

# Improving the quality of language learning in schools

## Approaches to teaching and learning

The development of a national languages strategy has raised a major issue about the quality of the language learning experience in our schools. In simple terms, can there be an agreed methodology for language teaching in order to raise standards and improve quality? A logical starting point for answering such a question would be the most comprehensive and well founded contemporary description of the language learning process - the Common European Framework of Reference (CEF).<sup>1</sup>

Of course it is not such a straightforward matter. The CEF itself is 260 pages long and is in any case a “framework” to aid practitioners of all kinds to reflect on what they are doing and to explain this to others. It is not a syllabus or a methodological guide. The issues raised in the CEF are themselves complex and often unresolved. In the words of one recent commentator “*Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century and ending only recently, .. (the) aim had been to find a universal panacea method for the optimum teaching and learning of modern languages. It is now generally accepted that no one single such method exists.*”<sup>2</sup>

It is for these reasons that both the Nuffield Inquiry and the Government response have tended to concentrate on provision and policy rather than pedagogy.

## Why consider issues of pedagogy now?

There are probably two factors which are pushing us to revise this more cautious viewpoint

- The 14-19 Green paper (and associated text) which argues implicitly that there have been shortcomings in our approaches to language teaching, reflected in low motivation among learners
- The unfolding Key Stage 3 Strategy which is very much about classroom approaches and which will in one way or another have an effect on language learning methodologies

It might further be argued that the likely reduction of compulsory language learning in England to one Key Stage puts a premium on what happens in that Key Stage and in particular on the nature of progression from Primary Entitlement and to KS4 Entitlement .

## The particularity of Languages in the Curriculum

A great deal has been done to show the links between language learning and other parts of the curriculum (in particular Literacy, Citizenship, Cultural Awareness, ICT). This is of course very positive. In considering possible “good practice” approaches to language learning we must also be aware of what is particular to language learning, not least in order to avoid unhelpful transfer of content and methodologies from other parts of the curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.(CEF) Council for Cultural Co-operation Education Committee, Modern languages Division  
CUP 2001

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Whitehead; Materials and Methods 1966-1996 in 30 Years of Language Teaching, CILT 1996

In a number of ways language teaching and learning are unique in the school curriculum.<sup>3</sup>

- Learning a second language is concerned with forms as much as if not more than with meanings. Much of the “meaning”, in particular for beginners, is already “known” - for example telling the time, families and friends, personal identity - and so the process of learning as well as the motivations for doing so are different, either from first language (L1) learning or from learning other subjects (accessing “new” content through L1.)
- Oracy skills are far more important for language learning than for most if not all other areas of the curriculum. Listening and Understanding, Speaking have equal weight with written skills in assessment schemes; the aural/oral mode is most common in classroom interaction. There is evidence to suggest that learners with low oracy levels struggle with foreign language learning.
- In language learning the model of performance – whether for teacher or learner – is frequently considered to be the native speaker, whose mastery of the language no non-native teacher (let alone learner) is likely to equal.
- The rest of the curriculum is not neutral to the acquisition of foreign language competence. It is known that the internalisation of a second language takes time and the amount of time allocated to foreign language learning in English schools is considerably less than in other parts of Europe. The teaching process within the school (or any institutional) framework has been likened to “gardening in a gale”. Tiny shoots of a foreign language are planted in a languages lesson only to be flattened by the gale of English in every other lesson and in the institution generally.

There are also areas where language learning is not unique but where it has a particularly important role to play not least through its invitation for learners to engage with “difference” in language and culture. This has a particular resonance also in relation to the inclusion agenda and the need for young people to develop sympathy for our contemporary multicultural, multilingual society

## **An agreed “approach” to language teaching and learning**

It is these particularities – in many ways the difficulties – of language learning in schools, colleges and universities which have inspired a wealth of research and development in the pedagogy of language teaching and learning. Interestingly there are significantly more WWW entries for Language Teaching or Language Teaching Methodology than for any comparable area of the curriculum.<sup>4</sup> As suggested above this has been a process which has gone on for over 250 years (actually even longer), but it has had a particular resonance since the Second World War and especially since the 1980s.<sup>5</sup> For although Maurice Whitehead is right to conclude that no single method exists, it is also the case, as he goes on to say, that there is a broadly accepted “approach” - a “*communicative approach, incorporating inter alia many of the best elements of a wide variety of methods*” This – slightly eclectic – communicative approach underpins the general consensus about language teaching and learning both here and abroad. It is associated particularly with the work of the Council of Europe in the 1970s but it has other influences and precursors

<sup>3</sup> See Eric Hawkins in *Modern Languages in the Curriculum* (1981) p 203 and ff,

<sup>4</sup> A web search using the Google search engine gives the following number of entries for Language Learning, Language Teaching and Language Teaching Methodology (figures for Geography and Mathematics in brackets)

Language Learning	2.35 million	(761K, 199K)
Language Teaching	1.98 million	(612K 185K)
Language Teaching Methodology	314K	(87.9K 141K)

<sup>5</sup> For example Hawkins *Modern Languages in the Curriculum* pp 97 - 200

and is based on both research into the processes of language learning and analysis of classroom practice. A brief overview of this background is given in an attached extract by Eric Hawkins.<sup>6</sup>

The difficulties of prescription as well as the likely nature of this “consensual” teaching approach within a spectrum of possibilities is well summarised in the Common European Framework itself –

*“There is at present no sufficiently strong research-based consensus on how learners learn for the Framework to base itself on any one learning theory. Some theorists believe that human information-processing abilities are strong enough for it to be sufficient for a human being to be exposed to sufficient understandable language for him/her to acquire the language and be able to use it both for understanding and production. They believe the ‘acquisition’ process to be inaccessible to observation or intuition and that it cannot be facilitated by conscious manipulation, whether by teaching or study methods. For them the most important thing a teacher can do is provide the richest possible linguistic environment in which learning can take place without formal teaching.*

*Others believe that in addition to exposure to comprehensible input, active participation in communicative interaction is a necessary and sufficient condition for language development. They too consider that explicit teaching or study of the language is irrelevant. At the other extreme, some believe that students who have learnt the necessary rules of grammar and learnt a vocabulary will be able to understand and use the language in the light of their previous experience and common sense without any need to rehearse. Between these polar extremes most ‘mainstream’ learners, teachers and their support services will follow more eclectic practices, recognising that learners do not necessarily learn what teachers teach and that they require substantial contextualised and intelligible language input as well as opportunities to use the language interactively, but that learning is facilitated, especially under artificial classroom conditions, by a combination of conscious learning and sufficient practice to reduce or eliminate the conscious attention paid to low-level physical skills of speaking and writing as well as to morphological and syntactic accuracy, thus freeing the mind for higher-level strategies of communication...*

*There is of course considerable variation among learners of different ages, types and backgrounds as to which of these elements they respond most fruitfully, and among teachers, course-writers etc as to the balance of elements provided in courses according to the importance they attach to production vs. reception, accuracy vs. fluency etc”<sup>7</sup>*

## **So is there no answer?**

It might be concluded from this that there is no answer to the question posed above, that because there is no consensus on how learners learn languages there can be no agreed language teaching method, that instead “anything goes”.

However, as this extract from the Common European Framework suggests, between the extremes of the “universal panacea” and the “anything goes” approach there is some quite solid common ground about the **conditions** which are necessary for successful language learning to take place. These conditions can provide a kind of template within which to position and evaluate a range of successful practices.

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<sup>6</sup> 30 Years of language Learning pp 15-32)

<sup>7</sup> CEF pp 139-140.....

So whatever else we can say about language learning it is relatively non-controversial to claim that successful learning takes place when –

1. Learners are exposed to **RICH INPUT** of the target language
2. They have many opportunities to **INTERACT** with the language
3. They are **MOTIVATED** to learn.

What are some of the implications of these three “*sine qua non*” conditions?

## 1 INPUT

Without “comprehensible input”<sup>8</sup> language learning is impossible. That input must also be varied and as intense (rich) as possible. This is why so much importance is attached to the maximisation of the use of target language in the learning situation (and not only in relation to learning tasks). Some very interesting research – most recently by the University of Southampton - has shown how learners seem to acquire foreign language in the first instance in “chunks”, assimilated through exposure to the language (qua CEF). There is not in this sense a simple progression in learning from words to sentences, but almost conversely from chunks of language to the words and structures which underpin them. The importance of INPUT for language assimilation puts a premium on –

- The development of Oracy. Although this input can be of all kinds oral input is particularly important for language assimilation - this in turn underlines the importance of phonetics and aural skills “education of the ear” , which may also have specific implications relating to the age of the learner
- Understanding the relationship between spoken and written language, which is not such a simple matter in a second language. Judgements need to be made on when to introduce the written form.
- Understanding the interrelationship between the “Chunks” of language and the words and structures which underpin those chunks.
- The need for a wide range of input stimuli (Teacher; native speaker assistant; significant access through use of technology, authentic materials and the time needed to read them)

It should further be noted that the importance of input also places considerable pressure on teacher confidence, competence and energy levels.

## 2 INTERACTION

If “Comprehensible Input” provides the raw material for language learning, then interaction in all its forms is the way that learners assimilate and internalise that language so that they can re-use it in new contexts. In this sense “Interaction” is not a simple or single-track concept. It involves any process in which the learner is actively working with language. It is in this process above all that the learner is both using and developing what are now known as “thinking skills”. The challenges here for teaching include -

- Linking the Input to the Interaction in a creative way. Some for example argue that it is not so much “comprehensibility” of input that is required as a just sufficient degree of challenge – learners need to understand enough not to be discouraged but also need to struggle to understand more. That initial interaction (struggle) creates understanding = learning.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The term used by the CEF was most commonly promoted by the linguist Krashen, whose view was that “that was it”, i.e. all that was needed for language learning. This is not generally accepted today (see Hawkins extract).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. Professor Richard Johnstone Communicative Interaction (CILT 1989)

- Using an appropriate range of interactive processes. The most obvious meaning of interaction is dialogue and it can of course mean interaction with an interlocutor, for example the teacher, the assistant, the exchange student. It also means interaction with a text, whether spoken or written. An Inductive approach to grammatical structure could be part of that interaction between learner and text, but it is not the only example.
- Helping learners develop strategies for learning – the process of learning to learn- and autonomisation of the learner. Some would argue that this is at the core of learning and that the teacher function is that of guiding and facilitating learning, enabling the learner to learn. In any case in language learning this autonomisation is likely to develop through the learner’s interaction with the language.<sup>10</sup>

It follows that a major task of the “teaching” process – perhaps the nub – is to make judgements about learners’ stage of development and about what kind of interaction is appropriate when. There are in this respect many connections and potentially creative synergies between our understandings of language teaching and the current concerns of the TLF strand of the Key Stage 3 strategy.

### 3 MOTIVATION

However good the teacher and these teaching process only learners can learn and they learn when they are ready and willing to do so. Teachers can create the conditions for this. Motivation is thus a major issue for all learning but perhaps in particular for language learning.<sup>11</sup>

We usually distinguish between two kinds of motivation – extrinsic which is to do with factors external to the learning process itself and intrinsic motivation –

- Extrinsically motivating factors for language learning include: Present or future career/ employability; Examination success, Social and Love life, Holidays and Leisure. They are generally more powerful among vocational and adult learners and high achievers who “enjoy” and expect examination achievement.
- Intrinsic motivation includes - love of learning per se , love of language (playing the game, performing, decoding), love of the teacher, love of the content (where for example cultural or conceptually challenging issues are central to the process)

In a school situation, although some support can be given to promote extrinsic motivation, addressing learners intrinsic needs may be more fruitful. Areas to be addressed may include -

- The content of the programme (making it relevant, conceptually interesting, challenging)
- The variety of learning activities undertaken ( promoting interest and a real love of language)

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<sup>10</sup> J Shiels “Communication in the modern languages classroom” Council of Europe 1988.

<sup>11</sup> See above on the particularities of language learning. Four issues seem to be particularly relevant -

- The suspension of disbelief required since the content is often already known by the learner (numbers, time, identities for example)
- The fact that the language learning process usually hits a wall after beginning stage – going through a “pain barrier” which some do not make (the passage from chunks to understanding)
- The observation made above that in an institutional setting the conditions for language learning are not optimal - gardening in a gale.
- The unreasonable “native speaker” model of competence which means that even successful language learners usually underestimate their progress

- The development in the learner of successful learning strategies - moving towards autonomy (cf. Interaction)
- the opportunities available for real (and virtual) contact with speakers of the target language and their culture (making it real – this can also have an effect on extrinsic motivation)

## Implications for teaching

If there is no unique method for language teaching, that does not therefore mean that there is no recognisable framework for language teaching which takes into account the factors outlined above. It is not simply a matter of chance and random choice.

Communicative language teaching involves a number of key characteristics which teachers (and learners) have to apply to different sets of circumstances (learning objectives, learner types, institutional settings etc etc). The main elements are probably:

- An underlying pedagogy based on an understanding of the nature of communicative competence. This has been summarised in terms of 6 competences or sub-competences, including linguistic and socio-cultural competence.<sup>12</sup> Despite its occasional bad press therefore “communicative language learning” has never been simply about “buying baguettes”. The communicative approach is about creating meaningful reasons for learning and using a foreign language. It has never precluded grammatical understanding or the development of discourse competence (aka text level work)
- A teaching style which is based on –
  - Support for learner autonomy and cooperation within the learning situation
  - Partnership between teacher and learners
  - Giving positive feedback in relation to the learners’ use of the target Language
- A teaching approach which is carefully structured to take account of learners’ needs and the conditions for successful language learning. The most widely understood model is described as follows –

<b>PRESENTATION</b>	of text, usually oral but also written, involving a wide range of (preferably interactive) activities to aid understanding and assimilation
<b>PRACTICE</b>	through interaction with the text - reusing the language , adapting, analysing, changing its form (or adapting its medium) in order to internalise it
<b>PRODUCTION</b>	of new language - moving away from the text in order to use the language now internalised in new contexts, more creatively, becoming autonomous.

One danger with this approach is that it can be rather formulaic, the teacher paying insufficient attention to the specific needs of specific learners, the existing understanding of the learners and the needs for learners to engage with the process at all times. Subsequent modifications to the “three stage” approach have tended to stress these

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<sup>12</sup> Van Ek *Objectives for Foreign Language Learning 1986* describes - linguistic competence (...vocabulary and structure), socio-linguistic competence (interpreting language according to situation), discourse competence (achieving coherence of separate utterances), strategic competence (strategies to compensate for gaps in knowledge), socio-cultural competence (familiarity with s-c context), social competence (desire and ability to interact with others)

points, in some practitioners' views even adding a fourth stage before presentation – that of Pre-PRESENTATION or interaction with **PRIOR LEARNING**<sup>13</sup>

## **Implications for policy**

So, as we move towards a national languages strategy, what are the possible implications of all of this for policy? Can we indeed “**raise the game**” in relation to the experience of language learning made available to learners in schools?

Firstly we need to understand what is not possible? Despite its superficial attractiveness it is unlikely that there could ever be an effective nationally prescribed language teaching methodology. There are too many variables (teachers, learners, institutions, needs, resources ..... ) and no sure way to learn a language. It is also worth remembering that there is a long history of such “single methods” or panaceas, and that although some short term progress is often made as a result, the actual method proposed is soon adapted by teachers and subsumed into a broader stream of history.<sup>14</sup> In the last analysis just as successful learning depends on the learners so does effective teaching depend largely on the motivation and competence of the teachers. It is therefore towards this motivation and competence that our energies should be primarily directed.

Although we can not provide a simple and single solution we could nevertheless do more to improve the experience of school based language learning. Four broad areas are susceptible to increased intervention

### **1) Upgrade guidance on communicative approaches to language teaching**

There is already some – embedded in QCA schemes of work and OFSTED reports and developed in a range of CILT publications. Some elements of the Key Stage 3 Strategy are also potential conduits for such issues. All of this could be built up, be made more explicit - linked to Curriculum on Line, involve discussions/seminars, bring in publishers (CILT already has a structure for doing this). We could use existing structures including on line information and fora to raise the game and provide sound advice and materials and opportunities for teachers to network and interact.

### **2) Provide better entitlement to contacts with native speakers**

The main mechanisms for such contacts are links and exchanges and the involvement of Foreign Language Assistants in our schools; increasingly such entitlement can also be supported by new technologies (web sites, e-pals etc). These are a key tool for ensuring relevance, opportunities for real communication. Intercultural understanding, motivation. We already have a wealth of experience and good practice in these areas, mainly through ETG, but we should seek further to develop both the mechanisms and the pedagogy of contacts and exchanges.

### **3) Support the development of new curricular content and delivery**

There is a need for Research and Development on the content of the languages curriculum. In particular we need to look at issues of content and of time allocation.

<sup>13</sup> B Page (ed) “Letting Go, Taking Hold” (CILT 1992)

<sup>14</sup> E.g. “grammar/ translation,” “reading method ” “direct method”, “natural method” “phonetic method”, “basic” “le français fondamental”, “unit/credits” “audio visual”, “audio lingual”, as well as a host of “alternative” approaches.

Building on current initiatives such as the CLIP (Content and Language Integration Project) we should develop a more relevant and meaningful (motivational) languages content – linking to other parts of the curriculum. Opportunities are provided for this by the proposed flexibility of the 14-19 Green paper proposals. We should also work with Language Colleges and others to further curriculum development (the vocational strand). Finally we should research and develop new modes of delivery – such as an intensive learning model supported by distance learning and new technologies (thus seeking to calm the “gale of English”)

#### **4) *Provide more opportunities for CPD and networking***

CILT already provides a great deal in this area and there are other providers also. However re-designed as well as enhanced, and long term, opportunities for CPD for secondary language teachers would have a massive impact. In time this could also be linked to developments in ITE. Such an initiative would fit logically within the generic TLF strand of the KS3 Strategy which addresses many of the issues raised above, but it would be broader than the proposed KS3 languages framework, which is only one aspect of what is needed. The core of the programme would be “approaches to Communicative language teaching”. Many practising teachers have only a rudimentary grasp of this from their training days – and as argued above – the challenge is an ongoing one. Such CPD could be linked to current concerns with progression (“Ladder” “Portfolio”) and could include elements such as -

- The interactive road show model (low cost – 1 day input, distance element around action research in MFL classrooms, report back and develop.
- A distance resource - CD rom and or in-line – with possibilities of accreditation (cuff Ladder)
- Enhanced opportunities for intensive courses in the target language here and abroad.

In support of all of this we could also build on existing resources to provide more effective national and international possibilities for networking among teachers. Our experience shows that this is the single most productive way of effecting curricular change and improvement.

## **Conclusion**

Teaching and learning are complex matters and, as this paper has argued, language learning has its particular and quite unique challenges. Although these do not lend themselves to a “one size fits all” methodological solution, which could be counter-productive, there is nevertheless more that could be done in terms of raising the capabilities of teachers and the competence of learners. The suggested 4 point plan for “raising the game” is based on our best understanding of the actual processes of language teaching and learning and would aim to improve the quality and relevance of teaching and the motivation of learners to learn.

Importantly they could be incorporated into the long term strategy by building on existing structures and without massive new investment or extraordinary levels of resource.