



Scottish Centre for Information on  
Language Teaching and Research

*DRAFT 1: January 2010*

## POINTS FOR REFLECTION

summarising:

# MAXIMISING POTENTIAL

A RESOURCE TO SUPPORT INCLUSION  
IN MODERN LANGUAGES

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/maximisingpotential/>



## POINTS FOR REFLECTION

This booklet consists of all the Points for Reflection drawn from the Maximising Potential programme published on the Modern Foreign Languages Environment (MFLE) website by Learning and Teaching Scotland and Scottish CILT in August 2007. Full details of the programme and the associated task sheets can be found here: <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/maximisingpotential>

The booklet is designed:

- as a summary for Modern Language Department Leaders who are considering using the full Maximising Potential programme in collaboration with colleagues;
- as a 'reader' for use with teachers participating in the programme;
- as a resource for reflective practitioners who are reviewing their own work in modern language teaching in the context of inclusion.

In the online programme, each Point for Reflection is followed by practical tasks designed to facilitate a programme of professional and curriculum development.

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# TAKING ACCOUNT OF THE NEEDS OF INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS

## Introduction to Units 1 & 2

Adapting and managing programmes of work so that they better meet the needs of learners can be approached from a number of different angles. The Maximising Potential development programme begins by considering individual pupils who are struggling to learn and who are at risk of failing unless we can find a way to better meet their learning needs.

These pupils may have cognitive, behavioural or physical characteristics which prevent them learning, or they may be disaffected and lack motivation to achieve their potential despite being able or even gifted pupils.

By identifying and removing or reducing barriers which are preventing them from learning, we can help pupils to become more successful learners; as a result, their confidence and motivation improve, and often their behaviour as well.

Individual needs are considered first, for the following reasons:

- The ability to identify barriers to learning correctly is the first step towards developing effective measures to reduce or eliminate them. Without this awareness and the ability to identify individual needs with some precision, any attempt at differentiation is likely to be a hit-or-miss affair.
- Individual barriers are often easier to identify than whole-class ones.
- If the learning needs of individual learners are ignored, the success of any whole-class development is likely to be compromised by pupils who are unable to cope with what is expected of them.
- The strategies developed to assist individual learners in difficulty often prove to be helpful to other learners as well, so the whole class benefits anyway.

The first two units, therefore, concentrate on identifying and responding to individual needs:

**Unit 1** focuses on learners at risk. It suggests a starting point for identifying barriers that may be hindering learning for individual members of your target group.

**Unit 2** focuses on teaching. It proposes a co-operative framework for devising strategies to reduce or eliminate those barriers.

## Points for reflection: Unit 1

### WHY AREN'T THEY LEARNING?

Some pupils are learning Modern Languages happily and successfully, while others of similar ability are struggling or have become alienated. Why?

One of the characteristics of classes where learners are having fewest difficulties is the way teachers plan differentiation, or, more exactly, what they consider as the starting point for planning.

When planning differentiation, we can ask ourselves two questions:

1. Why are some pupils not learning better than they do, despite my best efforts?
2. How can I help them to learn better?

We often start with Question 2, but this may allow some basic problems to go unrecognised, and these will interfere with any measures we adopt in response to Question 2.

We really need to start with Question 1: Why aren't they learning now? What's stopping them?

#### What are 'barriers to learning'?

Some of the difficulties facing learners arise not because they can't learn what we want them to learn, but because they can't learn it in the way we want them to learn it. Sometimes we unconsciously erect barriers which make language learning seem more difficult than it needs to be.

Often, we modern language teachers do not recognise these barriers. The trouble is, if we are not aware of the barriers we can't do anything about them, we just assume that it is the language that is too difficult for them. Yet this is rarely the case. At least in the early stages, the target language and the concepts that make up our programmes of work are not too difficult for most learners. So what is the problem?

#### Some common barriers

Support for Learning staff working on earlier projects identified some of the more common difficulties encountered by pupils in modern languages classrooms. They rated the barriers in order of importance as regards the need to deal with them. Here they are then, in order of importance.

Many pupils find these activities very difficult:

- copying accurately and/or legibly from the board
- following instructions, spoken or written

- keeping an accurate record of vocabulary, etc
- keeping up with the pace required
- concentrating for the necessary length of time.

Support staff also listed as significant barriers to learning:

- poor relationship with the teacher
- low self-esteem ('This is too hard for me. I can't do this. No point in trying.')

### **Isn't the language just too hard?**

Modern language teachers are well aware of the situations described above, but sometimes they assume that these difficulties arise because the language being too demanding for the pupils concerned; that the language itself causes the difficulties.

What the authors of Maximising Potential have discovered, through their work with schools, is that cause and effect are the other way round. By putting in place measures to help pupils with the barriers identified, their ability to cope with the target language improves. Sometimes their use of English improves too.

### **How can we identify barriers we can't see?**

Barriers like those listed above may be invisible to modern language teachers, but the effects they create and the behaviours that result are often very plain to see. When learners are experiencing difficulty with the work that has been set in the Modern Languages classroom, the signs are usually quite obvious. Most language teachers say they recognise only too well the behaviours listed below:

#### **In listening work, pupils:**

- keep losing the place on the tape
- are unsure what they have to do
- say they can't understand what is being said
- fail to complete answer sheets, guess, or get most answers wrong, etc.

#### **In oral work, pupils:**

- rarely volunteer an answer
- when you insist, can't answer or give a wrong answer
- answer yes or no, but can go no further
- appear not to have understood the question
- participate reluctantly in pair work
- may use English instead of the target language
- can't remember any of the needed words or phrases, etc.

#### **In written work, pupils:**

- fail to complete the work
- produce work that is illegible
- misspell a high proportion of words

### **In general pupils:**

- are unable to follow directions
- behave aggressively
- are reluctant to co-operate
- express indifference
- offer passive resistance
- are easily distracted, restless
- try to distract others, etc.

### **Interpreting unwanted behaviour**

Sometimes learners prefer to take avoidance strategies rather than admit to what they see as their failure. Teachers need to recognise the fact that these strategies, particularly ones which manifest themselves as misbehaviour, often mask pupils' underlying difficulties. It is important to recognise that behaviours such as reluctance to learn, inattention, and lack of co-operation often signal the existence of low self-esteem arising from curricular barriers which could be reduced or even eliminated.

Whilst most modern language recognise these behaviours, they don't always realise that that these behaviours can be the result rather than the cause of difficulties that pupils experience. We tend to say things like: 'If they would only concentrate... If they would only try harder...; If they would only pay attention... then they would do better.'

### **Tackling the barriers**

So we have to dig deeper. Why are they behaving like this? If it's not the language itself, it may be the way we are teaching it. If you are seeing a lot of this behaviour, then it's worth considering this possibility.

In all the cases the authors have observed or heard about, when curriculum development along these lines has been tackled, learning behaviour has improved, and for many pupils, that means behaviour *per se* has improved.

### **Implications**

Tackling barriers doesn't solve all the behaviour problems, of course; many pupils will still struggle with physical, emotional, social and other conditions that affect motivation to learn. The best that modern language teachers can do for pupils is to ensure that the curricular barriers, at least, are minimised. This can have a marked effect on motivation and attention to learning. Failure to address curricular issues leaves the root cause of some difficulties unchanged. This can cause a downward spiral of depressed self-esteem, poor motivation and low attainment. Repeated failure to succeed inevitably results in disaffection and reluctance to learn.

## **Benefits**

When we can identify the true barriers, we can devise strategies for minimising them or removing them altogether. Then more effective learning can take place.

The striking thing about these barriers is that they often seem to have little or nothing to do with language learning *per se*, but everything to do with the mechanics of the classroom. Could it be that some pupils do not, in fact have overwhelming difficulties with the language, but only with the difficulty teachers have in recognising what is hindering their pupils from learning as well as they might? The schools we have worked with show that this may well be the case; that the answer may lie in modifying the approaches teachers use, rather than in changing the level of language on offer.

## **How support staff can help**

Support staff are often adept at identifying potential barriers and can provide a valuable service to modern language departments. They can provide a realistic starting point for planning differentiated strategies which can quickly improve learning, not only of pupils who were obviously struggling, but for many others, too. Departments which work well with support staff to remove unnecessary barriers report improvements in behaviour and motivation that eventually lead to improvements in attainment.

*NOTE: The online Maximising Potential programme includes a PowerPoint presentation of the main points of this section, in graphic form.*

## Points for reflection: Unit 2

### RESPONDING TO INDIVIDUAL LEARNING NEEDS

The information stored in the accompanying grid (*see Appendix*) was developed by dyslexia specialist Margaret Crombie and modern language specialist Hilary McColl in the course of working together to produce advice on modern language learning requested by the British Dyslexia Association.

The grid serves as an example of a problem solving approach to meeting the needs of learners who experience difficulties in foreign language learning. It is intended as a reference sheet in its own right, and as an introduction to Task 2 in the Maximising Potential programme. The task uses a similar approach to plan effective ways of responding to the needs of other pupils or groups of pupils who are experiencing difficulties.

#### **The first column:**

Start by looking at the first column in the dyslexia grid. It contains descriptions characteristic of dyslexic learners in general. A single dyslexic learner is unlikely to experience all of these characteristics, and not all of them to the same degree, but it is important to remember that learners who experience these difficulties do not choose to do so; these are the conditions under which they work, and these provide us with a fixed starting point. The dyslexia specialist provided the bulk of the information in the first column. Note that these are examples of the most commonly experienced characteristics; more details could have been included, for example: individual learners' strengths and interests.

#### **The second column:**

The second column examines the effect each of these difficulties will have on language learning for this group of learners. The modern language specialist may be aware that certain learners are struggling with these aspects of language learning, but may not be aware of the true cause of the difficulty; learners may be seen as lazy or uncooperative, for example. Assistance from the Support for Learning department can help to identify learners who are known to be dyslexic, though there may be others in the class who are mildly dyslexic but who have not been identified. Measures put in place to help dyslexic learners should help them too.

#### **The third column:**

The third column suggests measures which the language specialist can incorporate into classroom practice that will help dyslexic learners and others. It is always best, if possible, to develop teaching and learning approaches that will also benefit the rest of the class, and that are sustainable beyond the lifetime of project. Staffing and time are valuable resources, but scarce.



### **The fourth column:**

Despite all that Modern Language teachers can do, however, some additional help may be needed in order to allow them to carry out plans detailed in the third column. These additional support needs go into the fourth column. They can include:

- support for the Modern Language teacher (for example, to create a set of help sheets for the class, or ICT training in some application that SfL recommend as likely to be helpful)
- support for a learner or group of learners to bring them up to speed on a particular skill (for example, dictionary skills or working with others)
- an additional measure agreed with the learner(s) (for example, spending extra time working at home)
- arrangements agreed with the school timetabler ( for example, to allow teachers to work co-operatively, or to facilitate access to the ICT suite).

Use this illustration as a model when you move on to Task 2 of the online programme, but be flexible. None of the examples in this grid will exactly parallel your own situation. The grid that you produce will be a unique document designed to respond to the needs of the specific pupils you have targeted.

Remember that gifted and talented learners can have additional support needs too, and these can be identified and planned for in the same way.



## REVIEWING CURRENT PRACTICE

### Introduction to Units 3 & 4

How can we possibly cater for all the individual needs identified in Units 1 & 2? To teach up to 30 individual lessons is not humanly possible. Fortunately there are many needs which are shared by all learners. By being aware of these, and by developing approaches that take these into account, we can provide a learning environment that meets a broader spectrum of needs, leaving fewer needs to be catered for individually.

In the next two units, therefore:

**Unit 3** focuses on the pupils and on understanding the needs that all learners share.

**Unit 4** focuses on teaching. It proposes a framework for auditing current practice in teaching a unit of work. The audit is designed to allow individual teachers to identify what they already do well and to prioritise areas that might benefit from further reflection. The framework takes account of current policies such as A Curriculum for Excellence and Assessment is for Learning.

### Retrospective and proactive responses

The planning process proposed in Units 1 & 2 is **retrospective**; that is, it helps teachers to respond effectively to specific individual difficulties once they have arisen and have been identified. Ideally, however, inclusive teaching means being **proactive**; developing approaches which minimise the chances of problems developing in the first place. As teachers develop approaches that are sufficiently broad and flexible to anticipate a wider range of learning needs, the need for special measures for individual pupils decreases. Units 3 & 4 are, therefore, designed to be **proactive**.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that although the developments suggested in Units 3 & 4 attempt to be proactive by focusing on the needs of **all** learners, retrospective responses will still sometimes be needed. Teachers still need to watch out for individual needs that may arise as a result of new steps being taken (e.g. a learner who finds it difficult to work in groups; a gifted learner who is used to being spoon fed, etc.) Developing teaching capacities that can apply BOTH of these approaches ensures that learners of all abilities have the best chance possible of becoming successful and enthusiastic language learners.

## Points for reflection: Unit 3

### KEY NEEDS OF ALL LEARNERS

Mary Simpson and Jenny Ure, in their study of differentiation in Scottish secondary schools some years ago concluded that there is no one strategy which is in itself more effective than any other

#### The key to success

The key to success, they found, is the extent to which the strategies used enable teachers to be responsive to the needs of individual learners. If teachers do not respond to individual needs, or are unsure how to create the conditions which allow them to do so, no strategy will be very effective. If teachers acknowledge the needs and find ways of meeting them that they and their pupils are comfortable with, success is likely to follow. The wider the range of strategies teachers can employ, the more likely they are to be able to meet the needs of a wide range of learners.

Simpson and Ure point out that all pupils share certain learning needs. Their list of key requirements for successful learning, reproduced below, apply to all learners. Note how well these chime with the four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence and with the approaches associated with the Assessment is for Learning programme.

#### Learners have shared needs associated with the following:

**the curriculum** - the need to be given appropriate levels of work; to know about what is to be learned; to be set realistic, short term targets; to have support in the acquisition of component or pre-requisite skills; etc.

**cognition** - the need to have explanations which are comprehensible; to have misunderstandings and misconceptions identified and rectified; to be given 'conceptual scaffolding' which will enable the organisation of detail or the elaboration of abstract concepts; to have available such strategies as concept-mapping, to assist in the development of understanding; etc.

**the management of learning** - the need to have support in the self-pacing or management of work; to be assisted in understanding how to work profitably in groups or teams; to be able to identify strategies for problem-solving/tackling exam questions/taking notes/highlighting key points/revising etc; to develop a strategy for asking for assistance with problems; etc.

**motivational factors** - the need to be motivated to learn; to expect success and progression in learning; to be confident; to expect problems to be capable of resolution; to have high but attainable goals; to recognise purpose in the learning process; to value the skills and knowledge acquired in school and to have an expectancy that these are a springboard for future learning; etc.

**personal factors** - the need to have idiosyncratic personal issues taken note of, eg times of crisis or stress; to have personal circumstances taken into account, eg lack of facilities for doing homework, lack of parental support or encouragement; to have assistance with improving personal and interpersonal skills; low self-esteem etc; to have help in dealing with peer group pressure etc.

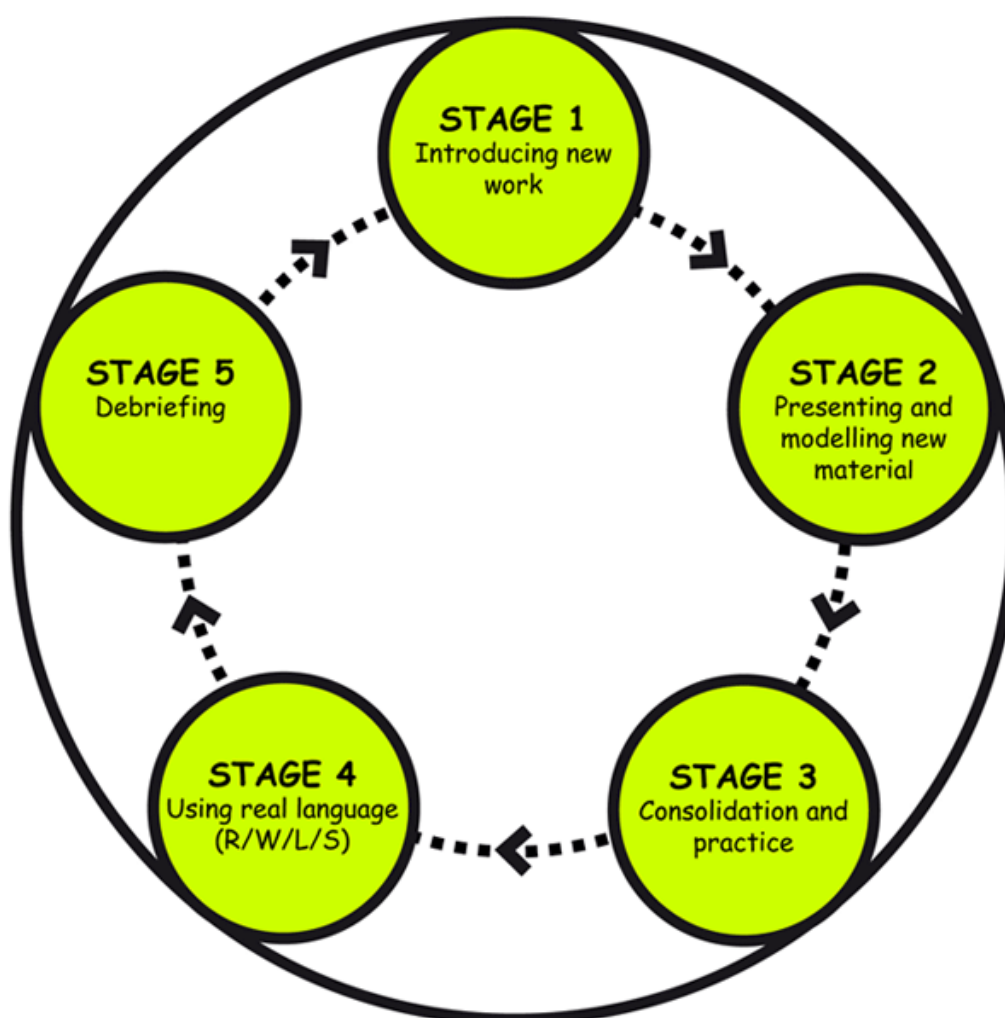
Source Simpson, M. and Ure, J. What's the Difference? A study of differentiation in Scottish secondary schools (Northern College Publications, 1994, page 85).

## Points for reflection: Unit 4

### A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

This item of the programme proposes an outline framework which can help you to examine shared needs in the context of a teaching a unit of work. It serves as a means of auditing current provision by proposing a sequence of stages into which teaching/learning activities might be divided. Although each stage is important, not all stages will take up the same amount of time, and each stage may contain a number of internal loops as you tackle different aspects of the current theme.

**The five stages of a possible teaching cycle:**



Of these five stages, Stages 2 and 4 usually receive the most attention. The Assessment for Learning programme focuses attention particularly on Stages 1 and 5. The stage most often ignored or glossed over is Stage 3, yet, for many Modern Language learners, this is perhaps the most important.

Stage 3 is the point at which learners need to become familiar with all aspects of the new language elements recently encountered; to experiment with new language structures; to see how these combine together and with previously learned material;

and to transfer meaning, sound, gender, spelling, rules of syntax, etc. from working memory to long-term memory banks so that they can recall items accurately when required. This is a tall order.

What happens if this stage is omitted or truncated? Then learners are required to move to Stage 4 (working with texts) insecure in their knowledge of recently taught language and without having had a chance to practice manipulating the new language elements for themselves or to install them in long term memory. This results in incomplete data storage, lack of confidence, increased likelihood of failure, feelings of reluctance and demotivation and, in some cases, avoidance strategies.

If Stage 3 is well managed, with plenty of opportunities for games and single outcome game-like activities which allow pupils to manipulate language for themselves in non-threatening pair and group situations, and which allow for randomised repetition of important vocabulary and structures, then they will be ready to move on confidently to using texts for reading, writing, listening and speaking activities at Stage 4 with a much increased chance of success.

The reason most often given for underplaying Stage 3 is that there isn't time, there's too much to get through. But schools that have taken the time to develop Stage 3 have found that improved confidence and motivation at Stage 4 have actually saved time and led to more satisfying achievement. Games and certain types of game-like software can offer ways of engaging pupils in those repetitive tasks which, though essential to effective learning, can seem boring and pointless if carried out solely by means of textbook-and-jotter or worksheet tasks.





## MANAGING CHANGE

### Introduction to Units 5 & 6

The last two units look at how all these needs, both individual and shared, can be managed in the classroom, where and how to start, and how the basic programme might be enhanced.

The development programme can be as simple or as extensive as you like. Either way, progress will be better ensured by taking small steps that are relatively easy to make and evaluate, rather than to make sweeping changes which may not work for reasons that are difficult to pinpoint.

**Section 5** considers the implications for managing learning in ways that can take account of the needs of a wider range of learners without putting intolerable strain on teachers. It also suggests some starting points for developing teaching in some of the areas considered.

**Section 6** goes on to consider how broadening content and approaches by making links with the rest of the curriculum, with the learners' world and with the wider world can enhance the modern languages curriculum for all learners.

## Points for reflection: Unit 5

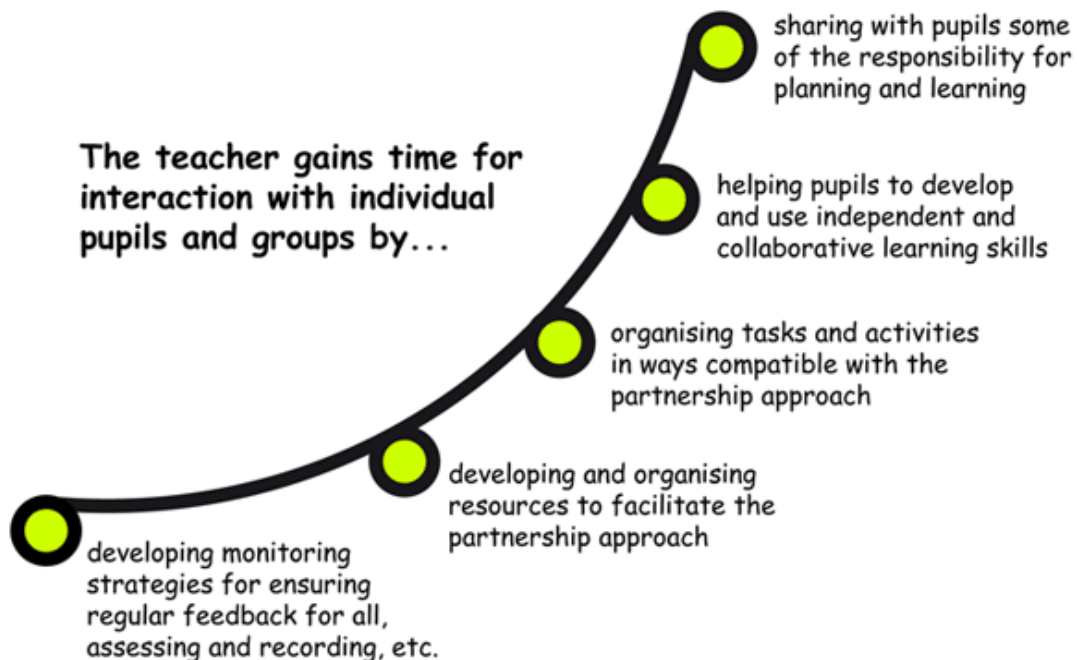
### STARTING POINTS FOR DEVELOPMENT

#### Managing change

So far, in this programme, the emphasis has been on observing and identifying learning needs so that we can plan strategies to accommodate them. But not all needs can be predicted in advance, and our best planning sometimes has outcomes that were not foreseen. It is the purposeful interaction between teacher and learner which provides opportunities to respond to more immediate and individual needs as they arise. This has significant implications for the way the teacher uses class time.

In order to be available to meet individual and small group needs, the teacher has to reduce those aspects of teaching which limit freedom to respond to needs as they arise. This means finding ways of managing the classroom (learners, resources, tasks, relationships, responsibilities) which will facilitate the creation of conditions which free the teacher to work closely with groups or with individual pupils. Some of those facilitating strategies are indicated in the diagram below and taken up again in the notes that accompany the tasks in this unit.

This diagram illustrates how the teacher can gain time for interaction with individual pupils and groups.



Teachers are understandably afraid of 'throwing out the baby with the bathwater'. How can you know if any change you make is going to work any better than what you were doing before? Here are some ways of reducing the risk:

### **Take small steps**

Neither you nor the pupils will be comfortable with whole-scale change. Take one step at a time, and prepare the pupils well, so that they are not upset by unexpected changes to usual practice. They need to know if your expectations have changed, and if so, why. Explain that small changes can often make a big difference to how well pupils learn, and involve them in evaluating the effectiveness of the new procedures. If they need to learn new skills (e.g. how to work in groups, engage in self- or peer- assessment, etc.) make sure that these skills are explicitly taught.

### **Add breadth and enrichment**

Maintain the existing regime for the time being, but experiment with additions and/or alterations to one or two activities with a view to widening their sensory scope, to introducing more choice and more independent or collaborative or active learning, etc., thereby accommodating the needs of more learners.

### **Offer choices**

First, try a range of approaches with your pupils so that you, and they, can find out which method works best for different individuals. Then, begin to offer choices, allowing pupils to choose whichever way seems to work best for them. Again, this begins to involve pupils in thinking about learning and encourages them to take on some of the responsibility. Vocabulary learning is often chosen as a vehicle for early experimentation, since it is relatively easy to evaluate the effectiveness of different approaches.

### **Start with one unit**

One tried and tested strategy is to pick out for your experiment a theme or unit of work which seems to be particularly difficult to teach successfully, and to develop just that part of your programme in line with the new ideas that you want to try. Since you selected something which was working unsatisfactorily anyway, you have nothing to lose. Also, if it works, you know that success is due to the change in approach, and that will give you the confidence to experiment further.

## Points for reflection: Unit 6

### MAKING LINKS

#### Linking the curriculum to the learners' world

Linking, in some form or other, has cropped up in a number of places in this programme. It is an important theme because it can point to ways of enriching the programme on offer to learners. The idea of modern language learning taking place in an enclosed environment, with no links beyond the classroom door, is unthinkable – this is, after all a subject essentially concerned with the wider world – yet potential links with pupils' personal worlds are sometimes overlooked.

#### Think locally as well as globally

This may be because we tend to think of languages as foreign – something over there, not right here. The result may be to distance some learners from the subject to the extent that they find it difficult to comprehend its relevance for them. Any measures, even local ones, that bring the outside world into the modern languages classroom or take the classroom out into the world, help to counteract the feeling of detachment and contribute to a sense of relevance for the learner.

One way of expanding this aspect of the curriculum is to think in terms of ever-increasing circles whose centre is the classroom and whose outer limit is of global proportions; curricular activities can range from pinning up work or posters in the corridor outside the classroom to taking part in an expedition to study or assist a third world country.

#### Make comparisons

Access 2 in Modern Languages introduced the requirement for pupils to make comparisons between aspects of life in a country whose language is being studied, and learners' own communities. Such linking of what is distant, foreign and alien with what is close, familiar and comfortable is relevant and reassuring for pupils at any level, but especially to those who are struggling with language and with motivation to learn. The task sheets in this section suggest ways of building such links into programmes of work at all levels.

*Workshop tasks associated with each of the Points for Reflection can be found online: <http://www.ltscotland.org/maximisingpotential>. The online programme also notes for senior management and help with managing the development project in school.*