

# Action research in languages teaching schools

Edited by Helen Poet





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# Foreword

**Ann Swarbrick**, Languages Education Lead for Initial Teacher Training, CfBT

As this research report goes to press, the future of languages in English schools looks more healthy than it has for some years. There is the prospect of languages establishing its place within the primary curriculum and pupils' take-up of languages is increasing in Year 10. The current routes into teaching are to be rationalised and extended, ensuring that good schools and effective languages departments take total or partial responsibility for training for the profession.

It is against this backdrop of new shifts in policy that we have brought together a group of schools which have worked with our Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) for many years, to develop an enquiry-based project which focused on the languages classroom and classroom practice.

CILT, the National Centre for Languages joined CfBT Education Trust in 2011. The move enabled our GTP to develop this current project which capitalises on a well established tradition within CfBT of supporting classroom-based research. The project deadlines were tight and in some ways reflected the frenetic and energising work-rate of the teachers we work with year-on-year within the GTP. We called the schools together for a research seminar in January 2012, field-work was completed between February and March and the reports were written up in April. It is a testament to the expertise of these teachers that they were able to meet these deadlines, integrating this research into teaching full timetables and preparing pupils for examinations. In other words, establishing enquiry into classroom practice as a central part of effective languages teaching.

We believe that good teachers continually question the planning decisions they make in their classrooms. In the future, when more and more people will be trained directly by schools, this could not be more important. We hope that this book inspires languages teachers to see how enquiry into their classroom practice can lead to better learning and inspiring teaching.

I would like to thank the headteachers of our participating schools for their support of this project. However, without the dedication of our group of teacher-researchers none of this would have been possible. The research they present here outlines the developmental process of research and the impact it has had on their languages departments. Our intention is that this book should inspire other groups of languages teachers to see the value of such work in articulating the reality of everyday life in the languages classroom. For unless we continually enquire into what best works for our pupils we will never understand what it is that makes a good languages learner. And if we do not know this then we will never solve the conundrum of how to motivate pupils to engage with the difficult task of learning a language. The teachers in this project have shown that research and teaching go hand in hand. I hope you enjoy reading their work.



**Ann Swarbrick**

Languages Education Lead for Initial Teacher Training, CfBT



**Ann Swarbrick**  
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# Introduction

Practitioner research is an important and increasingly common form of professional development for teachers. It forms part of the drive towards evidence-informed practice; that is, making changes to teaching practice based on an exploration of what works and what does not. The benefits of practitioner research are twofold: teachers can use the opportunity to improve their own practice, and they can share the knowledge gained with a wider audience of peers through publications such as this. Recent research has shown that teachers who have conducted their own research rated it as a useful way of improving their teaching practice<sup>1</sup>.

CfBT has been committed to practitioner research since 2009, and has supported teachers in schools to run their own projects. This publication is part of a growing series of practitioner research; it joins reports from schools in Abu Dhabi and from teachers at St Mark's Academy in England.

The current collection of practitioner research reports has been produced by teachers from languages departments in secondary schools across England. All of these schools are involved in the Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) run by the languages team at CfBT (formerly CILT). The teachers carried out the projects in their own schools, including the planning, data collection and reporting, with support from the research team and the languages team at CfBT.

A key feature of the practitioner research reports featured here is that the teachers involved all chose to use the opportunity to consult their students. This demonstrates that teachers are not the only beneficiaries of practitioner research because, as noted by several of the authors, ways of improving how they work with their students will be considered based on their findings. These research projects, therefore, have not just been conducted to further the teachers' professional development, but to inform and improve day-to-day teaching in the participating schools, which will in turn benefit their students.

## The reports

Each report explores an issue of interest to languages departments. However, it should be noted that the research also contains messages relevant to colleagues teaching other subjects. Each chapter has been written by the teachers who ran each practitioner research project.

The first four reports explore pupil learning styles and different classroom approaches. This includes pupils' views on different approaches to listening (Chapter 1) and speaking activities (Chapter 2), the use of integrated content and language learning with some groups of students (Chapter 3) and how pupils feel about independent learning (Chapter 4).

Chapters 5 and 6 relate to a key issue for many languages departments across England, that of uptake of languages. Chapter 5 looks at student motivation to study a language at Key Stage 4 in a school where languages are optional, while Chapter 6 investigates uptake at Key Stage 5 in a school where languages are compulsory up to Year 11.

Chapter 7 summarises a research project carried out by the CfBT GTP Programme Manager which explores the views of trainees and their mentors on teaching grammar.

Each chapter details:

- the overview and context of the research project
- the methodology used
- the findings from the project
- conclusions and reflections on how they might take the findings forward.

<sup>1</sup> Poet, H., Rudd, P. and Kelly, J. (2010) *Survey of teachers 2010: support to improve teaching practice*. London: General Teaching Council for England.



# An exploration of pupil views towards different approaches to listening activities in language lessons

Wynn Davison and Cyrielle Mazabraud, Bishop Challoner School, Birmingham

## 1.1 | Overview

This project was in the area of listening skills. This area is important to our school and our work because pupils in our school report that they find listening the most challenging of the language skills and we wanted to identify ways in which we could change pupils' opinions of, and attitudes towards, listening activities – and improve outcomes in assessments. The research aimed to investigate the impact of Netbooks on pupils' attitudes towards listening activities. In order to achieve these research aims, the following research questions were asked:

- How do Key Stage 3 (KS3) pupils feel about whole-class listening activities?
- How do pupils' attitudes towards listening using Netbooks differ from their views on whole-class listening activities?

## 1.2 | Context

Bishop Challoner is a mixed 11–18 Catholic comprehensive school and one of the first waves of Teaching Schools in the country. It was rated as 'outstanding' by Ofsted in 2009.

This research project has been undertaken by Wynn Davison, Head of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and Cyrielle Mazabraud, teacher of French and PGCE mentor. With the growing importance of the English baccalaureate (EBacc) we studied the previous years' GCSE results and found that listening was an area in need of development.

The EBacc is the latest comparator for schools' achievement. A language GCSE is one of the five subjects that count towards the EBacc in school performance tables. As a result, this policy has renewed the focus on MFL at Key Stage 4 (KS4). At Bishop Challoner, 48% of each cohort is targeted to follow an EBacc pathway.

French is offered to all our pupils and where timetabling and staffing permit, German is offered from Year 8.

As part of a whole-school initiative, now in its third year, all KS3 pupils are equipped with Netbooks. We wanted to investigate if we could use them to improve performance in listening with the long-term goal of raising achievement at GCSE.

## 1.3 | Methodology

Evidence for this project was gathered using a mixed-methods approach. The two top ability groups in Year 7 were chosen for the project as they are the groups who will definitely all follow an EBacc pathway in the future.

Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected by means of pupil questionnaires and interviews, supported by observations by teachers in lessons. Prior to filling in the questionnaires pupils completed listening tasks both as a whole class in the traditional teacher-managed way and individually using their Netbooks as described below:

- During the teacher-led listening exercise the recording was played twice with the teacher pausing after each question and scanning the room to see that pupils had noted their response before continuing.
- For the Netbooks exercise they were allocated a period of time in which they were able to listen to the recording as many times as they liked, pausing and rewinding the extract at will.

### **Pupil questionnaires and interviews**

The main method used to gather data was a questionnaire which was completed by the 63 pupils in the top ability groups in Year 7 (out of the 180 pupils in the whole year).

The questionnaire consisted of five questions, four of which used a scale from 1 to 5 for pupils to communicate their attitudes and feelings towards the two types of listening activities that they undertook. The final question asked them to express a straightforward choice indicating their preference for one style of listening activity or the other.

After the questionnaires a sample of the students was asked to expand on their answers in an unstructured interview. The aim of this was to provide some qualitative data to enable us to interpret the questionnaire results more clearly.

### Teacher observations

In addition to the pupil data collected we wanted to observe their reactions during each type of listening activity. While one teacher conducted the 'teacher-led' task, an observer was also positioned at the front of the classroom to observe behaviours and interactions. During both tasks the pupils were observed by the same two teachers and then the observations were discussed and the findings compiled.

## 1.4 | Key findings

*Figure 1.1: Pupil attitudes towards different methods for listening activities in language lessons*

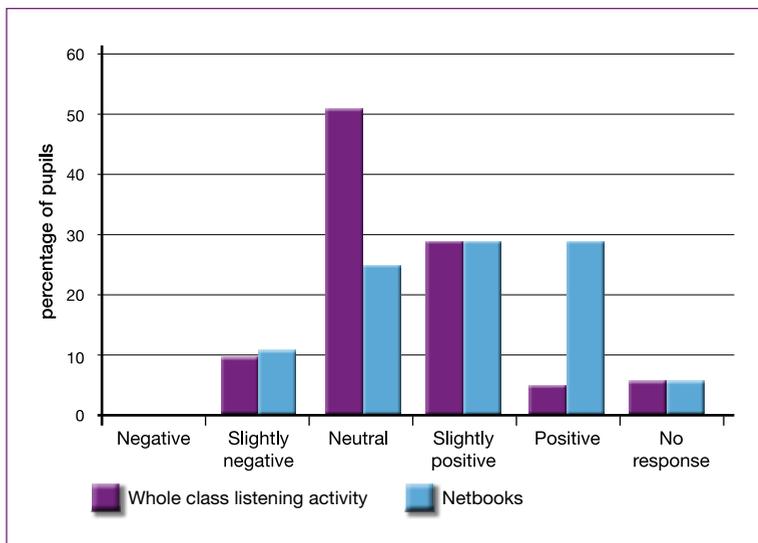
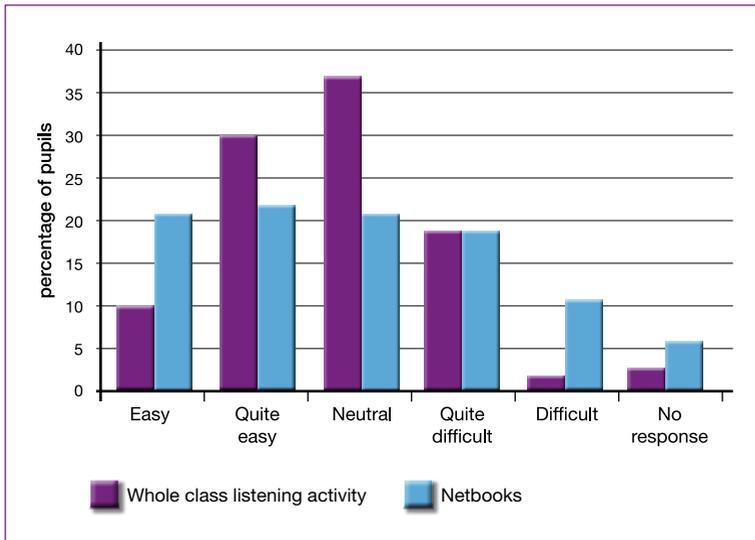


Table 1.1: Pupil views about preferred method for future listening tasks

In future, which method of conducting listening activities in class would you prefer your teacher to use?		
Whole class listening	Individual listening with Netbooks	No response
30%	68%	2%

As shown in Figure 1.1, more pupils were positive about using Netbooks in class for listening activities (58%) than whole-class listening tasks (34%). This was supported by the finding that more than two thirds (68%) of students would prefer to work individually on the Netbooks compared to the whole-class listening task when completing listening activities in the future (as shown in Table 1.1).

Figure 1.2: Pupil perceptions of difficulty of the tasks



Similar proportions of pupils rated the two tasks as 'easy' (around 40%), as shown in Figure 1.2. A slightly higher proportion of pupils rated Netbooks as difficult (30%) than rated the teacher-led task as difficult (21%). However we feel that pupil responses to the questions about difficulty may have been influenced by the difficulty level of the listening texts and not the way the task was done.

### Pupil interviews

The overall views of pupils were weighted more on the negative side for the whole-class listening activity and more positively for the individual task using Netbooks. The responses support the questionnaire data and have given a clearer understanding of the reasoning behind the numerical data. Examples of the reasons given by pupils for their views are shown below in Table 1.2.

**Table 1.2: Pupils' views, indicative of the most commonly held views expressed during the interviews**

<b>Whole class activity (teacher led)</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
'We knew what to do'	'It was too fast – I couldn't answer'
'The teacher stopped and gave hints'	'If someone moved you couldn't hear'
'It was quiet in class'	'People asked questions that were pointless'
<b>Individual activity (Netbooks)</b>	
<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
'I went at my own pace'	'It didn't work' / 'My headphones were broken' (technical issues)
'I was more relaxed'	'People asking for help put me off'
'I listened to one question lots but others I got first time'	

### **Teacher observations**

The pupils were quieter in the whole-class activity but some individuals looked frustrated when they hadn't got the answer before the next item was heard. Pupils were observed to be more at ease when in control of the recording themselves using the Netbooks. These observations are supported by the feedback gathered during the pupil interviews.

### **1.5 Reflection**

The action research project has shown that generally pupils at Bishop Challoner prefer using Netbooks for listening activities, although some pupils do still prefer whole-class listening exercises. The surprising element is in the feedback from pupils, which identified the small amount of background noise produced by all members of the class working independently with Netbooks as distracting to some pupils.

This project took place only with a sub-set of pupils from Year 7. In the light of our initial findings we will expand the use of Netbooks for listening activities to classes from the remainder of KS3 in the future. We will be developing our VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) courses to include more listening tasks which can be used in class, with more careful management of the background noise, or set as homework so that pupils can develop their listening skills using Netbooks without the distractions of the classroom. In addition, we will continue to track the progress of the Year 7 pupils involved in this research project.



There are some practical issues that we will need to consider. The problems that were presented by the Netbook task have highlighted the need to have a supply of spare headphones in the department: it would only take one pupil using the speakers on his/her Netbook to create enough of a distraction to other pupils to render the activity counterproductive. We have also concluded from our discussions with pupils that we need to continue to carry out some listening activities in the more traditional way as a whole class. This is in order to be able to teach the skills and techniques required to be able to maximise the benefit of subsequent individual study of listening texts.



# An exploration of the use of Group Talk in Year 7 language lessons at Crofton School – the effects on speaking as well as writing

Barbara Hlavaty, Crofton School, Fareham

## 2.1 | Overview

‘Group Talk’, as introduced by Greg Horton, is a speaking activity where students learn to express their opinions, including mild insults when disagreeing and using colloquial language<sup>2</sup>. There are some basic phrases which can be built upon and students are encouraged to have lively discussions about matters that interest them. Group Talk had been used in some classes at Crofton School but not as a department-wide strategy.

In our department we felt we needed to improve our students’ confidence and competence when speaking the target language (TL) because the speaking assessment at Key Stage 4 (KS4) now carries 20% of the final grade. At the same time we wanted to find out whether an improvement in speaking would simultaneously enhance the development of students’ skills. In the past we have found that students find the incidental use of colloquial language engaging and motivating and so we wanted to find out whether this would lead them to choose more colourful and varied language in both their speaking and writing.

## 2.2 | Context

Crofton School is a mixed comprehensive school for students aged 11–16 in the suburb of Fareham, on the south coast near Portsmouth. The school has a good reputation locally. Parents are supportive of the school and have high aspirations for their children. The proportion of students who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) when they leave KS4 is very low and the vast majority of our students continue with their education on leaving the school at 16.

The Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) department consists of full-time members of staff, two part-timers and one GTP (Graduate Trainee Programme) student. Languages are not compulsory at KS4 and we achieve an uptake of just over 50%. We decided to carry out the action research as a whole department as it fitted in with our Departmental Improvement Plan (DIP). In the summer of 2011 our MFL GCSE results had dipped by about 10% (in French 78% of pupils achieved grades between A\* and C; in German the proportion was 84%) which was largely due to disappointing writing results. We had also found as a department that the new speaking assessment tasks did not bring about as much success as we had hoped for. We therefore decided to focus on engaging speaking tasks and explore whether these would also lead to improvements in the skill of writing.

<sup>2</sup> More information is available on Teachers TV

## 2.3 | Methodology

We chose Year 7 learners of German as our group of focus as they are at the beginning of their language acquisition (none of our feeder schools teaches German at Key Stage 2 (KS2) and German is our starting language in Year 7). This meant we could be sure that everything the students were using was a direct consequence of our teaching input.

The Group Talk phrases (as published on Teachers TV) were adapted and differentiated for different abilities. We also chose colourful adjectives to complement their speaking. For this purpose we created some teaching materials (interactive whiteboard slides and Task Magic files) so that the whole department was using the same resources across all groups in Year 7. After the initial teaching input, which took several lessons, students then conducted Group Talk discussions on the topic of school, and in particular their subject 'likes' and 'dislikes'. When the students were ready to be observed, our GTP student went into every class and focused on two table groups, each seating 4–6 students, to record the use of the phrases as well as adjectives.

At the end of the unit students had to complete a written assessment. We then looked for evidence of the use of colourful adjectives. In addition, in the higher ability groups we were hoping to see adaptations of some of the pre-learnt Group Talk phrases. This was followed up by student interviews where students were asked about the experience of Group Talk activities.

## 2.4 | Key findings

We found that all ability groups really enjoyed the Group Talk activities; the students were particularly delighted to be able to use (mild) insults. At the end of the initial phase they reported a higher level of confidence as well as wanting to do more of it.

In the lesson observations it was noticed that all groups used all of the Group Talk phrases but that the frequency varied by ability group. As predicted, the higher ability groups used the more complex expressions such as 'ich mag ... lieber' (I prefer) and more unusual adjectives such as 'faszinierend' (fascinating).

We then looked at the impact of Group Talk on students' writing skills. All students had to complete a written assessment for which they had to produce a paragraph on 'Meine Schule'. There was no prescriptive content as we wanted to encourage independent use of language.

When the written assessments were reviewed we were very encouraged to see an increase in the variety of adjectives used across the sets (i.e. across the range of abilities). All sets used the following adjectives:

- stinklangweilig (it's so boring it stinks)
- totlangweilig (deadly boring)
- atemberaubend (breathtaking)
- wunderbar (wonderful)
- nutzlos (useless)
- nervig (annoying).

They also all used the verb forms:

- ich finde (I think)
- ich mag (I like)
- ich mag nicht (I don't like).

We believe that the variety of the adjectives increased due to the continuous use in their speaking tasks which the students said they enjoyed, as reported above. Incorporating a more animated speaking task appeared to improve the retention of more advanced vocabulary.

We also found an unexpected variation between sets 1 (the highest ability) and 2, where set 2 used more complex language than set 1. We feel this might be related to teacher involvement in and enthusiasm for the activities.

## 2.5 | Reflection

As a department we feel encouraged by our findings. We are very pleased with the enthusiasm the students showed during the speaking tasks but also the positive outcome for the writing skills. When we revisited the Group Talk activities four weeks later, we found that students still remembered many of the expressions and adjectives taught and they were eager to apply their previously learnt knowledge to a new topic. The challenge now lies in carrying on with Group Talk activities and extending the content as the students progress through Key Stages 3 and 4.

By conducting guided interviews we found out that students enjoyed the tasks, especially the insults, but they also commented that they appreciated the variety of things they could express. The majority of students said they wanted to spend more time on this.

In our experience many older students are embarrassed to 'have a go' at speaking a foreign language so we hope to break this pattern by continuing with these tasks. Given the fact that at GCSE speaking now accounts for 20% of the marks, there is an urgent need to increase students' confidence and competence.



# An evaluation of integrated content and language teaching on pupils' skills and attitudes

Lynne Gibbons, Colin Bradshaw and Fiona Temple-Smith, Dallam School, Cumbria

## 3.1 | Introduction

A specialist languages school since 1997, Dallam has consistently developed its commitment to an international ethos, now offering an Adventure Learning Curriculum in Key Stage 3 (KS3) and the option of the International Baccalaureate in a multilingual Key Stage 5 (KS5). Closely linked to the postgraduate certificate education (PGCE) in Modern Foreign Language (MFL) department at the University of Cumbria, our policy is to teach in the target language and to increase pupils' speaking in the language as much as possible: in this aim we are persistent but by no means consistent.

Since 2008, Dallam has offered Year 7 pupils and their parents a 'bilingual' form-group in which pupils and teachers speak only French or Spanish in all registration and Lifeskills (PSHE) lessons (around 100 minutes per week). This is in addition to 200 minutes of rigorous target-language French or Spanish lessons which include at least one lesson of cross-curriculum content (such as History, Geography or Citizenship). Always over-subscribed, the bilingual classes have been carefully balanced to match the mixed-ability nature of the year cohort, with our normal distribution of high-ability, special educational needs (SEN), English as an additional language (EAL) learners and those eligible for free school meals (FSM).

In 2011, the Year 9 bilingual French group of 28 pupils achieved outstanding results: 60% of those pupils were predicted to reach grades A\*-C in Year 11 (based on Fischer Family Trust D targets from Key Stage 2 (KS2) results); however, 89% of this group achieved this target two years earlier than expected. Whilst this is encouraging, we did not want to rely on evidence from just one class to justify our future development. The additional demands on teachers of these classes are considerable, as all schemes of work, lesson plans and resources have to be prepared to cover a range of subjects. Before extending provision, we need to know to what extent improved attitudes and skills might consistently reward this extra effort.

## 3.2 | Research aims

Our main aim was to evaluate the effects of this additional provision and focused methodology on pupils' attitudes and skills. Four measures were selected by which to compare Year 8 pupils in the current bilingual class (31 pupils) with the other two standard Spanish classes (of 24 and 30 pupils). We looked at:

- a) frequency and quality of pupils' voluntary /spontaneous oral participation in the target language
- b) pupils' independent ability to decode authentic texts, and pupils' confidence as readers
- c) pupils' motivation and confidence to use Spanish in and beyond the classroom
- d) their attitudes to registration and Lifeskills, when delivered in Spanish or English.

## 3.3 | Methodology

Several methods were used to capture both quantitative and qualitative data for each aspect.

Speaking participation was measured in observations of the three Year 8 classes in Spanish lessons. Incidents of pupils' use of Spanish for three different purposes were counted:

- to respond to the teacher
- to ask the teacher a question
- to speak to each other.

Prepared utterances (for example answers to reading questions) were not counted. The lesson content and activities were different in each lesson. The quality of spoken Spanish was assessed by an unprepared speaking task (a role-play) completed by representative groups from each class: this was filmed to enable an evaluation of confidence levels, and the tape-script was analysed for use of language and accuracy.

Reading skills were tested formally with a progressive 'challenge' of 60 minutes, taken by all classes simultaneously. The pupils worked at their own pace through three unseen tasks:

1. an authentic text typical of National Curriculum (NC) Level 4
2. a cross-over grade C-B question from GCSE (Edexcel June 2010)
3. a question from Edexcel AS reading at the standard typical of grade D.

The tasks were adapted so that comprehension alone could be tested. Immediately after this 'challenge', pupils completed an anonymous scaled questionnaire on their confidence in their own reading skills, particularly their ability to deduce meaning by using cognate or known keywords.

Attitudes to language learning and to learning in Lifeskills/registration were assessed by an anonymous 20-question scaled survey: this focused on four different areas although questions were in a randomised order to encourage more careful reading of questions. The key areas of questions were about pupils':

- a) perceptions of using Spanish in the classroom
- b) interest and confidence in using Spanish beyond the classroom
- c) attitudes to future study of languages
- d) perceptions of Year 8 Lifeskills/registration sessions.

## 3.4 | Key findings

### **Speaking: frequency and spontaneity**

During the Spanish lessons, the bilingual class made approximately one in four of all comments and questions in Spanish, whereas the two control classes, taken together, made almost two-thirds of utterances in Spanish, against expectations. However, one control class made very few remarks at all, and the bilingual class also said relatively little in either language in this lesson, unless answering a prepared question. The other control class, which might be described as 'chatty', was in fact making the greatest independent use of Spanish: with a 'target-language' teacher but no stringent 'Spanish only' rules, they volunteered twice as many answers in Spanish as in English and also asked half of their questions to the teacher in Spanish without prompting. By counting pupils' utterances as defined above, we concluded that the teacher's control of any speaking by pupils, due to the type of activity observed, was the more significant factor. When we repeat this process in the future, we intend to make sure that the bilingual group and control group carry out the same activities.

### **Speaking: quality**

All three classes were given the same amount of time and stimulus for the filmed improvised role-play. The individuals from the bilingual group made up to twice as many Spanish contributions as those from the control group (up to 15 rather than up to 7). More significant were the different levels of speaking evidenced, with half of the bilingual class performing at NC Level 4, whereas the other pupils remained at NC Level 1–2, as we would expect for a completely unprepared activity.

### **Reading: comprehension of authentic texts**

The reading papers were assessed simply as achieving (or not) at NC Level 4, at GCSE grade C-B and at grade D at AS level. The bilingual group appeared to be more able to tackle the more difficult questions and were more successful at the higher levels. In the standard classes, three quarters achieved NC Level 4, one in eight succeeded with the GCSE grade C-B task and almost as many, one in ten, succeeded with the AS question. The marks achieved by the bilingual class showed exactly the same proportion (three quarters) achieving NC Level 4, but a much higher proportion (over 4 in 10) succeeded on the GCSE question and over a quarter on the AS question.

### **Reading: pupils' confidence**

The questionnaire elicited the strength of pupils' confidence in their own general reading in Spanish, their ability to deduce meaning from cognates and to deduce gist by using known keywords. On all three points, over 90% of the bilingual class felt confident or very much so, whereas in the control group 84% felt able to use keywords effectively but only 60% felt confident about reading in Spanish in general.

### **Attitudes: to using Spanish in the classroom**

Regarding use of Spanish in the class and for homework tasks, bilingual class pupils reported much higher levels of confidence, of enjoyment of learning, of concentration and of application, with around 80% being positive across this range of questions, compared with around 50% in the control group.

### **Attitudes: to using Spanish outside the classroom**

Beyond the classroom, positive attitudes to using Spanish for both personal purposes (reading and listening) and for interactive purposes (speaking and writing) were almost twice as high in the bilingual group (around 60%) as in the control group (around 32%). This also extended to use of IT in Spanish, with 20% of the 'bilingual' class of Year 8s already using Spanish independently to communicate on the internet, compared with only one pupil among the 53 pupils in the control groups.

### **Attitudes: to further MFL study**

Enthusiasm for further study cannot be assessed by intentions for Year 10 options, as languages are compulsory at KS4 in our school, but 58% of the bilingual group said they looked forward to taking Spanish at GCSE and 71% said they might want continue beyond GCSE. The corresponding figures for the control group were that 25% of these pupils said they looked forward to languages GCSE and 21% were contemplating going beyond. This shows a considerable difference in the attitudes of pupils in the two groups.

Attitudes to beginning a second foreign language were also more positive (55% in the bilingual class were in favour compared with 36% of the control classes).

### **Attitudes: to Lifeskills and form registration sessions**

The fourth area of measurement, attitudes to pastoral and PSHE provision when conducted in Spanish or English, added an interesting comparison with the other outcomes. When asked about enjoyment of learning, engagement in lessons and the use of thinking skills, the bilingual class (which works through the same curriculum but entirely in Spanish) had a very similar view to the control group. Almost exactly the same proportion of pupils in the bilingual group said they enjoyed Lifeskills lessons as their peers working in English: overall 67% were positive compared with 65% of the control group.

## **3.5 | Conclusion**

The provision of an optional 'bilingual' form-group with additional target-language time, using a methodology of integrated content and language learning, is having a noticeably positive impact on the speaking and reading skills of our Year 8 pupils. The bilingual class has almost doubled the level of enthusiasm for language learning compared with the rest of the year group. Most impressive are the gains in confidence and motivation to use the language, particularly beyond the classroom. Progress and confidence in reading skills imply that underlying independent learning and thinking skills have also improved. Speaking gains were observed in the quality (NC level and accuracy) of utterances, although the frequency and spontaneity of spoken target language seems to depend more on the teacher's example and tolerance of classroom chatter than on a strict 'Spanish only' methodology.

### 3.6 | Next steps / Reflection

Additional and more reliable data will allow us to further investigate the gains made by maximising the teacher's use of Spanish rather than by insisting on the pupils' use of the language. To pursue this will require more regular and sophisticated measurements of who says what, why and how.

Increased independent use of Spanish on the internet is one early by-product of greater confidence that we had not anticipated. We could now look to increase opportunities and prompts for this in a more controlled way, with due regard for safeguarding issues, of course.

We recognise that our 'control group' pupils may be unusually de-motivated and unskilled, although we do not think so! To check this we could ask local and federated schools to try some of the same activities and questionnaires: carried out locally this would provide a basis for local Federation training and development, but comparisons with any other schools at the same stage of innovation would be welcome.

The evidence and analysis completed so far will form a baseline for future investigations which we hope to see future PGCE and GTP trainees involved in during their training at Dallam.



EXIT

# Students' engagement with independent learning of languages

Carolyn George and Nagore Ortega, All Saints Catholic High School, Sheffield

## 4.1 | Overview

Our research project aimed to establish why there appears to be a significant difference between our expectations of students' independent learning of languages and the reality.

This area is important to our school and our work because it is an area of focus in the school improvement plan and is a departmental priority.

In order to achieve these research aims, the following research questions were explored:

- What is the students' perception of independent learning? What are they actually doing?
- What are the barriers to successful independent learning?
- What extra support do students need in order to become successful independent learners?

## 4.2 | Context

All Saints Catholic High School is a large secondary school in the centre of Sheffield. We are a Christian community within the tradition of the Catholic Church, working in the spirit of gospel values. The school was judged 'Outstanding, with an outstanding Sixth Form' by Ofsted in March 2011.

The Modern Foreign Languages department offers French and Spanish from Key Stage 3 (KS3) to Key Stage 5 (KS5), including compulsory provision at Key Stage 4 (KS4). We customarily get an uptake of ten to fifteen students per year on our A Level courses.

The school mission is to encourage our students to fulfil their intellectual, spiritual and physical potential and to prepare each person for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of adult life. With this in mind, we think independent learning is a key factor and therefore this project investigated the students' engagement and perception of independent learning in language lessons.

## 4.3 | Methodology

In order to address the aims of the project, a mixed-methods approach was used, including a combination of quantitative and qualitative primary data gained from student and parent questionnaires, observation of students in personalised learning sessions and interviews with a sample student group. Specifically, we carried out the following:

- Questionnaires to students in Years 7–13. 161 responses were received, giving a response rate of 36%.
- Questionnaires to parents of students in Years 8, 9 and 10. 86 responses were received.
- Observation of four Year 11 students in personalised learning sessions was undertaken.
- Structured interviews took place with a sample of four students.

## 4.4 | Key findings

### Pupil questionnaires

In KS3 and KS4 students do not see learning vocabulary as a priority. 42% of those surveyed said that they only revise the day before the test and 11% said that they never learn vocabulary. In KS5, 50% spend 20 minutes a day or more doing some vocabulary revision.

Although the vast majority of students (95%) have access to the internet, most students (80%) said they rarely or only occasionally log on to the school VLE (virtual learning environment) even though there are resources available on it. When asked if pupils needed any extra help for their outside lessons learning, 'no extra help' and 'more strategies for learning vocabulary' were the most common responses.

### Parent questionnaires

From the relatively small sample of parents who completed questionnaires at parents' evenings for Years 8–10 (86 parents), 36% said that their children spend less than the recommended 10 minutes per day learning vocabulary and 15% do not know what methods they use for memorising vocabulary. All the parents confirmed that their children have access to the internet at home.

### Personalised learning sessions and student interviews

Students had mixed opinions about how to learn a language during their personalised learning time. Whilst they said they enjoy learning at their own pace, students felt they needed support and specific direction, as illustrated by this comment: *'I feel I have picked up skills I haven't acquired in lesson time and I enjoy working at my own pace but I still feel the need to be reassured of what I am doing'*. We found that for able and well-motivated students personalised learning is an opportunity to consolidate what they have done in class but less able students need more guidance and direction.

## 4.5 | Reflection

Our research has highlighted the need for more specific guidance and explicit expectations of independent study from the beginning of Year 7 in our school. We suggest that strategies for learning vocabulary should be shared and demonstrated by teachers to parents within weeks of students starting in our school. We have learnt that, with very few exceptions, all students have access to the internet and we should get them into the habit of using the available materials that they have in the school VLE from the very beginning of Year 7. Vocabulary tests should be regular and frequent.

As 'next steps' from this research, our study has suggested the following set of guidelines to improve the quality of the independent learning of our students:

- Provide more specific guidance and explicit expectations of independent study from Year 7.
- Get parents involved with strategies for learning vocabulary.
- Get students into the habit of using materials available in the VLE.
- Provide more frequent vocabulary tests.
- Use independent learning logs.



## Motivation in learning Modern Foreign Languages

Christine Newbould and Alexandra Troletti-Hartlow, Hillview School for Girls, Tonbridge

### 5.1 | Overview

When the study of modern languages became optional at Key Stage 4 (KS4) in Hillview School in 2006, the proportion of pupils wanting to carry on with the study of a modern language at KS4 remained high (90%). However, this is no longer the case – based on school data our prediction is that 60% of our current Year 8 pupils will study a foreign language at KS4. Consequently teachers of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in the school are very interested to find out the reasons why there has been a decline in interest.

The project undertaken was therefore aimed at finding out the reasons behind the decline in uptake and exploring why there is a lack of motivation to study foreign languages at KS4.

### 5.2 | Context

Hillview School is a non-selective school for girls in Tonbridge, Kent, with Performing Arts status.

Although the school is surrounded by grammar schools and independent schools, it is a successful school with good performance in the league tables. It has the reputation that pupils receive a sound education and are equipped with skills for life.

The Performing Arts status has been instrumental in building pupils' confidence and this has helped the learning of MFL.

## 5.3 | Method

The research was conducted with two year groups: Year 8 and Year 10.

Year 8 were chosen because this is when pupils at Hillview decide whether to continue with the study of a foreign language. The reason to target Year 8 was to find out if pupils are likely to choose to study a language at KS4. In total, 138 Year 8 pupils completed the questionnaire and 36 Year 8 pupils took part in the interviews.

We also wanted to consult with Year 10 to find out whether they were happy with their decision to study a language at KS4. Year 10 pupils studying a language were consulted by means of a questionnaire. This was followed up by interviews. In all, 78 Year 10 pupils completed the questionnaire and 68 Year 10 pupils took part in the interviews.

The two year groups were given opportunities to answer questions in writing and verbally. Pupils had the chance to write their views down anonymously and then expand on their responses verbally if they wished. Lesson observations also took place. The lesson observations were carried out by teachers to measure the level of participation and interest in the lessons.

## 5.4 | The findings

### Views of Year 8 pupils

Most pupils said they started to study a language in primary school. When questioned about their interest in the subject following their experience in Years 7 and 8, many pupils said that learning a language was interesting (60%).

Most pupils said they preferred group activities (80%) and project work (60%). Pupils said they would prefer activities similar to Drama, Dance or Art, which are pupils' favourite subjects.

Pupils felt there is too much of an emphasis on testing: that it seemed to be more important for a pupil to know their level in the four skills (listening, reading, writing and speaking) than to try to express an idea in the language. They said they were asked to learn vocabulary by heart and were not given opportunities to use the language in a creative way.



The observations showed that pupils were not participating very enthusiastically and were reluctant to say anything in case they made a mistake. The only time when pupils were very enthusiastic and participated fully was when they played games. Only then did they forget the restrictions and the wish to win overcame the fear of making a mistake.

The Year 8 pupils said that they would like to learn something of the culture of the countries where the language was spoken (music, food and fashion) and that they would be very interested to write to a pen friend. Most of the pupils taking part in the interviews said they would enjoy more opportunities to go on school trips or on exchanges.

Generally the Year 8 pupils felt that their study of a modern language would lead to an examination (GCSE) but that it would be difficult to secure a good grade.

### **Views of Year 10 pupils**

Year 10 pupils were asked when they had taken the decision to carry on the study of a foreign language and almost half (47%) answered that it was when they had to decide about their KS4 options, particularly at the time when they received the option booklet.

Almost two thirds of Year 10 pupils (65%) said their decision to continue to study a language was influenced by their parents. The other reasons that influenced pupils' choices were related to 'usefulness' in the future, particularly thinking about careers (85%). The interviews with pupils also showed that pupils thought that studying languages might be useful in the future or for holidays.

When pupils were asked to reflect on their experience and were asked whether they regretted choosing to study languages at KS4, 65% of pupils said that they did not regret their choice, although 33% said that they did regret it. The pupils who did not regret their choice generally found the lessons interesting. In contrast, the pupils who regretted taking languages at KS4 said they found the course difficult and were not confident of obtaining a good grade at GCSE. The interviews showed that the main reason for their dislike of the lesson is that they have to learn paragraphs by heart; in particular having to memorise vocabulary and reciting paragraphs learnt parrot fashion.

The questionnaire showed that pupils think the best part of language lessons is when they get an opportunity to practise with friends (40%) and when they can practise how to speak the language (31%).

Amongst the 78 pupils who filled in the questionnaire, only two listed Spanish as their favourite subject and none listed French as their favourite. The most popular subject in the school is Drama because they said it is easier to achieve a good grade at the same time as being fun.

Very few pupils were considering studying a language beyond KS4 because they felt the subject was too challenging and they did not think that they would get a good grade at A Level. Other common reasons for not studying a language at KS5 were that they did not think that they would need to know a language for the career they hoped to follow, and that they did not think studying a language was interesting.

Responses from both the written questionnaire and the interviews indicated that Year 10 pupils would find lessons more interesting if there were greater opportunities to work in groups and to learn about topics which are interesting to them. Pupils would like more opportunities to visit the countries, and to learn more about the history, geography, politics, culture and day-to-day life of the countries of the languages they are studying.

## 5.5 | Conclusion

With the understanding that similar projects of the same nature should be carried out in a number of schools with different profiles and catchment areas, the strong messages that the pupils at Hillview School have given us are that:

- they are open to the idea that learning a foreign language is a good idea
- so far, the only orientation that they are given is that it is an academic subject that they learn in school in order to pursue their education
- choosing languages at KS4 is not an easy option because they feel they are less likely to succeed (in terms of examination results) than if they study another subject
- preparing for the GCSE examination is not interesting
- the main issue with examination preparation is that they have to memorise long chunks of text with a linguistic content of very little value relating to their personal interests
- the preferred activities in a language lesson are group work and project work.

Based on these findings we could:

- present the study of a foreign language as a life experience that can open doors to a wealth of cultural experience
- show pupils that studying a language at school does not only mean preparing for tests and examinations
- give them an outcome at the end of their studies in addition to a grade
- teach them skills as well as content
- include in the lessons activities that give them scope for researching, experimenting and thinking.

We intend to explore how we can address this in our school. However we would also welcome a more positive governmental direction applauding and supporting school initiatives that would make the study of a language a life-changing experience for young people.



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# An investigation into the reasons for the low uptake of modern languages at Key Stage 5 at Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School and Language College

Joanne Walker, Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School and Language College, Coventry

## 6.1 | Overview

This research project focused on the issue of uptake of Modern Languages at Key Stage 5 (KS5) at Cardinal Wiseman. This is important to my school and my work because as a Language College, with compulsory languages at Key Stage 4 (KS4), we would expect a better uptake from our students. The main aims of the research project were to:

- identify which subjects our students opt for at KS5
- establish the reasons behind these choices
- determine the reasons why students are not opting to study languages at KS5, and
- investigate ways to make the continued study of a modern language more appealing to our students.

To achieve these objectives, the following key questions were addressed:

- Why is the take-up of languages at KS5 low at Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School and Language College?
- What factors contribute to the options taken by our students?
- What can we do as a department to make languages an appealing option at KS5?

## 6.2 | Context

Cardinal Wiseman Catholic School and Language College is a large, voluntary-aided comprehensive school which serves a diverse community in Coventry. The school has a varied population in terms of students' ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. The school has held specialist Languages status with a rural dimension since 2005. The school has a large and growing sixth form, and languages are offered at AS and A2 levels as well as at NVQ Level 3. The school currently teaches French, German and Spanish to GCSE level, as well as providing opportunities for students to take exams in their first language. In addition, the teaching of Mandarin Chinese has recently been introduced, with the first pupils opting to take GCSE from September 2012. I was appointed as Subject Leader of Spanish in September 2009 and a consistent area for improvement has been to increase the number of students opting to continue their studies of a language into KS5, with initiatives such as the introduction of NVQ Level 3 languages.

In 2012 the Modern Languages department will be teaching and examining a total of 17 students in KS5 (in French, German and Spanish) from a potential 258 students on roll in the sixth form – just 7% of the sixth form population. This is indicative of national trends, where there has been a 40% decrease since 1995 in the number of candidates entered for French, German and Spanish at A Level<sup>3</sup>. Some organisations, such as the Association for Language Learning (ALL), have endeavoured to explain this worrying trend and have highlighted two key issues: the perception of the difficulty of learning a modern language and the pressure on students to achieve the grades they need for their university course of choice.

There have been several news items in recent years which discuss the idea of 'hard' and 'soft' A Levels, citing Languages (both Modern and Classical) as a 'hard' A Level. Indeed, in the Russell Group booklet *Informed Choices*<sup>4</sup>, aimed at improving students' understanding of entry requirements to top universities, languages are listed as 'facilitating subjects' i.e. subjects which are required more often than others to gain a place on a wider range of degree courses. The implications of the decline in uptake and the importance placed on languages by higher education, coupled with languages being perceived as a difficult subject, mean that it is important to explore levels of uptake and reasons for uptake in our school in this research project.

<sup>3</sup> CILT analysis of JCQ entries, 2011 [http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research\\_and\\_statistics/statistics/secondary\\_statistics/as\\_a2\\_exam\\_entries.aspx](http://www.cilt.org.uk/home/research_and_statistics/statistics/secondary_statistics/as_a2_exam_entries.aspx)

<sup>4</sup> <http://russellgroup.org/Informed%20Choices%20final.pdf>

## 6.3 | Methodology

This project focused on the opinions of Year 11 students on the subject of continuing their studies of French, German or Spanish into KS5. To gather this evidence, a survey was used which included both closed and open questions. There were 238 students on roll in Year 11 and, as Languages are studied by all in KS4 at Cardinal Wiseman School, a survey was given to all of them to be completed in their tutor groups during registration. This took place at the same time as they were choosing the subjects they wished to continue with into the sixth form. There were absences from registration during the data collection period, and some students completed the survey incorrectly. In total, a sample of 122 completed surveys was achieved, a response rate of 51%. The survey focused on the key questions outlined in the project overview and consisted of nine questions in total. Some questions were closed and others were open, so that students were able to comment on the reasons for their choices. During data collection, it was possible to group answers to open questions into categories. The data was then analysed by question in order to give an accurate representation of opinions.

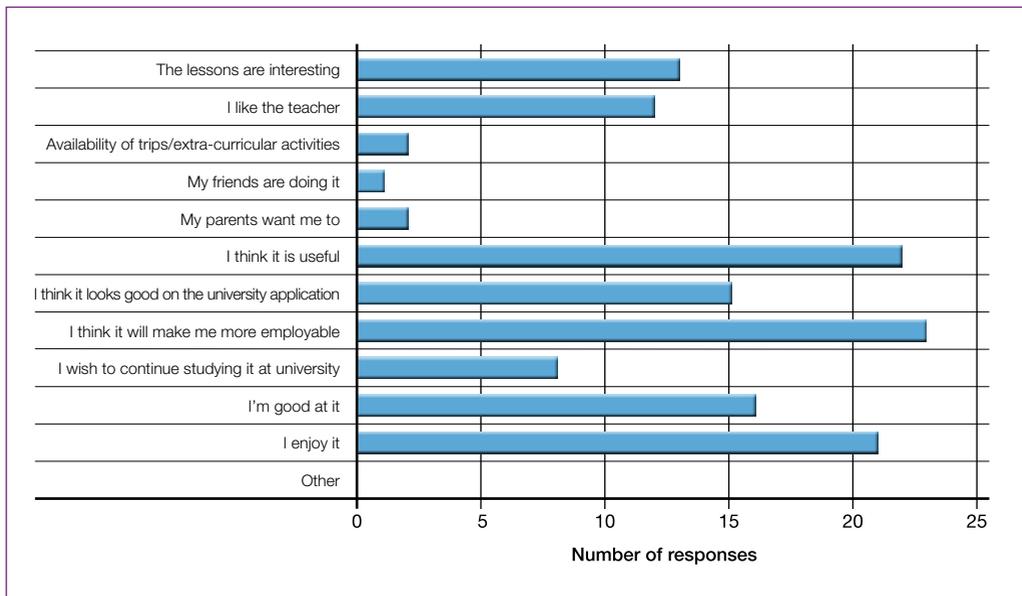
## 6.4 | Key findings

As expected, we found that two thirds of students (63%) did not plan to continue their study of a language into KS5. However, the survey indicates that 16% did plan to study a language in KS5, compared with only 7% in the current sixth form. In addition, 21% of respondents said that they did not know or had not yet decided whether they would continue studying a language in KS5.

As shown in Figure 6. 1, of those who did plan to continue to study Languages in KS5, the three most popular reasons given were:

- I think it will make me more employable
- I think it is useful
- I enjoy it.

Figure 6.1: What are the main factors in your choice to study a language at Key Stage 5?



Of those who did not plan to study languages in KS5, the two most common answers given were:

- It is difficult (*16 responses*)
- I do not think I will get the required entry grade (*16 responses*).

On this question, many students chose to specify another reason. These reasons could all be grouped into three categories:

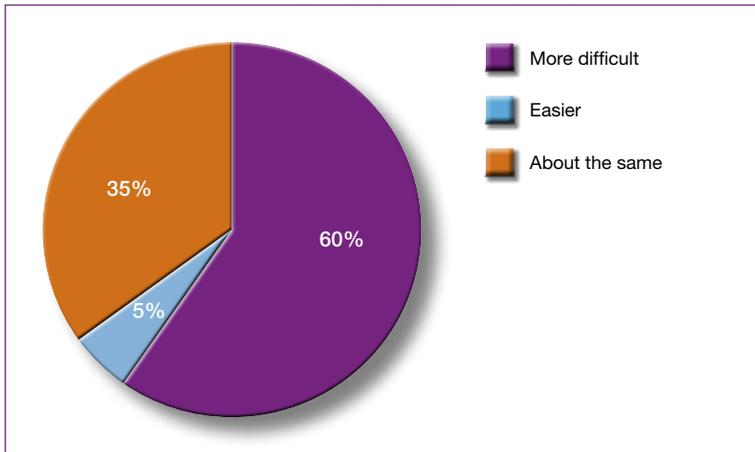
- Other subjects take priority
- Going on to a college where study of a language is unavailable
- Additional expressions of difficulty or dislike of the subject.

When asked which subjects they were planning to study at KS5, the most popular subject areas were Maths, English, Sciences, Psychology and History. It is worth noting that a range of 31 subject areas was given which shows the variety of options available to the students. The most common reasons specified for choosing these subjects were:

- enjoyment (*46 responses*)
- importance for future career (*38 responses*)
- interest (*20 responses*)
- usefulness for Higher Education (*17 responses*).

All of the pupils were asked about their perception of the difficulty of learning a language at KS5. As shown in Figure 6.2, 60% of respondents said that they thought that a language would be more difficult than other subjects at KS5.

Figure 6.2: How do you think study of a language at Key Stage 5 compares with other subjects?



Finally we asked the students for their opinions on what might encourage them to continue studying a language in KS5. The two most popular results were 'improving my CV' (18%) and 'earning more in the future due to having language skills' (15%).

## 6.5 | Conclusion

These results indicate that continued study of a language is not a priority for many of our students. There is clear evidence that many of them perceive languages to be a difficult option, both from their reasons for not continuing their study of a language and the explicit question about their perception of the difficulty level of languages. It is clear, however, that many of our students are planning to study 'facilitating subjects', as outlined in the Russell Group booklet *Informed Choices*. When looking at the reasons given for student options, the second most popular response was their usefulness for future career options. This suggests that while students clearly take the perceived difficulty of a subject into account when choosing their options, the perceived usefulness of the subject is more important to them.

## 6.6 | Reflections

This research has shown that the reasons behind the low uptake of languages in KS5 at Cardinal Wiseman are more complex and varied than expected. It is clear that students are looking for subjects that are going to be useful to them in the future, as well as subjects that they enjoy and that interest them.

A key finding from this research was that not all of the students at Cardinal Wiseman view further study of languages as useful or important for their future careers or study. The fact that students are opting for 'difficult' or 'facilitating' subjects such as maths and science shows that difficulty is not a barrier to choosing a subject, as long as there is a 'pay-off' at the end, in terms of better career or educational prospects. Additionally, the most common opinions on what might encourage students to continue studying a language were directly related to job opportunities. It is important that in the future the school makes students aware of the economic and educational benefits of studying a language to an advanced level.

Furthermore, when we take into account the reasons students give for choosing to continue certain subjects into KS5, and specifically the fact that the most common reason given was enjoyment, we must endeavour to ensure that students are engaged with and enjoy their language lessons at KS4.

Key targets, then, for improved uptake at KS5 must be to:

- 1) raise the profile of languages throughout the school, extolling the virtues of learning a language to an advanced level, with particular reference to the economic and educational benefits
- 2) ensure that school-based advice on careers and further education includes the benefits of learning another language in terms of the views of Higher Education institutions and employers
- 3) improve student engagement and enjoyment of KS4 language lessons, with a particular focus on how to avoid 'Controlled Assessment fatigue'.

It is promising that our students are not shying away from subjects because of their difficulty, and with a more focused recruitment campaign I am hopeful that we can increase the number of students opting for languages at KS5, and thereby improve their life chances.



## Towards a universal approach to grammar

Neil Hillman, Programme Leader, CfBT Languages Graduate Teacher Programme

### 7.1 | Overview

On the CfBT Languages Graduate Teacher Programme (GTP) we work with trainee teachers who are native speakers of languages other than English and who were all educated overseas. I was interested to find out whether their views about grammar reflects published research articles and what influences their approach. I was mindful of the fact that in the absence of any guidance, there might be a temptation to rely on techniques remembered from their own experiences as a learner. I decided to design a questionnaire to elicit their views. In order to obtain those of more experienced practitioners, I also surveyed the mentors who work alongside them, and a group of former trainees.

### 7.2 | Context

There has been an ongoing debate about the teaching of grammar in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), which began in the late 1960s when languages became a subject 'for all' rather than the elite. A review of research literature and articles shows that in reaction against the grammar-translation method, teachers became influenced by new approaches. This included the communicative approach, with a focus on communication rather than accuracy, which led to confusion amongst teachers about the place of grammar. This was exacerbated by the original publication of the National Curriculum in 1990 which made hardly any mention of grammar. Some saw the answer to be in teaching grammar as a separate entity, whilst others ignored grammar completely. A focus on the use of the target language (TL) seemed to steer teachers towards getting pupils to communicate and ignoring mistakes which would inhibit their confidence. The introduction of the National Literacy Strategy at the end of the 1980s and the recently revised Programme of Study for MFL have reinstated the importance of grammar and accuracy, but official guidance about the teaching of grammar is scarce.

## 7.3 | Methodology

I sought views about grammar from three groups of teachers associated with the CfBT Languages Graduate Teacher Programme. It is an employment-based route leading to Qualified Teacher Status. The programme is distinctive in that it trains only mother tongue speakers of French, German, Spanish, Italian and Mandarin Chinese to teach those languages in this country. It is a national programme with trainees based in partnership schools in all but one of the nine English regions.

I was delighted to receive a total of 62 responses to the questionnaire, split as outlined below.

I identified the three separate groups of respondents as follows:

**Group 1** is the group of GTP trainees who are native speakers of French, German, Italian, Mandarin Chinese or Spanish; I received 16 responses from this group.

**Group 2** is the GTP Alumni, native speakers of French, German or Spanish. Each has between one and eleven years' teaching experience. I received 30 responses.

**Group 3** is the GTP Mentor group. It consists of native and non-native speakers, each with at least three years' teaching experience and experience of mentoring trainee teachers. I received 16 responses.

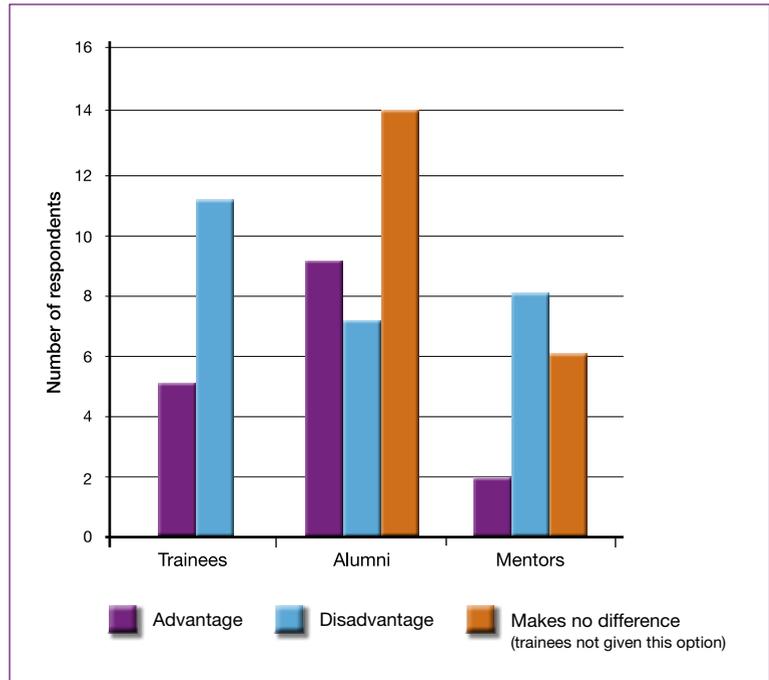
The proportion of responses from each language group reflects the linguistic balance of the current and previous cohorts.

Respondents included teachers from very contrasting demographic and school contexts, including selective and non-selective, single-sex and co-educational, specialist language colleges and academies, in rural, suburban and inner-city settings.

## 7.4 | Key findings

When asked whether being a native speaker of the language was an advantage when teaching grammar, more than half of trainees (Group 1) and mentors (Group 3) regarded it as a disadvantage (as shown in Figure 7.1). The main reasons cited for this were that a) they did not always know the rules themselves but had an instinctive ‘feel’; and b) that they did not anticipate the difficulties faced by English learners. Interestingly, almost half of the alumni responded that it was neither an advantage nor a disadvantage and many explained how they had sought guidance or tips from native English-speaking colleagues about which concepts presented pupils with difficulties and how to make them more accessible.

*Figure 7.1: Is being a native speaker an advantage or a disadvantage when teaching grammar?*



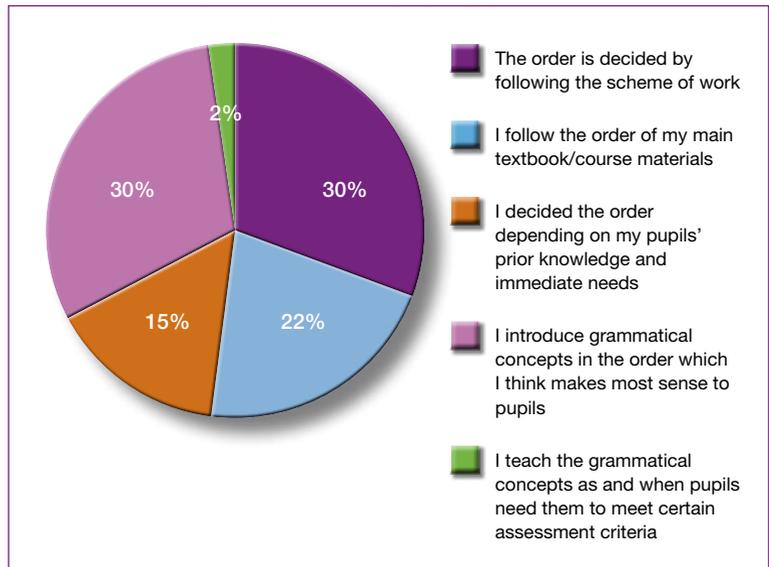
In response to the question about whether they taught grammar in the target language, around a third of the mentor group replied that they did, compared to more than half of trainees and of alumni, groups comprising only native speakers. This would seem to suggest that the native speakers are, in fact, more confident in this respect, as suggested by Meiring and Norman (2001)<sup>5</sup>.

I was interested to find out whether teachers make a conscious decision about which grammar points to teach and how the order of their introduction is decided. If MFL classrooms are truly communicative, pupils' grammar needs will develop organically, so how do teachers address this need in their planning? The trainees were at an early stage of their training so they were not asked this question. The combined responses of the Alumni and Mentor groups revealed that almost all of them work in departments which have no policy concerning the methodology of teaching grammar. Although almost a quarter replied that they teach grammar according to the order and content of the textbook, slightly more (around a third) responded that they introduce grammatical concepts in the order suggested by their scheme of work and a similar proportion introduce them in an order which they believe makes most sense to their pupils (see Figure 7.2). Few plan according to their pupils' prior knowledge and immediate needs or introduce concepts when pupils need them for forthcoming assessments. Although schemes of work vary between institutions, they are generally designed collaboratively by teachers and should be tailored to the needs of particular groups, if not individual pupils, by their users. Allowing for this assumption, the overall result shows that many of the teachers surveyed are able to be independent in their judgement of what grammar is necessary and in what order to teach it, as advocated by Pachler et al. (2009)<sup>6</sup>. For the minority, there is evidence to indicate that a more selective and critical use of textbooks is required.

<sup>5</sup> Meiring, L. and Norman, N. (2001) Grammar in MFL teaching revisited, *The language learning journal*, 23:1, 58-66.

<sup>6</sup> Pachler, N., Barnes, A. and Field, K. (2009) *Learning to teach modern foreign languages in the secondary school*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Figure 7.2: How is the order in which you introduce new grammatical concepts in your lessons decided? (Alumni and Mentors only)



However it is decided or taught, grammar is considered to be important by both the mentors and alumni (groups 2 and 3). Just over half (53%) estimate that they spend an average of a third of the lesson time teaching grammar at KS3; this rises to 65% at KS4. It is interesting to note, though, that many of the alumni had received training in teaching grammar during the past five years, which for many included their initial training, but none of the mentor group had. It would appear, then, that there exists a cohort of experienced practitioners, who are also school-based trainers and in many cases subject leaders, but who have not had a formal opportunity to reflect upon, share, discuss and learn techniques and strategies for improving the teaching and learning of grammar.

The majority of all three groups surveyed responded that they enjoyed teaching grammar and three quarters reported that their pupils enjoyed learning it. Many gave examples of innovative and creative ways in which they introduced and practised grammar points, for example using mnemonics, team games, competitions, challenges, different media, ICT and kinaesthetic activities. One alumnus gave the following example:

*'Students become very creative in designing their own games to reinforce grammatical structures. They teach each other and most of them like to spot grammatical differences.'*

Amongst responses to an open question inviting any other comments, one trainee commented:

*'I like teaching grammar in my challenging class because I can try several methods and judge which ones are the best for low-level students as well as for the most able. Also, teaching grammar is an opportunity for the most able students to help the less able ones.'*

One experienced mentor justified her approach to 'fun' grammar lessons by saying:

*'It definitely works, I have found, to make students act as "language detectives" trying to piece together clues about a sentence, to work out the rules of that particular tense, agreements, etc. Let them discover the grammar for themselves, the teacher simply guides them correctly when they start to go wrong!'*

Another wrote: *'They begin to see grammar as a living thing, not a set of rules to follow.'*

## 7.5 | Reflection

One thing that the majority of survey participants and authors agree on is the need for a consistent approach, whichever is favoured or adopted. According to the results of my survey, there is clearly a willingness amongst practitioners to develop their TL teaching of grammar, even amongst those who already do so. The survey responses indicate that teaching grammar in a creative and enjoyable way has maintained motivation and none of the respondents indicated that pupils became disengaged when being taught grammar. Anecdotal evidence suggests that newer teachers often feel the need to divert from the TL to explain a particular construction or function in English, as they see this as a way of maintaining motivation and re-establishing good behaviour. *'They just switch off when I'm explaining it in French'* is a typical comment. The teacher's use of English should not be considered as a behaviour management tool in response to poor behaviour or, in this case, lack of understanding of a grammar point, which lessens pupils' self-esteem. The key here, we would argue, lies in established routines and effective planning. The switch to English should be a deliberate (i.e. planned) act and, ideally, negotiated with or signalled to the class, for example: *'Est-ce que je peux parler en Anglais un moment?'* ('Can I speak in English for a moment?')

The survey also revealed two other key features of TL grammar teaching: the use of gesture, mime and body language; and reliance on cognates. Both of these strategies are effective and, it could be argued, the former contributes to the 'fun' aspect of grammar and the latter to the development of pupils' thinking skills. I would argue that these become most effective if combined and used with other techniques, bearing in mind that for some pupils English is not their first language and they cannot always make the cognate connection.

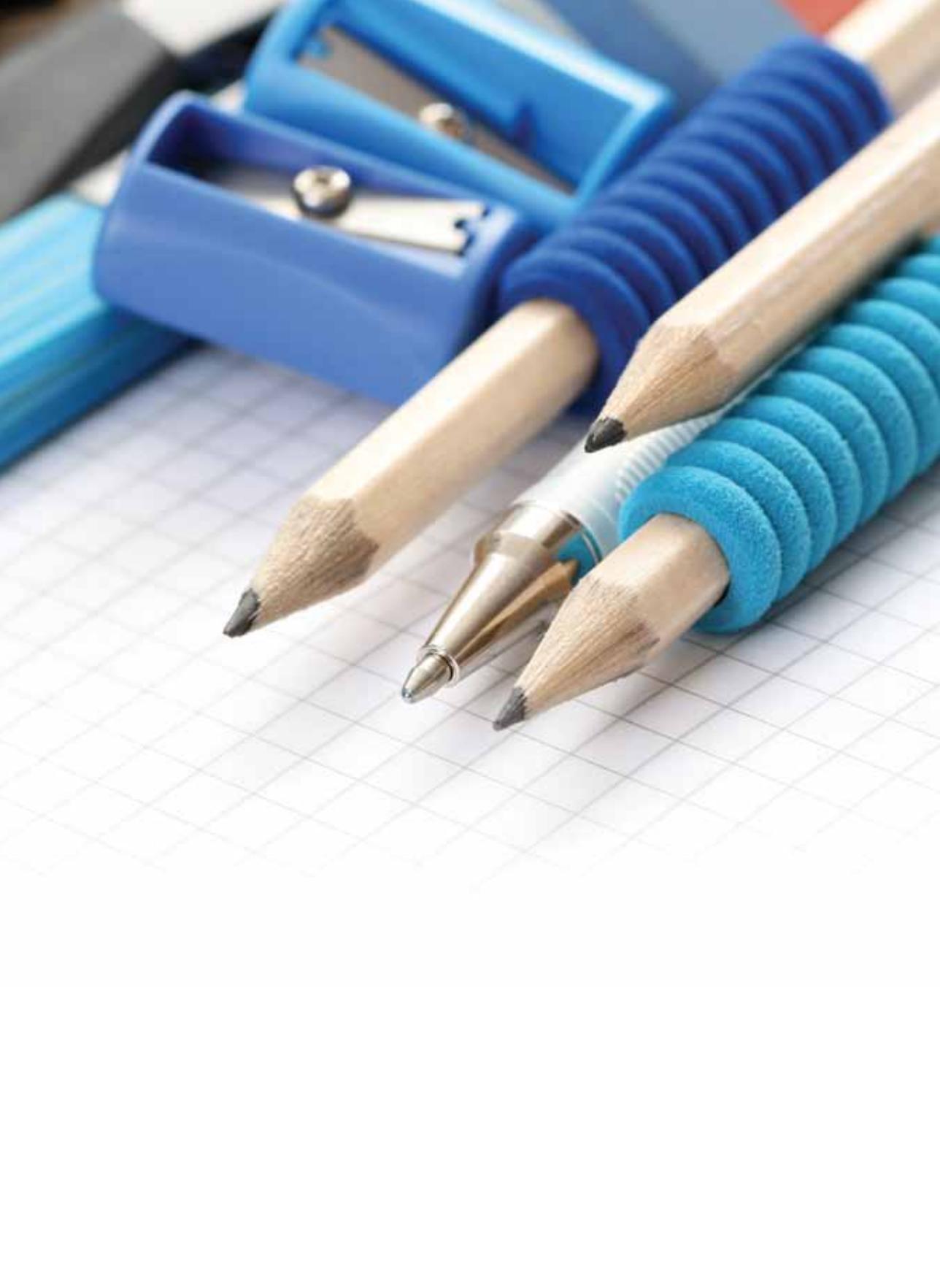
In all three groups, participants felt that a combination of approaches is required to teach grammar. It is heartening to see that both beginning and experienced teachers are experimenting, taking risks and reflecting on their own practice. It could be argued that in the absence of funded collegiate training sessions, self-evaluation and reflection have become a critical part of continuing professional development.

We would also suggest there is a need for teachers to engage with the theories surrounding language learning strategies and to become involved in wider professional dialogue. Practitioner research would provide a platform for researchers and practitioners to discuss, experiment with and evaluate the effectiveness of successful strategies and could lead to a wider dissemination of effective pedagogy and greater confidence amongst teachers. Lamb and Simpson (2003)<sup>7</sup> highlight that: *'Teachers have to be allowed to rediscover the joy of learning so that they can enthuse the learners of tomorrow.'* (p.62). They go on to add, importantly, that if we are to encourage teachers to become autonomous learners, they must be allowed to explore issues outside of national policy trends or remits.

What emerges is that there needs to be a clear policy about grammar pedagogy and that we need to find ways to allow teachers to participate in discussions around what this pedagogy might look like and to be involved in embedding it into language classrooms.

This evidence suggests we should exploit and develop the talents and enthusiasm of the current and future generations of MFL teachers, whilst responding to their academic needs and aspirations. Practitioner research into grammar could do much to secure a successful universal approach.

<sup>7</sup> Lamb, T. and Simpson, M. (2003) Escaping from the treadmill: practitioner research and professional autonomy, *The language learning journal*, 28:1, 55-63.









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