Foreign Language Learning and Inclusion: Who? Why? What? – and How?

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Abstract

The presumption of mainstream schooling and the removal of core status for foreign language learning at Key Stage 4 are presenting new challenges to our ideal of foreign language learning for all. In the current climate, the case for including children with special educational needs in foreign language learning classes has to be made with greater clarity than ever. In this article Hilary McColl considers what foreign language learning is really *for* and how we can justify its inclusion in the curriculum of all our young people. She suggests that for all learners, whatever their ability, foreign language learning only makes sense if it is set within the context of the communities who use the language, and that for some learners these twin concepts of 'communication' and 'community' can only be understood if we make explicit links between what is distant-and-strange and what is close-and-familiar. She asks whether the courses we currently offer can achieve the outcomes we say we desire, and suggests what steps we need to take to make them more fit for purpose.

Ever since 'integration' became 'inclusion' educators have been trying to ensure no child is denied access to the full curriculum. This includes, of course, access to foreign language learning; but we are still trying to make a sound case for including it in the curriculum of every child. Who hasn't heard arguments like: 'Do we really mean *every* child? Even those who are having difficulty with English?' 'Why make them do a subject that is too difficult for them?' 'It's not as if they all *want* to do it; many of them can't see the point.' Parents, too, say things such as, 'But he'll never need to speak another language', and 'There are more important things for her to learn.' Some of these arguments seem very persuasive, so we need to be very sure that it *is* the right thing to do. What's the purpose of language learning? What is it *for*? What expectations do we have of learners? What benefits are we offering? And when we have answered all these questions satisfactorily, what about the courses we offer? Are they fit for the purposes we have identified? Will the learners' experiences prove to have been worthwhile?

Which young people are we talking about?

Perhaps, instead, we should say 'Which people?' – because the time spent in school may be the only chance our future adults will ever have to become involved in foreign language learning. In 2003, during the European Year of People with Disabilities, the European Commissioners realised that very little had been done anywhere in Europe to ensure that people with disabilities or learning difficulties have the same access to foreign language learning as the rest of the European population, for most of whom it is a core subject. Wondering, as others have done, whether young people with disabilities and learning difficulties are capable of benefiting from opportunities to engage in foreign language learning, they called for a pan-European investigation. The resulting report (European Commission, 2005) was published in January this year. In the course of their study the

researchers found evidence of considerable success in foreign language learning across all SEN categories and concluded that:

> ... all young people in the European Union, whatever their disability, whether educated in mainstream or segregated schools/streams, have equal rights to foreign languages education
>
> (Executive Summary).

This echoes the findings of my own small-scale study carried out in Scotland in the summer of 2002 (McColl, McPake, Picozzi, 2003). Out of a sample of just over 4,000 young people between the ages of 12 and 16 who were attending special schools or resourced bases in mainstream schools, half were following a course of foreign language learning and half were not. The half who were *not* learning a language included young people with hearing and visual impairment, moderate and severe learning difficulties, communication disorders and social/emotional or behavioural difficulties. This came as no surprise. What *was* surprising was that the group of young people who *were* learning a language successfully was made up of young people from exactly the same categories.

The evidence from both these investigations seems to suggest that the question of whether or not to offer a foreign language programme to certain students has more to do with adult attitudes and expectations, or with resource availability,y than with the ability of students to benefit.

The European Commission report (2005) expresses it thus:

> The arguments for, or against, provision of foreign language learning needs to be considered in relation to newly emerging understanding and realities. These persuasively show that there are no groups of young people who should be denied access to foreign language learning because it is in their 'better interests'. There will be individuals who on a case-by-case basis may not benefit, but the arguments for withdrawal should be made in a fully informed manner...
>
> (p. 1)

In no case in the course of our own study did we come across a special school or base where languages had been tried and abandoned; all believed that the courses they were offering supplied benefits that no other school subject could provide. Some of the schools not already offering a language course told us that they were considering doing so as soon as staffing and other resources would allow. This contrasts markedly with reports from some mainstream classes where dissatisfaction with their experiences is leading a significant number of pupils to abandon language learning as soon as they are allowed to do so. Before it is too late, we need look carefully at the characteristics of those courses that succeed in engaging pupils and to make whatever changes are necessary to our rationale and to the courses we offer.

What is language learning *for*?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001), to which each member country's language qualifications are now linked, states in its introduction that 'the aim of language teaching is to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned' (Introduction, p.4). But there is surely more to it than this. What about the learners for whom we know that foreign language learning will be a struggle and that they may never be described as 'competent and proficient', perhaps even in their own language?

Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, speaking in Strasbourg on 24 September 2004 in a speech to mark the European Day of Languages, thought the aims were much broader:

> *Language learning is a powerful tool for building tolerant, peaceful and inclusive multicultural societies. The experience of learning a new language helps to develop openness to other cultures and acceptance of different ways if life and beliefs. It raises awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and promotes tolerance of people with a different lifestyle.*

Catherine Ashton, UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the School Standards Office, in her foreword to *languages for All: Languages for Life: A Strategy for England* (DfES, 2002) iterates the same thought:

> Languages contribute to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society, to personal fulfilment, mutual understanding... we must recognise language skills as central to breaking down barriers both within this country and between our nation and others.
>
> (p. 4)

The Executive Summary of the same document puts it even more strongly:

> ... language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras, they are an essential part of being a citizen.
>
> (p. 5)

The report of the Ministerial Action Group on Languages (SEED, 2000) which forms the basis of the national policy for modern languages in Scotland, in developing a rationale for language learning, also recognises that some learners will achieve only limited language competence:

> ...[the teaching of] languages at school has an essential role to play in preparing all students for citizenship of the wider society. If it helps them become sensitive to the languages and culture of others and develops in them sufficient confidence and competence to be able to use their languages, *however modestly*, in their interactions with other citizens, then we believe they are more likely to understand others and to be respected by them. In this way the wider society becomes more open, democratic and inclusive.
>
> (pp. 13–14, emphasis added)

It is reassuring to find that these views expressed by policy makers are endorsed by teachers working closely with our young people. After detailing strategies that can help children on the autistic spectrum to succeed in foreign language learning, the North West Regional Special Educational Needs Partnership (DfES with North West Regional SEN Partnership, 2004) recognises that:

> Although visual aids and firsthand experiences help the pupils with asd to know the context of the target language, it will be almost impossible for them to understand the perspectives and possible different viewpoints of the people.
>
> (p. 23)

Nevertheless, they conclude their document with a firm statement:

> It is important, however, that they are given the opportunity to learn about other cultures and countries in order to be able to see themselves as citizens of the world as well as their own immediate communities.
>
> (p. 23)

Implicit in all of the views quoted above is the notion that language learning fulfils its purpose only when it is viewed as *communication* and is set in the context of *community*. Who would deny that in today's troubled world such attitudes and predispositions are highly desirable for all young people, regardless of ability, and not only in the international arena, but *at home as well*? If we truly believe that language learning has such a purpose, and that it is the gateway to the acquisition of these values, can we justifiably exclude *any* of our young people?

Twin strands: communication and community

This leads us inescapably to the question of whether the courses we offer are 'fit for purpose'. A review of current policy in England makes it clear that these two strands are recognised at the highest level. Speaking of the Primary School entitlement, *Languages for All: Languages for Life: A Strategy for England* (DfES, 2002)*,* proposes that 'Every child should have the opportunity throughout Key Stage 2 to study a foreign language and develop their interest in the culture of other nations' (DfES 2002, p.16), and indeed, Unit 12 in the KS2 scheme of work (DfES 2004) is devoted to cultural study. At KS3 'all learners will continue to have an opportunity to learn at least one foreign language and develop cultural understanding' (p.22). Cultural study is one of five stated objectives (p.14). But is this enough for pupils with learning difficulties? In terms of column inches at least, the overwhelming emphasis is on foreign language learning, and 'cultural study' clearly means 'study of foreign culture'. These are the very concepts that are difficult for some of our young people to grasp – a point well understood by those responsible for developing the courses we have seen to be successful. A document disseminated to all Scottish secondary schools a few years ago summarised the views expressed by teachers in the special schools that had been visited (McColl, Hewitt and Baldry, 1997):

> Pupils with special educational needs are citizens too; indeed, it could be argued that they more than most need a clear sense of themselves in community. Without an awareness of themselves and of the close and local communities to which they belong, the idea of a European community can have no meaning.
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> The first step, therefore, in developing a European dimension for pupils with special educational needs, will be to ensure that, for all pupils, the school ethos and the curriculum exemplify and promote an awareness of oneself in community, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails.
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> For some pupils, the community will be their immediate environment; for others it will embrace the many interlocking communities, including Europe, which make up our modern world. For most, the programme will include an opportunity to become familiar with the culture and language of some of our European neighbours.
>
> (Section 1, p. 11)

These views subsequently informed the development of assessment arrangements in foreign languages at Access 1 and 2 for Scottish schools, where cultural study provides a context for learning the associated foreign language, and where pupils are required to compare and contrast the aspects of 'foreign' life they are studying and the equivalent aspects of life in their own community.

Providing a context for foreign language learning

It is this overlapping of communities, this linking of 'foreign' with 'familiar', which I think is crucial for the learners we are focusing on in this issue of the *Journal.* For some of our more able learners, no doubt, we can expect the relationship between communication and community to be implicitly understood, and perhaps, for them, the appropriate attitudes and predispositions can be 'caught' even if they are not taught, but for less able learners the concepts involved can be new and challenging and need to be taught explicitly. As one teacher who works in a special school reminded us recently (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2005):

> My pupils began with only the haziest understanding that they live in a country called Scotland and that they speak a language called English. Only after investigating a country in depth did they begin to move towards a notion that there might be lots of other countries. It was only when we began to look for a second country to investigate that the notion of Europe and Scotland/Britain within Europe could be addressed in any meaningful way.
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> (Part A, p. 14)

This links very closely with the question of identity, suggesting that some of our learners may never come to a clear understanding of themselves and their place in community until they have an opportunity to compare their lives with those of people elsewhere. We have heard of cases where the often-heard assertion that 'everybody abroad speaks English' is taken by some learners to be literally true. Their observation, based on limited experience, appears to be confirmed by what adults are telling them, and so the insistence of the French on speaking French, say, or the Germans on speaking German, appears to be simply perverse. The same teacher also says:

> When I introduced modern languages into the curriculum of my pupils 'communicative competence' in any language other than English was not one of my goals. It was the first learning outcome [comparing communities], not the second, that drew me in. I only became interested in Outcome 2 [language learning] when I saw how motivating it was for my pupils to begin to communicate for the first time in a language other than their own.
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> (Part A, p. 5)

The courses that we offer to learners therefore need to address the concepts of identity and difference *explicitly*, with reference *both* to the foreign country *and* to the home community if the associated language learning is to make any sense. The syllabuses offered by the Scottish Qualifications Authority at levels Access 1 and 2 attempt to do this, but such approaches are rare.

If we examine the courses offered by schools who cater well for learners of all abilities, we find that broadly based courses such as these, whether officially sanctioned are not, are highly valued not only by schools but by learners and their parents as well. To quote the recent European Commission (2005) report again:

> ...success [in foreign language learning] extends beyond communicative competence and includes other significant educational domains and key competence-building areas involving personal and social development... [It] is not a question of foreign language learning for the sake of learning a language, but foreign language learning as a platform for enhanced education and personal development.
>
> (Executive Summary)

All the evidence suggests that meaningful language learning experiences are more difficult to provide when the foreign language is taught simply for its own sake, devoid of cultural context – and perhaps here is one of the reasons for feelings of alienation experienced by many of our young language learners today. If the French or German tasks they are set to do appear to have no purpose other than to occupy the time and the space allocated to them in the timetable, it is little wonder that such tasks seem 'foreign' and 'alien' and therefore irrelevant.

It is possible that more able learners cope with these deficiencies better than less able ones, although recent research suggest that the motivation even of more able learners improves when these deficiencies are remedied. In recent research carried out by Scottish CILT (2004), a sample of S4 (Year 11) pupils were questioned about their attitudes to foreign language learning, with a view to finding out which activities they enjoyed and preferred. Asked what they most liked doing, the most popular activity was 'learning about people and ways of life in other countries'; asked about the frequency of activities they were actually offered in class, 'learning about other people and ways of life' was ranked ninth out of ten items.

I must make it clear at this point that I am not advocating that we abandon foreign language learning in favour of cultural studies – far from it. Communication is a key aspect of culture. It allows us to experience directly, for ourselves, physically and mentally, what it means to be 'foreign' and gives us first-hand access to the thoughts and feelings of others. Monolingualism is a straightjacket which has the effect of sealing us off from first hand experience of 'otherness'. What I am suggesting is that language study *alone* may be insufficient for some learners; that community study not only enhances *but also validates* language learning. We are doing our already disadvantaged young people a disservice if we treat cultural study as an optional extra, or as something divorced from language or from our own experience.

What are the implications for foreign language learning?

First of all, I believe, we have to acknowledge that not all language learners will become 'competent and proficient users'. But we must also explain that language competence is not the only goal – it is simply a means to an end, and that end is relevant for all pupils – that whatever level of attainment is reached will serve as the springboard to other desirable outcomes. For some pupils, the linguistic and cultural outcomes will be significant in terms of their future career, for others, not. But for all pupils the experiences can be life-changing and life-enhancing, if not always predictable (see McColl, 2000).

Unfortunately, the experiences pupils have of language learning are not always pleasurable; they can also be humiliating and frustrating and damaging to self-esteem. We must do something about that; if we don't, the other outcomes become unattainable too. Even well documented benefits, such as meta-linguistic awareness, language development and social skills development (NCC, 1993; Martin & Miller, 1999) cannot be taken for granted. We need to be more explicit. These remain *potential* outcomes unless we plan and teach our foreign language programmes with these aims in mind. Wishful thinking alone cannot produce programmes that are fit for purpose. So what can we do?

Policy development

- We need, urgently, to clarify our aims and expectations and say whether they are the same for all language learners.

- We need to debate and then state clearly what we think the benefits of language learning are, and to design a range of courses which explicitly address the full range of those benefits.
- In doing this we need to be prepared to go beyond considerations of communicative competence in the target language, and accept that not all of the benefits will be linguistic ones.

Curriculum development

- We need to be more aware of individual learning needs and to accept that we may need help to understand these before we can provide effectively for the wide range of abilities and disabilities which characterise our learners.
- Young people need us to set them 'do-able' tasks and to be prepared to provide whatever support they need in order to experience themselves as successful language learners.
- We need to link language learning to local as well as to more distant communities in order to bridge the gap between familiar and more 'alien' concepts.

Whole school and community development

Take any and all opportunities to get the foreign language out of the classroom. This doesn't just mean making use of ICT to facilitate virtual communication with people abroad, but exploiting the local communities as well – the community of the school itself, the neigbourhood, local businesses – anything that will demonstrate the fact that languages are relevant no matter where you happen to be, and that differences are interesting, not threatening. Some examples might be:

1. Take another look at the school's Citizenship programme. Foreign languages have a bigger contribution to make than perhaps has been realised.
2. Link one or more language topics to other areas of the curriculum (e.g. numbers, money to maths; food to home economics).
3. Invite into school speakers of other languages who reside in the local community, who may even be relatives of students in the school. The fact that they don't speak the 'target' language is unimportant; where young people are concerned, it is easier to 'turn them on' to languages (in the plural) than to the language that happens to be on the school timetable. French becomes more significant when it is seen as only one of the many languages that people speak, and the one that we happen to be starting with.
4. If possible, encourage learners to explore the linguistic and cultural potential of the neigbourhood: visit businesses, use the local library, interview local people.
5. Exploit the other skills learners bring to the classroom with them; use them in the service of language learning by setting language tasks which require an end product (a poster, a brochure, a painting, captioned photographs, an account of personal research done on the web, etc.)
6. Explore links with the school's enterprise programme, or any other whole school initiative.

Once the principle of linking to local as well as to distant communities becomes an accepted part of planning, many more opportunities will present themselves.

Staff development

My own staff development work with mixed groups of foreign language teachers and support teachers over the last ten years or so has convinced me that, if we language teachers are to provide adequately for the diverse needs of our pupils; we need the help of the colleagues who have crucial information about the learning needs we have to cater for. We need to make better use of that help.

A successful language programme is one that provides learners with progressive challenges *that can be met*, so that, at whatever level they are working, students can experience success as learners. This is an attainable goal, yet all too often we language teachers fail to identify with sufficiently accuracy the specific difficulties facing some of the learners in our classes. And if we can't do this, then we have no hope of finding strategies to remove or reduce the barriers blocking our students' progress. We can spend our lives devising ways of engaging our students, but if we don't understand their difficulties we may ourselves be erecting barriers for them. Effective differentiation can start only when we know what these barriers are (McColl, 2000; 2002).

This lack of understanding often seems to leave language teachers with a crisis of self-confidence. We begin to think that there is a mystique about teaching learners with special needs, and that they would be better taught by those who are familiar with this 'special' way of teaching. But, of course, there is no special way of teaching. Language teachers often lack, not teaching skills, but an understanding of why some of their students seem unable or unwilling to take advantage of those skills, and of how quite small changes in the way work is presented or supported can sometimes make a huge difference to a learner's chances of success (see Cajkler and Addelman, 2000).

Many foreign language teachers, through no fault of their own, have had little or no training in identifying barriers to learning; but our teaching support colleagues do have these skills, as well as the advantage of seeing young people at work in other classes. They are usually willing and able to help us to see these barriers more clearly, so that we can begin to plan a way round them. All too often, however, even where support is made available, it is used in ways which, though perhaps helpful to individual young people, does nothing to improve the teacher's ability to cater for a wider range of learners.

Why don't we make better use of the expertise available to us? The explanations suggested by teachers on professional development courses are common enough:

- No time is allocated for support in foreign languages because school management feels maths and English are more important.
- Some time is allocated (never enough), but the teacher allocated 'does not speak the target language' (sometimes felt to be essential), so is simply used as an extra pair of eyes and hands, to help keep order, or to help individual young people to focus on the tasks in hand. There is no input to course development.
- The potential for collaboration and course development is understood by the teachers concerned but, as no time is allocated for planning, nothing can be done about it.
- Even where language and support teachers are fortunate enough to be provided with opportunities to work together on course development, they don't know how best to exploit the limited time available.
- Some language teachers report feeling uncomfortable with another adult in the classroom; some support teachers report being uncomfortable about making suggestions about content or methodology for fear of appearing to criticise their colleagues.

A project piloted in four Edinburgh City schools between 2002 and 2004 as part of their programme to promote inclusion in foreign languages attempted to overcome some of these barriers to effective collaboration. (See European Commission report, 2005, pp. 106–109). An Innovation Fund provided support to pilot schools to ensure that planning time was made available for at least one pair of language/support teachers to work together, with the aim of improving access to foreign language learning for an identified group of students who were giving cause for concern. They began with a joint training session, followed by joint observation of the student groups concerned. They discussed what they had seen, and their (often differing) interpretations of it, and were provided with a framework to support joint planning to meet the needs they had identified. In each case the problems proved to be not the language itself, as the language teachers had expected, but the ways in which the students and their learning was being managed. Some of the strategies adopted involved:

- finding ways of reducing conflict (e.g. providing pens/pencils that could be borrowed when required)
- introducing a 'settling' routine at the start of each lesson
- offering a wider range of activities, particularly ones which encouraged more multi-sensory and active learning and more individualised learning
- giving students more choice, and responsibility for the choices that they made
- providing support/reference materials which were richer visually and to which students could refer at will
- finding ways of teaching other skills which in turn would provide new incentives to use the foreign language (e.g. learning to use a video camera in order to make films related to language topics, which could then be exchanged with schools abroad; baking for and running a French café on the school's 'Enterprise Day').

In each case, at the end of the project year, the pilot groups showed a marked improvement in motivation (in one school two students who had been withdrawn the previous year asked if they could return, in another parents commented on improved attitude) and attainment (students performed better than expected at the end of the year). The schools involved were planning to extend the project to other classes, other languages and/or to other subjects. Both language and support teachers felt they had benefited from the opportunity to work together in a more systematic way, and the language teachers felt better equipped professionally to cater for the widening range of ability in language classes.

Such opportunities, however, are rare. Yet without them we seem doomed as a nation to continue alienating learners who are convinced that they 'can't do languages'. I live in hope that someone, somewhere, will see this as a way forward and provide the means for effective collaboration between language specialists and support specialists. In this way, language teachers will be enabled to provide successfully, for all learners, the chance to benefit from the richness of their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Our young people deserve no less.

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