

The 3rd Millennial Modern Linguist: Developing New Pedagogies

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Introduction

Can old and new techniques in ICT and teaching stretch stronger pupils' abilities in language? For many years ICT use has been concentrated on providing resources for weaker learners. Differentiation has tended to be differentiation 'downwards'. This action research project experimented with techniques in ICT and teaching to provide more extension for stronger pupils, to stretch their abilities in language. The aim was to find out if a balance of hardware, software, traditional teaching and 'imported' teaching ideas can lead to better written work, particularly in modern foreign languages. The thrust of the project was to encourage more complex use of French in groups of beginners (P7/S1/S2). In some initial practice in the classroom it was found that a judicious marriage between traditional resources and cutting-edge ICT provided the best results. This research project is therefore not solely about the technology – it is, above all, about the pedagogy behind the technology.

'**The 3rd Millennial Modern Linguist: Developing New Pedagogies**' tackles the theme of the able child: who is this and what can be done in terms of course structuring and classroom pedagogy to cater better for this group? Topics include the use of differentiated teaching and collaborative approaches to raise motivation in this group, and how this positively affects the teaching of all pupils.

The follow-up article, "**From Learning Logs to Learning Blogs**", will examine practical approaches to achieving some of the goals set out below.

The 3rd Millennial Modern Linguist: Developing New Pedagogies

1 What is a 'gifted' pupil?

Teachers' understanding of what makes one individual 'gifted' is influenced by their previous experiences and interactions (Sutherland, 2005). These understandings involve phrases such as 'able', 'top flight', 'first class' and 'talented', but in this paper we will refer to 'gifted' children to describe any who are atypically stronger at school than others. Stereotypes are used extensively to initially try to label a child as 'gifted', but summative assessment is most commonly the means by which a pupil is deemed 'gifted' for the purposes of a school report, pupil profile, class setting or streaming. However, the term itself does not help deconstruct the concept to move beyond this narrow definition. It suggests some kind of genetic atypically high intelligence, affected more by genes than by educational and social environment. Sutherland (2005) hints at some sort of "atypical development", thus suggesting that the nature of a gifted pupil's success is derived from more than simply genetics, and rather that it is also or alternatively the result of development within an educational and socio-cultural environment. "Atypical development" is similar to the way that we define the state of those in the group most commonly labelled as having Special Educational Needs, these being pupils recognised as having additional support needs in order that they can access, more often than not, the most basic levels of the curriculum. The use of the term "atypical development" for both atypically high and low achievers leads us to realise that 'gifted' pupils, too, have special educational needs. The question is: are these needs being met within our school system and within the classrooms of teachers?

As terminology developed to cater for an apparently ever-widening scope of special educational needs – dyslexia, dyspraxia, Attention Deficit Disorder, and so on – one term was left out of policy and guidelines: able pupils (Kearney, 1999; Smith, 2005). In the meantime, less able pupils saw a raft of support in the form of national legislation¹, Local Education Authority and individual school policies whereby specialist schemes, such as "Successmaker", were developed, extra staff were hired and processes of extraction from class to pursue the basic skills of numeracy and literacy became the norm.

Means of 'curing' the problem of what to do with our highest achievers were pursued, too, but in a far less sophisticated and less well-funded manner. Setting became an issue of national importance (SOEID, 1996) and a political soundbite: *schools should make more use of setting* (McConnell, 2002b). But all this was being stated against an apparently opposing backdrop of inclusive education and education for all. Further still, setting was being used as a 'cure' for a 'gifted' group of pupils whose ability, and how best to cater for it, had barely been examined in any detail. Therefore, teachers were left to implement a policy with good intentions, but they could only rely upon anecdotal and stereotypical means of identifying gifted pupils and the means with which to teach them effectively.

¹ Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/05/11112347/23484>; This Act mentions, as an example, how it will affect those pupils with a Record of Needs, that is, atypically weaker learners. It does not mention how it might support able pupils.

Despite legislation offering the entitlement to an individually tailored education that expands every child to their full potential, Scotland generally appears not to have moved beyond the support of atypically less able pupils. The experiences and interactions of teachers have therefore been solely concentrated on this group, with simplistic means employed to differentiate for those who are atypically more able. This action research aims to provide some new experiences and interactions for teachers and show that an inclusive education for gifted pupils can exist, and may also help raise overall standards in particular skills. Some, but not all, of the techniques suggested make judicious use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT)

2 The importance of inclusive education in Scotland

2.1 Inclusion and the role of setting and extraction

Providing guidance on the teaching of gifted children in classes set by ability could be seen as a simple solution. Much work has been done in this area with several schools concentrating on the implementation of "gifted and talented" policies and practice (BBC Interactive, 2001). For example, St Paul's High School, Glasgow, has seen improvement in results as a consequence of a streaming policy has been substantial (Munro, 2005) though the origin and effects of external factors have led to these figures being disputed (Buie, 2005b). Inclusion of all pupils of the same age in the same class at school is a key policy of the Scottish education system and schools are now claiming that the mixed ability inclusive classrooms are leading to great success in the classroom.

For example, Rothesay Academy experienced a rise from 9% to 45% in the number of pupils who gained five or more Standard grade Credit awards in the space of one year, thanks to efforts made in mixed ability class organisation (Anonymous, 2005). There are regular legislative reminders to the importance of providing access to a suitably challenging educational experience for all (SOED, 1994; SOEID, 1999; SE, 2001; SEED, 2002; SEED, 2003). However, there are inevitably shortcomings in the way inclusion is handled in different areas. Smith and Sutherland (2003) claim that teachers often spend more time with struggling pupils under the belief that able pupils will progress on their own. McMichael (1998) claims that this belief is not the reality, i.e. that these pupils *have been shown frequently to underachieve and to find their school years frustrating and even debilitating*. Often the teacher uses them to help support weaker students, thus leaving questions over their own intelligence and ability being stretched: are they reaching the zone of proximal development (Cairns, 2005; Sutherland, 2005)?

Such experiences have been publicly recorded as the reason for the move of St Paul's High School Glasgow to introduce setting (Buie, 2005a)². Sutherland (2005) backs this up, noticing that while structures, procedures, extra staffing and funding for teacher training are in place for less able pupils, there is little or no evidence of the same importance being given to the education of able pupils. Policy has also been interpreted in a "downward" fashion: the aforementioned apparent contradictions between inclusion and pushing for higher standards led to misunderstandings and confusion over the term "entitlement to Modern Foreign Languages" (McConnell 2002a) of all students. Interpreting this in the atypically downwards manner to which they had become accustomed, LEAs, Head Teachers and even Modern Languages

² Buie quotes Headteacher Rod O'Donnell: "He told me his schooling had almost been a complete waste of time, particularly in his first and second years. He had done really well in primary and been a great worker, and when he arrived at St Paul's he was keen to do well here too. But he realised that if he did well in class he became recognised and being recognised in a Glasgow comprehensive maybe wasn't the best policy for his own safety. So he decided on anonymity and stopped achieving. Instead of being top in Maths, he deliberately under-performed. "The really disappointing thing was that the teachers didn't notice it, so they let him under-perform."

teachers interpreted this highly positive statement (i.e. all students should be encouraged and given the right to learn a foreign language³) in a negative way: remove atypically poor children from Modern Languages, and set a trend for 'opting out', rather than encouraging "average" and atypically talented children to pursue their language learning with more vigour, for longer and to a higher standard than before.

Other possibilities for inclusion of the gifted have relied on comparisons with the areas of sports or music. One such example is Freeman's Sports Approach (Freeman, 2000), where students make the choice to take extra provision to improve skills. There is, however, no entrance examination to determine if they *should* be able to cope with the demands of the work. Facilities are open to all and not just those pre-selected by educators through summative assessment or stereotypical views of 'gifted-ness'. Such an approach has been used successfully in the educational world of music and sport, with selection taking place over time (moving from the 'B' orchestra to the 'A' orchestra, from the second team to the first team), but with provision for all those who wish to be included in the activity.

The Partners in Excellence (PiE) project is the closest example to this approach that can be found in a Scottish modern foreign languages setting. PiE is a language-learning project coordinated on the behalf of three Local Education Authorities in the West coast of Scotland. It uses a combination of a Virtual Learning Environment, immersion trips abroad, summer schools and film-making weekends, enhanced ICT training and equipment in the 29 participating secondary schools. Pupils opt in to take part in all the activities, including immersion visits and, in the longer term, the popular Virtual Learning Environment.⁴ Many pupils who would not have been motivated to learn languages claim much higher motivation having taken part in the project, and the numbers taking foreign languages in the upper secondary school have increased year-on-year (Johnstone *et al.*, 2004).

However, despite projects like these, research into the concept of inclusion and its multiple ways of being applied is relatively young, with little evidence on the success or otherwise of the policy in regular classrooms in Scotland. So it has proven difficult thus far to persuade educators to look at adapting their practice to better accommodate the inclusive classroom (Smith, 2005).

2.2 Assessment: an unconstructive endgame?

Arguably then, policy messages affect curricula, which in turn affect the way teachers perceive their duties in teaching. Also, in planning for able pupils school managers have opted for setting (and in some cases streaming) in a bid to raise and maintain standards, despite research showing that setting is demotivating not just for those in 'bottom' sets but also for those deemed to be at the 'top' (Smith, 2005). The means of achieving set classes is nearly exclusively based on forms of summative assessment – grades and "goal achievement" having long been seen as indicators of intelligence (Dweck, 1999; Freeman, 2000). The pressure on teachers to have pupils gain success in summative tests is immense, with anecdotal evidence indicating the majority of the school year, from October until June, is taken up with preparation for and analysis of summative testing: continual assessments, National Assessment Bank tests (NABs), final exams and end-of-unit or year tests for non-certificate classes. Black and William (2002) believe that the dominance of summative assessment "can draw teachers away from the paths to effective formative assessment". This is against the background of a growing lobby, influenced by the same authors and enacted by recent political initiatives in the form of Assessment is for Learning (AifL), that reduces the importance of summative assessment, where students are encouraged in "drilling

³ See McConnell (2002)

⁴ www.languagezone.org

to produce right answers to short out-of-context questions”, and moves educators towards methods of effective formative assessment.

Summative assessment is narrow, testing the ability to gain relatively high marks on a set of questions, the teacher often teaching to the test and not managing to move beyond that. Time is a main factor here. Summative assessment normally links success to a ratio of normative benchmarks of quality compared to age. Thus, there is an assumption that all learners will learn the same amount at the same age to the same high standard. There is also an assumption that pupils will do their best for a test. Freeman (2000) disagrees, claiming that students, and gifted students in particular, learn best during “sensitive periods” and not the age-related “critical periods” that we rely on. “Critical periods” are those specific times that education systems and institutions impose for testing and recognising best achievement, such as Standard Grade examinations at the end of S4, Highers at the end of S5, and so on. By way of contrast, “sensitive periods” can occur at any moment and last an undetermined period of time, where children learn better and quicker. During these periods achievement is at its best. Sensitive periods and critical periods do not necessarily occur simultaneously. Gifted students are not consistently gifted, either (Smith, 2005). Some may reach a plateau, while other learners develop their ability in a particular area at a later stage. Summative assessment, where many students are tested simultaneously, does not lend itself to these non-age-related peculiarities that form the makeup of all students. Summative assessment tests at the end of a learning period and Sutherland (2005) questions whether Scottish schools, in the constant drive of “raising achievement”, are in fact pushing the “incremental view” of intelligence off the agenda. Also, what is the range of summative assessment and is that range sufficient to test the multiple intelligences *all* pupils display (Gardner, 1999)?

However, in a recent study on the use of chatrooms for language-learning (Tudini, 2003), transcripts of the written instant messaging sessions were used as a means of summative assessment. This was used in a way very different from the traditional summative test. Students chose their best transcripts from a semester of instant messaging sessions and these were then marked. The assessment can be classed as summative as the results were fed back at the end of the course and no feedback, other than a mark, was provided. However, the assessment here was not based around fixed questions from the teacher. So a different set of criteria were required in this summative assessment. Certainly, richness of grammar and correctness featured but the assessment also looked at fluency, conversation facilitation, the ability to reconstruct one’s language as a result of error correction, and the ability to solicit help. Indeed, it was this last criterion of summative assessment that created a formative assessment element in every instant messaging session: students constantly asked for help rephrasing their texts; most of the interactions involved some form of solicitation of help or rephrasing by a native speaker. This is one example where the instant messaging programme and the summative assessment aim given to students before the course of study combined to provide a formative assessment opportunity.

In the long term, formative assessment offers the practitioner the possibility to assess progress during the learner’s “sensitive periods”, when achievement and understanding is not only at its best, but also most receptive to constructive criticism for further improvement. The Assessment is for learning (AifL) programme in Scotland extols the positive aspects of formative assessment for every student’s learning. There are four main principles of this programme, which have guided this action research project. It was seen as necessary by Government to use these principles in the light of the expectation that all Scottish schools be part of AifL by 2007 (SE, 2004).

- Learners understand clearly what they are trying to learn, and what is expected of them;

- Learners are given feedback about the quality of their work and what they can do to make it better;
- Learners are given advice about how to go about making improvements;
- Learners are fully involved in deciding what needs to be done next, and who can give them help if they need it.

However, practitioners have generally revealed reductionalist attitudes to the teaching of mixed ability classes (Smith, 2005). For example:

- 'Giftedness' and talent are seen as innate;
- Intelligence is measured via IQ, which in turn is measured via summative testing;
- Tests are assigned for diagnosis of intelligence or the need for special (i.e. Lower ability) additional needs to be addressed;
- Development of gifted learners is their own responsibility (i.e. We speak of "throwing away talent");
- Intervention in either case means separation from one's peers.

This reductionalist attitude is not a built-in quality at all. Rather, it is the result of interactions and experiences (Sutherland, 2005) that have constrained teachers "to act against their better judgement about the best ways to develop the learning of their pupils" (Black and William, 2002). After all, the French *former* means "to educate", yet formative assessment is still lagging in most classroom pedagogy.

These principles can realistically be applied in the Scottish classroom. Inclusive education is not mutually exclusive from the education of able pupils. There is legislative provision for teacher training and resources (Sutherland 2005), and there are examples of pedagogical success in the learning that can take place in mixed ability, inclusive classes (see Ward, 2005⁵). The principles stated in AifL reveal the learner as the most important cog in the wheel of assessment and progression. The learner sets the pace and follows personal lines of interest with guidance from the teacher. The teacher is no longer the assessor while the learner quakes in expectancy. The learner is empowered to build knowledge not only from the teacher but also from his or her peers. This principle of constructivist and collaborative work is worthy of discussion in order to develop the four main ideas of formative assessment and find a pedagogy that will allow able and less able pupils to reach their full potential without target-setting from teachers or examination authorities reducing expectations, and thus results, a pedagogy that will draw learning back to the path of effective formative work. As we have seen, using tools such as instant messaging has had a proven success in furthering formative assessment while providing a necessary summative grade.

3. Constructivist approaches as a pedagogical influence: the 3rd Millennial School

3.1 Collaborative Learning and Constructivism

⁵ Ward's own action research, as part of the AifL pilot programme, was presented at the SALT 2003 Conference and published in the Scottish Languages Review (Issue 10).

Most educational institutions still concentrate on transmitting knowledge, filling pupils up with facts and trying to pinpoint what knowledge our students will require to be successful in a world that, really, we cannot predict. Felix (2005) suggests that in the light of the uncertain nature of the next 10, 15 or 20 years educational institutions should instead concentrate on developing in students certain values. He proposes that what he calls the "3rd Millennial School" upholds six distinct learning expectations:

- Flexibility;
- Inclusiveness;
- Collaboration;
- Authenticity;
- Relevance; and
- Extended institutional boundaries.

Collaboration appears to permeate each element of this vision. Collaboration also plays a key role in the Scottish context, notably in A Curriculum for Excellence (SEED, 2004a), which outlines its ambitions for learning to lead to successful learners (inclusiveness, flexibility, authenticity, *collaboration*), confident individuals (relevance, *collaboration*), effective contributors (through extended institutional boundaries and *collaboration*) and responsible citizens (inclusiveness, *collaboration*). The importance of collaboration is evident and supported in research (e.g. Gokhale, 1995), but collaboration for collaboration's sake will not work: it is always one of several facets of learning. Making collaborative work worthwhile and effective therefore requires the other elements in this 3rd Millennial mix to be well applied, and this is not as difficult a task as one might imagine.

Let us now examine how the "successful learners" element of 'A Curriculum for Excellence' equates to Felix's 3rd Millennial School and how this can be applied to Modern Languages.

3.2 Modern Languages in the 3rd Millennial School

Modern Languages teachers have always sought the means of providing authentic experiences for their students. In the past this was almost exclusively through school trips and exchanges for a small proportion of students or through realia brought back from the teacher's travels. More students are now participating in finding and using authentic materials through internet use. However, the teacher should open this world further to their learners. Learners are not always capable of finding authentic, worthwhile resources without the aid of the teacher. Traditionally this kind of support has been provided by creating type-written lists of online resources, subsequently by putting these on the wall of the library or classroom or, at its worst, bookmarked links being kept on the teacher's computer never to surface again until (s)he deems the resource of interest to a third party and then "releases" this knowledge. In some more advanced stages these links have been shared online as HTML (HyperText Markup Language) links on a webpage. The technical knowledge required on the part of the teacher has been significant in the latter case; most teachers find writing in the language of the internet, HTML, prohibitively difficult and time-consuming. By making this effort, though, some teachers have managed to begin breaking down the institutional boundaries to education, the same boundaries of classroom and timetabling that have stopped Freeman's Sports Approach of large numbers of pupils volunteering for extra tuition from taking hold in the time-poor busy life of a modern school.

However, to combine this authenticity offered by the internet with flexibility and relevance there is a change required in the roles of teacher and student. Where the teacher has been the "sage on the stage" there is now a necessity to move towards another model: "the guide on the side" (Bernier, 2003). We move back to the other constant in our model. Global interaction – or collaboration – has been a feature of the business and media world for many years and more initiatives are in place to help educators replicate this in the world of the classroom. This global interaction does in fact facilitate the breaking down of the classroom and school timetable to extend learning beyond these constraints. Negotiated curricula mean that learning is increasingly adapted to the needs of individual pupils (Tudini, 2003; Felix, 2005); learning is personalised leaving more time for the individual student to explore new avenues of learning; learners are being made more aware of *how* they learn not just *what* they learn. However, this meta-cognitive knowledge must be better used (Savery & Duffy, 1995; Felix, 2005); teaching learners *how* to learn is a methodology widely recognised as being essential if a learner is to know what (s)he does or doesn't know to construct more knowledge at the next lesson. The construction of new knowledge based on previous knowledge has thus far been in the hands of the teacher's lesson plans. Our collaborative learning model here puts the onus on the pupils to make the first move in deciding on to where to move.

Collaborative learning therefore represents the key for learners to achieve their best in this 3rd Millennial education generation: it brings together authentic resources, inclusiveness, it extends educational boundaries and brings more people into the classroom, and makes information more personalised and therefore more relevant to the learner. Combined with internet technology (particularly the emerging scope of "social software") collaborative learning means that the image of one teacher and 30 pupils is no longer valid. Pupils are no longer restricted to one point of view and one source of facts – their teacher – as they have primary access to authentic resources and experts from beyond their classroom walls.

The follow-up article, "From Learning Logs to Learning Blogs", will show how social software combines this theory with technology in practice.

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