1 Positioning MFL teaching in schools

Issues and debates

Ann Swarbrick

Introduction

Consider for a moment these three students who, in the past, have completed their PGCE in MFL with the Open University:

- Marc was brought up in Mauritius. His first language was French. When he was ten, his family moved to Britain and he went to school in South London. Despite the fact that his home language was French, his bilingualism was largely ignored at secondary level, though he took GCE French early. He studied Spanish and Mathematics at University during the 1970s and subsequently became a social worker.
- After graduating in French and Spanish from university in the north-east of England where she had been brought up, Jane became a marketing manager. She gave this up to have a family and studied for a part-time MA in child psychology during her eight years at home. She took the PGCE course after her three children had started school, preferring to teach rather than to return to marketing.
- Birgit is a German national married to a major in the British armed forces. They had been posted in various places both in the UK and overseas and during much of this time she had been an undergraduate with the Open University and had become a qualified interpreter. Since her husband was approaching retirement and a more settled life, they bought a house in the south-west of England. They decided the time had come for Birgit to concentrate on her own career. Teaching was something she had always wanted to do.

Each of these students is a well-educated adult, already having a first degree with a high level of proficiency in one or two foreign languages, and in one case a further degree. Throughout their PGCE, they developed their language skills further and demonstrated how they updated their subject specialism. They all had considerable skills and experience of work acquired before they decided to enter teaching. They all had the same goal in following the PGCE course – to become excellent MFL teachers. Yet it is obvious that they are individuals who bring with them their

distinct personality, particular skills, interests and values. They initially entered teacher education with views, based on their own experiences, about the nature of MFL, about teaching methods or about the purpose of the MFL curriculum. These earlier experiences acted as a powerful filter, an interpretative framework, through which all the ideas, discussions and activities of their teacher education course passed. As such, what each student brought to their teacher education course was an important dimension to learning to teach.

Research into how people learn to teach has shown the extent and significance of the ideas that students bring with them into teaching, and how these ideas are one of the most important determinants of what they will take from their education course (Grossman 1990, Guillame and Rudney 1993, Zeichner 1993). Research has also shown that these values and beliefs are tenaciously maintained and that many beginning teachers start their career relatively unchanged by their teacher education course. The purpose of this chapter is initially to encourage beginning teachers, new entrants into the profession and experienced teachers to consider what their own beliefs and values are with regard to teaching MFL, and to present the main arguments in the debates about the nature and purpose of MFL in order to challenge the myths and test their beliefs and assumptions. Underpinning this chapter is the acknowledgement that learning to teach MFL also requires being introduced into a particular subject sub-culture and community. It is debate and intervention in teaching MFL which define that community and which are central to the effectiveness of MFL teaching. Participation in the debates and determination of these issues are therefore important for all MFL teachers whatever their stage of development. Discussion and debate with colleagues not only make learning more effective but make professional life more interesting and enable teachers to take more control of what happens in school. Teaching can be an isolating experience – ironic given the number of interactions any teacher has with pupils every day – but teacher/pupil contact is not enough for professional educators; discussion with adults engaged in the same task is essential to maintain interest and excitement. Working closely with colleagues can be a vital stimulus for reflection on how to develop a particular teaching style, or techniques which reflect an individual's own values as a teacher.

The nature of MFL

In arriving at an understanding of the main issues and debates in teaching MFL, a valuable starting point is to consider, briefly in this instance, how the purpose and nature of MFL have changed over the post-war period. Since the introduction of state education in 1870, with the setting up of elementary schools in England and Wales wherever needed, there has been some state support for providing a curriculum which included MFL. For example, the 1871 Elementary Code aimed to widen the curriculum by increasing the list of 'specific' subjects to be included. Languages was one of the subjects to be added to the list, along with, for example, political economy and the natural sciences. These had to be taught

> according to a graduated scheme of which the Inspector can report that it is well adapted to the capacity of the children and is sufficiently distinct from the ordinary reading-book lesson to justify its description as a specific subject of instruction.
>
> (Elementary Code 1871)

'Specifics' were limited to Standards IV, V and VI and no more than two could be taught at any one time.

Despite this provision for universal language teaching, the reality is that the subject largely remained the preserve of the public and grammar schools. But in the 1960s and 1970s the widespread establishment of comprehensive schools meant for the first time that foreign language study was open to virtually all pupils, at least in the early secondary years.

> This broadening of the 'market' for foreign languages created pressure for change in teaching methods and curricula, to suit the needs of non-traditional groups of learners. Similarly, more active and experiential modes of learning (such as the use of group work) were coming into favour across the curriculum as a whole. These general educational themes again created new expectations and pressures for those concerned more specifically with the teaching and learning of foreign languages.
>
> (Mitchell 1994)

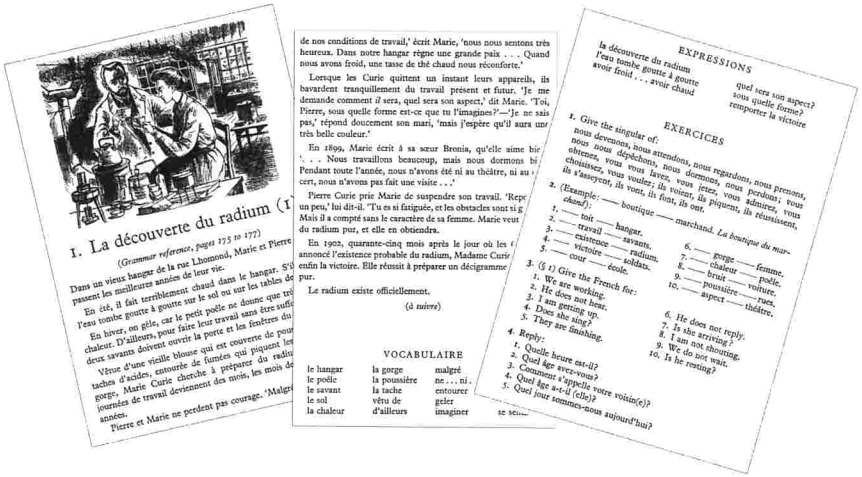
Changes in the nature and purpose of MFL teaching are well illustrated through an analysis of teaching materials. Here are three extracts taken from textbooks for French written at different times. Each illustrates a particular approach to language teaching and is based on an implicit view of the nature of MFL:

1 illustrates the grammar-translation approach (published 1961);
2 illustrates the audio-visual approach (published 1973);
3 illustrates the communicative approach to language teaching (published 1990).

Extract 1

The first extract (p. 6) is from a textbook designed for grammar-school pupils in their third year of learning French.

Each chapter of the book follows a similar pattern: a text followed by listed vocabulary and expressions the reader will encounter in the text, and a series of substitution and drilling exercises. The subject matter of the text is not otherwise exploited. All of the activity around the text dissects the grammatical structures which appear within it. The text itself is written for learners of French; it is not written for a French-speaking audience. The extract here is designed for a lesson in which grammar rules are taught deductively and used for textual analysis. There are plainly right and wrong answers, accuracy is very important and there is a strong emphasis on the written word. In some ways it becomes clear that much of



1. La découverte du radium (1

(Grammar reference, pages 175 to 177)

Dans un vieux hangar de la rue Lhomond, Marie et Pierre passent les meilleures années de leur vie.

En été, il fait terriblement chaud dans le hangar. S'il tombe goutte à goutte sur le sol ou sur les tables de l'eau

En hiver, on gèle, car le petit poêle ne donne que très chaleur. D'ailleurs, pour faire leur travail sans être suffo deux savants doivent ouvrir la porte et les fenêtres du

Vêtue d'une vieille blouse qui est couverte de pour taches d'acides, entourée de fumées qui piquent les gorge, Marie Curie cherche à préparer du radiu journées de travail deviennent des mois, les mois de années.

Pierre et Marie ne perdent pas courage. 'Malgré

de nos conditions de travail,' écrit Marie, 'nous nous sentons très heureux. Dans notre hangar règne une grande paix . . . Quand nous avons froid, une tasse de thé chaud nous réconforte.'

Lorsque les Curie quittent un instant leurs appareils, ils bavardent tranquillement du travail présent et futur. 'Je me demande comment *il* sera, quel sera son aspect,' dit Marie. 'Toi, Pierre, sous quelle forme est-ce que tu l'imagines?'—'Je ne sais pas,' répond doucement son mari, 'mais j'espère qu'il aura une très belle couleur.'

En 1899, Marie écrit à sa sœur Bronia, qu'elle aime bie

'. . . Nous travaillons beaucoup, mais nous dormons bi

Pendant toute l'année, nous n'avons été ni au théâtre, ni au

cert, nous n'avons pas fait une visite . . .'

Pierre Curie prie Marie de suspendre son travail. 'Repo

un peu,' lui dit-il. 'Tu es si fatiguée, et les obstacles sont si g

Mais il a compté sans le caractère de sa femme. Marie veut

du radium pur, et elle en obtiendra.

En 1902, quarante-cinq mois après le jour où les

annoncé l'existence probable du radium, Madame Curie

enfin la victoire. Elle réussit à préparer un décigramme

pur.

Le radium existe officiellement.

(à suivre)

VOCABULAIRE

le hangar	la gorge	malgré
le poêle	la poussière	ne . . . ni .
le savant	la tache	entourer
le sol	vêtu de	geler
la chaleur	d'ailleurs	imaginer

EXPRESSIONS

la découverte du radium
l'eau tombe goutte à goutte
avoir froid . . . avoir chaud
quel sera son aspect?
sous quelle forme?
remporter la victoire

EXERCICES

1. Give the singular of:
nous devenons, nous attendons, nous regardons, nous pressons, nous nous dépêchons, nous demeurons, nous perdons; vous obtenez, vous vous levez, vous jetez, vous admirez, vous choisissez, vous voulez; ils voient, ils piquent, ils réussissent, ils s'asseyent, ils vont, ils font, ils ont.

2. (Example: ——— boutique ——— marchand. *La boutique du marchand.*):
1. ——— toit ——— hangar.
2. ——— travail ——— savants.
3. ——— existence ——— radium.
4. ——— victoire ——— soldats.
5. ——— cour ——— école.

3. (§ 1) Give the French for:
1. We are working.
2. He does not hear.
3. I am getting up.
4. Does she sing?
5. They are finishing.

4. Reply:
1. Quelle heure est-il?
2. Quel âge avez-vous?
3. Comment s'appelle votre voisin(e)?
4. Quel âge a-t-il (elle)?
5. Quel jour sommes-nous aujourd'hui?

6. He does not reply.
7. Is she arriving?
8. I am not shouting.
9. We do not wait.
10. Is he resting?

La famille Marsaud

leçon un première leçon 1

La famille Marsaud 1

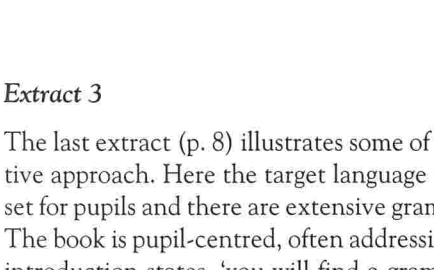
A

[1] Voici la famille Marsaud. [2] Voici Monsieur Marsaud. [3] Monsieur Marsaud est le père de la famille. [4] Il est dans le jardin. [5] Voici Madame Marsaud dans la cuisine. [6] Madame Marsaud est la mère de la famille. [7] Elle est la femme de Monsieur Marsaud, [8] et la mère des enfants.

Répondez s'il vous plaît

Regardez les images 1 à 8.

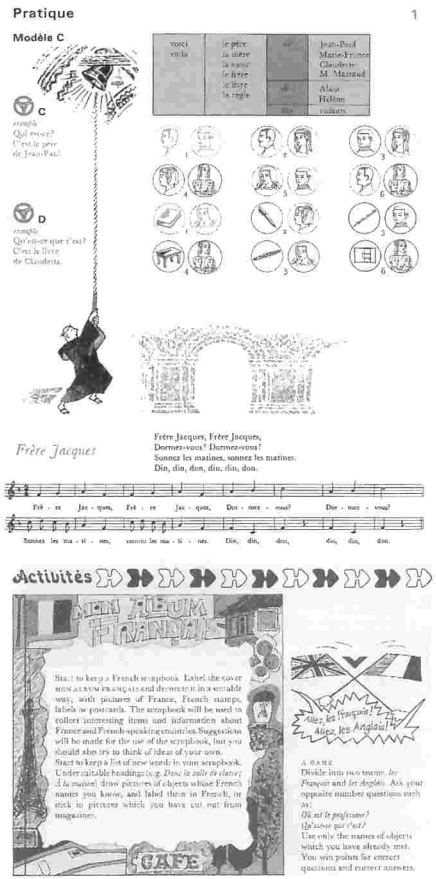
1. Qui est-ce?
2. Qui est-ce?
3. Qui est le père de la famille?
4. Où est-il?
5. Où est Mme Marsaud?
6. Qui est la mère de la famille?
7. Qui est la femme de M. Marsaud?
8. De qui est-elle la mère?



La famille Nicolas 1

Voici une famille française.
C'est la famille Nicolas.

Bonjour, Monsieur Nicolas!
Bonjour, Madame Nicolas!
Bonjour, les Nicolas!



Pratique 1

Modèle C

voici / voilà	le père / la mère / la sœur / le frère / le livre / la règle	et	Jean-Paul / Marie-Jeanne / Claudette / M. Marsaud / Alain / Hélène / enfants

C

exemple
Qui est-ce?
C'est le père de Jean-Paul.

D

exemple
Qu'est-ce que c'est?
C'est le livre de Claudette.

Frère Jacques

Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques,
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les matines, sonnez les matines.
Din, din, don, din, din, don.

Frè - re Jac - ques, Frè - re Jac - ques, Dor - mez - vous? Dor - mez - vous?

Sonnez les ma - ti - nes, sonnez les ma - ti - nes. Din, din, don, din, din, don.

Activités

MON ALBUM FRANÇAIS

Start to keep a French scrapbook. Label the cover MON ALBUM FRANÇAIS and decorate it in a suitable way, with pictures of France, French stamps, labels or postcards. The scrapbook will be used to collect interesting items and information about France and French-speaking countries. Suggestions will be made for the use of the scrapbook, but you should also try to think of ideas of your own.
Start to keep a list of new words in your scrapbook. Under suitable headings (e.g. *Dans la salle de classe*; *À la maison*) draw pictures of objects whose French names you know, and label them in French, or stick in pictures which you have cut out from magazines.

CAFE

Allez, les Français!
Allez, les Anglais!

À DEUX
Divide into two teams, *les Français* and *les Anglais*. Ask your opposite number questions such as:
Où est le professeur?
Qu'est-ce que c'est?
Use only the names of objects which you have already met.
You win points for correct questions and correct answers.

Extract 2

The second extract (p. 7) was used widely in the early years of comprehensive schooling. The defining features of this audio-visual course were the reel-to-reel tape and film strips which accompanied it. Again, each lesson follows the same pattern, beginning with a text (this time accompanied by an audio recording) followed by drilling and practice. Pupils are exposed to stock phrases which they repeat until they know them by heart. Questions and answers are repeated in the same way. The aim is accuracy. Selected language structures drive this curriculum; control of grammar is the central element of language learning. As can be seen here, the structures learned are then applied in real-life contexts. Oral/aural work is emphasized. Here the visuals are considered to be an important part of the learning process as is the focus on people, in this case fictional and real. So here it is clear that languages are being learned with the intention of use, certainly more so than in Extract 1.

Extract 3

The last extract (p. 8) illustrates some of the guiding principles of the communicative approach. Here the target language is used throughout. Lesson objectives are set for pupils and there are extensive grammar notes with accompanying examples. The book is pupil-centred, often addressing the reader personally; for example, the introduction states, 'you will find a grammar and reference section, which shows you how the French language works and how every part of a sentence gives you important clues about its meaning.' Authentic or pseudo-authentic target language texts are used in place of artificially, structurally controlled exercises. The use of the target language is meaning-oriented; that is, language is not just used to provide practice of a structure, with such activities as role-play becoming important. Pupils are set tasks which allow them to respond personally, for instance making choices and describing photographs for themselves.

From the different focuses of MFL teaching and learning illustrated in these three extracts, it becomes clear that in teaching MFL the teacher has to bear in mind:

- the audience, the attainment range, age and capabilities of the pupils;
- the purposes of teaching MFL. Is it the acquisition of the written language which will enable the high-attaining pupil to study MFL as any other 'academic' subject and to analyse an accepted canon of literature, or is the main purpose to emphasize language as communication?
- the implicit theory of language learning. Is learning a language best done through the acquisition of its structures through drilling and rote-learning? Or is it located within social interactions requiring verbal communication? Or is a mixture of both required?

As we have seen from these extracts, the function, methodology, pedagogy and purpose of MFL within the state education system have changed significantly over the past fifty years. Whilst there has long been state provision for teaching languages in schools, it is only relatively recently that there has been any statutory definition of what should be taught and to whom. In 1992 the National Curriculum for MFL was introduced, which laid down for the first time what was to be taught. Undoubtedly this had a huge impact on the teaching and learning of MFL.

The impact of the National Curriculum

Though the MFL National Curriculum (NC) did not impose a huge change of direction for many teachers, generally speaking the NC has a relatively turbulent history in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Though it was a key plank of educational policy in other countries, teachers here had autonomy in their classrooms until the late eighties. In 1988 a new Education Act entered the statute books and NC working parties were set up to make recommendations in the form of a report (for MFL The Harris Report) to the then Secretary of State for Education and Science, John MacGregor. This group put forward a clear statement about the contribution MFL makes to the curriculum in schools. The National Curriculum Council (NCC) then converted these reports into Consultation Reports which were subsequently converted into Draft Orders and later into legislation. The resultant document, now in its third edition, outlines the expectations of teachers and learners in MFL. It is at one and the same time a programme of study and an assessment tool.

As a tool to make the learning entitlement of children coherent, the NC has had a profound effect on the teaching and learning of MFL. Though it did not set out either methodology or issues of pedagogy, it did give emphasis to the following:

- communicating in the target language;
- development of language skills;
- development of language learning skills and knowledge of language;
- cultural awareness.

In order to ensure coverage of all aspects of the curriculum, teachers in state schools have needed to change their practice in order to accommodate it. This is how one teacher described the impact it had on her teaching as she describes her evolution as a languages teacher:

> Over the years my style has developed and changed from when I started to teach. It was very much more structured at the beginning around presenting the new language in terms of a text, exploiting the text, examining the structures and moving on. As regards the actual focus of my teaching it's much more child-centred now. I expect much more of the input of the lesson to come from them. I see myself much more now as the person who gets them to speak German rather than the person who speaks German at them and gets them to understand me. I think the biggest impact that the National Curriculum has had on my teaching is that I am much more aware of individual students. That's made a big difference to my lesson planning and the sort of activities I get them to do.
>
> (Elaine Taylor, Crownhills Community College)

In the name of accountability and clarity, schools have absorbed many changes over the last decade. Many applaud the introduction of the NC. However, given that the year 2000 saw the introduction of the third revised curriculum, small wonder that many teachers feel bruised and exhausted by the demands put upon them. Add to this an unrelenting Ofsted inspection programme and the preoccupations of MFL teachers in the UK begin to become clear.

Having considered some of the background context for MFL practice in schools, let us now turn to current debates.

Controversies and disagreements

There have been many issues of debate over the past twenty years in MFL, our major preoccupations being:

- the place of grammar;
- whether form comes before function or vice versa;
- whether French should lose its dominance as a taught language;
- whether languages should be part of the primary curriculum;
- the place of error correction – assimilating new attitudes and approaches to assessment;
- the use of the target language as the teaching medium;
- whether language can be taught divorced from the culture of the people who speak it;
- the languages which should be taught in schools;
- whether languages should be part of the compulsory curriculum;
- whether and why boys underachieve in languages;
- whether skills development is more important than content;
- the importance of developing pupil autonomy in languages;
- whether ICT has a place in the MFL curriculum and how it can enhance learning.

All of these issues are discussed within this volume. Some, however, have entered the public debate and have been unhelpfully polarized.

This table illustrates just a few of the polarities arising from these issues:

This country needs linguists	English is a global language – learning foreign languages is not a priority
Languages are a vital part of the compulsory curriculum	Languages are among the most unpopular subjects and should be optional
Languages are needed to understand other cultures	Understanding culture is not dependent on knowing the associated languages
The earlier you start languages the better	Early start makes no difference to proficiency
Accuracy is more important than communication	Knowing rules of grammar does not mean you can communicate
ICT will liberate the language learner and transform the nature of the subject	ICT has little to offer MFL teachers and learners

The polarization suggests a simplicity which hides the complexity of the arguments. Let us take these particular issues and discuss some of the main areas of debate arising from them.

Why teach foreign languages in school?

For many years the study of a modern foreign language in the UK has been considered dispensable, the assumption being that the rest of the world speaks English and consequently the British have no need to learn other languages. Such complacency is misplaced. In the preliminary report for the Nuffield Languages Inquiry David Graddol explores the linguistic challenges facing teachers and policy-makers in the twenty-first century. His crystal ball-gazing makes interesting, if not alarming, reading given this commonly-held view of the hegemony of English. He surmises, for instance, that, as 'new Englishes' develop, the native speaker of English will become an irrelevance because:

- global communication will not be based on a single language;
- a greater proportion of the population will need to speak several languages at a high level of proficiency;
- English will be used mainly as a language of wider communication between non-native speakers so that English speakers from the antipodes, North America and Britain will become what he calls 'minority stake holders';
- new Englishes will reflect the mother tongue of the speaker, e.g. Indian or Nigerian English;
- in fifty years time, Arabic, Spanish and Hindi/Urdu will each have roughly the same number of native speakers as English;

- the internet is no longer a monoglot medium. The information available in Spanish, German and Japanese is increasing rapidly and non-English speakers account for an increasing proportion of internet users.

(Graddol 2000)

Indeed the final report of the Inquiry is unequivocal on the position of 'the native speaker' as the only model of competence.

> Native speakers of English may feel that the language belongs to them, but it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign language who will determine its world future ... Mobility of employment is in danger of becoming the preserve of people from other countries.
>
> (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000)

In surveys of pupils' preferences, MFL is not a popular school subject. One only needs to read the examination statistics and consider the number of pupils who opt out of languages at the first opportunity as they reach the end of compulsory schooling to understand the enormity of the problem. This haemorrhage will, without doubt, affect teacher supply in years to come – no post-16 pupils, so no graduates, so no new teachers. This state of affairs has made the MFL teacher's task onerous in persuading both pupils and headteachers that MFL should have a place in the curriculum. So why is it important for pupils to learn foreign languages?

Vocational reasons

Pupils will need languages for future professional work. This may be the case for a small minority but many languages teachers bear witness to the fact that this utilitarian argument does not draw young people. They cannot visualize themselves as working adults and, realistically, it is unlikely that they will need languages at work unless they specialize at HE level or unless the world of business in this country changes its view of the lack of importance of any language other than English. Even now, since proficiency at native-speaker level is available and preferred by many businesses, the languages graduate is already in a highly competitive market.

Educational reasons

These are the most compelling arguments, in my view, for retaining MFL in the curriculum. They revolve around the foreign language as part of education in its broadest sense and as part of an 'apprenticeship of learning how to learn' (Hawkins 1981). Learning another language can help develop greater confidence and aptitude in the pupils' first language. Foreign languages also can play a crucial part in educating pupils to become citizens of the world.

> Some of the most moving and relevant examples of language learning in practice have been the attempts of the very young and the striving of those with learning difficulties to communicate in foreign tongues. Through it they have learned about themselves, about the world, about their own language.
>
> (King 1999: 24)

Unless learners see the point in language learning because language study is relevant in its own right and/or because it provides access to knowledge and understanding of value to the learner, then they will continue to opt out of the subject at the earliest opportunity. This may mean teachers creating more opportunities for pupils to study issues in the foreign language which match more closely their intellectual maturity and which stimulate the curiosity of learners.

Moral reasons

Much of the development which has happened as a result of new thinking about the curriculum over the past decade has indeed begun to open up learners' minds to an awareness that other cultures exist and that their attitude to them in some way defines the type of person they are. An awareness of culture will include studying the way of life in other countries, studying its literature and studying those psychological aspects of language and behaviour which define what is and is not acceptable within a culture. In this sense pupils need to confront other cultures if they are to be broadly educated and to understand the arrogance of the monolingual position. The approach teachers take to this issue, the emphasis they place on it, will in some respects define their values and attitudes as citizens of a multicultural, multilingual society. Indeed, if they place emphasis on language only as skill development rather than language as a social and cultural tool for communication, then much that makes learning a language compelling and interesting will be missed:

> Each and every day the foreign languages classroom sets challenges for its learners, requiring them to step outside of Hawkins's 'monolingual prison' and realise that the first language offers only one very narrow window in their perception of the world.
>
> (Holmes 2000)

This view may not be the view of many of the people pupils meet outside the school environment but the role of the MFL teacher is, in part, to confront controversial issues. As Hawkins points out, 'The wise teacher will work with and through the parents the child loves, but the home values are not sacrosanct; the curriculum must respect, but also sometimes challenge, the parochial environment' (Hawkins 1981: 30).

Linguistic reasons

Evidence is coming to light that the explicit teaching of language at word, sentence and text level and the teaching of grammatical terminology within the primary phase help children to be more aware of the structure of language and of language as a

communicative code. This can in turn help in developing a knowledge of another language. For instance, Beate Poole in this volume discusses her research on the impact of the National Literacy Strategy on MFL learning. The interviews she conducted with teachers suggest that there is now greater potential for real synergy between the teaching of English and foreign languages. Teachers reported in pupils an increased awareness of language patterns and rules and increased ability to identify regularities and irregularities (Poole, this volume: ch. 13). Instruction in a foreign language can have a direct effect on the development of cognitive processes. The linguistic argument, then, for foreign language learning is strong.

We begin to see here a rationale for teaching languages in schools. Through a study of languages, young people can learn about themselves, about the world, about the power of language as a communication tool, about their own language. They can learn social skills and gain self-confidence through understanding that they are cracking a code which has the potential to open up a new world to them, with horizons far beyond their own village, town or city. They can develop an awareness that others have different perceptions, values, priorities and attitudes. If we consider all of this, then the role of the language teacher stretches far beyond the teaching of lexis or grammar.

Can languages be taught with no reference to culture?

Cultural learning and cultural awareness need to complement the focus on language. Snow and Byram have usefully defined the skills and knowledge appertaining to cultural awareness in terms of four '*savoirs*':

> *Savoir être*
> An ability to give up ethnocentric attitudes and ways of seeing other cultures as if they were abnormal deviations from the norms of one's own. This involves changes in attitude and change in perspective, putting oneself in someone else's shoes, however temporarily.
>
> *Savoirs*
> Acquiring knowledge about some aspects of another culture, in particular those values and beliefs which people share and which give them a sense of belonging to a social group, for example a national identity.
>
> *Savoir apprendre*
> An ability to observe, collect data and analyse how people of another culture behave, what values and beliefs they share, how they experience and perceive their world.
>
> *Savoir faire*
> The ability to interact with people of another culture in real time, by drawing upon and integrating the other three *savoirs*.
>
> (Snow and Byram 1997: 10)

Learning about the culture under this definition goes far beyond giving information about lifestyle and festivals, etc. It is about understanding facts about a country but also with consideration of the perspectives taken and attitudes held by different peoples. If teachers accept this wide definition, then language learning and teaching become much richer than considering language as a means of survival on holiday or in commercial transactions. It also gives broader scope for projects which can be undertaken in school visits abroad, such as data collection, interviewing, devising questionnaires, developing observational skills and note-taking. Byram, Morgan *et al.* (1994) consider this in depth with theoretical discussions about the nature of culture-learning, as well as case studies describing ethnography and other approaches to culture and language-learning in the classroom and abroad.

Language competence plainly has a skill component but it goes far beyond that.

> If it were mainly this then teaching languages would be largely a matter of instruction or training. This view of language learning underlies the misguided claim that it is possible simply to teach 'Languages for Special Purposes' or 'Languages for Business', as if there were some functional dimension of language which could be acquired without reference to the culture in which it has its place. All human behaviour has its place within a culture – we cannot learn any forms of behaviour (business etiquette for instance) as if it could be detached from this culture.
>
> (Williams 2000: 12)

Teachers of MFL, then, need to consider the various dimensions of language in order to persuade pupils of their intrinsic value. Pupils themselves need to see the place languages have in their curriculum. Unless we are able to encourage curiosity about other national cultures they will continue to see little point in language learning.

Should languages be taught within the primary curriculum?

In recent years, the issue of primary languages has come to the fore. This has been largely due to a grass-roots movement by parents and teachers in mainly middle-class areas of the country. During the 1990s, French clubs began to appear, particularly in the south-east of England where parents decided that they wanted their primary-aged children to learn a foreign language. These parents accept that learning a language is a 'good thing' even though they do not necessarily speak other languages themselves. Since the primary NC had just been introduced, it was clear that there was no room for additional subjects within the curriculum and, added to this, there was and still is a lack of expertise in primary staff rooms. The problem is less acute where middle schools exist but the issues described below still apply. Thus, with parental pressure and competition between schools mounting, many primary schools introduced after-school language clubs – usually French. The frequency of these clubs increased with the introduction of such commercial

ventures as *Le Club Français* which developed a network of teachers and published materials. This piecemeal approach to the introduction of languages at primary level began to cause concerns for such bodies as The National Association of Languages Advisors, who saw many problems arising because of a lack of a coherent approach and strategy. Some LEAs began to provide training and opportunities for schools to introduce languages in a systematic way (Kent and Surrey being just two of many), and the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research with the DfEE set up an early language learning initiative to promote and develop the provision and quality of MFL in the primary sector. This included the formation of a National Advisory Centre on Early Language Learning (NACELL) linking these and many other schemes and developing a bank of materials.

The debate about when pupils should begin to have entitlement to MFL education was fuelled further when Tony Blair, the Prime Minister, stated, 'Everyone knows that with languages, the earlier you start the easier they are' (Romanes Lecture, Oxford, December 1999). This indeed reflected the thinking of many of those parents and schools in favour of an early start to language learning but it raises many questions:

- Who will teach languages in primary schools?
- What are the implications for staffing and recruitment?
- What will be the connection between the primary and secondary languages curriculums?
- Who will make the connection?
- Which languages should be taught in primary school?
- Will there be a National Curriculum for primary languages?
- Will there be a need for much more refined and systematic cross-phase liaison?
- What will happen to the rest of the primary curriculum if another subject is added?
- Would language awareness linked to literacy be a better way forward than learning a specific language for a limited amount of time?

All these are issues currently being debated by the MFL teaching community.

One of the problems is that the Prime Minister's 'soundbite', whilst it is resonant of popular myths about languages acquisition, is not supported by definitive research findings. There are as many research studies to argue against starting language learning early (for example, Burstall 1974 and Poole1991) as there are for it (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991, Snow and Hoefnagle-Höhle 1978). The argument is not clear-cut. In some research studies, it is shown that primary learners show advantage in some competences such as listening comprehension and pronunciation, but in others, older learners out-perform younger learners in the rate of language acquisition because they have a better knowledge of language patterns, are better at more cognitively-demanding tasks and have better-developed learning strategies and study skills. There are other variables which need to be taken into account as outlined by Sharpe and Driscoll (2000: 79):

> The majority of research evidence concerning the comparative rate of acquisition between younger and older learners relates to outcomes as measured by tests, which arguably favour older learners, either because the tests are cognitively too demanding for younger age groups or because the testing techniques are unfamiliar to younger pupils.

The point is not that languages should or should not be taught in primary schools but that a national strategy is essential if it is to succeed, and any such strategy needs to be funded and based on sound research evidence. The arguments for and against and the reasons behind those arguments need to be understood and discussed by teachers and policy-makers before decisions about pupils' futures are made.

The decline of declension

Teachers' attitude to grammar can reflect in some ways their values about languages education and what they think about pupil learning. Peter Morris from Gordano School, Portishead, for instance, sees grammar as a liberating force:

> Well, grammar is an interesting question. It was extremely unfashionable for a while but I think if you teach grammar well, it is a liberator. It allows the students to express ideas beyond set phrases. The challenge really is to reduce it to bite sized chunks so that they can absorb, then build on that.

For him grammar is an issue of equality. He believes that all children have a right to be taught the building blocks of language and that, for low-attaining pupils, a diet of vocabulary-learning and matching pictures to nouns is an insult and an inhibitor to progress.

The question 'Does grammar matter?' may seem odd for anyone educated through grammar-translation – of course it matters. In the grammar-translation method, the way to learn languages was to study grammar and memorize rules and vocabulary through texts.

> Teaching consisted primarily of organising grammar for analysis and application. Reading and writing predominated, and oral skills were seen as very much secondary aims ... Grammar rules were taught deductively and used for textual analysis and comparisons. The accuracy of the resulting translations into and from English were a mark of proficiency and competence in mastering a language ... Accuracy was all.
>
> (Grenfell 1999: 11)

Though many MFL teachers who were trained to teach in the 1960s and 1970s were themselves taught by this method, the vast majority of them have been profoundly influenced by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) which turned the grammar-translation method on its head. The origins of CLT have their roots in research into how learners learn languages. This approach, a broad

school of ideas which took a hold in this country with comprehensivization when languages became a subject offered to most pupils rather than to an elite (see Mitchell 1994, Grenfell (ibid.) and Grenfell (this volume) for a full introduction to the communicative approach), manifests itself in classroom activities which maximize opportunities for learners to use the target language for meaningful purposes, with their attention on the messages they are creating and the task they are completing, rather than on *correctness* of language *form* and language *structure*. Communicating a message effectively became more important than concentrating on the absolute accuracy of the utterance. But certain aspects of grammatical structure are essential if communication is to be effective. There will, for instance, be ineffective communication if someone, unable to construct a past tense, tells another that a meeting is at 3.00 when in fact the meeting was at 3.00 yesterday. So correction of grammatical mistakes plainly does matter but CLT developed a more sophisticated approach to correction. And this is, in my view, where confusion began to arise in teachers' minds. In a bid to get pupils communicating in a foreign language, correction of mistakes in the form of explicitly pointing them out and teaching correct forms, which would inhibit pupils' confidence and flow, took second place and in some classrooms nearly disappeared.

The grammatical mistakes pupils make matter in terms of what they can tell the teacher about the pupils' linguistic development. The reason why is discussed by Keith Morrow:

> Mistakes may matter for two reasons. First, and perhaps surprisingly, they may be direct evidence for what the student knows about the language system. The student of English who says, 'Last night I taked my girlfriend to the cinema' clearly knows that in general the past tense of verbs in English is formed with 'ed.' This will be very important information for the teacher concerned to build upon what the student knows. Second, and less surprisingly, mistakes are equally direct evidence of problems the student is having. Whether he 'knows' that the past tense of this particular verb is irregular and has forgotten it in the heat of the moment, or whether he has never known it at all is a question the teacher may want to address.
>
> (Morrow 1994)

So the reason grammar teaching has become an issue for debate in MFL – in Peter Morris's words it became 'unfashionable' – is because, as CLT has evolved in this country, the explicit teaching of grammar has for many teachers been missed from the equation. Grammar does come into the communicative equation but the ideas associated with it as far as grammar is concerned have often been misinterpreted over a thirty-year period. The process has been not unlike a game of Chinese whispers. In the same way as, in the game, the message whispered down the line becomes muddled and usually results in something hardly approximating to the original, so too some of the central planks of the communicative approach have been eroded from one generation to the next. The message changed from 'grammar

matters' to 'grammar doesn't matter'. It is for this reason that, throughout the 1990s, there was confusion within MFL departments about the place of grammar within the largely accepted communicative approach. This was not helped by the near exclusion of the word 'grammar' from the first NC for MFL. Whereas the working party proposals which informed the drafting of the original NC for languages is unequivocal about the importance of grammar –

> Knowledge of structure can (and often should) be consolidated at appropriate places in the process by deliberate learning of their basic features ... Even learners who have thoroughly grasped a structure will need during later work to consolidate their knowledge of it. A well written grammar section can help but a more effective method might be to ask learners at appropriate intervals to summarise their understanding of a structure and give examples of its use.
>
> (DES 1990)

– and devotes ten paragraphs of the report to it, the first edition of the NC watered this down to:

> In learning and using the target language, pupils should have regular opportunities to ... use knowledge about language (linguistic patterns, structures, grammatical features and relationships, and compound words and phrases) to infer meaning and develop their own use of language.
>
> (DES 1991)

However, as Ann Miller points out in this volume, without a grammatical framework to operate within, pupils will be unable to construct language which conveys messages which they themselves want to communicate – the central tenet of CLT.

> they (pupils) may be brought up on a diet of textbooks in which ... a programme is designed according to learners' supposed 'communicative needs', but no attempt is made to provide learners with input that allows them to make generalisations (whether conscious or nor) about rules. They are simply expected to operate with learned by heart routines which have no common structural elements .... If they are constantly asked to produce sentences which they could not construct for themselves, they will achieve little or no autonomy as users of language. They may acquire lexis, but in the absence of grammatical competence, they are obliged, like their peers brought up on decontextualised exercises, to use word-for-word translation from English as a strategy. Indeed, they are in some ways disadvantaged in relation to the first group of learners since, lacking rules, they have no way of learning from their errors and are condemned to repeat them, cast adrift in a sea of approximation.
>
> (Miller, this volume: 154)

If grammar is important, teachers also need to consider how it is to be taught. Interestingly, in a recent European Project (The Iliad Project), a group of teachers interviewed from France, Spain, Austria, Sweden and England were all in sympathy with Sue Simson, a teacher from Turves Green Girls' School, Birmingham:

> I think grammar doesn't make any sense in isolation. You need to put it into a context. So I like to choose a topic that I think is particularly appropriate for any particular element of grammar that I want to teach and set it up initially within a context. Then delve into the rigours of it, work through the patterns, the structures, the exceptions, the rules.

As I discussed in my introduction, there is a propensity for beginning teachers to fall back on their own experience as learners. If grammar was presented to them as rules to be learnt, through drills for instance, in isolation from any communicative situation, then they may feel that this is appropriate for their present classes. This is another area of the grammar debate and one which deserves considerable discussion amongst colleagues. Issues which arise from this are:

- Can grammar be taught in the target language?
- How do teachers differentiate between those structures appropriate for all learners and those for high attainers?
- Is it appropriate to talk about grammar in English and, if so, how does this fit into a lesson taught largely in the target language?
- Is it appropriate to use grammatical terminology and, if so, does there need to be synergy with English colleagues who also teach grammar explicitly?
- Are pupils expected to deduce rules from a series of examples or are they presented with the rules first and then allowed to practise them through a series of activities?

Teachers in any department are unlikely to be unanimous in their answers to these questions but this is one aspect of language debate which will run and run.

New approaches to text using ICT

An exciting prospect and another area of debate for MFL teachers is that the use of ICT in the language classroom is beginning to raise fundamental questions about the way we teach. For instance, accepted consensus in the UK is to introduce new language first and foremost in its spoken form before moving on to the written form. The result has been to push oral proficiency to the fore at the expense of other skills. Since the introduction of the CD-ROM and the internet, we find that language is now often presented in ways which challenge this hierarchy. The new technologies may concurrently require listening, reading, writing and, to a lesser extent, speaking. Pupils come into contact with electronic texts that are presented in different modes – integrating text, images, icons, sound, animation and video sequences. We find that the old divisions of print, audio and video become blurred.

Texts are no longer solely fixed, printed texts with a few illustrations. Electronic texts are not sequential but random, allowing the reader to wander and to choose. These texts are often not permanent. Some websites have a tendency to disappear or change: their strength lies in the fact that they can be continually updated. For teachers, though, this raises issues about how we regard text. We need to learn to be flexible, to adapt quickly to the changing world, to possible technical breakdown and to question the provenance of text.

The importance of engaging in the debate

Teachers sometimes have a disregard for theoretically-based reading. There is a scepticism about intellectual discussion and theoretical thought and yet practice in schools is influenced by these. Why is there so much scepticism about theory in schools? Teachers do theorize but it may be that they lack a technical vocabulary with which they can think about, create and share with each other ideas about teaching and learning (Hargreaves TTA annual lecture 1996). Or they may be unable to apply ideas that they gain through courses or Inset because of lack of time to plan and discuss, because of inappropriate rooming policies, a defined curriculum and rigid exam system.

Nevertheless, we, all of us, need to be aware of the pedagogy and methodology we teach in order to be able to justify why we do what we do. This is particularly true for the growing number of teachers involved in the support of student teachers and newly qualified teachers.

Conclusion

Teachers today are in a world of constant change; there are expectations from outside and inside school. Student teachers and newly-qualified teachers need to be prepared to live on these shifting sands since there is no reason to think that a period of stability and non-intervention is just around the corner. It is important that they learn to develop their voice in the staff room and in their subject associations in order to contribute to the ever-developing definition of language teaching and to our collective understanding of pupils' MFL learning. Without this participation, teaching is in danger of becoming something which is defined by those who do not teach. Where does this leave notions of professionalism?

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2 Drop out from language study at age 16+

A historical perspective

Eric Hawkins

Nine out of ten students stop learning a language at 16.
(Nuffield Foundation Inquiry 2000)

Introduction

A curriculum house with a leaking roof?

When Sir Trevor McDonald, as co-chairman of the Nuffield Foundation two-year inquiry into foreign language teaching, launched the committee's Final Report (Languages: the next generation, June 2000), his first words were to quote the committee's finding: 'Nine out of ten students stop learning a language at 16.'

The drift away from foreign languages at 16 was further confirmed by the publication of the GCE A level results in the following August. They made headlines in the Press. The *Times* announced (17 August 2000): 'STUDENTS SHUN LANGUAGES ... Pupils accused of isolationist attitudes as they abandon learning French, German and Spanish and switch to computer and IT studies.'

The Nuffield Report summed up what 'shunning languages' at age 16 will mean: 'We are on course for the next generation to be disadvantaged, edged out of the employment market both at home and abroad. We are heading towards a minority clinging to monolingualism.'

In practical terms shunning languages at 16 has already led to such a collapse of entries for university degree courses that some universities are closing their language departments. This promises a further drying up of the dwindling supply of graduate linguists from whom our future teachers must be recruited. The 'golden handshakes' of up to £10,000 now on offer to tempt language graduates to train for teaching will be of little effect unless there is a source of graduates to tempt. So the drop out at age 16 threatens the very continuation of language teaching in schools.

The statistics of post-16 drop out had already been set out in the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) publication *Thirty years of Language Teaching* (Hawkins 1996), which described the foreign language