Teaching modern languages to pupils with special educational needs? With pleasure!

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The views expressed and the ideas in this article have been generated during my five terms' secondment to Avon County Council from my post of Head of Modern Languages at the Grange School, Bristol. I am indebted to the dedicated teachers with whom I worked to develop a policy of a foreign modern language for all.

An attempt at a definition

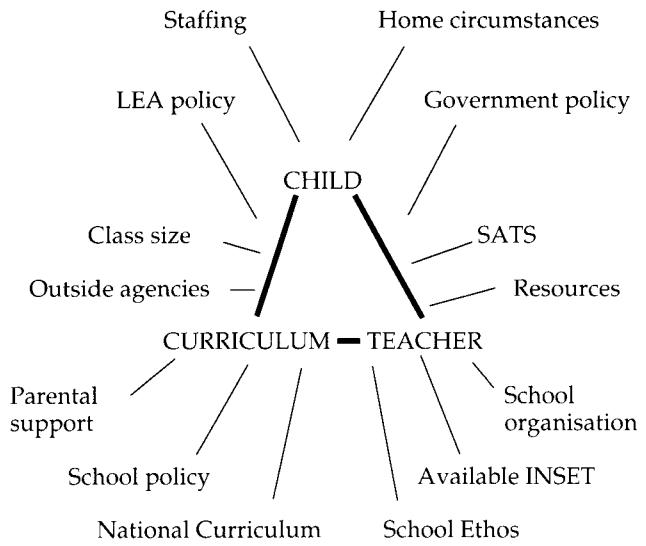
The phrase 'Special Educational Needs' covers a whole range of learning difficulties. Reasons for these vary considerably. A child might have suffered brain damage at birth, another might have received his/her early education in a different cultural system.

This paper addresses some of the issues involved in teaching a Modern Foreign Language to those pupils who now tend to be categorised as lower attainers in mainstream schools, that is pupils whose attainment places them in the bottom 10 to 20% of the attainment range of a comprehensive school year group at a given time.

'. . . children, young people in ordinary schools who are deemed by the system to be failures but who invariably respond to encouragement and good teaching with willingness, humour and style.' (Ramasut, 1989)

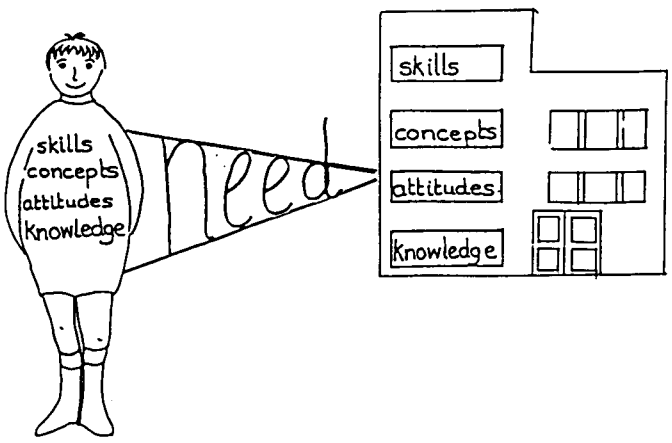
Before the Warnock report (1978) these pupils may have been defined as 'sick' or 'handicapped'. Since, people more readily consider that special needs arise from an interaction of many factors, both environmental and child-based, which effect pupils in their attempts to learn. In Figure 1, an attempt has been made to isolate some of the factors which may impinge on the teacher-child relationship and take into account internal and external influences on the triangle child–teacher–curriculum.

Figure 1. The interactional model



(Adapted from Ian Pratt, 1989)

Few elements in the above model are within the power of the individual teachers to change in the short term. The only options open to the teachers are to look at what they teach and how they teach it. In this way, indirectly, changes can be brought about in the child in terms of experience, success, self concept, learning, motivation and behaviour.



(Ian Pratt, 1989)

'Special educational needs are not just a reflection of pupils' inherent difficulties or disabilities; they are often related to factors, within schools which can prevent or exacerbate some problems. For example, schools that successfully meet the demands of a diverse range of individual needs through agreed policies on teaching and learning approaches are invariably effective in meeting special educational needs.'

(The National Curriculum Council, 1989)

This last message is clear, to cater as effectively as possible for the needs of some of its pupils, the whole school should agree its policy and implement it as a team. Nevertheless and however great the task might seem for the single teacher on his or on her own, there are still steps which can be taken to adapt the modern languages curriculum to suit more adequately some of the learners.

Learning a new language

When pupils start a new language, they all have the same base line: no previous knowledge. The low attainer has therefore not failed and will be as enthusiastic as the other pupils in the group.

Colleagues teaching in Special Schools emphasise that, when learning a foreign modern language, children with Special Educational Needs must not encounter failure. It is therefore our task as language teachers to ensure that our pupils encounter success in everything they do. But it is also important that the pupils feel challenged by the task which they are set – otherwise boredom will set in as will low self-esteem.

Catering for all pupils on a level commensurate with both their linguistic attainment and their interest levels has great implications for short-term and long-term planning: objectives will need to be set, progression worked out, strategies to practise the new language developed, appropriate tasks thought out, ways of supporting the learner devised, assessment rationale and tasks planned.

Setting objectives

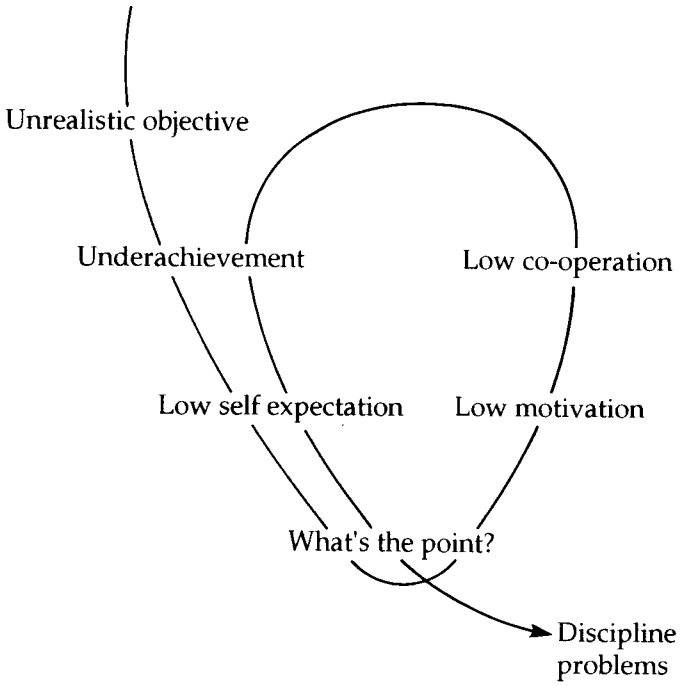
Objectives must be well defined, clear to all and understood by all. It is important to stop and ask two fundamental questions: 'What are we doing and what are we doing this for?'. Mark Fowler attributes part of the success of Graded Objectives in Modern Languages to the very fact that 'objectives are described in advance and pupils observe in detail their progress.' (Fowler, 1989)

Objectives must be short term – for the lesson and/or part of it and be clearly related to the overall aim.

Objectives must be realistic, i.e. achievable. This might for instance mean that the number of words to be practised and mastered will be small and will vary from child to child – an attainable target could be set as a minimum; those who can acquire more will be given the scope to do so. This practice might well be extended to the number of tasks to be completed in the lesson: the group will be given a choice of five or six tasks but instructed that the minimum number of tasks to be completed by all is two; this should not prevent those who can accomplish more than the minimum set to do so.

On no account must the scheme of work assume that 'objectives are the same for pupils of all abilities and only progress towards them is different.' (Fowler, ibid.). The level of conceptualisation, the aptitude to retain information and to draw relationships – just to name a few areas – vary greatly between different groups of the school population. Giving them the same objectives might hinder some and discourage others. Unrealistic objectives could lead to a downward spiral. See Figure 2.

Figure 2



Seeing progression and making progress

In order for pupils to have a sense of progression and progress, it is important to ensure that they take very small steps. The material to learn, the practice, the task to be done must be analysed and broken into the smallest possible units which are then recorded as objectives and tackled.

This process ensures that:

- each learning unit is commensurate to the learner's learning power.
- the learning pace can be sustained – big chunks can take a long time to assimilate.
- the learner will be able to measure progress frequently and easily.

This presupposes that time is made available to do so. Fowler suggests that a 'free lesson' be built in once a fortnight – out of the language time – to discuss objectives and progress.

'Allowing time in the "free" lesson every two weeks to discuss progress with pupils will ensure that the progress is noticed by them and, where appropriate, recorded on progress card. Such an arrangement will also provide on occasion for real, individual interaction in addition to the normal class conversation. It also provides the teacher with a ready excuse to give to the pupil the individual teacher attention demanded in class lesson.'

It goes without saying that positive achievement must be recognised and celebrated. All children thrive on encouragement and praise.

Practising the new language

It is recognised that Low Attainers often have short term memory and find it difficult to acquire the new language. The teacher must therefore ensure that the pupils are exposed to the language which is to be acquired in many varied and attractive ways. Games, songs and rhymes can be a good way of practising, but a word of caution, low attainers often hate losing and a badly handled game might create discipline problems.

Practice activities should be kept extremely short: 3–4 minutes maximum.

They should be carefully structured so that the pupils hear a lot of language before they are asked to produce any. Activities encouraging a physical response should prove very useful.

Opportunities should be found to enable the pupils to revise and reuse language they have explored at some previous stage. This 'old' language should be reworked in different situations so that the air of 'déjà vu' does not affect their interest in the activity.

Setting a task

Pupils are motivated to learn when they have a real need to acquire the language. The tasks which give rise to the language to be learnt must therefore engage the learners. Writing in 1984 about a project involving pupils with a mild mental handicap who were learning French, Alexander Glass underlines the value of a positive outcome.

> The motivation and enthusiasm of these pupils for learning French were boundless. There were obvious reasons for this: there was to be a practical outcome. (Glass, 1984)

In this case the outcome was a visit to France, but other types of end product can be just as motivating – a presentation, a tape, a show, a game, etc.

The language is not learnt for its own sake, but for practical communication. Yet some level of language awareness can be brought into the process: colleagues in Special Schools have reported the fact that pupils have commented upon some differences they have noticed between the French and the English way of presenting language, for example, the fact that in French, days do not start with capitals as in English. This reinforces the development of the mother tongue for some, but also highlights the individuality of each language – albeit on a very simple level.

The task in which the language will need to be used must be real and might offer totally new experiences which relate to another world, another culture. Mark Fowler describes how children could be made to experience the 'dunking of a chocolate filled roll in a bowl of hot chocolate'.

The task might well afford the learners the opportunities to rehearse skills which were not fully acquired in the mother tongue – such as telling the time; it is important that the teacher does not assume that such skills have been acquired and that some space is made for a fresh exploration in a new neutral medium, the foreign modern language.

The need to experience must be born in mind – manipulating the real thing is important, and the use of props and realia does a lot to motivate and support low attainers.

An open-ended task will enable pupils to operate at a level at which they feel comfortable: starting from the point they are at, they will acquire the language they can cope with to fulfil the task to a level of attainment of which they are capable. This type of task gives the maximum of flexibility for pupils to explore, acquire and use language; it offers a wide range of differentiation.

Once the task is set, e.g. 'We want to find out what young people think of smoking and send the information to our link class', the class and the teacher could set the objectives:

1. What exactly do we need to find out?
2. Where are we going to find it?
3. What exactly do we need to learn to be able to find out?

4. How will we present the information once we have found it out?'

The outcome need not be a piece of writing; a collage, a rap, a song, a poem said on a tape might trigger imagination and creativity.

Supporting the learner

Low attainers need and must be given support; this support will be provided by:

- the teacher
- the support teacher – if there is one. His/her role must be agreed before the lesson. The support teacher is a highly trained and qualified professional who has intimate knowledge of strategies which support the learner. The support teacher might not know the foreign language, but this does not matter – his/her knowledge of Special Needs and the modern language teacher's knowledge of the foreign language should be pooled to give the pupils a positive experience. It is important to agree each teacher's role in the classroom before the lesson begins.
- the Foreign Language Assistant – who must be fully briefed on expectations and methodology.
- Information Technology: even though it is not a panacea, it is another resource available to the teacher to practise and apply language; it enables variation and escape from sterile stylised situations. Its flexibility enables pupils to approach an activity at a level appropriate to their own capabilities. But its use must be appropriate and integrated and not there for its own sake.

It is important that the pupils are aware of the level of support afforded to them so that they can measure their own progress not only in terms of the acquisition of the foreign language but also in terms of independence.

Assessing progress and attainment

The assessment must reflect the objectives set for the learner.

'It will match the objectives and will not follow a vigorous cumulative approach or assume rapid cognitive development.'
(Fowler, 1989)

It must give pupils frequent and positive feed back on their achievement and not measure their failure.

In the words of Mark Fowler, the framework for assessment must also 'allow for positive statements to be made regarding performance in relation to support provided. (. . .) It is important that teachers and students recognise this, not as failure to develop communication skills but as a means of communication. (. . .) Success is thus understood as success in relation to criteria relevant to them'.

The assessment need not be a test at the end of a unit of work, it can be continuous assessment, taking into consideration the pupils' achievements throughout a task. If part of the assessment is a test, bits of it could be tasks/activities which have been done during the course of the work.

The assessment should help the pupil and the teacher to set personal objectives for the next task/unit of work.

Developing skills

Not all pupils will perform in all skills.

The receptive skills might be perceived as being more accessible to low attainers. This will not always be true: some pupils will find listening comprehension very difficult because of, for instance, intermittent loss of hearing; others will not cope with reading comprehension because their reading skills are not fully developed. It is important for the language teacher to ascertain how comfortable the pupil feels in each skill and to build up his/her development progressively; it is also necessary to give pupils opportunities to develop all skills, receptive and productive, as they negotiate.

(a) Listening

This is the very first stage of language acquisition.

It is also a means of communication with the foreign country: listening and (with a lot of guidance) understanding what pupils from, for example, a link school are saying.

The pupils need to learn to listen effectively through, for instance, all sorts of fun exercises which will encourage them to listen to do something, e.g. find the odd man out (in terms of sounds), was that French or English, etc.

Plenty of input is needed:

- to allow time for 'absorption'. The use of a kind of 'physical response' provides feedback to assess how much is being 'absorbed' This might involve showing cards, placing cards in order, providing the number of an item on a page, etc.
- to provide models for the pupils to start producing language when they feel up to it.

The input should be graded;

- from known to unknown. (Cognates are useful tools.)
- from simple to more complex.

Listening does not automatically mean test. It also means task. Pupils respond better when they have a reason for listening for things, an activity to do with the language which has been heard and understood. There is even a place for listening for pleasure, when pupils can enjoy songs, sounds effects, poems without proving understanding.

Support must be provided; it should be non-verbal if possible as some pupils will find reading even English yet another barrier between them and the task.

If the task serves as a test, it must be broken into very small steps: e.g.

- First of all, we are going to listen for the names of fruit, (and possibly teacher stops tape after each fruit + provides a list of fruit in the wrong order, or drawings of the fruit. The tape can be played as many times as the pupils need).
- This time round, listen for prices. (The correct prices are provided jumbled up at the bottom of the page.)

(b) Speaking

This skill is not necessarily an appropriate objective for low attainers who find remembering language for productive purpose very difficult.

Speaking means communication and not public performance: the low attainer does not relish the thought of running the risk of 'floundering' in front of the whole class. Pair work or group work is a more effective way of enabling speaking.

'If activities are varied and several opportunities are given for practising the new language, rather than the point being laboured, problems (of attention and discipline) are likely to be fewer.' (Gee Macrory, 1989)

If the class works as a whole, activities should offer anonymity (e.g. chorus repetitions). During question/answer sessions some pupils' wish to remain silent should be respected but such pupils must be listened to at another moment of the lesson, when their performance will be less public and they won't feel so threatened. Support can be extended by grading question types and a model can be provided – tape/teacher/another pupil.

When pupils work in groups, the teacher needs to be sensitive to their individual needs; in their groups, pupils will need to work with others who will leave them space and, at the same time, provide some form of support. The composition of the groups could vary according to the desired outcome.

Before the groups are left to work on their own, they must have fully rehearsed the language needed and know what the task involves. Recording their work on cassettes enables pupils to experiment with language, rehearse and present the teacher with an end product of which they are proud.

(c) Reading

This skill is also a means of communicating with the foreign country (signs, pamphlets, letters, postcards from the foreign country).

Points to consider

- Some low attainers are poor readers in their mother tongue. They might actually recognise the shape of the words and phrases in a foreign language more easily than they do in their own language.

- Scanning is an extremely difficult skill for most low attainers.
- Big writing is not enough to ensure comprehension.
- Computer print-outs can be very difficult to read.
- Capital letters are not usually easier to read: children have been taught to read in lower case.
- Reading does not mean reading aloud.
- Gist reading needs to be taught, starting from cognates and known words.

Activities must be varied and engaging. Questions on a text, even in English, can be very tedious. Ticking grids, numbering drawings or speech bubbles, reorganising order of cards bearing information, matching them with real objects, sequencing them, etc., provide more active alternatives.

Reading activities should have a purpose, e.g. understanding instructions to do something – and doing it! The language must be kept simple and be supported by a lot of clear illustrations.

Reading for pleasure can be afforded through cartoons, 'big books' with plenty of supportive illustrations, computer/concept keyboard.

(d) Writing

This is not necessarily an appropriate objective for a low attainer who find remembering language for productive purposes very difficult.

This skill is no longer a requirement for GCSE – at least at the lower end of the attainment range – but might need to be reported on in terms of National Curriculum. It is also important for low attainers – and children with special needs – that they are given the same opportunities as the others. They should therefore be given the means to write. But if they are to succeed, they must be given maximum support.

Writing tasks must be kept simple but meaningful and take into account the fact that some children do need help with psycho-motor skills; writing can mean:

copy writing but with a purpose and plenty of time. Pupils could be asked to adapt a model or a template by, for instance, just inserting their own name, or changing one word. But it must be remembered that copying from the board (or from a screen) involves a lot of eye/hand co-ordination and is therefore a very difficult skill. The model must be immediately accessible.

word-processing

- to offer support through the concept keyboard or the whole word or whole sentence word-processor such as Minnie.
- to offer the possibility of drafting and redrafting – with or without teacher's support.
- to end up with a piece of work which is neat and legible and which does more for the self-esteem than the usual writing produced by low attainers.

a scrap-book in which things, words, pictures can be stuck; which can serve as a record of topics, experiences and activities.

Mixed ability or not?

The grouping, in terms of mixed ability or setting, makes little difference as too how the pupils are going to learn provided the teacher feels at ease. Nevertheless, it needs to be said that the identification of a 'bottom set' can lead to the concentration in one group of pupils whose special needs express themselves in the shape of disruptive behaviour. This might not provide the ideal situation for the pupils or the teacher and it might be worth considering – if it is possible – two or three parallel lower attainers' sets. This in tandem with a more imaginative use of the faculty time and space might afford a learning situation which is more suited to the pupils' needs.

Use of time and space

Low attainers need to rehearse the new language in many varied situations; the use of games, problem solving activities, meaningful tasks should provide some of these situations.

The breaking of the lesson into small but intensive 'snippets' of purposeful activities will make the time pass more quickly and more pleasantly for all – pupils and teacher.

This breaking up of the lessons into various moments could actually be marked by movement from one corner of the class to the other – or from one classroom to another. In one comprehensive school two teachers were time-tabled to teach two parallel sets of Year 10 low attainers last two 40 minute periods on Friday afternoon. To alleviate the potential problems this could create in terms of pupils' poor motivation, concentration, discipline and of everybody's frustration and temper, the teachers decided to swap their groups after 40 minutes: each room would offer two activities, each taking approximately 20 minutes; the activities usually tended to follow the four basic skills but would also offer tasks which were multi-skill based and creative in nature. This way of working required organisation on the part of the teachers: they planned their week' s work for these groups together and agreed to present and practise the same new material to their respective groups during the first 80 minute lesson of the week so that the Friday session could be meaningful. Pupils responded well and the end of Friday was no longer a potential catastrophe for all.

The use of pair or group work

Group or pair work presents distinct advantages:

- it frees the teacher to address individual's needs more precisely and more intensively.
- it gives the teacher time to monitor and assess each individual's progress.
- it diffuses the potential confrontation between the teacher and the class or individual pupils.

'The classroom has been very relaxed for a bottom set. This impression is recorded by almost all our visitors as an initial comment on what they have seen.'

(D. Longland and R. Waller)

Equal opportunities

Pupils with Special Needs and/or low attainers have the same rights as other pupils; they must be given the same access to, for example, Foreign Language Assistants, visits to foreign countries or language days.

Conclusion

Colleagues who teach a foreign modern language in Special Schools and those who teach low attainers and children with special educational needs have underlined how beneficial the experience had been for their pupils. They have underlined that the aim was not to make the pupils fluent speakers of French or German but to give them access to the same curriculum as their peers. This has enhanced children's self-esteem and self-image.

The emphasis is on small steps, success, enjoyment and feedback of positive achievement. This means short-term, clearly defined objectives and a fun way of learning.

As modern language teachers, we are very fortunate to have colleagues who are experts in supporting pupils with special needs. They are both in our schools and in Special Schools. We can learn from their expertise, they might value our expertise. We must meet and share our skills to ensure that 'the experience of language learning (. . .) be enjoyable, broadening the pupils' appreciation of and demands upon the world rather than narrowing them'. (Fowler, 1989)

'It is worth remembering that for most if not all of these learners, the experience of modern language learning at school will have been an introduction to language learning and a filling-out of their general language education. As such, it will have benefited their general education as members of a multi-lingual world in the multi-lingual countries of Britain and had positively beneficial effects both cognitively and on their general mother tongue skills. The experience will have been an "apprenticeship" which has its own objectives, criteria for achievement.'

(Hawkins, 1981)

The National Curriculum report *Modern Languages for ages 11–16* clearly states that 'in principle all pupils with special educational needs should have the opportunity to experience a modern foreign language'. The same document highlights three

headings which could summarise the aims of learning a modern foreign language to pupils with special educational needs:

- to develop general language skills, through a new learning experience leading to positive achievement
- to increase social skills by providing a new context for communication and interaction
- to encourage awareness of other peoples, places and cultures.

When planning work for low attainers and pupils with special educational needs, remember: extremely small steps, progression, variety, activity, pace, fun, enjoyment, imagination, creativity. These will bring their own rewards in so far as the pupils will be able to see and measure their own progress and as a result, self esteem and motivation will grow.

Last year, I was getting out of my car in the car park of a Special School when I was greeted by:

Pupil – Bonjour, Miss.
Me – Bonjour! Ça va?
Pupil – Oui! (Big grin)
Moi – Je cherche Madame E. Où est Madame E.?
Pupil – (Gestures towards the staff room)
Moi – Ah! Dans la salle des profs! D'accord! Merci beaucoup! Au revoir!
Pupil – (Huge grin) Au revoir!

The huge grins spoke miles; the pupil's – because he had successfully understood and helped a native speaker – and the teacher's, Madame E., whose face reflected pride in her pupil's achievement.

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