

## AS OTHERS SEE US...

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### *Abstract*

This article describes a small piece of research, which was undertaken to gain pupils' perceptions of techniques and strategies used by teachers who use the target language extensively in the modern languages classroom. A sample of S3 pupils from one school, representing a variety of ability levels, was interviewed about their language teachers' efforts to develop their oral skills in the foreign language (French). The aim was to explore the learners' perspective of this approach.

The pupils interviewed were aware of many of the techniques their teachers used in the classroom to help them improve their speaking skills and considered that the teachers' use of the TL did facilitate development of their language skills. When talking about their own contributions in the foreign language, all pupils mentioned the embarrassment of speaking out in front of their peers as an issue inhibiting their participation. However, they also indicated which activities made them feel more secure and disposed to speak. The study was exploratory and on a very small scale but suggests the need for more research into the strategies ML teachers use to overcome learners' inhibitions and that successfully promote development of pupils' oral skills.

### *Learning to speak a modern foreign language*

In the world of business, language skills are seen as advantageous, not only in terms of being able to communicate with others, but also as a means of development of the individual. The following quotes by Neil Bentley, Head of Skills and Employment at CBI and Isabella Moore, ex-president of the British Chambers of Commerce & Industry and now Director of CILT, the National Centre for Languages, serve to illustrate the attitudes of business regarding the desirability of speaking another language:

"...just talking English doesn't cut the mustard, so if we don't have young people with language skills, we're not going to win the deals." (Bentley 2005).

"Language learning contributes to literacy and citizenship, teaches intercultural awareness, builds knowledge of other cultures and improves communicative competence". (Moore 2005)

However it would appear that it is not only business but also many of our young people themselves who see the benefit of learning to speak a foreign language. A recent survey commissioned by the youth work charity YouthLink (2003), which questioned over three thousand young people between the ages of 11 and 25, found that 41% said they would like to work in Europe. It would seem logical to infer that they see themselves speaking the language of whichever country they opt to work in. Therefore the focus of this investigation was to gain views from a sample of learners about how the teacher facilitated development of their oral skills. The next section takes a brief look at some of the current arguments about how best this can be achieved. It considers some of the approaches towards developing learners' language skills and describes some of the issues that informed the interview questions, relating to the teachers' use of the target language (henceforth TL) and activities and strategies that supported or hindered development of the pupils' oral skills.

### *Setting the study in context*

In the Scottish secondary context, the teacher may be the only source of TL input that many pupils are exposed to. It would thus seem reasonable to assume that pupils who have only 3 or 4 hours a week of a modern language, should have exposure to as much of the TL as possible (Turnbull, 2001). This makes the greatest use of the time available to promote conscious and unconscious learning (Macdonald, 1993). Turnbull argues that teacher TL use, which he calls 'teacher talk' in the classroom has considerable influence on learners' progress. Ellis and Sinclair (1996) claim that the recurrence of language to which learners are exposed in the day-to-day routine of the languages classroom aids consolidation of vocabulary and phrases. However, despite a majority of studies supporting the use of the TL as the desirable means of interaction in class (Ellis 1986; Lightbown 1991; Gass & Varonis 1994; Gass 1997), there are also arguments against its exclusive or near exclusive use. Cook (2001) argues that the learners' first language may be used effectively to introduce vocabulary and grammatical concepts, which learners may find difficult or need time to interpret. Curran's Community Language Learning (1976), the new Concurrent Method (Jacobson, 1990) and the Bilingual Method (Dodson, 1967), all argue that the use of the learners' first language in the classroom under certain conditions in conjunction with the second language does not affect the learners' eventual achievement in terms of oral production.

Taking the above contentions into consideration, it seemed appropriate to ask the 'consumers', i.e. the pupils, their opinions of the way they were taught. The majority of research concerning TL teaching has been done in English taught as a foreign language, with adult learners, and I was keen to ask Scottish adolescent learners if the teachers' use of the TL, in this case French, in the classroom was something they viewed positively or not.

They were asked for details of the kind of language used by teachers in the classroom in order to interact with the class and to stimulate a response in the target language. It was envisaged that the pupils' answers might also indicate strategies that do not support pupils' contributions. In addition, pupils were also asked about activities that gave them the opportunity to practise and improve their output and how these were managed. As Ur (1995) contends:

'...the most important classroom activity of the teacher is to initiate and manage activities that provide students with opportunities for effective practice.'

As the main focus was on techniques used by teachers with the intention of making their pupils talk confidently, it was also necessary to look at how teachers dealt with pupils' errors in speaking. The handling of error correction has to be approached sensitively by the teacher in order to sustain a feeling of achievement by the learner (Edge 1989). Lynch (1996) points out that, unless carefully managed, the act of correcting may impose an emotional burden on the learner as teachers' responses to learners' contribution in the foreign language provide not only cognitive feedback, but also affective feedback, demonstrating approval or disapproval. As the pupils interviewed were all adolescent learners, possibly more sensitive to criticism than more mature learners, I felt that this was an area that also needed investigation. The next section briefly describes the socio-economic profile of the school the pupils attend, before moving on to describe sampling decisions and how the data was collected.

### *The school*

At the time of the study I was Principal Teacher of Modern Languages in a small (480 pupils) comprehensive school in the north of Edinburgh, in an area of multiple deprivation. According to the 2004 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation figures, the total

school catchment area is one of the 15% of most deprived areas of Scotland. However, there is one district within the catchment area, which falls into the bottom 3% in terms of deprivation. Almost half of the pupils qualify for free meals (43%). 5-14 levels for the S1 intake (2003) for Mathematics and English were as follows:

	Level A	Level B	Level C	Level D	Level E
<b>Mathematics</b>	12.5%	25.0%	41.3%		
<b>Reading</b>	14.4%	23.1%	21.2%	20.2%	5.8%
<b>Writing</b>	14.4%	32.7%	23.1%		

Nevertheless, despite general low levels of English language in relation to many other schools, the pupils are well disposed to learning modern languages. French and German are taught from S1 and there is a second language Spanish class in S3 and also one in S5/6. Each year there is a foreign trip to either France or Germany, which is usually oversubscribed. In the modern languages classroom all four members of staff in the department use the target language extensively. Working in a modern languages department in which the favoured means of communication in the classroom is the target language, I was particularly interested how pupils reacted to its almost exclusive use by their teachers and if they felt that this helped or hindered the development of their oral skills.

## Methods

### *Sampling*

In order to gain insights into pupils' views of the way they were helped to develop their speaking skills, a sample of pupils from third year (S3) was interviewed reflecting the spread of abilities and the ratio of boys to girls within the school. S3 pupils were chosen because they had at least three years of languages study. All studied French, although not all of the pupils selected had the same teacher, nor had they had the same teacher throughout their French learning experience in secondary school.

This was a deliberate choice because I wanted their responses to reflect how they perceived what was happening throughout the department, rather than views affected by attachment or hostility to one particular teacher. They were selected, not randomly, but according to a teacher rating of each pupil's ability and willingness to articulate his/her thoughts about the learning experience in the modern languages classroom.

In the ML department pupils were set according to ability. Pupils from different sets were interviewed in order to get responses from a range of ability levels. Seven pupils were interviewed about what makes them feel confident about talking in the TL: a boy and a girl from a top-performing set; a boy and a girl from a middle to top set; a girl from a middle to lower set; and a boy and a girl from a bottom set. All were about the middle of their class in terms of attainment. This was in an attempt to avoid possible over-positive or negative responses from pupils at the top end of the class or from pupils who were near the bottom in terms of attainment.

The sample represented just over 8 per cent of the S3 cohort. As a foundation for an investigation of a much bigger type, which I will subsequently be pursuing, I felt that, despite the small numbers, it was a useful exercise as a pilot study.

### *Interviews*

I chose to interview pupils so that if there were any misunderstandings they could ask for clarification and any answers that seemed interesting could be explored. In addition, I felt pupils would take an interview seriously and give greater thought to their answers. Each interview lasted no longer than 20 minutes and was recorded on audiotape. Pupils were told that their views were being sought in order to improve the service provided by the department and also to inform teachers in training. The questions were as open-ended and as non-directive as possible, to avoid pupils trying to second-guess what they thought might be an answer I might be looking for and it was stressed that they had to answer honestly even if they thought I wouldn't like the response. They were also given the opportunity to ask questions although none did. In an effort to ease them into the interview and get them talking the first four questions were about the pupils themselves. Thereafter questions were grouped into topics which reflected the central question of how they viewed the techniques teachers used in class to try to encourage them to talk: teacher use of the target language in the classroom; learner use of the target language in the classroom; handling of errors. The final question was a more general one about language learning. The questions used were as follows:

- How long have you been learning French?
- How confident or not do you feel about speaking French?
- Do you think you've made progress in speaking French or not?
- How do you know that you've made progress in speaking in French?
- When does the teacher speak French in class?
- Do you think it helps you to learn when the teacher talks French?
- If so, why? If not, why?
- If there is a problem in understanding when the teacher talks in French how does he/she make sure that everyone understands?
- What makes you talk French in class?
- What sort of speaking activities do you do in the languages classroom?
- Which speaking activities do you prefer?
- How do you know if you make a mistake?
- How do you feel about making mistakes in speaking?
- If you had to tell teachers the best way to get kids to talk in French, what would you say?

### *Analysis*

Transcripts of the interviews were studied and the data classified into categories representing commonalities and variations in the pupils' own experiences as described by them and relating to the questions.

## **Findings**

In response to the questions about teacher use of the TL, the pupils interviewed displayed a clear perception of what they thought the teacher was trying to achieve in class when focusing on oral production and how s/he went about it. All the pupils said their teachers used French as the medium of communication in the classroom all or almost all of the

time. They were unanimous that this was beneficial for the development of their understanding of the language:

'It's easier when he's speaking French ... gradually you get used to it';

'You're taking it in and you're learning it'

Pupils implicitly recognised that teachers employed a variety of methods to ensure understanding by the pupils. Features of teacher language which pupils indicated aided understanding included:

- Repetition: 'He goes over and over, over it all';
- Comprehension checks: 'He asks everyone "Do you understand"';
- Rewording/clarification: 'She explains it in a different way in French';
- Use of body language/actions: 'She does hand stuff and that and we know what she's talking about'.

Pupils appreciated that if difficulties in understanding persisted, the teacher used class support to ensure everybody's comprehension, asking someone in the class to explain what had been said. Alternatively in smaller group situations s/he would address pupils' needs directly, giving individual support:

'If you don't understand, he'll tell you and you'll understand the next time'.

However pupils also had their own strategies for dealing with comprehension problems. Either they asked the teacher directly:

'... we ask her what she said',

or they asked their peers, usually the person sitting next to them, to explain. If communication broke down completely the teacher used English, but pupils appeared to accept that this was only used as a last resort:

'She'll say it in English ... then she'll say it in French and get them to repeat it'.

With regard to the pupils' own contributions various methods were used by teachers to try and encourage pupils' participation in class. All the pupils talked of their teacher's insistence on pupils' use of the TL for communication within the class. Requests directed to the teacher for stationery items, toilet breaks etc. had to be made in the TL:

'You have to do it in French, like when you want a rubber ... or when you need help';

'We speak to her mostly in French instead of English'.

Pupils recognized that this was helpful for their language development, with one pupil saying it made her feel more confident. All pupils recognised that everyone would be asked to contribute and that there was no chance for anyone to opt out of speaking activities:

'... he goes round every pupil in the class; people that don't answer much, he asks them'.

When talking about the activities they did in class which helped develop their oral skills, all expressed appreciation of the use of 'language games' to help them speak, particularly the middle and lower set pupils. They all displayed an understanding of how games could help them learn while also acting as a motivational tool:

'... the teacher makes it fun, but while it's fun, we're learning as well'.

They were keen to win if it was a competitive game and thus made more of an effort with pronunciation and structure:

'... so you want to try really hard to win the game'.

One pupil said that she spoke more confidently during games as there wasn't the pressure of being assessed. Role-plays were also popular with both top and lower ranking pupils. Some indicated a preference for working with one or two others, rather than speaking out before the whole class:

'It's like someone you know and you don't worry'.

The lowest ranking pupils enjoyed re-visiting formerly learned material, seeing it as a means of retaining what they had already learned and improving their performance:

'Things that you've done before. Get better at them'.

Many of the pupils mentioned a forthcoming trip to France as a motivational factor, although not all of them were going.

With regard to errors, teachers were perceived as being clear about marking them, while encouraging their learners to continue:

'If you do it a bit wrong he'll tell you and you have to try again'.

They employed various methods of correction, including modelling the correct answer, giving the first letter of a word or the first word of a phrase and visual clues, pointing to objects or miming actions to jog pupils' memory:

'She gives us a wee clue ... and then we, like, jog our memory'.

In much the same way as pupils relied on their classmates for assistance if understanding the teacher's language caused difficulty, peer support was also evident in correction of errors when pupils were producing their own language:

'... someone in the class'll try and help you a bit'.

However pupils did not always view their peers' intervention as supportive, fearing ridicule if they made a mistake:

'... all the rest of the class might start laughing at you'.

However, when pressed, no one admitted to having been laughed at by another class member, nor having derided anyone when a mistake was made. Nonetheless this uneasiness was something mentioned by all pupils, who all expressed some level of embarrassment and lack of confidence about speaking out in front of the whole class:

'It's quite embarrassing ... everyone's listening to you'.

This feeling was despite clearly understanding that making mistakes was an inevitable part of their learning:

'Everybody makes mistakes'; '... 'cos you've got to learn'.

### *Conclusions*

It is clear from the pupils' responses that they are aware of many of the techniques used by teachers to develop their speaking skills in the foreign language. They approved of an environment where the TL was the agreed means of communication and accepted that everyone was required to contribute. As one pupil noted,

'I think if he just taught us and spoke English in the middle, we'd never learn French'

They recognised teachers' strategies for making their language more comprehensible to their learners, whether this involved using other members of the class to explain, or steps taken by the teacher him/herself, such as repetition, exaggerated body language, rewording and elaboration. Games used to practise speaking were appreciated, as were role-plays and pair work, particularly in terms of providing a more secure context for less confident speakers to express themselves.

However lack of confidence as a barrier to speaking in class was a factor raised by every pupil interviewed, either referring to their own experience, or that of others. Fear of derision by their peers and possibly implicitly by the teacher was an element that featured in these pupils' impressions of factors inhibiting learners from speaking in class.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive views expressed by the pupils of the way their teachers went about encouraging their oral contributions, perhaps in the light of their lack of confidence, we should be looking at how other countries manage to produce confident communicators in foreign languages. Germany springs to mind as an example. Or perhaps within our own education system, pupils might be less inhibited about speaking out if they were encouraged to believe, not just by ML teachers, that learning to speak a foreign language is essential and advantageous, both in terms of personal development and future possibilities. After all, Scotland's First Minister, in a debate in the Scottish parliament in 2001 stated,

"I believe that all our young people should have the right to learn a language - it's essential for them, for us and for Scotland."

This was a very small-scale study involving a sample of students from one year-group in one school. Pupils in other schools, from other backgrounds, exposed to different teaching methods, might very well answer the questions with a different emphasis. However the consensus of these pupils was that they were happy with the methods used by their teachers to help them develop their speaking skills and the issues raised are ones which the majority of teachers are working to address in order to give pupils the confidence and the skills they need not only to pass exams but to be able to participate in meaningful interaction at a global level. A further larger study is planned to look at how teachers who are viewed as successful stimulate and support pupils' contributions in the foreign language.

## Notes

**Community Language Learning.** Curran's method involves the teacher conveying the meaning of the students' L1 sentences by translation into the L2.

**New Concurrent Method.** Jacobson suggests that teachers can make systematic use of cognates and of code switching between the two languages in the classroom.

**Bilingual Method.** Dodson's bilingual method conveys the L2 meaning through the teacher's 'interpreting' L2 sentences into the L1.

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