

Teaching approaches: structure, grammar, vocabulary and target language

1. What are the most effective ways of teaching and improving: grammar
 - grammar
 - vocabulary
 - language mastery

1a. Grammar

For MFL teaching in general it is vital to recognise several things. First, we need to adopt a long-term view rather than one based on short-term gain, coupled with a recognition that declarative knowledge does not always convert easily into procedural knowledge (Macrory and Stone, 1996, 2000). Second, learners need to have exposure and practice of all parts of the grammatical system in a carefully sequenced and developmental way (some textbooks and SoW still privilege highly transactionally useful parts of the grammatical system). Third, teachers need to design form-focussed communicative activities that allow learners to use the language in a meaningful way (Spada, 1997), such as through task-based learning (Ellis, 2003). Fourth, we need an explicit recognition and understanding of the role of error in language learning (see further below, questions 10, 11, 13, where we link this to risk-taking).

There is a growing evidence base for the value of Content and Language Integrated Learning approach (henceforth, CLIL). For a case study in the UK context see the (2013) Ofsted report *Developing modern languages through other subjects: Chenderit School*, as well as Woodfield's section in Erler et al. (2012). However, the evidence suggests that CLIL is not necessarily equally useful for all aspects of language learning. Dalton-Puffer's (2015) overview study includes vocabulary and morphology among the areas positively affected, but syntax among the areas where the effect of CLIL is as yet indeterminate. (Morphology and syntax are usually both thought of as being part of grammar.)

We would stress that the success of CLIL crucially depends on the availability of suitably qualified teachers. However, on a positive note, we add that CLIL may be conceptualised broadly, so as to encompass not only the teaching of other subjects (such as geography) in a foreign language, but also the teaching of interesting materials related to the country (countries) and culture(s) associated with the foreign language in question, by MFL teachers themselves. This is contrasted with bland topics such as pets, houses, holidays and pollution, which are often found in materials developed and used in the UK but which learners find less stimulating.

1.b Vocabulary

See the point made under 1a, above, concerning CLIL. Furthermore, there is evidence that deliberate learning of vocabulary can lead to retention of 'reusable knowledge' (Nation 2001). Learners should also be trained in strategy use e.g. 'guessing from context, dictionary use, word part analysis

and learning using word cards' (Nation 2007). Strategy training, however, should involve awareness-raising of strategy options, both implicit and explicit instruction, and opportunities for practice to develop confidence (Griffiths 2014).

1.c Language mastery

The term “language mastery” in the question does not appear to be on a par with grammar and vocabulary, as it includes those aspects, and pretty much everything else. Thus, we would say that CLIL may contribute to aspects of language mastery.

2. What are the cognitive processes involved in learning a language? What does this tell us about how languages can be best taught?

Obvious ones here include attention, memory, reasoning, problem solving and decision-making. The implication is that what is required are structured input and opportunities for meaningful interaction (Lee and Van Patten, 2003) and for meaningful output.

3. Do teaching methods vary depending on the language being taught? If so, what are some of the key differences?

While at one level the processes of language learning are very similar, equally the differences between languages will require differential attention/teaching strategies from teachers. One example of this is the difficulty of moving from a stress-timed language such as English to a syllable-timed language such as French, Spanish or Italian (or vice-versa), requiring a slightly different approach to teaching listening comprehension. Other key differences may include the grammatical system, phoneme-grapheme correspondences in alphabetic languages, the learning of new graphemes in non-Roman alphabets or symbols/characters needed in logographic writing systems (e.g. Mandarin). Thus, pedagogy needs to be based on a solid understanding of the linguistic features of the language being taught.

4. Can language teaching learn from the teaching methods of other subjects? If so, what are these teaching methods?

We would like to point again to the evidence in support of cross-curricular approaches to language teaching, where useful content is presented in a foreign language (CLIL; see question 1, above).

On a more informal, intuitive note we would suggest that MFL can learn from both English and Maths.

English celebrates variation, and rejects prescriptivism, whereas MFL can be rather prescriptive about the target language (e.g. 'the best French is spoken in ...'; 'most French speakers do X, but that's wrong') and struggles with variation. This position is diametrically opposed to the descriptivist view of professional academic linguists, and MFL pedagogy is all about 'authentic texts', which inevitably show variation. And of course MFL should always try to compare the target language with English, so the MFL teacher should know about the content (as well as the methods) of English.

Maths is all about patterns and generalisations, and teaches children to apply general patterns to particular cases. Learning a foreign language is in many ways parallel to this (e.g. 'given the way in which past tense formation works in German, how does one inflect verb X?')

Class structure, activities and resources

5. What is the optimal language lesson length and frequency? Should students be grouped by attainment? How is this different from other subjects?

These are difficult questions to answer definitively as variables such as class size, continuity of teacher and the individual profiles of learners all play a part. This is also true of lesson length, although a more fruitful perspective might be to consider length of episode. Where schools timetable long lessons, teachers may need to think about how best to break the lesson up. Lesson frequency is another matter as frequent lessons rather than one per week offer a clear advantage and we should look at the curriculum time that countries that are successful in language teaching provide.

We think there is a case for some setting by attainment, perhaps in KS4/exam preparation, but the grouping of low attainers together for a substantial proportion of time can produce a negative atmosphere.

6. What proportion of the time do effective teachers spend on a) teacher directed whole class work, b) group or pair work, c) individual work?

7. What tools and resources (including a scheme of work, textbooks, online tools, and other resources) are effective in supporting language teaching?

A well designed SoW or textbook can be a very good tool, but teachers also need the knowledge about how to construct a SoW with progression, assessment and differentiation built in if they are to adequately evaluate any that they are presented with and may need to choose from.

8. How might schools make even better use of technology to support language teaching?

There is evidence that video-conferencing with native speaker learners is effective in developing intercultural awareness and motivation (Macrory et al., 2012; Phillips, 2010; Pritchard, Hunt and Barnes, 2010). The ready availability of e.g. Skype and FaceTime has made this kind of activity relatively easy to implement.

We would also mention vocabulary-learning apps such as Duolingo. Underlying such apps is often a network-based view of the mental lexicon, which has been the dominant model in the past three or four decades (for an overview of much relevant psycholinguistic research, see Ober & Shenaut 2006).

9. What specific activities (e.g. homework, assessments, group activities, etc.) are effective at teaching languages?

Increasing uptake and improving outcomes

10. How can schools and teachers improve uptake and promote enthusiasm for learning languages?

We would argue that what is needed is a longer-term view that allows for revisiting language, understanding of the role of error and activities that allow learners to both experiment and reflect upon language – also connecting with speakers of the language through technology (see question 8, above) or more traditional means such as links with schools (Macrory and Beaumont, 2007).

Additional benefits are to be gained from teaching interesting content either through a CLIL approach (broadly defined; see also question 1, above). While languages are currently perceived by some learners to be difficult, learners — including more able ones — are sometimes simply left bored.

We also note that there is considerable international evidence of the relationship between enhanced learner autonomy and intrinsic motivation, e.g. Deci et al 1991; Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009; Lamb 2011; Murray et al 2011; Ushioda 1996. This can be reinforced through the development of assessment for learning, in which learners learn to reflect on their own learning, set targets and assess their progress, enhancing a sense of responsibility for and control over learning (e.g. Black and Jones 2006; Lamb and Little 2016). In addition, significant research and consultation took place in order to develop the 14-19 Diploma in Languages and International Communication, which included the importance of meaningful content in contexts of interest to learners as crucial to sustaining engagement.

Finally, although there is a long way to go in improving uptake, we would like to draw attention to — as well as encouragement from — the success of the UK Linguistics Olympiad (www.uklo.org). Having started in 2010 this competition sees thousands of schoolchildren every year work on problems

drawn from a huge variety of languages. Our UK teams do rather well at the International Linguistics Olympiad (<http://www.ioling.org/>), but more importantly the level of participation is a clear testament to the appetite to engage with languages.

11. How can teachers stretch the most able, whilst supporting less capable language students?

More able learners need the freedom to take risks and experiment and work independently; teachers need to break the language right down and build it back up for the less able. All learners need confidence building as well as interesting content.

12. How do teachers monitor student performance? How do schools monitor teacher performance?

This question appears to be asking what current practice is rather than requesting a viewpoint. Ofsted reports are more likely to yield this information.

13. How can teachers provide effective feedback to their students? How can schools provide effective feedback to their teachers?

Teachers can support learning by engaging pupils in reflection on their own learning, encouraging them to see links between first language(s) and the new language(s), links between parts of the grammatical system(s) of the new language(s) and ensuring that they understand that learning is gradual, incremental and developmental and that error is a natural and informative part of the process.

Schools (and thus senior management teams) need to grasp that language learning is a complex process and take a longer term view of what constitutes progress. Effective feedback to teachers could include discussion of longer-term planning, the effective use of the target language, how teachers respond to error and what assessment over a longer period (e.g. a half term) tells them about pupil progress.

Supporting and developing language teachers

14. What are some of the barriers and enablers for effective teaching?

Perhaps the main barrier is currently the tendency to teach to the test, particularly in secondary schools. Some unfortunate results are that the recursive nature of language learning, the time needed to engage in risk-taking language use and opportunities to engage with interesting texts/content and to interact with other speakers are not given sufficient attention and consideration.

An important barrier in especially primary schools is the lack of subject knowledge (language mastery, prominently including knowledge of the grammatical system of the TL) on the part of teachers and the 'lack of presence' of MFL (Macrory, in preparation)

15. What guidance are teachers and schools currently relying on?

16. What guidance would teachers and schools benefit from?

See question 14, above. In addition, teachers would benefit from guidance regarding the teaching of literacy skills in MFL (Erler & Macaro, 2011; Woore, 2009, 2010), including phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

There would also be benefits in guidance on how to support and build upon the skills of learners of EAL/plurilingual pupils.

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