

BARRIERS TO LEARNING: PREREQUISITE SKILLS

We must be prepared to start from where learners actually are, not from where we would like them to be.

Some barriers arise because students lack basic skills that MFL teachers tend to take for granted, assuming that students have already acquired them. If teachers then fail to identify and remedy such deficiencies, new learning is likely to be ineffective. Two examples:

1. In a school in where the MFL department was keen to improve reading skills in French with S4 learners (15/16 yrs) learners, a teacher from the pupil support department was brought in to work with a small number of pupils who were struggling. After a term working on reading skills, the pupils in the small group were still displaying reluctance to use a dictionary to help them interpret the text. The teachers decided to look specifically at dictionary skills, beginning with familiarity with the alphabet, alphabetic sequencing, use of headwords, etc. These proved to be problematical for most in the group, so the second term was spent on exercises to strengthen these skills. As a result, the pupils' scores for in reading improved and their results in the Reading paper at the end of the session exceeded all expectations. The MFL department is currently engaged in embedding dictionary skills in all language programmes.

The teacher has since written up this experience as a case study for publication, and the story was picked up by the Times Educational Supplement. Links to these can be found on the website.

2. In an S1 class (12/13 yrs) learning to tell the time in French, one girl stood out from the rest. Her hand was always up, her answers were confident and her accent impeccable. Unfortunately the answers she gave bore no relation to the time shown on the clock face the teacher was using for practice. The teacher subsequently discovered that the girl had been very ill when she was younger and had missed the lessons when the rest of the class learned to tell the time. As a result, she was unable to tell the time in English. A few sessions with the learning support teacher remedied the situation, enabling the girl to acquire an important life skill, as well as to improve her performance in French.

The discovery that students lack basic skills can be frustrating; bemoaning their lack is understandable, but professionalism requires that teachers initiate action to recover the situation. Sometimes, as in the above examples, deficiencies can be relatively quickly remedied. Others, such as a general lack of language awareness, may require more long-term support.

Common deficiencies

Some deficiencies in prior learning occur quite frequently and can present formidable obstacles. Prerequisite skills or knowledge may need to be taught explicitly, in the mother tongue, so that learners can master the skills and then make progress in the foreign language. Examples:

- Insecure understanding of analogue and/or digital time formats.
- Only a vague understanding of sound-symbol correspondence.
- Lack of familiarity with alphabetic order beyond the ability to 'rattle off' the alphabet.
- No knowledge of dictionary conventions.
- Lack of social skills needed to work effectively alone or in a group.
- No experience of learning 'by heart', and other learning strategies.

Where such deficiencies are common, the missing skills need to be taught in class. Support staff may be able to help, but the responsibility lies with the class teacher. Either way, the advantage of teaching these skills in the foreign language class is that they will be taught in a context that can be immediately practised, and progress can be evaluated alongside progress in target language skills.

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