

Editorial

Douglas Allford and Norbert Pachler

"There is indeed evidence of rises in standards in literacy following the introduction of the National Literacy Project ... and of the NLS itself"

As we reflect upon trends in language education in Britain over the last few years, the picture that emerges is decidedly mixed. In the case of the study of English as the mother tongue (L1), there are some positive developments to record (although syllabus changes at primary level have also encountered criticism). So far as the study of modern foreign/second languages is concerned, it is harder to find encouraging signs.

THE MOTHER TONGUE

The key role of L1 literacy is widely acknowledged in discussions of education, society and the economy. In a conference paper which looks at the role of education in meeting the economic challenges of the new century, a leading economist, Sir Alan Budd, outlines two goals of the British government and how they are to be realised:

The first objective (higher and more rapidly growing GDP) can be achieved by raising the productivity of those in work. The second objective [increasing the level of employment] can be achieved by raising the skills and increasing the willingness to work of those who are unemployed. Education and training can be expected to help achieve both objectives. (Budd, 2000: 2)

In today's constantly shifting labour market, 'the recognised need is for a workforce with a high standard of basic skills and the ability to adapt continuously to new technologies and changing working environments' (Budd, 2000:3). These basic skills and the ability to adapt to new technologies and to pursue lifelong learning are to be established on foundations of L1 literacy (along with numeracy and ICT competence).

In talking of current policy on literacy teaching, Budd does not explicitly refer to the National Literacy Strategy (NLS) but that is clearly what he has in mind. His views, since they

are those of a former government economic adviser now the head of an Oxford college (Queen's), are worth noting. He believes that:

the most important education policies are those that relate to schools. The British have long envied countries such as Japan and Germany where the educational attainments of the average (i.e. median) school leaver are so much higher than those in the UK. (Budd, 2000: 7)

This tallies with the argument that the National Literacy Strategy was not conceived and implemented in order to address problems of illiteracy but, rather, that its main aim seems to be to raise levels of literacy amongst the general population (Hannon, 2000: 12).

Budd also notes (*ibid.*) that many teachers object to a regime of testing and in particular to the publication of results. However, he implies that such objections are outweighed by rises in standards of literacy, improvements in the employment prospects of school leavers and likely economic benefits.

There is indeed evidence of rises in standards in literacy following the introduction of the National Literacy Project (run in some schools in 1996 and 1997 as a trial for the National Literacy Strategy) and of the NLS itself, which has been in effect in all primary schools in England since 1998. The percentage of 11-year-olds reaching the government target of level 4 in reading at key stage 2 rose from 57% in 1996 to 75% in 2002 (Machin and McNally, 2003; OFSTED, 2003). Higher attainment levels were found in schools participating in the National Literacy Project between 1996 and 1998 than in similar, non-participating schools; and there is also evidence of 'modest but positive effects of the policy that persist to age 16, as GCSE English performance is seen to be higher for children affected by the [National Literacy Project]' (Machin and McNally, 2003: 25-6). In other words, the first

cohort of pupils to have studied under the approach embodied in the NLS – albeit for only their final year of primary school – performed better at GCSE.

The results of an international comparison of levels of teenage literacy are also interesting. Working under the auspices of the OECD and UNESCO, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a collaborative effort to measure reading literacy amongst 15-year-olds. Forty-three countries are currently participating, of whom 28 are OECD members. Students are placed on a scale divided into five levels according to ability, and ‘the results show wide differences between countries in the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in reading literacy’ (PISA, 2003: 5). On the OECD-PISA database for 2003, countries are ranked according to the percentage of students performing at each of the five levels on the combined reading literacy scale (PISA, 2003: 7). The UK is placed ninth (of 43), behind only Japan (5th) of the largest economies.

However, of the major English-speaking countries, the UK comes below Canada (4th), Ireland (6th), New Zealand (7th) and Australia (8th), and is ahead only of the USA (16th). It is worth noting that of these countries Australia for one introduced literacy programmes during the 1990s quite different in many respects from the NLS (see Unsworth, 2000: 26).

Thus it remains entirely possible that reservations expressed about the NLS are valid (see Allford, 2003) and that other types of focused literacy instruction and classroom management may be even more effective. Nonetheless, this possibility seems to have been disregarded by policy-makers, and an approach embodying many of the weaknesses as well as the strengths of the NLS is being adopted for MFLs, as we shall see.

MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

The Nuffield Languages Inquiry into the state of MFLs in the UK demonstrated that for a variety of reasons speaking English alone was not enough on the international job market, that the government did not have a coherent approach to MFLs and that the UK desperately needed more MFL teachers (Nuffield, 2000: 6-7) (for a discussion of these issues see Pachler, forthcoming). However, in its 2002 Green Paper, which led the way to the National Language Strategy for England published in December of the same year, the DfES took little note of key Nuffield recommendations, such as improving arrangements in secondary schools and making MFLs a specified component of the 16-19 curriculum (Nuffield, 2000: 8-9). Perversely, the National Language Strategy puts paid to the ‘Languages for all’ policy by reducing the entitlement for pupils to learn at least one foreign language and to develop cultural understanding

to key stage 3 (pupils aged 11-14).

In addition, the *Framework for Teaching Modern Foreign Languages: Years 7, 8 and 9* (DfES, 2003) represents an extension to MFL study of the prescriptivism that characterises the National Literacy Strategy discussed above. The framework for MFLs, which is accompanied by an array of training material, consists of a prescriptive step-by-step approach. The document sets out a rigid set of year-on-year objectives which are to be followed in detail by teachers. This approach broadly assumes that foreign language learning follows a clearly definable progression from word via sentence to text. This notion, however, is difficult to reconcile with what we know from research, namely that foreign language learning is a non-linear process.

It is unclear whether this degree of prescriptiveness in content, pedagogical approaches and outcomes will lead to the desired increases, either in attainment or in pupil (and teacher) motivation.

Neither is it clear what impact such policies will have on the decline in numbers of students studying MFLs beyond the most basic levels, but there are grounds for concern. A 2002 survey by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT; available at www.cilt.org.uk) – now The National Centre for Languages – in collaboration with the *Times Educational Supplement* (TES; available at www.tes.co.uk) into future provision in foreign languages for key stage 4 (sample size 4000 Heads of Languages in England, of whom 393 (12.6%) returned the questionnaire) does not bode well. The percentage of schools providing a foreign language for all has declined from 73% in 2000-01 to 50% in 2002-03 and the proportion of schools with disapplication rates of over 15% (i.e. schools allowing 15% or more of pupils aged 14-16 to drop foreign languages) has increased in the same period from 8% to 25%. When asked whether their school would be likely to make foreign languages optional if the law allowed it, 29% said their school would do so (or had done so), and in a further 25% of schools this was ‘under consideration’. The survey also reported a correlation between social background and the likelihood of opting to drop a foreign language. Pupil attitudes, government policies and teacher supply were considered to be the main obstacles to MFL success.

We as a society are now engaging with EU enlargement; and we must also, in the wake of al-Qaida atrocities and the invasion of Iraq, learn to understand the values and beliefs of other communities and to resist those simplistic, racist responses which are the terrorist’s greatest weapon. It would be deplorable indeed if, at this very juncture, our education system were to be depriving young people of opportunities to understand the languages and cultures of others.

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THIS ISSUE OF THE LANGUAGE LEARNING JOURNAL

After the two-part special issue of the *Language Learning Journal* on foreign language teaching as an evidence-based profession, the journal now returns to its more familiar structure, with the reappearance of the Reviews Section. (We should like to record our gratitude to the Reviews Editor, Nigel Norman, for his co-operation in the special issue.)

In the present issue, as part of her series 'In Other Journals', Elspeth Broady provides a timely discussion of learning about the cultures associated with other languages. She notes various examples of how the concept 'culture' has shifted from what was fixed and factual to something fluid and elusive. Whilst these new conceptions of culture bring their difficulties, to engage with them is to resist stereotyping.

An interesting piece of research by Ursula Wingate into learners' dictionary use touches on some of the cognitive complexities involved. As well as underlining the need for learners to be taught how to use dictionaries effectively, the article also provides an interesting perspective on just *why* learners need to be capable of linguistic analysis and to have a basic grasp of metalinguistic concepts and terminology.

In a Review Article, David Block discusses Rod Ellis's book on task-based language teaching and, in an imaginative initiative, he has also collected and presented the views of some of his students on the book. Ellis works primarily in the field that is designated Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and much of the research he discusses relates to the study of English as a Second Language (ESL). There are of course important differences between much of ESL study and studying a foreign language in the UK – two of the most obvious differences often being the degree of exposure to the target language and the level of motivation to learn it. Nonetheless, so long

as such differences are borne in mind, the British MFL teacher can learn from ESL study elsewhere. For instance, the piece in this number of the journal by Jeanette Denton, whilst her students are adult Japanese learners of English, contains ideas which could be adapted to a UK context.

Finally, we are very pleased to include in our 'Reflections' series a piece by the German Ambassador. It is heartening to note that, whereas in this country the study of MFLs appears to be faltering at present (as the articles by Beatrice Davies and Catherine Watts indicate), in mainland Europe a much more positive and vigorous attitude prevails.

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