other genuinely and frequently
- the choice of published material avoiding the use of English
- ways in which comprehension work can be developed without having recourse to the use of English

Attending to these various aspects increases the opportunities of using the FL and creates the conditions in which teacher talk in the foreign language will appear more natural.

## Teachers' views on teacher use of the foreign language

Prior to a detailed examination of these various positive steps, it is important to consider the feelings and opinions of teachers on the matter to appreciate what they perceive as major difficulties. Extensive research carried out in Scotland (Mitchell, 1988) gives detailed information on what actually went on in the classrooms of teachers taking part in a curriculum development project concentrating on communicative language-teaching. The first phase of the Project consisted in a survey of the views of teachers as to what they considered to be 'the communicative approach'. The survey is based on the views of 59 teachers from 20 secondary schools. Within this framework only one fifth of the teachers 'referred unprompted to the use of the FL for classroom management as an activity contributing significantly to the development of pupils' FL communicative competence'<sup>2</sup>. Once the issue was raised by the researcher, teachers had a lot to say. Views varied widely as to the desirability of the FL use for managerial purposes. Mitchell reports that the majority of teachers interviewed considered that some mix of the mother tongue and the foreign language was appropriate:

*'It is clear that the only area in which teachers generally felt use of the FL to be appropriate was that of organisational instructions (to do with seating, handing out collection of materials etc.)'*<sup>3</sup>

Other areas such as activity instructions, explaining meanings, explaining grammar, teaching background and disciplining were considered by many as being inappropriate for FL use. If these views prevail, it is possible that the mother tongue is spoken by the teacher more often than the foreign language.

The use of the FL was perceived as a factor of stress. The need to be fluent, the need to be persevering were pointed out. In the course of a study of teachers using communicative activities, similar comments were collected concerning the stressful nature of conducting the business of a FL class in the FL (Chambers, 1989).<sup>4</sup>

The need to be efficient, to save time, to be understood by all pupils appears to be a strong disincentive to the use of the foreign language as a managerial means of communication. Mitchell reports that some teachers felt that they could not use the FL for managerial purposes with lower sets and that control of mixed ability classes would be impossible. She concludes that:

*'this seemed to be an area where the "communicative" movement had yet to make a big impact on teachers' thinking'*<sup>5</sup>

A third of the teachers interviewed by Mitchell felt that the level of language required for various managerial functions was too complex and beyond the language taught concurrently in the coursebook.

Several teachers also said that 'It was very difficult to estab-

lish the norm of FL use at any other time than the start of the year,' with new first year pupils. Some of these teachers were aware of making a special effort at the beginning of the new term.

In some respect these views are conflicting and could be taken to create a double-bind. On the one hand it is said that pupils must be used to the foreign language as the means of communication in the classroom; on the other hand it is obvious that the possibilities are very limited with beginners. It is necessary to identify the essential language needed and reduce the variety of sentences available to be able to function in most situations at a simple level. To assume that if pupils have not been used to the teacher using the FL at the beginning, it is impossible to introduce it at a later stage, is not necessarily true. Since many pupils increase their linguistic knowledge rapidly over the first three years, it would seem logical to expect that the gap between the managerial needs of the teacher and the pupils' comprehension becomes less as the years go by. As few teachers teach the same pupils for the five years of their secondary schooling, the lack of continuity can be used either way; either as an excuse for giving up any attempt at using the FL to teach or as a new attempt, a new start each year. Indeed a few teachers in Mitchell's survey said that extensive use of FL could not be expected until Year 8 or later. They were aware of the slow developmental character of the task. Those who were successful were supported by a unified departmental policy. Speaking from personal experience, a concentrated effort on the teacher's part in Year 10, whatever happened previously, can produce rewarding results. This is not to argue for a late introduction of the FL for managerial purposes but rather for realistic expectations and the notion of incremental learning which is widely accepted by teachers when they deal with the linguistic content of course-books.

The nature of the problem underlying the use of the FL as a medium of instruction in the classroom is twofold. From a practical point of view, the undertaking is perceived by many teachers as a difficult one which can be approached in a systematic and practical way if one is determined to do it. However such determination needs to be supported by a firm belief that the endeavour contributes significantly to the language learning. Mitchell concludes that:

'the theoretical rationale from which the 'communicative approach' derives much of its force (that the target language system is largely acquired rather than consciously learned, from message-oriented experience of its use), did not appear to have many adherents among this group of teachers.'<sup>6</sup>

It seems reasonable to expect that an undertaking which presents practical problems will have less chances to be sustained if the underlying belief in its validity is not strong. Equally a fundamental belief in the validity of the 'communicative approach' is not sufficient to guarantee success in the classroom. Practical suggestions may be helpful and eventually contribute to the consolidation of the theoretical position.

## Teacher talk in the target language

In the language classroom, the teacher is the only source of spoken foreign language which the pupils experience live with the paralinguistic support which is non-existent on recorded audio tapes. In the beginning learners often find it easier to understand the teacher than a recorded message, so FL teacher talk is crucial in the development of listening skills.

The managerial language needed by language teachers can be divided into four categories<sup>7</sup>

- Organisational instructions
- Activity instructions
- Evaluation and correction of pupil's FL performance
- Disciplinary interventions

### 1. Organisational instructions

Of the four categories, these are the easiest to give in the foreign language: telling pupils what to do, how to group themselves, what materials to use. There are at least four reasons why it is so:

- They are used frequently, often daily, possibly several times

per lesson so that there is constant re-inforcement.

- They often apply collectively; this enables an individual pupil who has not understood to follow by mere imitation.
- Pupils are not required to respond verbally but simply to carry out the instructions physically.
- The teacher can easily prompt, if understanding is not obvious, by using visual cues, or demonstration (when there is a total lack of comprehension).

Many coursebooks supply a list of such instructions at the beginning of their first book but rarely repeat it and increase it in their subsequent stages. Initially this language has to be taught and it is very useful to keep a record for each class of the language which has been taught and practised. Many students during their initial training need to learn how to give instructions properly and consistently. Although the examples in this article are given in French, the principles of systematicity which should control the teaching and use of foreign language instructions remain the same for all languages although some decisions to opt for a particular phrase may well be language specific in some cases.

#### (a) Instructions using the imperative form

Entrez

Asseyez-vous

Sortez vos affaires

Ouvrez/Fermez la porte/ la fenêtre, s'il vous plaît

Cherchez les livres

Distribuez les livres/ les cahiers

Ramassez les livres/ les cahiers/ les fiches/ les feuilles

Donnez-moi vos notes

Combien as-tu?

Combien de réponses justes?

Prenez vos cahiers de texte

Ecrivez le travail du soir pour (Jeudi)

Commencez

Continuez

Arrêtez

Ecoutez

Répétez

Effacez/ Gommez

Echangez les cartes/ les fiches

#### (b) Instructions in the infinitive after either 'vous pouvez' or 'il faut'

Il faut continuer

commencer

travailler avec un partenaire

écouter

échanger

sortir

ouvrir la fenêtre

## 2. Activity instructions

The kind of teaching activities chosen by the teacher determines obviously the language required to organise such activities. There is a much greater variety, less routine and less predictability in this case than for general classroom instructions. For these reasons this aspect of the enterprise requires forethought and preparation. Teachers who piloted the Hampshire Modern Language Skills Development Programme (HMLS DP) which contains a variety of new communicative activities reported that much thinking about the presentation had been required, rehearsing mentally the sequence and choosing carefully the language known to the pupils (Chambers, 1989). However there are some instructions and other guiding comments which are frequently used and can be considered as an extension of the organisational instructions:

- a. Travaillez avec un/ une partenaire  
Travaillez par deux/ par quatre

Trouvez le partenaire avec la même carte

Posez des questions

Remplissez la fiche

Cochez la case

Complétez la fiche

Cachez votre carte

Mélangez les cartes

Faites trois colonnes

Ecrivez un chiffre

Bien

b. C'est bien

C'est juste

C'est vrai

C'est intéressant (ça)

c. C'est bien écrit

C'est bien présenté

C'est un beau dessin

C'est mieux

C'est beaucoup mieux

C'est vraiment bien

Recommence

d. Je trouve que c'est bien

Je pense que c'est bien/ intéressant etc . . .

Tu as bien travaillé

Correction is often best effected by simply providing the correct form and does not require grammatical explanation. Examples usually make the correction self-evident.

One should also include the language required to maintain interest, to check comprehension, to maintain contact with the pupils:

Tu comprends?

Vous comprenez?

The same instructions must be taught in the singular form of the imperative as soon as one feels pupils are ready; it is then possible to introduce pupils to the value of the ending and train them to listen for the sound (é). Later the sentences using infinitives can be introduced.

b. Il faut lire

écrire

choisir

remplir . . .

This list is not exhaustive and needs updating according to the teaching requirements.

Some activities require more complex or less frequently used directives. In such cases, *demonstration* involving the teacher and a pupil and some visual cues on the board or the overhead projector is a powerful tool, more effective than the language which may accompany the demonstration. The support of *written instructions* is essential too. Pupils will have more time to work out what is to be done, they can help each other or even use a dictionary. At the beginners' stage, the written instructions may be the longest text that pupils have encountered; this enables them to exercise their reading skills for an obvious purpose.

For example, in Level One of HMLS DP<sup>8</sup> pupils have to read such instructions:

'Ecoute Emmanuel. Il explique ce qu'il a dans sa chambre. Dans la colonne: "Emmanuel" fais un trait à côté de chaque objet que tu entends comme dans l'exemple. Si tu entends le chiffre "deux" fais deux traits etc . . . Puis écoute Nathalie.'

'Quatre jeunes Français décrivent leurs maisons. Voici 5 plans. Ecoute la description des quatre maisons et écris le nom d'Eric, Christelle, Valérie et Olivier sous la maison où ils habitent respectivement. Attention! Il y a un plan supplémentaire.'

Read aloud with the class and supported by demonstration, these instructions are effective with most pupils and should help the teacher not to resort to the use of English.

### 3. Evaluation and correction

The language required initially to evaluate and express appreciation is easily kept to a minimum; this seems to present little problem; the variety can be increased gradually over the years as well as the complexity'.

a. Oui

Bon

Tu as compris?

Vous avez compris?

Je vais expliquer

Regardez

Ecoutez-moi, encore une fois

Qui n'a pas compris?

Qui veut commencer?

Qui veut faire ça?

Tu vois?

Essaie

Il faut essayer

Ça s'écrit comment en français?

Qu'est-ce que j'ai dit, en anglais?

Qu'est-ce qu'il faut faire?

Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?

Most of these questions except the last two require only a very brief answer from the pupil: oui, non, moi, spelling a word in French or giving a meaning in English. The last two are more likely to provoke a response in English.

### 4. Disciplinary interventions and class control

Mitchell (1988) reports that for mild disciplinary intervention most teachers observed used FL but whenever real disruption threatened then teachers resorted to English. The problem here is not so much linguistic (the language used for classroom control is predictable and fairly repetitive) as psychological. The fear of loss of control can be a strong incentive to the use of English, known to be understood instantly by the pupil. Order in the classroom is the basic requirement of a learning situation. When a good atmosphere prevails, there is no need to treat minor disciplinary reminders any differently from other directives. Only in extreme and individual cases is it necessary to have recourse to English. But obviously the risk is too great in some situations for the teacher to adhere strictly to a principle, whatever its validity in terms of communicative language learning theory. But these instances are likely to be exceptional.

A very limited range of vocabulary is necessary at first. Gradually one can extend the range of sentences to apply to specific misdemeanours.

a. Silence

Du calme

Reste tranquille

Tourne-toi

b. Arrête de parler

bouger

Laisse (Peter) tranquille

Ne te balance pas sur ta chaise

Ne parle pas

Il ne faut pas regarder la fiche de . . .

Il ne faut pas tricher

The use of the phrase 'arrête de' + infinitive can delay the introduction of the negative form if it is judged desirable.

### Teacher FL talk and the language course syllabus

However carefully monitored and graded is the introduction of the language needed for classroom management, there will be a gap particularly in the first few months. Mitchell (1988) made a