

## Adapting MFL in the curriculum to meet the needs of deaf students (Why? and How?)

Before considering **how** to adapt the MFL curriculum to meet the needs of deaf youngsters we first have to consider **why**. How many of you, I wonder, have supported youngsters who have been excluded from modern foreign language classes? Perhaps you have even suggested that this should be done? How many parents of deaf children do you know of who have willingly supported such a move? How many schools? I doubt if there are any statistics that can answer those questions authoritatively, but anecdotal evidence suggests the situation is by no means unusual.

Some of the arguments in favour of disapplication are quite persuasive:

‘She has difficulty enough with English; why burden her with another language she’ll never need?’

‘He needs the time to do more important things, like improving literacy and numeracy.’

‘Where else are we going to find the time for the extra tuition he/she needs?’

‘Where are we going to find a ToD who knows the language and can support her?’

‘He’s already learning two languages – English and BSL.’

The questions surrounding disapplication become more urgent now, as MFL develops nationally into an entitlement for all pupils in primary schools. It will no longer be a problem that can be put off until the youngster goes on to secondary school. What advice are we going to give head teachers and parents at this early stage? The extension of the DDA to cover education, and access to the curriculum in particular, also makes it likely that such questions will become more searching.

So, **why** should deaf youngsters ‘do languages’? Here are some points to consider:

- The assumption that ‘deaf students can’t learn foreign languages’ is a false one. Like other groups, abilities vary. Some deaf students do very well (see SQA results).
- The only way we can find out which deaf students will succeed with MFL is to let them all try and see how well they cope. They can always be withdrawn later, but to deny them the opportunity to start their studies along with the rest is to close a door which may never again be opened for them.
- Deaf pupils/students themselves don’t like being different from their peers. Why should they be the only ones not to study a foreign language? Yet, often, they are not asked; or they are persuaded – and may well believe – that withdrawal is best for them. Later in life they may realise that this was a missed opportunity. Deaf adults that I and my colleagues have spoken to sometimes resent the fact that this decision was made for them before they had a chance to discover for themselves whether or not the effort could have been worthwhile.
- Growth in literacy is dependent on growth in language awareness. No one language has a monopoly here; all languages contribute. It is well attested, by teachers and pupils alike, that it was only when grammar and syntax are formally explained in the foreign language class, and especially when compared with English, that ‘the penny dropped’. English, as well as the foreign language, therefore, benefits from that improved understanding.

(cf. Angela Brown at <<http://www.ssc.education.ed.ac.uk/courses/deaf/dnov05b.html>>)

- The benefits of MFL are deemed to include, along with competence in the language, students' initiation into other personally important competencies and dispositions. MFL is seen as the gateway to: cultural and intercultural awareness; understanding and acceptance of cultural differences; reduction of the tendency to stereotype; European and global citizenship ...; the list is endless. By denying access to MFL, we may be denying all these other benefits too. Can we be sure that other parts of the curriculum will supply the deficiency? (cf. McColl *Support for Learning Journal* Vol. 20/3 2005).

As most deaf youngsters are now educated in mainstream schools, the second big question for MFL teachers and the ToDs who support in their classes is **how** to make the experience rewarding and successful for those deaf students who embark on such study along with their hearing peers. Everything depends, of course, on MFL teachers and ToDs being willing and able to make the necessary adjustments.

There being little literature on this subject, two colleagues and myself set out to provide some. We consulted teachers, ToDs and deaf students themselves, as well as our own combined experience of teaching and supporting in MFL classes. The result was published as *Deaf and Multilingual: A practical guide to teaching and supporting deaf learners in foreign language classes* (Mole, McColl & Vale, 2006. Details below). We hoped that it would be useful not only to ToDs supporting for the first time in MFL classes, but also to MFL teachers facing deaf students for the first time. The decision to include both perspectives in the one volume arose from our conviction that it is only when professional educators with different and complementary skills understand and respect each others' work that they can work well together, and only when they work well together that students become truly empowered.

There is space here only to give a few of the principles that are covered in the book:

Deaf students respond well to lessons and courses that are clearly structured, well explained and well supported by textual and other visual material.

Oral language, of its nature, is fleeting, so any measures that aim to 'capture' the oral language and make it visible is helpful for deaf students. Ways of doing this will vary according to the age and stage of the learners, but, broadly speaking, this has implications for:

**Whole class work** – e.g. always facing the deaf learner, speaking clearly, and making lip-reading as easy as possible; making sure the deaf learner is 'following'; pointing to members of the class who are responding.

**Group work** – often difficult for deaf learners, but regular group members can be trained in deaf awareness and this can make an enormous difference ( – aspects of Citizenship here, too?)

**Board work** – e.g. writing up instructions, and the main points of the lesson, clearly and legibly.

**Graphic representations** – e.g. providing explanatory grids and diagrams, or pictorial posters and help sheets which can be consulted before, during and after the lesson.

**Course notes** – e.g. letting the deaf learner and support worker know in advance what will be covered during each lesson; providing previews in the form of course notes, tape/video scripts, vocabulary lists.

**Language learning technology** – e.g. using subtitled/captioned videos/CDs/DVDs whenever possible. Audiotapes may be of use to some learners if tapescripts can be provided and if the sound quality is very good. Other language learning technology can be very helpful, especially when it is multi-sensory. What is available and how access can be maximised is one of the areas for discussion between professionals.

**Communication support** – e.g. sign support, note taking, acoustic improvements, additional 1-1 tutorials.

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