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Grammar in MFL teaching revisited

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This paper addresses a major issue in foreign language learning, namely the role and status of grammar within the context of recent policy and curriculum developments. An analysis of National Curriculum and GCSE requirements and their impact upon teachers and learners reveals the need for a significant reassessment of the profile of grammar. The stage is therefore set for a reappraisal of this issue, and a consideration of its compatibility with current communicative methods.

INTRODUCTION

Grammar has traditionally been a source of debate in the teaching of foreign languages. Its status has been largely determined by prevailing methodologies, themselves the prey of developments in research and shifting fashions. More significant than this, however, is the impact of policy change upon teaching and learning, which can signal a radical reversal of classroom practice, demanding swift and often inadequately prepared implementation. There can be little doubt that policy and syllabus requirements shape teacher perceptions, which in turn account for changing attitudes towards grammar in the classroom. A consideration of the historical context, current developments in policy and changes in examinations will clear the way for revisiting this fundamental and often misrepresented issue.

"There can be little doubt that policy and syllabus requirements shape teacher ...attitudes towards grammar in the classroom"

THE DECLINE OF GRAMMAR

It is a commonly held view in the foreign language teaching community that the role of grammar has suffered in favour of communicative approaches. The acknowledged deficiency in linguistic accuracy is particularly apparent in post-GCSE students (see Hurman, 1992), making teachers more acutely aware of the need to establish grammatical concepts at an earlier age. In his survey of A level French oral examiners' views Hurman found that 41% had observed a decline in language form (accuracy), while 56% commented on an increase in communicative skill. In their survey of examiners' reports of French A level and GCSE papers Metcalfe et al. (1995: 47) clearly highlight the need for accuracy to support communication skills; an SEG examiner notes: "The inability to form verb tenses or to choose the correct tense was the principal cause of failure to communicate the required information." Examiners clearly feel that "the move from accuracy has become too pronounced" and state in a report of 1992 that "the emphasis placed on successful communication seems to have encouraged a neglect of accurate writing" (Metcalfe et al. 1995: 47).

On the other hand a WJEC examiners' report of 1992 drew attention to candidates' rote-learning of grammar coupled with an inability to make any sense out of it (cited in Metcalfe et al., 1995: 50), who continue:

> ...Some candidates had filled their first page with three tense conjugations of regular paradigms (plus *avoir* and *être*) and had listed all the past participles, but were incapable of writing one single verb correctly in the context of a sentence.

This deficiency translates itself ultimately into a worrying lack of linguistic knowledge and grammatical awareness amongst those in Higher Education and those intending to teach. Bloor (1986) (cited in Metcalfe et al., 1995: 47) found "serious gaps in the linguistic knowledge of English of his Modern Languages university students (58% of whom could not identify an infinitive)." Research by Wray (1993) and Williamson and Hardman (1995) found similar deficiencies in linguistic knowledge amongst student teachers, and a QCA report on the teaching of grammar in the National Curriculum (QCA, 1998: 55) noted:

> Most young teachers have knowledge of some parts of speech but little overall understanding of syntax or its relation to the development of writing and many lack a framework to assess pupils' syntactic development.

Reasons for this disconcerting trend are in part attributable to prevailing policy and practice and their development over the past decade. It is therefore important to establish the role of grammar within communicative language teaching by analysing trends in the National Curriculum and GCSE examinations against the background of relevant research over this period.

GRAMMAR IN THE NATIONAL CURRICULUM

The teaching of grammar has long been a contentious issue and often the casualty of changing methodologies. The final report of the National Curriculum (DES/WO, 1990) contained many substantial and forward-looking recommendations, the force of which was subsequently much diluted. On the issue of grammar it recognised that 'modern language teaching and learning has suffered in the past from extremes of practice, and nowhere more than in the treatment of grammar' (9.22). In fact, the antithesis between 'grammar' and 'communication' is in many senses a false one, as Pachler and Field (1997:145) suggest: 'the ability to recognise linguistic patterns and to make use of and apply grammatical rules aids communication rather than inhibits it.'

Success in learning a foreign language in the period of the grammar-translation method was largely determined by the ability of the learner to understand and apply grammatical structures. This was achieved through close analysis of language patterns, explanations and rules, and it was assessed predominantly by means of written tasks, constructed to exemplify essential grammatical features of the language, rather than to realise a communicative purpose. Despite moves during the 1970s towards more communicative approaches, and initiatives such as the Graded Objectives movement, the place of grammar was not diminished because of the demand for grammatical accuracy in the O level examination. It was not until 1988 and the introduction of GCSE that the swing away from grammar-translation began to have a major impact. It would appear that the increased emphasis on the four skills in the GCSE was leading to a marginalisation of grammar.

Interestingly, however, in the final report for the National Curriculum (DES/WO, 1990: 9.14) a significant section of chapter 9 ("Sounds, words and structures") is devoted to the importance of grammar. The document stresses that grammar constitutes "the skeleton of any language" and goes on to state that "an increasing awareness of [grammar] can be an important ingredient in learners' progress towards a truly independent use of language." Furthermore it places grammar firmly at the centre of progress in the receptive, as well as the productive, skills by claiming that "...a good understanding of structures is also central to success in listening and reading."(DES/WO, 1990: 9.21).

By the time the statutory version of the National Curriculum appeared (DES/WO, 1991), the role assigned to grammar became diluted amongst a plethora of other more communicative considerations like "communicating in the target language", "understanding and responding", "developing the ability to work with others". Grammar itself was subsumed in the sub-section "developing language-learning skills and awareness of language"(DES/WO, 1991:25):

> Pupils should have regular opportunities to:
> use knowledge about language (linguistic patterns, structures, grammatical features and relationships and compound words and phrases) to infer meaning and develop their own use of language.

There are also references in the statements of attainment which imply a knowledge of grammar, (DES/WO, 1991), for example:

> ask about, describe and narrate *past, present and future* actions and events (AT2, Level 6b);
>
> apply basic elements of *grammar* to new contexts and generally adopt correct word order (AT4, Level 5);
>
> redraft writing tasks, achieving greater *accuracy, precision* and variety of expression (AT4, Level 7) (our italics).

"the antithesis between 'grammar' and 'communication' is in many senses a false one"

These references to grammar continue, both directly and indirectly, in the revised National Curriculum Programme of Study Part I, (DFE/WO, 1995: 3):

> Pupils should be taught to:
> 2i: describe and discuss *past, present and future* events;
> 2n: redraft their writing to improve its *accuracy* and presentation;
> 3f: understand and apply patterns, rules and exceptions in language forms and *structures* (our italics).

Similarly, in the attainment targets, progress to the higher levels can only be achieved through an understanding and application of tense forms, for example:

> Pupils show understanding...of familiar material from several topics, including *past, present and future* events (AT1, Level 5)
>
> They are beginning to apply basic elements of *grammar* in new contexts... (AT4, Level 5) (our italics).

As pupils progress through the levels more emphasis is given to the importance of accuracy. Thus, for example, AT2, Level 8 stipulates that language should be "largely *accurate* with few

mistakes of any significance", and AT3, Level 6 refers to "using context and *grammatical understanding*" to deduce meaning. AT 4 Level 8 requires that "spelling and *grammar* are generally *accurate*" and the use of reference materials should "extend their range of language and improve *accuracy*" (our italics).

In the 1999 document (DfEE/QCA, 1999) there are more direct references to the term "grammar" itself (which were absent from the 1995 document), both in the margin summaries and in the programme of study. The margin notes (DfEE/QCA, 1999:16) which summarise the main points that pupils will learn during a Key Stage state, at Key Stage 3, that pupils should:

> ...become familiar with the sounds, written form and *grammar* of the language, and use this knowledge with increasing confidence and competence, to express themselves in role-plays, conversations and writing (our italics).

"In the 1999 document... there are more direct references to the term "grammar""

Although these margin references are condensed into the "focus statement" in the National Curriculum for MFL in Wales (ACCAC, 2000: 6) and could in this form easily be overlooked, they are none the less resonant as a statement of intent: 'They [pupils] should be taught to pay increasing attention to *accuracy*, *grammar* and register' (our italics). At Key Stage 4 (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16) there is a marked progression. Thus, pupils should 'begin to use a modern foreign language more independently, drawing on *a firmer grasp of grammar*, and a wider and more complex range of expression' (our italics).

In the additional note on using the target language it is stated that:

> Pupils are expected to use and respond to the target language, and to use English only when necessary (for example when *discussing a grammar point* or when comparing English and the target language) (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16) (our italics).

The Programme of Study itself again refers explicitly to the term "grammar", for example in the section "acquiring knowledge, skills and understanding of the target language"(DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16, 1b) and "knowledge of language": 'Pupils should be taught... the *grammar* of the target language and how to apply it' (ACCAC, 2000: 6, 3.4) (our italics).

Other references are equally unambiguous: 'Pupils should be taught... how to express themselves using a *range of vocabulary and structures*' (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16,1c) (our italics).

The sub-section "developing language skills" states that 'pupils should be taught... how to redraft their writing to improve its *accuracy* and presentation, including the use of ICT' (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 16, 2j) (our italics).

Similarly in the National Curriculum for MFL in Wales Key Stage 3 Programme of Study (ACCAC, 2000: 7, 5.8):

> Pupils should be given opportunities to: produce a variety of types of writing, including the use of ICT, redrafting where necessary, to improve *accuracy* and presentation.

The Attainment Targets contain references to grammar similar to those in the 1995 document, but these have become more substantial and overt. The table below (Fig.1) summarises these more direct references in the 1999/2000 documents, highlighting differences of emphasis and wording between the English and Welsh National Curriculum versions.

Figure 1

	NC for England	NC for MFL in Wales
AT1, Level 6	Pupils show that they understand short narrative and extracts of spoken language, which cover various *past, present and future events* and include familiar language in unfamiliar contexts	(as in England)
AT2, Level 4	They are beginning to use their *knowledge of grammar* to adapt and substitute single words and phrases (our italics).	They are beginning to use their *knowledge of language* to adapt and substitute single words and phrases (our italics).
AT2, Level 6	they apply their *knowledge of grammar* in new contexts (our italics).	(as in England)
AT 4, Level 4	They are beginning to use their *knowledge of grammar* to adapt and substitute individual words and set phrases (our italics).	(Same as in 1995, i.e. they adapt a model *by* substituting individual words and phrases.)
AT 4, Level 6	They apply *grammar* in new contexts. Although there may be occasional mistakes, the meaning is clear (our italics).	They apply their knowledge of *grammar* in new contexts. Although there may be a few mistakes, the meaning is usually clear (our italics).
AT 4, Exceptional performance	Pupils write coherently and *accurately* about a wide range of factual and imaginative topics. (our italics).	(as in England)

As can be seen, therefore, there is a clearly discernible progression from the 1995 revised version of the National Curriculum for MFL to the 1999/2000 documents. Does the use of the actual term "grammar" signal its reinstatement from its marginalised status? The answer to this question must surely lie with the GCSE examination system, which after all to a large extent determines and defines classroom practice.

GRAMMAR AND GCSE

The influence of examination syllabuses and specifications on classroom methodology is indisputable and will inevitably govern practice more than the National Curriculum at Key Stage 4. As Norman (1998: 49) suggests:

> [GCSE] assumes the role of methodological intermediary making explicit nationally prescribed proposals (NC) in the development of appropriate test forms, which in turn directly determine classroom method.

The WJEC GCSE examination syllabus itself provides further evidence of the changed status of grammar. In the 1996 syllabus there was no reference to grammar in the assessment objectives, but there was a list of grammatical requirements, which indicated "item required for recognition purposes only" and " item required for productive use" (WJEC, 1996: 19). This was differentiated into two lists: Basic and Higher. Included in the basic level section on "verbs" was productive use of the present, imperfect, *passé composé*, and recognition of the future and the passive. The higher level requires recognition of the conditional perfect, past historic and present subjunctive. The whole list represents a formidable set of grammatical challenges, interestingly not reflected in the assessment objectives.

With the introduction of the revised GCSE (WJEC, 1998) came noteworthy changes to the status of grammar. Direct references to grammar were made in the assessment objectives:

> 3.3.2 **Speaking**. Candidates entered for Higher Tier will... be expected to:
> - use longer sequences of speech and a variety of vocabulary, *structure* and *time references*
> 3.3.4 **Writing.** Candidates entered for Foundation Tier will be expected to:
> - describe events in the *past, present and future.*
> Candidates entered for Higher Tier will... be expected to:
> - write with increasing *accuracy* and an increasingly wide range of language
> (our italics).

In the 1998 syllabus, grammatical structures that were previously differentiated at higher level have been incorporated into a requirement for all candidates. The distinction between "recognition" and "production" has disappeared. Instead there is a statement that "candidates entered for the Higher Tier should be able to use the more complex structures with a high degree of accuracy" (WJEC, 1998:13). In the example given for "order of pronouns" in the pre-1998 syllabus (WJEC, 1996:19) the phrase "*Il me l'a dit*" was identified for recognition only at basic level and production at higher level. In the new syllabus, candidates for both tiers should be able to recognise and use the structure. Most noticeable are the increased expectations in the area of verbs, including, for example, future, conditional and conditional perfect, again for recognition and use in both tiers! A number of other syllabus changes reflect a move towards raising the academic standard of the foundation tier. The extent to which these changes find expression in questions in the new GCSE examination papers has not yet been investigated and would be an interesting area of research.

Also the contexts of the newly merged topics require more skilful manipulation of grammatical structures in both foundation and higher tiers. Pre-1998 there was differentiation of tasks within topic areas for the basic and higher tiers, but this significantly changes after 1998. Thus, for example, in the topic area of food *all* candidates are now expected to be able to "comment on different types of restaurant (e.g. national/vegetarian) and say which they prefer and why, comment on food quality, make complaints" (WJEC, 1998: 8). Topics previously designated at higher level only have been subsumed into other categories and required by *all* candidates ("communications and the media", "emergencies", "health and welfare").

The rationale for this merging of topics and structures is to allow for foundation tier candidates to cope with the common questions that occur in both tiers and therefore to be in a position to achieve a grade C. Hence the grade descriptions for grade C (WJEC, 1998: 5) require candidates, for example, to be able to "express personal opinions and write about a variety of topics, including *past, present and future events*" (our italics).

It is interesting that in the 1996 WJEC syllabus there were no grade descriptions and therefore this grammatical hurdle for a grade C was not apparent. Their subsequent inclusion in the 1998 WJEC syllabus links grammar specifically to the assessment process. All of these changes will have an impact directly or indirectly on the role of grammar.

"The influence of examination syllabuses and specifications on classroom methodology is indisputable"

GRAMMAR AND COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CONFLICT?

In addition to the above there are issues concerning the nature of communicative language teaching and its primary emphasis on functions and notions, rather than grammatical objectives. It is interesting that Canale, quoted by Mitchell

(1994), suggests that communicative competence consists of four components:

> 1.Grammatical competence (linguistic competence, narrowly defined — pronunciation, syntax and vocabulary)
> 2.Discourse competence (knowledge of the rules governing the structure of longer texts, conversation etc.)
> 3.Sociolinguistic competence (control of speech and writing styles appropriate to different situations, knowledge of rules of politeness etc.)
> 4.Strategic competence (knowledge of coping strategies, which can keep communication going when language knowledge is still imperfect — e.g. how to negotiate meaning or repair misunderstandings).

"the consigning of grammar and communication to opposite ends of the methodological spectrum, in clear tension with each other, has led to the present impasse in the debate over language teaching standards"

But as Pachler, Norman and Field (1999: 23) point out, conceptions of communicative competence have changed and, in the British context at least, have become synonymous with notional-functional aspects, i.e. 2, 3 and 4 above, to the detriment of grammatical competence. Surely therefore there is a need to redress the balance and reaffirm the status of grammar alongside the other three competences. Grenfell (1996: 15) states:

> Setting grammar and communicative approaches against one another in the classroom does a disservice to both...each have their place in a balanced approach.

Pachler, Norman and Field (1999: 23) corroborate this and acknowledge its impact upon teaching standards:

> It seems the consigning of grammar and communication to opposite ends of the methodological spectrum, in clear tension with each other, has led to the present impasse in the debate over language teaching standards.

The risk of such claims, however, is the over-simplification, which such a polarisation produces, since it is neither useful nor practical to view these issues so discretely. We should be seeking to integrate, rather than separate. The over-emphasis on functions and notions that has led inexorably to the stranglehold of the topic-based approach has made such integration problematical and has eroded the value of grammar in foreign language teaching. (For a detailed discussion on teaching grammar in the MFL classroom see Pachler, 1999, Pachler, 2000 or Jones, 2000: 142-157).

Thus, for example, a unit which sets out to teach "free time and hobbies" will concentrate on a limited number of functions that will depend upon a larger number of structures. In the sentence "Are you playing chess this evening?" the communicative function is "enquiring about someone's future intentions". The grammar comprises present continuous, interrogative and second person. It is obvious, therefore, that teachers would need to be selective in their teaching of grammar points within the context of a given function. To adopt a totally grammatical approach would be functionally unviable, whilst adopting a communicative approach without sufficient grammatical analysis leaves an incomplete grasp of structure and an inability to transfer it to other situations and contexts. Consider too a sentence that may occur early in any French or German course such as "Every morning after breakfast he goes into the kitchen to do the washing up." This may be simply acquired, rehearsed and practised as an example of a topic on daily routine. Yet in French it contains no fewer than five major grammatical points, and in German as many as eight! Faced with this, there is clearly something of a practical dilemma and the danger is that the teacher, seeing the enormity of the grammatical task, will choose to concentrate on the message rather than the medium. (For further discussion see the section below "Selection of grammar within a topic.")

A research questionnaire aimed at establishing professional development needs of teachers in partnership schools involved in initial teacher training in South Wales was conducted during the academic year 1997-98. 46 teacher responses from 22 schools in 4 LEAs were analysed. These indicated a perceived need for training in the teaching of grammar, but more significantly provided the catalyst for a thorough reappraisal of the whole issue.

The questionnaire established the proportion of grammar taught in lessons at both Key Stages and at three ability levels. This is summarised in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1: What proportion of your lessons is spent teaching grammar?

n=46	% of lesson time	Lower Ability % of teachers	Middle Ability % of teachers	Upper Ability % of teachers
Key Stage 3	n/a	8	6	18
	0-10	74	26	8
	10-25	15	54	28
	25-30	2	11	37
	50-75	0	2	6
Key Stage 4	n/a	37	24	16
	0-10	19	4	2
	10-25	33	37	24
	25-30	8	30	43
	50-75	0	4	12

Teachers were not guided in their interpretation of the notion of "teaching grammar", whether covert or overt. For the purposes of this study, therefore, we are accepting a broad and all-embracing definition of the term. It emerged that in the majority of cases less than 50% of time is

spent teaching grammar at *any* ability level and *any* Key Stage. There is also clearly a correlation between ability level and the proportion of time spent teaching grammar, which is an interesting outcome in the light of research by Wright (1999: 36):

> There are those who would claim — bearing particularly in mind what Brumfit (1980) has said about the burden placed on memory by functional-notional approaches — that the less able a learner is, the more he or she needs the support of system and pattern, not the reverse.

This raises the possibility that the grammatical baby has been thrown out with the communicative bath water!

GRAMMAR TEACHING: PRACTICAL CONCERNS

Teaching grammar in the MFL context raises three fundamental issues of concern to teachers:

- the abstract nature of ***technical terminology***;
- the teaching of grammar through the medium of the ***target language***;
- the most appropriate ***selection of grammar*** within any given topic.

Technical terminology

The majority of pupils who begin to learn a foreign language have little or no awareness of grammatical concepts. In the learning of a foreign language, therefore, a lack of understanding of how words are connected in a sentence simply results in a meaningless string of vocabulary. Rendall (1998: 46) refers to Bodmer (1944; 1987) and his point about grammar: "having lists of words you know the usual meaning of, will not get you very far (in a language) unless you have knowledge of another kind."

Equally the existence of technical terminology renders the teaching of grammar problematic. The appearance of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998) and the "literacy hour", introduced into British primary schools in September 1999, addresses this precise issue, and it will be interesting to track the impact this has upon the teaching of MFL in the future. Thus in Year 3, Term 3, for example "Pupils should be taught... to identify pronouns and understand their functions in sentences"(DfEE, 1998: 36), in Year 4, Term 1, they should be taught "to revise work on verbs from Year 1, Term 3 and to investigate verb tenses: (past, present and future)" (DfEE, 1998: 38). This recalls Eric Hawkins' proposed language awareness programme for all pupils in the primary school (1984), which in turn echoes recommendations made in the Bullock Report (1975).

In the current context of foreign language teaching it is important that judicious use is made of technical terminology (metalanguage). This can be done in two ways: firstly by limiting the amount of metalanguage to essentials such as noun, verb, adjective, article, preposition, pronoun, adverb, and omitting such manifestly advanced concepts as preterite, subjunctive, passive etc., which "will appear pedantic, and most of it will be utter nonsense to students anyway" (Cross, 1991). Secondly, it is necessary to ensure that such metalanguage is only introduced after ample exposure to and practice of the language items themselves. Moreover, pupils should be encouraged to induce rules of grammar themselves from a plethora of examples and also to express these rules in their own words, which the teacher can then use as a basis for a more formal explanation. Such an approach was recommended to increase pupils' responsibility for their own learning as far back as the National Curriculum final report, which suggests that teachers might 'ask learners at appropriate intervals to summarise their understanding of a structure and to give examples of its use' (DES/WO, 1990: 9.19).

Such ownership of grammar by means of self-discovery and establishment of the learners' own rules and terms should lead to an easier acceptance of technical terminology when it is confronted eventually.

Target language grammar teaching

From discussions with teachers in partnership schools, structured teaching of grammar, particularly through the target language, was perceived as an essential professional development need. This situation signals a sea-change in attitudes from those recorded by Franklin (1990: 21), where 88% of teachers were explaining grammar in English, and 11% in French but "with difficulties". This change can in all probability be attributed to increased implementation of the National Curriculum and also the requirements of the revised GCSE for rubrics in the target language. In addition communicative methodology has brought with it increased status for the practical use of the target language, not only for teaching content, but also for instructional routine, management, incidental classroom interchanges — in short, meaningful interaction. (For further detailed empirical evidence in relation to target language and grammar teaching see Macaro 1997 and Macaro, 2000: 177-181.)

Possible reasons for not using the target language can be inferred from Franklin's research (1990: 21), which states that 83% of teachers did not use the target language because of their own lack of confidence. This must surely apply in even greater measure to the teaching of grammar, because of the specialised nature of language required, for example, "endings", "form", "add"

"having lists of words you know the usual meaning of will not get you very far (in a language) unless you have knowledge of another kind"

and "agreement." Yet these should not constitute such a major problem for either teacher or learner as they are often cognates, and as such easily recognisable. Also, and significantly, there is an increasing fund of resource support for teachers in the form of, for example, Macdonald's useful "Explanations (grammar)" in the section "Language for classroom use" (Macdonald, 1993). Similarly *Idées pratiques pour la classe de français*, (MGP, 1991) and *Praktische Ideen für den Deutschunterricht* (MGP, 1991) present grammar in the target language.

The conventions of course-book practice have not been conducive either to consistent target language teaching of grammar. Presentation of grammar points in the majority of post-National Curriculum course-books tends to take the form of "learning tips", where morphological features are highlighted but frequently not explained, or short explanations are given in English. There is a methodological mismatch between the presentation of grammar in reference sections at the back of the book and their treatment, usually in the form of these pattern boxes, in the teaching units themselves. The glossaries are commonly written in English, using often previously unexplained technical terms and do little to develop independent learning, precisely in an area where autonomy is of the essence. The tendency to relegate grammar to a summary at the back of the book, where detailed explanations are given in English and technical terminology is used, is at variance with the target language methodology used in the teaching units. New generation sixth form materials such as *Objectif Bac 1* (Pillette and Clark, 1999) and *Aufgeschlossen* (Esser, Spencer and Wesson, 1999) adopt a target language grammar teaching approach within the units themselves, although they still have their glossaries in English.

"Presentation of grammar points ...tends to take the form of 'learning tips', where morphological features are highlighted but frequently not explained"

However, the use of English to teach grammar may have far-reaching pedagogical implications because it relegates grammar to a different, "special" and difficult category. This in turn will inevitably influence pupils' perceptions, intimidating them and impeding progress in learning. If teaching in the target language is perceived as too demanding and threatening, the explanations given should arise directly from examples met in context, rather than being a set of abstract rules that will be unhelpful and in any case not always true. Equally valid is the approach recommended above for technical terminology, that is, that learners extrapolate rules themselves from their own practice and research. Such an approach is recognised as developing the key skills for the National Curriculum in England (DfEE/QCA, 1999: 8) and common requirements in Wales (ACCAC, 2000: 5), namely "improving own learning and performance" and "problem solving"(DfEE/QCA) and "problem solving"(ACCAC). As Pachler suggests (2000: 28):

> We need to provide more opportunities for learners to analyse the discourse features and discourse markers of texts, i.e. how texts are structured, with a view to learners modelling their own language production on it by extracting and recombining relevant information than is currently the case in many FL classrooms.

Once again one can trace the origins of this thinking back to the National Curriculum final report which states that 'the twin approaches of exploring and being shown rather than being told and of involving learners actively in the process are most likely to lead to success'(DES/WO, 1990: 9.22).

Selection of grammar within a topic

As GCSE syllabuses are designed around communicative goals, e.g. how to ask the way, buy an ice cream, the grammar cannot be restricted to a manageable, systematised progression. For example our sentence used earlier "Every day after breakfast He goes into the kitchen to do the washing up" becomes in German "*Jeden Morgen nach dem Frühstück geht er in die Küche, um abzuwaschen.*"

Although German is acknowledged to have a highly complex, inflected structure, the sentence "I would like to buy a kilo of apples at the market" in French similarly contains five grammatical points. The challenges for the teacher of moving beyond a purely "phrase-book" approach to teaching chunks of language are immense — s/he is forced to make a selection!

Brumfit (1980, cited by Wright, 1999) sees the burden on the learner's memory and the imposed division between grammatical sub-systems and communicative functions as uneconomical. He suggests that the most efficient solution is to place grammar at the core, and to have notional-functional material spiralling around it. Turner (1996: 18) illustrates this as a 'spiral staircase' allowing learners to build up their knowledge of the grammatical system gradually, through revisiting and extending what has been covered in the past. Hence partial knowledge will be extended later and grammatical items recycled through different topic areas, encouraging learners to see that language is transferable across topics. As Turner (1996: 16) notes: "in the absence of a 'National Syllabus' teachers turn to a coursebook for their syllabus", and these are "semantically organised in terms of topics, situations or functions". In her appraisal of three recent coursebooks she concludes that the approach taken "mystifies, rather than clarifies, the underlying grammatical system for learners." The teacher then must decide upon a selection of specific grammatical points and view them in a larger framework of grammatical progression. Thus,

for example, the construction "*Je voudrais*" can justifiably initially be taught as lexis. At a later stage of learning it must be included in a structured analysis, which moves from uninformed use of isolated vocabulary to deeper conceptual understanding. The danger here is that grammar may become decontextualised and taught discretely, rather than within a communicative context.

Coursebooks play their part in dictating the sequence of grammar to be taught and learnt. In the light of this a more critical and selective use of course-books by teachers is necessary. In the matter of good practice, the National Curriculum final report proposals recommended the selective use of course materials, highlighting that "there is no expectation...that everything in a course-book must be used or that what it contains will by itself satisfy all the needs of the group which is using it" (DfE/WO, 1990: 10.15).

Such selective use of materials should concentrate more upon the possibilities for extension and recycling at later stages, rather than presenting a piecemeal and disconnected treatment of a collection of phrases — a sort of linguistic survival kit!

GRAMMAR REVISITED: FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND KEY SKILLS

It is significant that a section of the final report for the National Curriculum (DES/WO, 1990, chapter 9: "Sounds, words and structures") is devoted to the importance of grammar. The document stresses that grammar constitutes "the skeleton of any language" (9.14) and goes on to state that "an increasing awareness of [it] can be an important ingredient in learners' progress towards a truly independent use of language." (9.14) There are also some very useful methodological principles, which neatly summarise the essentials of good practice. These advocate a presentation of grammatical structures "not through formal exposition, but through demonstrations which make a strong visual or oral impression, and require an active response" (9.17).

The essential feature of this process is the concretisation of concepts, arrived at through visual resource support (for example, timelines to illustrate tense, colour coding for gender). The clear note sounded here in favour of the pedagogical importance of grammar is not reflected, however, in the National Curriculum (DES/WO, 1991) or in the revised version (DES/WO, 1995.) The revision of 2000 signals a notable shift of emphasis in the status of grammar which would appear to be particularly opportune in the light of the increased demands for accuracy and the time constraints of the new AS specifications (WJEC, 2001/02), as well as the increased emphasis on grammar at GCSE level. The introduction of key skills at AS level and National Curriculum (1999/2000), particularly "improving own learning and performance", and the language-learning skills that form part of the programme of study of the National Curriculum will surely answer some of the challenges faced by the teacher in promoting cognitive skills such as problem-solving and independent learning. What we are advocating therefore is the beginning of a process leading to pupils discovering language patterns themselves, rather than being instructed in them, and to eventually "cracking the code" of technical terminology, which presents such an obstacle to effective learning for so many learners.

Practice activities such as role-play and information gap tasks then become less random, topic-bound and dependent solely on memory, and more an exercise in the application of a structure duly understood.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the preoccupation with standards in teaching and learning signals the reinstatement of grammar as a fundamental component of communication in foreign language teaching. As we have attempted to show, this is reflected in perceptions of teachers and in the changing character of syllabuses. The recent emphasis on the development of key skills surely provides a platform for a fresh approach to the issue of grammar and the age-old dilemma of how and when to incorporate it meaningfully. In other words, the case is established and the stage is set for revisiting.

"What we are advocating ...is the beginning of a process leading to pupils discovering language patterns themselves, rather than being instructed in them, and to eventually 'cracking the code' of technical terminology"

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