

# Dialogues

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## Intrinsic interest and explicit instruction: Reforming MFL pedagogy in English schools

by [Ian Bauckham](#)

*In this article, Ian Bauckham, the CEO of Tenax Schools Trust and advisor to the Department for Education, description of article ...*

### Background and challenge

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as a school subject in England faces very significant challenges. Although still compulsory in Key Stages 2 and 3 (ages 7–11 and 11–14 respectively) in all maintained schools, its removal from the National Curriculum mandatory core in Key Stage 4 (age 14–16) in 2004 led to a sharp decline in the number of pupils continuing with the subject to GCSE at age 16. Despite the inclusion of MFL in the heavily incentivised EBacc suite of GCSEs from 2011, there has been only a modest increase in numbers, and the proportion of pupils taking a language to GCSE has remained stubbornly below 50%.

The EBacc suite of qualifications mentioned above is highly valued by the Government, and schools are encouraged to enter as many pupils as possible for all five ‘pillars’ needed to achieve the EBacc. These are English, mathematics, at least two sciences, one of either history or geography, and any one modern or ancient language. There is a national ambition, which is driving policy, for 75% of pupils, rising to 90% by 2027, to be entered for all five EBacc ‘pillars’. Currently, about 80% of pupils who miss the EBacc by one ‘pillar’ (so are entered for 4 of the five) are missing the language entry. Improving continuation of languages through to GCSE is thus central to the Government’s wider policy aims.

The decline in GCSE language take up is mirrored at A-level, where in French, German and Spanish, taken together, there were some 20,000 entries in 2018, of which only some 3,000 were in German (to Please cite: Bauckham, I. (2019). Intrinsic interest and explicit instruction: Reforming MFL pedagogy in English schools. *Languages, Society & Policy*. <https://doi.org/XXX>

put this in perspective, there are something over 700,000 16-year-olds in England). A-level MFL entries have halved over the past 20 years. This obviously then has an impact on the numbers taking degree-level courses in languages, and in turn the supply of qualified linguists, including those training to teach languages.

It was against this backdrop that the Teaching Schools Council in 2016 commissioned [a report](#) on effective Modern Languages pedagogy in schools, which was welcomed by the Department for Education, and which has now led to the establishment of a national Centre for Excellence in MFL pedagogy based at the University of York, and a pilot network of hubs for the co-development and dissemination of effective MFL pedagogy.

## The recommendations of the MFL Pedagogy Review (November 2016)

The Review made a number of recommendations covering all aspects of school practice in MFL teaching. For the purposes of our topic it is worth highlighting the following:

- 1. Whatever their level of achievement, the vast majority of young people should study a modern foreign language up to the age of 16, and take a GCSE in it.*
- 2. Pupils need to gain systematic knowledge of the vocabulary, grammar, and sound and spelling systems (phonics) of their new language, and how these are used by speakers of the language. They need to reinforce this knowledge with extensive planned practice and use in order to build the skills needed for communication.*
- 6. Languages teachers should know and build on the grammar taught in the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum for English.*
- 7. Secondary schools should know about the modern languages taught at their feeder primary schools.*
- 8. Teachers should carefully plan their own and pupils' use of the new language in class to support and reinforce learning, and ensure that meanings are always clear and confusion avoided.*
- 13. Assessment should use a range of tasks, including those focused on specific aspects of the language taught, such as vocabulary or grammar. Some tasks should require pupils to compose sentences, short pieces of writing and oral presentations of their own.*

The underlying insights that led the review group to frame the recommendations in this way included the view that at its heart, the MFL curriculum should be composed of segmented and appropriately sequenced content which, when systematically taught, practised and embedded, would equip learners with the foundational knowledge components for the next stage of language learning. This means that curriculum organisation (sequencing) should at every stage be determined by *linguistic*

considerations, not by other, external, considerations such as an order of thematic topics or a misplaced view that, for example, expressing an opinion is linguistically more difficult than stating a fact (this commonplace misunderstanding comes from a misapplication of [Bloom's taxonomy](#)).

To illustrate this point, one might reflect on the almost universal opening sequence of lessons for novice language learners: meeting and introducing oneself to another person. Many curriculum planners assume this is a foundational activity, so it tends to come first. However, while it may be a foundational *activity*, the language used for this sequence of questions and answers is not necessarily foundational. Consider:

- *Comment tu t'appelles ? Je m'appelle Suzi*
- *Quel âge as-tu ? J'ai onze ans*
- *Est-ce que tu as des frères ou des sœurs ? J'ai un frère*

This commonly taught sequence of questions contains at least the following problems:

- Three different ways of forming a question (tone of voice, inversion and *est-ce que* prefix)
- A fairly advanced reflexive verb, unlikely to be replicable at this stage
- Likely confusion over the meaning of *j'ai*: does it mean 'I am' (eleven) or does it mean 'I have' (a brother)?
- Likely conclusion that *quel* means 'how'
- Likely conclusion that *comment* means 'what'

While it is true that once the learner has memorised the questions and answers they can meet the objective of introducing themselves to another person, in fact they have actually learnt very little that positions them for the next stage of learning, because the organising principle was not the language itself but something external to it (effectively a thematic topic). The only thing the learner now has is the ability to ask and answer the questions that have been memorised. So the first stage of learning has not opened up a pathway forward; it has actually created a limitation, a ceiling.

While these early language lessons may appear enjoyable, with pair work and other superficially motivating activities, at a deeper level the underlying aim of all learning, which is to develop pupils' sense of self-efficacy, is not met. Over time, an approach to language learning of this sort leads to a deep sense of dependency and helplessness in the learner.

This becomes still clearer if we contrast an alternative opening sequence of lessons, where for example the singular forms of the verbs 'to be' and 'to have' are taught, together with a limited but high-frequency selection of adjectives and nouns (cutting across traditional 'topics'): 'I have a dog', 'I am happy/sad', etc. The learner practises these to automaticity, fully embedding them in the long-term memory, and then learns explicitly a single way to form a question (subject-verb inversion, for example), and also the way in which negatives are formed (*je ne suis pas triste*). Now we can see that not only does the learner have the practical ability to make some sentences, but also has learnt some

foundational knowledge that equips her for the next stage of language learning. This approach is still sadly too infrequently encountered.

## **So what is the ‘knowledge content’ of modern languages?**

As with any subject, it is essential for teachers to be clear on what the substantive knowledge of a language is. We can identify three broad aspects of knowledge: vocabulary or the lexicon; grammar; and phonics. In order to build coherent schemata in the minds of learners, it is important that a language programme being taught through formal instruction is sequenced so that knowledge in these three domains is systematically built. That means ensuring that pupils’ knowledge of the phonics and spelling system of the language is taught early on, not left to chance as is often the case. It means that grammatical progression drives the shape of the course, so that pupils learn basic and then more advanced grammatical forms, which prepare them for the next stage of learning and increasingly allow them to form new sentences correctly by themselves. As we saw earlier, an approach that teaches whole sentences without regard to their structure or components actually imposes ceilings to progression, whereas one that teaches necessary grammar, which can be used in the next stages, opens doors to future progression. And for vocabulary, teaching programmes must plan to teach and reinforce common words through repeated encounter, including those with abstract meanings, and especially common verbs, knowledge of which drives progression particularly in Indo-European languages. Emphasis must always be given to words that occur frequently and therefore demand both high retention and high recall. In language programmes where the thematic topics are the main organising principle, this too is often overlooked, and common words are underemphasised while more esoteric items are given prominence because they happen to look relevant to the ‘topic’ in hand.

## **What approach to pedagogy is most effective?**

It is important to understand that in the British context, successfully learning a new language overwhelmingly happens, primarily, through formal instruction and deliberate practice. The conditions for natural or unconscious acquisition barely exist for most British teenagers. This necessitates the deliberately planned approach to the curriculum described above, but it also has implications for pedagogy.

The underlying principle here is that small amounts of new content should be introduced at any given time, particularly bearing in mind the limits of the working memory and that well-planned deliberate practice must be used to ensure the new elements are embedded in the long-term memory and build

coherent schemata, rather than appearing to be just a list of facts. Direct instruction approaches work best, and are certainly more time-efficient, especially with novice learners. There is a widespread view that it is always better for learners to identify unfamiliar grammatical patterns themselves and deduce what they might mean. This is not supported by the research, which distinctly shows that it is better to teach the grammatical points ‘up front’ clearly, and then move on to practising and using them (Marsden 2006; Marsden and Chen 2011). In terms of practice, it is most effective for grammar in particular, following the initial direct teaching, for learners to be required to identify and understand the grammar that has been covered in the input language (listening or reading), and to practise this stage before they are required to use the new grammar productively. As for methodology for vocabulary teaching, it is important to dispel the myth that ‘errorless learning’ of new vocabulary somehow represents ‘lazy’ or uninspiring practice. It does not, and has shown to be at least as effective as some of the time-consuming and elaborate inductive approaches that teachers have felt obliged to construct.

When texts are used with novice learners, it is important that the actual knowledge of learners is matched to the demands of the text. Too often, language programmes are uncritical about ‘authentic texts’, believing that it is more important for a text to be authentic than it is for it to be ‘decodable’ by the learner given the knowledge they have. We would do well to follow the principles of early phonics teaching in English, where it is an established principle that children should be asked to read texts containing letters and words that they have been taught to read. To do otherwise both encourages the habit of wild guessing, and also, in less resilient learners, forms low self-esteem and erodes self-efficacy.

## What does the progression model look like?

Finally, there are some important points to make about the progression models teachers use to quantify pupils’ learning. Generally, these have tended to consist of overarching descriptors of functional competence. An example might be: *Pupils are able to introduce themselves to a new acquaintance and give and elicit details such as name, age, hobbies and family.* As we saw above, this approach to quantifying progression is one step removed from the substantive content of the language itself. It does not tell the teacher, for example, whether the pupil can use the singular forms of the verbs ‘to be’ and ‘to have’ fluently and with automaticity. Neither does it tell the teacher whether the pupil can form questions using subject-verb inversion. As such, it does not actually tell the teacher or the pupil about the extent to which the pupil has the knowledge needed for the next stage of learning, nor does it pinpoint any feature of the language which might require re-teaching or further practice to automatise. It is essentially backward-looking rather than forward-looking in character.

If we accept the need to atomise and sequence the linguistic knowledge needed for systematically building competence in the language, and are focussed at each point on ensuring the knowledge needed for the next stage is secured, then it becomes incumbent on us to ensure that assessment and feedback to both teacher and pupil reflect this directly to ensure knowledge gaps are closed and re-

teaching or further practice is put in place. In this way only can a sense of confidence and self-efficacy be built.

## Conclusion

Modern languages face a range of challenges, and shifting a national perception that we are bad at them will take time. However, we would do well to be honest about the lack of success the common approaches of recent decades have produced. Only by focussing on the importance of building pupil self-efficacy through the planned and systematic teaching of properly sequenced linguistic elements in vocabulary, grammar and phonics, and their appropriate practice, can we build a new approach to language learning that will stand a better chance of success than any of the approaches used thus far.

## Resources

Modern Foreign Languages Pedagogy Review (2016): <https://www.tscouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/MFL-Pedagogy-Review-Report-2.pdf>

Principles of teaching grammar, a presentation by the National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1-wFnq88ZNzV2Iw-EcVAuK81qrK2Vl3v1/view>

## Further reading

Marsden, E. (2006). Exploring input processing in the classroom. *Language Learning*, 56, 507–566.

Marsden, E. & Chen, H.-Y. (2011). The roles of structured input activities in processing instruction and the kinds of knowledge they promote. *Language Learning*, 61, 1058–1098.

## About the author

Ian Bauckham CBE is a headteacher and executive leader of a multi-academy trust in south-east England. He has spent his career in teaching after graduating in Modern Languages and currently

advises both the Department for Education and Ofsted on a range of areas, including modern languages policy. He chaired the Teaching Schools Council's enquiry into MFL in 2016 and authored the report that came out of that enquiry. He has long experience of training, support and school improvement work across the sector and has served as President of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL).