

WHY AREN'T THEY LEARNING?

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

When planning differentiation, teachers can ask themselves 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?

Teachers tend to start at point 2, but this may allow some basic problems to go unrecognised, and these will interfere with any measures they adopt in response to question 2. It is important to begin by discovering what is **hindering** learning, so that, in considering question 2, measures can be taken to minimise those difficulties or to stop them recurring.

Identifying 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 teachers unconsciously erect barriers which make language learning seem more difficult than it needs to be.

Sometimes modern language teachers (who after all are very familiar with the language) can't see these barriers (which makes them easy to ignore or to put down to lack of effort on the part of the learner). However, the effect barriers create is very obvious, so teachers can learn to detect the existence of barriers by looking at the way learners behave.

Learners who are experiencing difficulty with the work that has been set in the modern languages classroom...

in oral work...

- rarely volunteer an answer
- when the teacher insists, 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 and may use English instead of the target language
- can't remember any of the relevant words or phrases etc.

in listening work, they...

- 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 reading or written work...

- they fail to complete the work
- their work is illegible
- a high proportion of words are misspelled

in general they...

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

Sometimes struggling learners prefer to take avoidance strategies rather than admit to what they see as their failure. Teachers need to be alert to the fact that these strategies, particularly ones which manifest themselves as misbehaviour, often mask the underlying difficulties the student is facing. 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 difficulties which could be addressed.

Removing unnecessary barriers can have a marked effect on motivation and attention to learning. Of course there may also be other barriers inhibiting a pupil's motivation to learn (physical, emotional, social etc.) but we have little or no control over these. The best we teachers can do is to ensure that the curricular barriers, at least, are minimised. Failure to address these issues leaves the root cause of some difficulties unchanged and a downward spiral of low self esteem and low attainment,

Removing or reducing barriers

Once the barriers have been recognised, strategies can be devised for minimising them, or, even better, removing them altogether. With them out of the way, 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 students do not, in fact have overwhelming difficulties with the language, but only with the difficulty the teachers have in recognising what is hindering them from learning as well as they might?

Support for Learning staff are often adept at identifying potential barriers and can provide a valuable service to MFL departments, providing 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 who have built strong traditions of working with Support for Learning staff to remove unnecessary barriers report improvements in behaviour and motivation, leading to improvements in attainment. With the barriers taken care of, strategies for improving learning have a better chance of success.

Websource <http://languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/barriers.html>

Further reading 'Some common barriers':
<http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/resources/commonbarriers.pdf>