

TITLE OF THE ASSIGNMENT: How can we tackle male student disengagement in the Modern Foreign Languages classroom?

Download a copy and have a go at highlighting examples where this student is meeting the success criteria.

Show where **the student has followed the module brief** – an outstanding engagement with the instructions.

Show in **purple text** where a student has grasped a concept, cited an author or critically engaged with the literature/practice.

Show in **green text** where the student is making links between theory and practice.

In **red text** highlight coherence in the essay (clear use of discourse markers); where they have set out longer quotations correctly and referenced accurately.

How can we tackle male student disengagement in the Modern Foreign Languages classroom?

I was drawn to focus on this area for two main reasons. The first is student-centred, and the second is subject-centred. My previous placement was at an all-girls, non-selective, secular secondary school; and my current placement is at an all-boys, non-selective, religious school. It will be useful to explore the ongoing debate around boys and underachievement in

the context of having also taught in an all-girls classroom. Interestingly, from very early on in my second placement, it seemed to me that in terms of misbehaviour, disaffection and disengagement were more of an issue in the all-boys environment I had experienced, whereas generally, diligence and focus in the classroom – while present at both schools, was more common in the all-girls environment. The reasons for this may have nothing to do with gender, and I hope that engaging further with academic research on this topic will help me come to some conclusions.

In **Michael Kimmel's** research on the reported achievement gap between boys and girls, he says that:

[There is] ... the persistence of an ideology of masculinity – especially among working class boys and minority boys - that being serious about school contradicts the basic tenets of masculinity. By contrast, disengagement from school is actually seen as an enhancement of masculinity. (**Kimmel**, 2010: 28).

In this article, **Kimmel** also looks at the discrepancy in achievement between boys and girls in English and Foreign Languages, where he discovers that girls' test scores in these subjects are said to 'outpace boys significantly.' I checked UK data, and discovered that boys almost match girls in achievement in the UK. But, there was a marked difference between boys and girls in GCSE achievement in English and Modern Languages. (**Skelton and Francis**, 2005: 4). Kimmel argues that any mismatch in achievement levels is due to disengagement caused by an outdated masculine ideal where subjects such as English are seen as 'feminine' and therefore at odds with the 'norms of masculinity' (**Kimmel**, 2010:34-5).

The second reason I have chosen to focus on disengagement is because I feel it is particularly relevant to my subject. Taking languages at GCSE is not compulsory. It is therefore understandable that some students see it as a less relevant subject to engage with at school. Why spend time learning vocabulary about the school day when you could be

committing your time to practising your algebra for your maths GCSE? This is further compounded by the simple fact that as speakers of English, a widely spoken and global language, many students struggle to “see the point” of learning French, Spanish or German, when “everyone speaks English anyway!”. This sits in stark contrast to students in other parts of Europe, where learning one or two other languages is not only common, but expected and necessary. Interest and engagement in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) could also be influenced by stereotypical, gendered attitudes to studying languages and humanities.

First, let's examine the nature of disengagement in my current placement. Rogers identifies several key behavioural symptoms of disengagement, which include being non-compliant (but not aggressive or threatening); creating low level disruption; repeatedly being excluded; absence for 20% or more of the academic year; and being quiet and withdrawn in lessons. (Rogers, 2016 :132). I have witnessed all these behaviours in certain students at my current placement, bar the high level of absence. The non-compliant behaviour mentioned particularly manifests itself in a non-confrontational refusal to complete exercises, write in exercise books; or talk to fellow students during pair or group work. This behaviour also manifests in students resting their heads on the desk and trying to sleep. A less obvious example of disengagement, that is far more common, is a student simply trying to be invisible by never putting their hand up or engaging in class discussion, and doing the bare minimum of work required.

The first method of tackling disengagement that I will discuss here, that has been seen to be effective, and which encompasses several separate strategies, is to use ‘a range of teaching methods’, adapting to the needs and learning styles of all pupils. (**Riley, Rustique-Forrester**, 2002: 73). The authors of this book found that lessons that young people dislike the most and find ‘boring’ are those that are ‘repetitive, rigid and not catering to the diversity of learning styles.’ For example, the authors identify ‘boring’ tasks as completing worksheets or copying notes from board (Ibid., 72). Although I would agree that

copying notes from the board would fall under the description of a 'boring' task for students to complete, the claim that repetitive tasks fail to cater to a diverse range of learning styles **is contestable** due to its assumed existence of these different learning styles. In 2008, scholars carried out a review of existing literature on learning styles. They found that although numerous studies have supposedly confirmed the existence of different learning types (e.g. audio, visual etc.), those studies were not conducted in a manner that would make their findings valid. And, regarding the claim that different people have varying, specific aptitudes for processing new ideas, the reviewers found virtually no evidence for this. (**Pashler** et al, 2009). In summary, let us ignore **Riley and Rustique-Forrester's** reference to these learning styles, and take on board their valid idea that 1) all students need varied, interesting tasks in the classroom to enable engagement.

This idea is also supported by **Lumby** who states that to learn, disengaged students need active teaching methods and the opportunity to work with other students. This makes sense: working with other students offers a break from the traditional teacher-led classroom and offers greater variety. **Buck and Wightwick** also highlight the importance of promoting this kind of interactive, dynamic communication between students in the MFL classroom in their book, which focuses on the idea of learning by doing. They warn that if a lesson is centred on the teacher for too long, students don't get the opportunity to use the language skills they have learned, which in turn can lead to disenchantment with the subject, and a reluctance to continue with it (**Buck and Wightwick**, 2013: 55,1).

Within the MFL classroom, this diversity and dynamism can be achieved in a number of ways. Communicative language teaching (CLT) – an MFL teaching style that has been widely adopted across the UK – requires that the teacher sets up a range of short activities for the students, which often involve a lot of social interaction in the target language (TL). The activities will have an aim, and the students will need to employ their knowledge of the TL in order to accomplish that aim. (**Littlewood**, 1981). CLT also often incorporates an element of competition into the classroom. For example, the teacher may split the class into

two teams, awarding teams points when members get involved; or having representatives from each team 'compete' in 1-1 games.

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Another way to tackle disengagement, according to the literature, is 4) through working with the student to boost their self-esteem and self-belief. In a systematic review looking into theories behind behaviour in learning contexts, two explanations found by the authors for off-task behaviour were related to the student's confidence in their ability. Specifically, a 'fear of failure' and a belief that they are 'unable' to do the task at hand (**Powell et al**, 2004).

Lumby's research also supports this explanation of disengaged, off-task behaviour when he states that in order to thrive in school, students need to have a 'sense of competence' and to 'feel valued' rather than feeling like a 'problem that needs solving'. (Lumby,2013).

I have witnessed the effectiveness of this simple, compassionate approach to disengagement in my previous placement. One pupil in my year 7 class was the quietest of the group, never raising her hand, and often silently refusing to complete her work. She seemed to lack confidence. In order to help her contribute more, during some pair work I asked her what an answer to something was. It was half right, and I helped her work out the correct answer. When feeding back (with hands down) I chose her to answer - she was shy, but with my encouragement and praise, she gave the answer in Spanish correctly. I made sure she felt really proud of this by giving her lots of encouragement and a house point. Later that lesson she showed how much more engaged she was by raising her hand of her own volition to answer a question for the very first time in one of my lessons. This was very motivating to see, and showed to me how effective this sort of coaxing, encouraging approach can be. I kept this up, and she became one of my students who got involved in classroom discussion most regularly.

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It may also be helpful to consider the students' gender when tackling disengagement through helping the students to see the relevance of MFL. As discussed earlier in this essay, some students may be at risk of believing out-dated stereotypes that tell them that maths and sciences are for boys, and English, languages and the arts are for girls. (Kimmel, 2010:34-35). In my observations so far at an all-boys school, I have noticed symptoms of this. In a class of 30 students, during an exercise where students had to write in French about the subjects they liked and disliked, I was surprised by how unanimously the pupils said they disliked English, while the majority stated they liked maths, and DT. This is of course not conclusive evidence, but may point towards a natural inclination, driven by peer pressure, to conform to traditional gender stereotypes when it comes to study and achievement.

For this project, I intend to focus on three strategies to tackle male student disengagement in the MFL classroom. The first I will employ falls under the wider strategy of using a range of teaching methods – using games and competition to engage disaffected learners. I choose to focus on this because this is an element of CLT I have found logistically challenging to introduce in the past, but which I have seen to be effective.

The second strategy I will focus on is working on building the self-confidence and esteem of pupils through targeted questioning, praise and 1-1 support.

Finally, the third strategy detailed above, is about making the subject relevant to the pupils. I will do this through ensuring that in the vast majority of lessons I teach, I include one of the following: a cultural reference/interesting fact; or a multi-lingual role model.

I will measure the effectiveness of the chosen strategies through tracking the progress and levels of participation in student A, who is in my year 8, mixed ability French class.

Student A is regularly on report, and therefore clearly often has to be reprimanded for negative behaviour in other subjects too. I decided to focus on this student, as during my

observation period at this placement, I noticed that he regularly exhibited many of the behaviours mentioned earlier in this essay that show disengagement: regularly being off-task; disrupting others through talking to them; resting his head on the desk; not putting his hand up during questioning and being very slow to start classroom tasks or activities (if he starts them at all).

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I will begin by evaluating the impact of strategy two: using games and competition. In order to test this strategy, I implemented a series of lessons. All of these included at least two games with elements of competition. In figure one you can see one of these lesson plans, which includes a game where pairs must work together to unjumble and order examples of dialogues correctly (activity 2). The pairs are given the incentive of house points – the first few pairs to finish are awarded. The other game is called ‘Les points’ – The points (activity four). In this game, the class is split into two teams. To win points, a student must translate a phrase in the boxes correctly. They must choose the box they want to try by using French (e.g. C, deux = C2). If they are correct, the teacher clicks on the box to reveal how many points they get, and their team is awarded. (See Figure two for Powerpoint slide). I chose a student volunteer to record the points for both teams on the board. To check how well this strategy was improving student A’s disengagement, I asked my mentor to observe him for three lessons before the strategy was implemented, and for the four lessons when my strategies were implemented. I asked my mentor to make a tally of how many times student A exhibited off-task behaviour in each of the lessons’ activities, using the proforma shown in Figure three. You can find examples of these tallies in this ‘before’ and ‘after’ period in the Appendix in Figures four and five. As you can see in Figure five, which corresponds to the lesson plan described, during the ‘les points’ game, student A did not go off-task once. During the other game, where he had to unjumble a dialogue with his partner, he went off-task three times. This may simply have been because it was still early in the lesson, and he hadn’t yet settled in, or because he doesn’t like working in a pair, or maybe he didn’t like

or understand the topic. It's impossible to know for sure. During the three-lesson 'before' period, where no games or competition were included in the lesson, student A was recorded as 'off-task', on average, 15 times. In the four-lesson 'after' period when I was testing this strategy and including at least 2 competitive games in each lesson, he was recorded as off-task, on average, eight times. Despite there being strong evidence that games and competition help to engage boys in MFL lessons, as mentioned earlier, (Jones, 2001) we cannot assume that it was these games and competition that improved student A's disengagement. It could have been that my mentor's perception of the student's engagement shifted because she knew I had started implementing this strategy, meaning she noticed off-task behaviour less. Or it could have been other external factors, such as a personal decision to focus better in class. Or, it may have been caused by the other strategy I implemented, which resulted in a growing rapport between myself and student A.

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Appendix – figures 1 - 11

See evidence portfolio

	A	B	C	D	E
1	250 gr of cheese	1 kilo of pears	12 potatoes	1 tin of tuna	500gr of fish
2	50gr of raspberries	100gr of salt	1 and a half kilos of strawberries	½ a kilo of ham	2kg of chicken
3	450g of meat	250gr of carrots	A bag of potatoes	A packet of biscuits	A piece of cake
4	½ a kilo of cherries	Two tins of fish	1.5 kilos of tomatoes	A tin of tomatoes	10 slices of ham

Roe Hampton London PGCE MFL

Student teacher: *LD* Observer: *GCW*
 Date: *10/2/19* Class: *8 1st 2nd*
 Language: *FRENCH* Ability range group: *Mixed*

SEND/EAL students (names & details):

Resources including ICT:
 Last lesson: *vocab test - foods / opinions on food*
 Title: *Au Marche!*
 Objective: *Understand + be able to ask for food + drink at a French market*

Time	Activity	Description Details
11:50	Entrance/ Starter	Watch up on board - vocab - last lesson (check scores = 15/16) (P1183) (K/W)
12:00	Unjumble dialogue	1. Show dialogue pair-work 2. Unjumble + slide in correctly → <i>not to push</i> (K/W) (P1183)
12:10	Listening	Gap fill: different market + correct (check-ge) dialogues (L)
12:20	Points Game	- 2 teams - Boys have to translate phrases correctly on board (speaking) (H/ROCK = more points to win points)
12:30	Speaking	→ Boys use dialogues from earlier = practice French
12:35	Plenary	
12:39	+ feedback to class	→ 1 boy learned, 1 thing to keep practicing 1 translation (I would like 300g of apples, please → G)
12:40	Dismiss	

Student: [redacted] Year: *8*
 Key Stage: *KS3*
 Topic: *What you like to eat*

Off-task behaviour tally:

(Off-task = talking to others / head on desk / avoiding starting task / silent in speaking activity)

Task 1: *111*
 Task 2: *11*
 Task 3: *111*

Student: _____
 Key Stage: _____ Year: _____
 Topic: _____

Off-task behaviour tally:

(Off-task ^{eg} = talking to others / head on desk / avoiding starting task / silent in speaking activity)

Task 1: _____

Task 2: _____

Task 3: _____

Task 4: _____

Task 5: _____

Figure 3: Proforma to log off-task behaviour

Student: [REDACTED]
 Key Stage: KS3 Year: 8
 Topic: Going to the market

Off-task behaviour tally:

(Off-task ^{eg} = talking to others / head on desk / avoiding starting task / silent in speaking activity)

Task 1: ||

Task 2: |||

Task 3: ||

Task 4: _____

Task 5: |

Figure 5: After strategies implemented: tally of off-task behaviour

SELF-REFLECTION
 TM with Student A 14/03/19

This is the second TM I have had with this student. He was given a caution for talking too much. I used restorative techniques - why kept back? / what was going on? / what will we do differently next time? I praised him, telling him he is clearly able, + is capable of producing good work. There was a collaborative atmosphere. He promised to stay on task better next lesson.

SELF-REFLECTION 18/3/19
Student A behaviour

Student A's behaviour was better this lesson. As he came in, I reminded him of our chat last week, and what we decided to do differently this lesson. I was impressed with his increased levels of engagement - and I made sure to choose him when he put his hand up for the first time (I think!) in my lessons. On the way out, I told him 'good work today' and said I was pleased.

19/3/19
SELF-REFLECTION: Student A

Student A is now on report due to negative behaviour in other lessons. After today's lesson, I was generally pleased with his

21/3/19
SELF-REFLECTION: Student A

Today on student A's report, I gave him a (3) "achieved" - for all 3 of his report targets. I praised him on this, and told him that I have been really happy with his progress in my lessons, and to keep it up. He seemed happy when I said this and wished me a good day on his way out. I feel as though he has made very good