

EPILOGUE

This research set out to explore the experience of learning a second language for secondary pupils in Scotland who have a communication disorder of the high-functioning autistic type. Many of these individuals have been diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome, whose prevalence may now be around six per thousand (depending on criteria used), and of whom 12 percent also may have dyslexic difficulties, according to the survey in this research.

The survey produced data on around sixty-six pupils with a communication disorder who were receiving support in accessing the curriculum through learning support departments, resourced bases or autism specific units attached to secondary schools. The majority were having MFL lessons in a mainstream class, with or without support. Some had their lessons in CDU.

From the questionnaires returned to me by the teachers in these bases, and from my observations in the MCDU, it appears that there are barriers to MFL learning specific to this group, although individuals vary within this broad generalisation. If unsupported in mainstream MFL classes the autistic impairments in social interaction and communication could have a certain effect on their learning, but should not be enough to disable the pupil in this subject, as their concrete language skills tend to be at least average. The inflexibility, need for routine and difficulty with transitions common to many on the autistic spectrum potentially could be the cause of significant barriers but can be overcome by the aware teacher following certain strategies, which should allow success. Many pupils have problems with self-organisation, but a sympathetic support or class teacher (or a fellow pupil) could offer the small amount of assistance required to see them through this. Some will have a hypersensitivity to sensory input, which may require an understanding approach. A few will display inappropriate behaviour which may be difficult to manage in a big class, and could be managed by moving the pupil to an individual work station or withdrawing temporarily, preferably to a quiet room where they feel secure until their equilibrium is restored. Most of the group currently in or attached

to mainstream schools are of average (or higher) cognitive ability, although this may change as a wider range of pupils, acting with their parents, claim their entitlement to an inclusive mainstream education.

A proportion of the pupil group researched had additional dyslexic difficulties (one seventh) which superficially may appear to be within the group of disorders of communication where autism lies. This study suggests that these are very different impairments, the strengths and deficits being almost complementary to each other. The small number who seem genuinely to be autistic and dyslexic are more affected by the dyslexia when learning the MFL. Multi-sensory techniques to help dyslexic pupils in learning the MFL are therefore highly relevant for this joint group.

This research study has brought me through what seems like quite a long voyage and my findings from my ports of call along the way have yielded interesting discoveries, surprises and disappointments and some new personal contacts. There have been periods where the study seemed becalmed, but as inspiration returned, I embarked on a new tack, and the way forward became apparent. I feel that I have now finally managed to steer a course home and to arrive somewhat the wiser at my homeport.

I have become increasingly interested in the subject as I have progressed and can now see that more research needs to be done to fill the gaps I have left, particularly with regard to finding out the views of mainstream MFL teachers who are often working with high-functioning autistic or Asperger pupils with little (or sometimes no) support. I know now that it is hard to get information about teachers and pupils in that situation and hope any who read this and with whom I have not had any contact would e-mail me with their experiences. I realise the shortcomings of this research in that it refers to only some of this group (about 66 pupils). It also raises as many questions as it may answer, most particularly regarding the undiagnosed or unsupported ASD pupils. However, it has made me stop and consider the different circumstances under which our MCDU pupils would have learned a MFL if they had lived in another area. The fact that some barriers suggested for similar pupils elsewhere are simply not applicable in MCDU, suggests that it may be a beneficial

environment for our pupils to learn in. The barriers some of our pupils face in accessing the curriculum may on the face of it be less incapacitating than those some others face, yet the social problems ours face daily are just as overwhelming for them as steps may be for a wheelchair user.

This research study has increased my determination to continue to raise awareness of this group who in some ways appear to be invisible, and to plead the case for them to be acknowledged as a group with distinct impairments and strengths. Reading Schneider (1999) recently, I have been struck by his pride in being different (after diagnosis in his 60's) and his empathy with the view expressed in Isaiah 55 v.8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts nor are your ways my ways".

A practical end-result of this research has been to produce a grid of the learner characteristics of communication disordered pupils in this group, plus the effect which this may have on their learning and some suggested strategies to help them achieve their potential in this subject. This grid parallels the one for dyslexic pupils compiled by Crombie and McColl in 2000. The research showed that many are being taught in large mainstream classes and this guidance on handling pupils in this group may be useful to teachers with little experience of their impairments and the behaviour they can produce. A chance meeting with a MFL principal teacher in a secondary school in another area, with high-functioning autistic pupils of this kind, but no extra resources to help them cope, confirmed my fears that the sixty-six youngsters identified in this survey are the tip of the iceberg. There are almost certainly many, many more in our Scottish schools, and some will be undiagnosed as yet.

Although the grid I have compiled details a number of autistic learner characteristics which may give rise to barriers, the overall conclusion of this research project must be that communication disordered pupils of this type can learn, and can greatly benefit from learning, a foreign language. As one might expect, perhaps, the highest level of achievement will be found in those who are the most cognitively able, biddable and non-dyslexic. This pupil can draw on his strength in memorising facts

and vocabulary, and his unselfconsciousness in speaking the target language. He will benefit from the social skills practice intrinsic in this subject, from widening his knowledge of other peoples and cultures and from the academic challenge of assimilating a foreign language. There will be some pupils who for a variety of reasons are better suited to assessment at Access 2/3 rather than Standard Grade and beyond. Whatever level they achieve, it would appear from this study that it will be regarded as having been a worthwhile experience for them and an appropriate use of this time in school.

The research study concludes with a plea that this group of high-functioning autistic pupils should be regarded as a group in their own right, particularly in view of the fact that their numbers in Scottish schools may well be increasing. They should not be lumped together with any other group who have impairments of a dyslexic nature, or otherwise, when accessing the curriculum. One must especially beware of disabling them, as any other, by labels. There can be a danger that an attitude flourishes of regarding any pupil with a Record of Needs as a self-contained issue, where one should not rock the boat and over extend or stimulate them. The opportunity to fully access the curriculum, which includes an entitlement to an MFL, is not only a statutory right, but also right for all this communication disordered group. In the volatile world that is the twenty first century, these pupils as much as any others need to be encouraged to look beyond the boundaries of this country and to become increasingly aware of the language and culture, which are inextricably linked, of other countries. It is our duty as teachers and educators of the young to enable not disable such young people, and to make sure they receive their rightful entitlement to the modern foreign language in Scotland' s classrooms.

POST-SCRIPT

The last word in this research paper should perhaps be given to an (informal) evaluation of some of my research findings, relating to the grid of barriers identified for CD pupils in the MFL and some possible strategies for tackling them. This has been returned to me shortly before submission from a P.T. (mentioned on p. 76) who has a pupil with Asperger syndrome in her MFL department, but has no learning support assistant or extra resources. At our previously mentioned chance meeting, it was apparent she and the boy's MFL teacher were finding it difficult to meet his needs and finding him challenging in class. She was very willing to receive and evaluate the grid (see Epilogue) and her feedback concludes this paper.

E-mail received from:

C. McK. (MFL Principal teacher).

Re: Learner Characteristics and Strategies

Date: 12 February 2002

"I find your chart very interesting and the comments do reflect real classroom experience.

In real classroom life – I have 30 pupils and the teaching/learning strategies are difficult to apply. I have tried suggestions such as keep pupil near front, promised a motivator (this worked), set time deadlines for completion (very successful).

Additional support is in the dream world in an average comprehensive school modern languages department. ICT is not yet possible – one computer per room and not really used by pupils yet.

Ideal document for discussion with new colleague/student teacher or LS if relevant.

Gives a focus for teacher who is unsure of how to deal with such a case.

So, all in all very helpful and I hope to use it in a departmental in-service discussion session. Topic will be how to best serve these youngsters and how to consider various strategies.

Hope these comments are useful – they are tried and tested in the classroom!"