

Modern languages - beyond Nuffield and into the 21st Century

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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 outline¹, 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)² 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

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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)³. 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’ movement⁴. Others have moved in a different direction, producing a ‘super-communicative approach’ based on a combination of total physical response, neuro-linguistic programming and suggestopaedia⁵. 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

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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 language⁶. 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

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to the familiarity of language offered to pupils, level of support and personal response. However, these strands are not explicitly stated, nor are their relative weighting across and between Attainment Targets. This framework also offers an idealised model of progression: increasing structural competence in the language is defined in terms of teaching words, words to phrases, phrases to sentences, sentences to paragraphs and paragraphs to aural and literate texts. However, it is by no means clear that foreign languages are learnt in this way at all.

It is not satisfactory that National Curriculum level stops at the end of Key Stage 3, to be replaced with GCSE grades. A more integrated structure is needed. The Programme of Study does continue into Key Stage 4, and much emphasis is placed on the list dealing with 'Knowledge skills and Understanding'. However, the items included under this heading need unpacking in a way which makes practical sense to teachers in terms of pupils' progression and linguistic independence.⁷ Recent experience of teaching within this framework has surely demonstrated the problems and pitfalls of attempting to reduce the complexity of pupils' linguistic progression so that it matches assessment criteria.

There is also an urgent need to interpret the Areas of Experience or 'Breadth of Study'⁸ in ways which reflects the intellectual maturity of pupils. Much has been done in the past decade or so to produce lively, attractive language learning materials, which are fun for pupils. However, in some cases this has led to a tendency to view language learning as a game. Whilst this approach may work for some time with younger pupils, there is a need to find different focuses for the second stage of secondary school language learning. Otherwise, pupils tire of constantly mimicking dialogues based on transactional language, which rarely connects with their intellectual curiosity and individual self-expression. This may be what lies behind the loss of momentum in learning in years 10 and 11. The National Curriculum does not address this issue at all.

THE CONTENT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

It could be that Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) (see Fruhauf *et al.*, 1995) may provide a means to addressing this issue. Here other subjects in the curriculum are taught through the target language. Certainly, this style of language learning and teaching is growing in popularity within Europe and may offer us examples of good practice to guide our own provision. Another way forward may be to relate school curricula to the *Common European Framework* published by the Council of Europe (1996). Its many lists include the types of social, linguistic and vocational skills and competencies we might expect from learners. Many of these connect

implicitly with the thinking skills, key skills and cross curricular dimensions now required in the revised National Curriculum (*op. cit.*: 8–9). Yet it is not clear how these skills can become part of an integrated learning programme in MFLs.

In the case of the Common European Framework, a simple distinction is made between skills which relate to *savoir-faire*, *savoir-être*, and *savoir-apprendre*. The first relates to getting things done in the language; the second to the way individuals affect and are affected by their learning; and the third to pupils' ability to learn, in other words, learning strategies. Communicative language teaching has been too concerned with the first of these in recent years: the ways to get things done in the language, to transact business. In recent years one trend in modern language teaching has been to democratise the subject, to make it available to all and teach it in ways which have contemporary relevance. However, this has often led to a premature emphasis on modern languages as a vocational adjunct: to get things done rather than as a medium for thought and creativity. What we need is a greater sense of individuals developing and expressing themselves in the language. In early stages, the practice of such an aim might be limited to simple expressions of pupils' preferences, but in the second part of secondary school modern languages lessons, pupils need to be presented with topics and issues which match their intellectual maturity. Ever more refined and grammatically complex transactional dialogues simply do not engage the interest of a large proportion of learners.

Some materials, for example, those published by Charis (1996) to deal with spiritual, moral, cultural and social values do offer topics which could genuinely engage pupils and expect them to think through issues, stories and topics in the foreign language. But many contemporary materials are comparatively shallow.

A particular problem affecting Key Stage 4 language arises from current pressure on schools to perform well in GCSE-based 'league tables'. Large numbers of schools have adopted the modular GCSE course because of perceptions that a rise in mean grades awarded across the ability range will result. However, GCSE modular courses are not sufficiently demanding to establish secure long-term linguistic foundations and the longer-term impact of this results-driven game-playing may be to drive down overall standards.

Modern foreign languages in the 16–19 age-range are also a cause for concern. The overall number of A level entries is falling after a substantial increase in the early 1990s (Moys, 1998: 47). Curricular reform at 16+ has been slow in developing, wedded as we still are to the 'gold standard' of the A level exam and its selective function. However, faced with indecision and reluctance to adopt a broader, international-style Baccalaureate curriculum for this age group, most

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exam boards have gone it alone in introducing 'new' A levels. Diversity is now so great that it is sometimes difficult to know what to have an A level in a foreign language means in linguistic terms. Revamping the AS level (which is one part of recent governmental reforms for this sector) again hardly changes this situation (see Pachler, 1999 – especially Chapters 1 and 2 – for a fuller discussion). Undergraduate degrees are similarly affected, as the norm is now to combine language studies with all manner of other subjects.

LOSS OF PURPOSE

The Nuffield Inquiry suggests that all is not well in modern languages in this country. Its tone and content too shows some doubt as to what we are all about. Where are we going with languages? Do we still need to teach and learn modern foreign languages as we pass from one century and one millennium to another? The numbers of those speaking English is increasing. Its linguistic dominance in global terms would seem to be clearly established.

Nevertheless, on the ever-expanding world-wide technological networks, English may not necessarily provide the only means of international communication in the future. Fairly soon, for example, English may be third in terms of the language used on the Internet. Here, written skills predominate. Different vocabularies are needed and a smaller range of language strategies. Perhaps we can see a situation where a smaller set of skills is needed, but in a larger group of languages.

The temptation to believe that the British can get by without modern foreign languages should be resisted. The thrust of reform and curricular developments in the last couple of decades has emphasised the need to produce British citizens who can get by culturally, professionally and personally in countries abroad. However, it is questionable whether a significant proportion of the population ever succeed in doing so. Certainly, if we take passes at grade A-C in GCSE as a measure of minimum linguistic competence, then only a minority of the populace do so. If we consider the proportion then going on to advanced language studies at A level and university, the picture is sobering, bearing in mind the resources committed to secondary school modern language lessons.

Obviously, there are reasons for learning languages other than acquiring transactional skills. Other aims include understanding how language works as a system, the development of learner independence, enhancing cognitive skills in manipulation of information, and enhancing intercultural understanding. Yet, these frequently seem secondary to the all-or-nothing goal of acquiring practical linguistic competence.

Across the various levels of modern language learning, from primary to undergraduate, we still

seem unclear whether we are training pupils in language or whether we still see language learning in terms of broader educational goals. If skills-focused, then perhaps modern languages need to be integrated much more with the subjects where they can best be deployed, as in CLIL. If more concerned with the development of the cultured mind, then perhaps languages need to abandon some utilitarian aims and objectives in favour of a stronger link with the societies and cultures which create them.

The notion of democratisation is enshrined in the contemporary mission to expand access to language learning. Such an approach has done much to bring languages to all pupils, yet it may be that such a policy is not sensitive enough to individual strengths and purposes. It is as if particular needs are subsumed beneath the uniformity of the National Curriculum and the professional consensus surrounding the GCSE examination. Both are perhaps inhibiting further ways of thinking about languages and the skills needed in a high-tech age.

CONCLUSION

This article has focused on 'methodological doubt', 'curricular confusion', and 'loss of purpose' in modern languages, and what follows are a few brief responses to the concerns outlined above.

PRIMARY

There is a desperate need for coherence and cohesion across the language learning age range, which should start with a clear directive for foreign languages in primary education. A lot of effort and enthusiasm is going into primary foreign language teaching at local level. However, there is no agreed curriculum or teaching philosophy; and time allowed, quality of teaching and standards achieved vary significantly. French is also the main language taught here, which is not in our own longer-term strategic interest. It could be that such an initiation in foreign languages needs to come in a 'box' and provide a minimum *savoir* in the way in which the national literacy and numeracy strategies do. Let us hope that the results of the CILT Primary Language Learning Initiative provide examples of good practice to guide thinking in this area.

There is also the need for a curriculum which takes the outcome of primary languages as a foundation for KS3 language learning in secondary schools. This is essential for progression and continuity. The non-statutory guidelines for Key Stage 2 set out in the revised National Curriculum (DfEE 1999: 32-36) are a welcome move in this direction, although they reveal internal tensions of purpose, content and methodology.

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SECONDARY

Training and support is needed for teachers in developing aspects of the Programme of Study in terms of the sort of strands of progression I have listed above, especially at KS4. Too much is left implicit, which often leaves teachers dependent on published materials that vary considerably in what they do and do not include in their models of progression.

The possibilities of disapplication are now being realised in schools looking for ways of freeing up time in the KS4 curriculum. Perhaps the choice should be less between the long and the short course at KS4 than about the type of language learning to be followed and for what purpose. Here the integration of vocational and academic elements of foreign language learning should be clearly stated with defined objectives. Moreover, the vocational opportunities of integrating languages with GNVQ and NVQ courses have not yet been fully realised.

POST-COMPULSORY

There is a need to find a way of substantially increasing the number of learners who carry on with foreign languages at 16+ and into higher education. The initiative (Languages Lead Body 1995) to develop criterion-referenced language standards as a yardstick to measure foreign language proficiency relevant to work environments is to be welcomed. However, the present standards are inadequate, since the scales used are notional-functional and do not integrate with an overall model of linguistic progression, from Primary to Higher Education, producing a series of schemes which do not connect. One consequence is that gaining a modern languages degree at a British University seems to be no guarantee of a shared minimum standard of practical language proficiency (see Coleman, 1996). It is a national imperative to fix a standard measure which will fairly reflect the amount of linguistic work undertaken in undergraduate studies and the level of proficiency achieved. Such a framework or set of standards might also take into account the various subject orientations. In the UK our separate assessment schemes for National Curriculum, GCSE, A level, GNVQs and degree courses do not operate according to an integrated framework. This type of scheme has been operationalised in English as a Foreign Language - why not in other modern languages? Such a framework also needs to be linked to current European initiatives in providing a common approach to second language learning and teaching (see Council for Cultural Cooperation, 1996).

TEACHER PROFESSIONALISM

These changes would challenge methodological orthodoxies and curricular prescriptions. They

would also force a reassessment of the aims and purposes of modern foreign language teaching and learning. To bring about such changes requires not only top-down shifts in policy and practice but also a robust and healthy teaching force. The way in which teacher professionalism has been recast in terms of institutional inwardness and a preoccupation with exam results for public scrutiny is to be regretted. The result has been a withering of professional associations, the proliferation of courses which offer mostly an instrumental view of continuing professional development and a blight on individual inquisitiveness about the problems and processes of foreign language learning and teaching. It will take a lot to repair this damage⁹ but there seems no end in sight to the managerial functionalism which now guides what teachers do. Despite the loss, confusion and doubts discussed in this article, determination, energy and a commitment to teaching languages will hopefully persist into the twenty-first century.

NOTES

¹ We now have a new revised version (DfEE 1999), in force from September 2000.

² The Nuffield Languages Inquiry is a UK-wide inquiry appointed by the Nuffield Foundation to take stock of our national capability in languages. The Inquiry was scheduled to run from Spring 1998 to the end of 1999. The report and recommendation were published in Spring 2000 (The Nuffield Inquiry 2000).

³ The views of Stephen Krashen remain controversial. He has been extensively criticised for apparently equating the processes of second language learning with those of first language learning. In fact, his arguments are more subtly expressed than this crude summary, and he does include empirical evidence for his claims. The approach he advocates is certainly more natural rather than instructional. It is rare for applied linguists to offer specific methodological advice to guide classroom practice in the way he has done.

⁴ In claiming this I would not want to be seen as offering a caricature of the very careful work which has been undertaken to rethink 'knowledge about language' and to attempt to find the ways in which explicit grammar teaching can underpin the development of communicative competence.

⁵ The same thinking is used in 'structure and enactment' of the literacy hour in primary schools (DfEE 1998).

⁶ The words 'learning strategies' are not listed in the revised Programme of Study (DfEE 1999: 16-17). However, there is some acknowledgement of their importance in the five items listed under the heading: Developing Language-Learning Skills (*ibid*). This does, however, seem to be a rather restricted list.

⁷ The streamlining of the Programme of Study in the new revised version does not help in this matter.

⁸ The listed areas of experience have now been reduced to a sub-item of the 'Breadth of Study' in the revised version (*ibid*). I believe the thrust of my argument still applies under this new arrangement.

⁹ See Grenfell, 1998 for a discussion of modern foreign languages teacher education and Grenfell, 1997 for a consideration of the respective roles of theory and practice in teachers' professional development.

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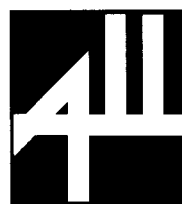
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