

Intrinsic interest and explicit instruction: reforming MFL pedagogy in English schools

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The challenge

- In 2018 there were 256,000 entries for French, German and Spanish (maths GCSE entries were 716,000)
- 32,000 entries for other languages – combination of ‘lesser taught’ and community/heritage
- c80% of pupils not getting Ebacc suite with one ‘pillar’ absent miss it because of the language
- At A Level in 2018 around 20,000 entries for French, German and Spanish together (German c3000)

From Pedagogy Review (Nov 2016)

1. Whatever their level of achievement, the vast majority of young people should study a modern foreign language up to the age of 16, and take a GCSE in it.
2. Pupils need to gain systematic knowledge of the vocabulary, grammar, and sound and spelling systems (phonics) of their new language, and how these are used by speakers of the language. They need to reinforce this knowledge with extensive planned practice and use in order to build the skills needed for communication.
6. Languages teachers should know and build on the grammar taught in the key stage 2 national curriculum for English.
7. Secondary schools should know about the modern languages taught at their feeder primary schools. Wherever possible, they should support language learning in primary schools and plan to build on pupils' primary school language knowledge.
8. Teachers should carefully plan their own and pupils' use of the new language in class to support and reinforce learning, and ensure that meanings are always clear and confusion avoided.
13. Assessment should use a range of tasks, including those focused on specific aspects of the language taught, such as vocabulary or grammar. Some tasks should require pupils to compose sentences, short pieces of writing and oral presentations of their own. Assessment should not make excessive demands on teachers' time.
14. Mentors for teacher trainees should focus on the systematic development of trainees' subject-specific knowledge and expertise in language teaching. They should ensure that a clearly worked out curriculum is in place.

How is a FL in UK school context learnt?

- A foreign language taught in an Anglophone context in 2-4 hours per week to teenagers is not 'naturally acquired', it is formally learnt
- This requires identification, segmentation, sequencing explicit instruction and practice of knowledge content (as with any other subject)
- The natural acquisition / formal learning confusion has underpinned much misunderstanding, including among policy makers
- Intrinsic, self-sustaining interest in languages requires development of conscious knowledge of how language works and ability to create new sentences accurately

Content shaped by grammar and vocabulary, not thematic topics

- What is the substantive knowledge base of a language?
- Words and rules for combining them – grammar and vocabulary
- And the pronunciation and spelling/writing system – phonics
- Misapprehension to say that the thematic topics (environment, holidays etc) we build vocabulary around are the ‘knowledge content’
- Equally a misapprehension to say that listening, speaking, reading and writing are the ‘knowledge content’
- **So identification, segmentation and sequencing of vocabulary, grammar and phonics are critical**

Progression model driven by content

- Core principle of knowledge-based curriculum: progression is driven by and described in terms of the curriculum itself, ie what knowledge content is being taught
- MFL assessment has tended to be underpinned by 'competency statements' (ie descriptors that sit one step removed from the content itself eg 'can talk about', 'can describe', 'of increasing difficulty', etc) rather than by clarity about which actual words and grammar mastered
- Taking this seriously again requires us to be precise about the words and grammar we expect pupils fully to know, then assess and state how well they have learnt them

The importance of deliberate practice

- Practice critical in every subject, and no less so in MFL
- Must not shy away from it – without practice, there can be no rapid recall and automatisisation
- Practice must automatise, force recall and extend
- Must have regard to cognitive load – best to automatise small amounts of new knowledge
- Limits of working memory require that manageable amounts are practised at any given time

'Authentic materials'

- 'Authentic materials' so pupils would only ever see 'real life' materials
- However, what do we know about vocabulary gaps in learning to read in English? The '90% rule' ...
- Parallel with 'fully decodable texts' in early reading
- Implications for MFL and 'authentic materials'?
- It is important that materials we use for practice consist entirely or almost entirely of words and grammar which we have actually taught
- Implications of doing otherwise?

The use of the 'target language'

- Using the 'target language' in the classroom was for many years a non-negotiable (Ofsted etc)
- Important for purposeful practice of knowledge, and value for learning intonation, speed etc
- But used indiscriminately not helpful (associated with natural acquisition presumption)
- And if a barrier to understanding teacher explanation then can be actively damaging
- But that should not lead to its abandonment, just to a recognition that carefully chosen and discriminate use is needed, always with an eye to recall and practice

The pedagogy of grammar teaching

- Working memory: 3-4 'chunks' of knowledge at a time
- Upfront short explanation (using English if necessary, focussing on meaning and form)
- Followed by practice in 'input language' (identifying in context where the grammar is salient for meaning)
- Then productive practice
- Need to reach automaticity and use quickly
- If reference to eg tables or lists needed to complete task then memorisation and automaticity not being achieved, probably too much at one go

Which vocabulary?

- If language course constructed around thematic topics, then we tend to over-emphasise specialist vocabulary directly associated with the topic, and under-emphasise other common words
- Common words especially with non-concrete meaning tend to be under-taught
- The importance of verbs – including in unconjugated form, and those with non-topic-specific meaning
- Prioritise frequency of occurrence in making choices
- What are the 25 commonest verbs in the French language? All should be known well by end of first year.

The pedagogy of vocabulary teaching

- Teachers should have a secure repertoire of approaches for teaching vocabulary
- Nothing wrong with ‘errorless learning’ – telling pupils the meaning of new words (does not have to be a guessing game)
- Key is to move rapidly to recognition of new words and use in context
- Memorisation is the aim – repeated ‘forced recall’ is main way to achieve memorisation
- Learn words in groups
- But not too many at once – remember limits of working memory
- For both grammar and vocabulary, spaced practice and ‘forced recall’ are important – ‘forgetting’ can be a positive thing!

What about phonics?

- Phonics is shorthand for the pronunciation and spelling/writing system of (alphabetically written) languages
- Important to teach unfamiliar sounds and their associated spellings early
- Important to teach sound-letter correspondences which are different to English early
- And practise that knowledge – should be automatized largely by end of first year so pupils can read out anything more or less accurately and offer plausible spellings for new words heard

Myths and misunderstandings

- Opinions are ‘harder’ than statements of fact
- Pupils acquire language through classroom target language use
- English must never be used
- Only authentic materials should be used – pupils will be motivated to ‘infer’ meaning when using such materials
- ‘Meaning making’ happens independently of mastering structure
- Interest in language learning is created by lively teaching and varied activities alone
- If pupils rote learn enough fixed phrases they will become fluent
- We learn a FL in the same way as we learn our mother tongue(s)
- Language courses have to be arranged by topics to make them interesting and relevant
- Every lesson must include the ‘four skills’ (listening, reading, speaking, writing)
- Progression is best expressed by the range of topics or the range of situations you can communicate about
- Grammar and vocabulary based approaches are not ‘creative’

How is this relevant to Language Analysis?

- Promotes intrinsic interest (how the language works), rather than relying on instrumental motivation (communicative ability) alone
- This can help sustain motivation through the long process of learning a foreign language
- It promotes explicit understanding of language, which facilitates future language learning capacity

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