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### Interaction or instruction? A comparison of KS 3 and KS 4 MFL lessons

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# Interaction or Instruction? A comparison of KS 3 and KS 4 MFL lessons

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents one part of a wider study which looks at the space afforded to MFL teachers to make decisions about their teaching at the planning stage and in the classroom. The article focuses on the classroom observations which were one of the sources for the collection of rich data. In an attempt to quantify the space available, the study looks for evidence of interaction between the participants in the lessons with close analysis of the work of three MFL teachers. Interaction can take on different meanings to different people and I use it to mean an exchange, not necessarily vocal, between pupils and teacher. The article looks at the space for interaction in modern foreign languages lessons and compares Key Stage 3 (KS 3) with GCSE Key Stage 4 (KS 4) classes through an analysis of the data gathered in lesson observations. For each teacher two slices of lessons are analysed allowing comparison of the types of interaction between KS 3 and KS 4 lessons. The initial findings seem to indicate that some teachers adopt a more instructional style as they move into KS 4 and closer to the GCSE examination. In GCSE classes, there is a marked increase in the number of instructions as opposed to interactions together with an indication that in KS 4, more tasks are conducted as tests than is the case in KS 3. This difference has implications for the scope available to the MFL teachers in shaping their lessons.

## INTERACTION OR INSTRUCTION? A COMPARISON OF KS 3 AND KS 4 MFL LESSONS

As part of a wider study investigating teachers' space and motivation for choice within a sociocultural activity theory (SCAT) framework, I observed three MFL teachers, each teaching three lessons in KS 3 and three lessons in KS 4. Comparison of KS 3 and KS 4 lessons taught by individual teachers revealed quantitative and qualitative differences in the type of interactions observed.

## FRAMEWORK AND QUESTION

The larger study looks at the MFL lesson as a unit of activity where physical, cultural, historical and social influences meet (Engeström: 1999, Bruner: 1990) and tries to identify the teacher's and the pupils' voices in order to gauge what space seems available to individual minds amidst the tangle of collective trends and practices (Leont'ev: 1978, Stetsenko:

2005). Space does not mean a void, a nothingness. Space is the criss-crossing of trajectories interacting with each other so that, with each interaction, the space is re-created (Lomov: 1982, Bereiter: 1991). The SCAT emphasis on interaction echoes the importance placed on teacher-pupil interaction by pedagogy research. For example, Stones (1979) stresses that classroom interaction allows teacher and pupil experiences to come together to create new understandings of concepts, and Tochon in particular (1992, 1993) describes good teaching as 'moments of expertise' where the constant interaction between teacher, curriculum, and pupils contributes to creating new knowledge in all the participants. It is in this complex space that choices will be made and where diverse, sometimes divergent motivations will meet and interact.

I propose that one possible measure of this constantly changing space could be the amount of interaction observed by the researcher and perceived by the participants in the lessons.

## RESEARCH AND PROCEDURES

The data presented here were collected as part of a larger study which includes lesson observations, teacher and pupil interviews after each observed lesson, and teachers commenting on their lesson plans. This article presents my observations of differences in the proportion of interaction versus instruction in the style of three teachers when they move from KS 3 to KS 4. The three teachers work in mixed urban comprehensive schools – in school B, Julie and Caroline, in school C, Sheila.

A choice had to be made whether to record the lessons on video tape or to write observation notes. I feared that recording them on video would give me only tunnel vision and possibly cause me to miss some of the actions whereas, as an observer, I felt more confident in being aware of responses anywhere in the classroom whilst accepting that I was bound to miss some. The other reason for not choosing to record the lessons on video was the

**"classroom interaction allows teacher and pupil experiences to come together to create new understandings of concepts"**

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**"I counted as 'instances of interaction' every time there was a reciprocal exchange between teacher and pupils"**

desire to be as unobtrusive as possible.

This article does not pretend to identify every single influence which intervenes in the MFL lesson but it presents some observations which emerged from the wider study.

**INTERACTION VERSUS INSTRUCTION**

It would be impossible to give a comprehensive description of every lesson but it may be possible to look at types of behaviour in order to gain some insight which will help us to compare the KS 3 with the KS 4 lessons I observed. In choosing a classroom observational model, Ellis' (1990) classroom behaviour categories were rejected because they do not differentiate enough between response and directions, as were Van Lier's (1988) because he highlights the control element of the classroom interactions. I found Flanders' (1970: 34) classroom observational model, together with its adaptation by Moskowitz (1976), the most suitable guide to classifying what I observed in the classroom because it highlights the directions in which acts of communication move between the participants, whether they initiate or respond. I used Flanders' ten groups model to check and compare with my own interpretation of interaction and instruction together with one element [jokes] from Moskowitz (1976):

pupils, not necessarily positive or educative, sometimes through words but also through eye contact, facial expression or mime.

Examples from my lesson observation notes which I counted as interaction include:

- Teacher checks why a girl did not come to detention
- "Well done! Do you know another way to ask for this?"
- "Is there anything people don't understand?" while teacher looks interrogatively at the pupils
- Jo and his sneezing muscle [in-joke]. Teacher smiles and a few pupils laugh
- One pupil looks lost. Teacher explains again and checks he is fine now.
- Pupil asks "Miss, what's a 'coin-cuisine'?" Teacher reminds them of the rooms in the house and says that 'coin' means 'corner'. "Can you work it out?"

I counted as 'instances of instruction' every time the teacher spoke to the class in either English or the target language without expecting a reply, like giving instructions to do something; instructions for classroom management. Although ordering and obeying are also a form of interaction it is a one way communication from the teacher to the pupil and not

Table 1

		My interpretation		
			Instruction	Interaction
Teacher Talk:	Response	1) accepts feeling		X
		2) praises or encourages		X
		3) accepts or uses ideas of pupils		X
		4) asks questions	X	X
		5) jokes		X
	Initiation	6) lecturing	X	
		7) giving directions	X	
		8) criticizing or justifying authority	X	
Pupil Talk:	Response	9) Pupil-talk-response		X
	Initiation	10) Pupil-talk-initiation		X
Silence:		11) Silence or confusion		

As an observer taking notes, I became aware that in KS 4 lessons I was having to write more quickly than in KS 3 lessons and to record more often what the teachers were saying or doing than what the pupils were saying or doing. When I looked at my notes afterwards I realised that more of the events I had noted down came into Flanders' categories 5, 6 and 7 although I also include non-verbal communications whereas Flanders does not.

I counted as 'instances of interaction' every time there was a reciprocal exchange between teacher and

a two-way exchange between the participants.

Examples of instruction fall into four main groups, which I established after a retrospective reading of my lesson observation notes:

Firstly, calls for the register

Secondly, instructions (in the target language or in English) to establish or maintain good classroom management: 'Come on, get yourselves organised' (Caroline in Y 8.3); 'quiet, I am talking' (Caroline, Y10); 'Come on, Luke, enough!' (Julie, Y11); 'Greg! Russell! Get on with it!' (Sheila, Y11) or saying

'Hier!' ('here!') whilst pointing at a seat in the second row to which the teacher wants a pupil to move. To a pupil: "If I have to wait any more you will have to work at lunch-time".

Thirdly, instructions or explanations to carry out tasks: 'Ecoutez, répétez' ('listen, repeat') before chorusing new words (Caroline, Y7), 'vous avez 4 minutes' ('you have four minutes') (Caroline, Y11); 'prenez le livre, page 93' ('take your books, page 93') (Julie, Y8), 'il faut copier le français et mettre l'anglais à côté' ('you have to copy the French and put the English alongside it') (Julie, Y8), Sheila points to the worksheet and explains what to do. She asks William to translate (Sheila, Y7).

Fourthly, direct references to GCSE and information giving: 'For your exam you need to use three tenses.' (Caroline, Y11), 'It's very typical of a GCSE reading task' (Caroline, Y11); 'Remember cuir' ('leather') because it can come up in an exam.' (Julie, Y10); 'We've got lots of role-play practice for the exam. This will also help with coursework.' (Julie, Y11); 'In order to get a grade C you should really score 17 points.' (Sheila, Y11.3); 'This is so simple. I want you to use better expressions in the exam.' (Sheila, Y11.1).

– "On the side there is key vocab that we haven't necessarily covered. I won't go through that now

but it can be useful when we do role-plays. Now look at question 3 and answer quickly" (teacher speaks very fast).

- "Turn the sheet over. [teacher reads questions]. I am not going to read the descriptions of the hotels on purpose. Do it."
- "Read n.2; all the vocab is on the first side of the worksheet. Go!"
- "Come on [...] we've got an exam to pass."
- "Come on. I want to get onto another listening."

The tone and frequency of the interactions seemed to point to an interesting line of investigation so all the examples of interactions and all the examples of instructions in all the lesson observations were counted. The number of times when each instance is recorded are added up and the total is then expressed as a percentage of the lesson time. Percentages do not necessarily mean reliability, particularly in this case, where it is my interpretation of the teacher's behaviour which differentiates between instruction and interaction, but they do match my impressions as an observer that more was coming from the teacher than from the pupils.

The results are shown in the tables 2a, 2b, 2c following.

**"The tone and frequency of the interactions seemed to point to an interesting line of investigation"**

Table 2a

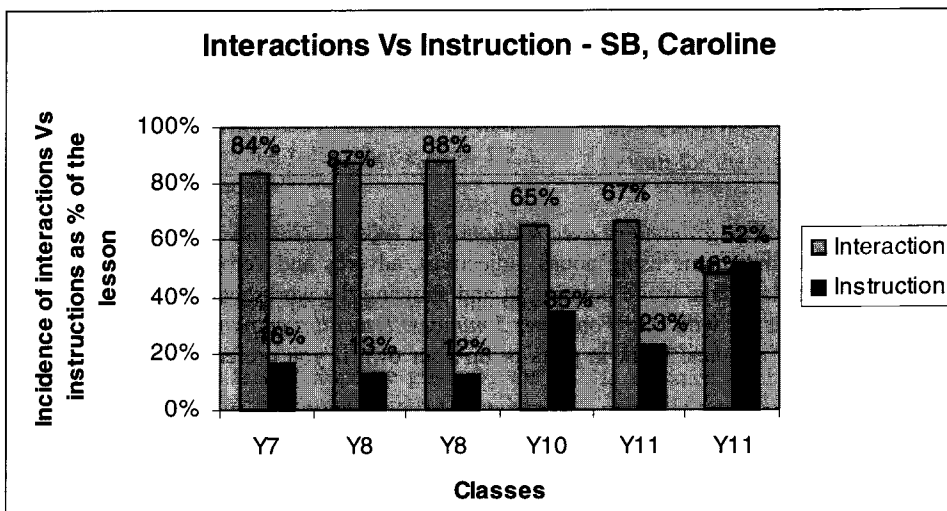


Table 2b

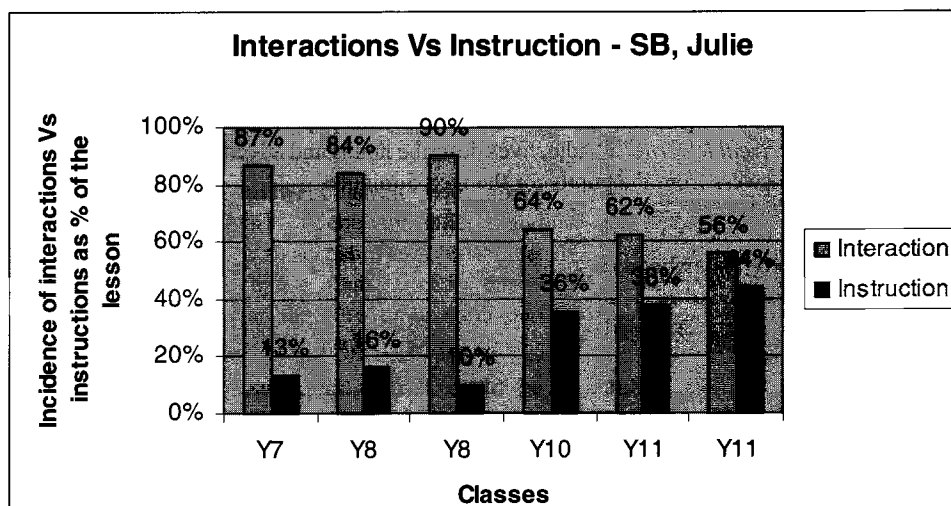
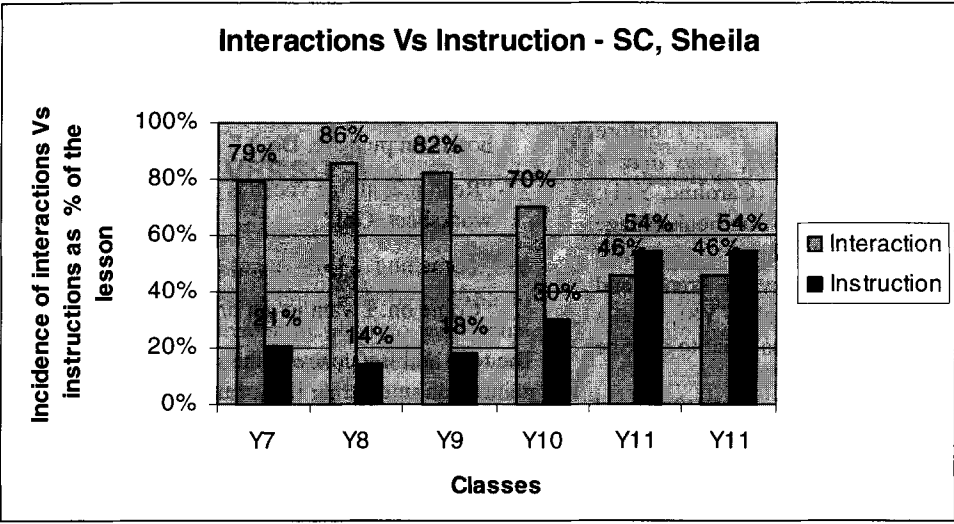


Table 2c



**“Each teacher has her own style and each class its own dynamic”**

Each teacher has her own style and each class its own dynamic and together they develop their own relationship within the context of their particular school; so the tables above are not meant to compare one teacher with another but rather to illustrate the perceived shift in each case towards a more instructional style in KS4.

In order to probe these differences I decided to attempt a comparison of similar events in a KS 3 and a KS 4 class for each teacher. The lesson slices represent 6 - 7 minutes of each lesson, which was the length of time needed to see many activities from beginning to end. In each case elements are examined which stood out in the wider study as

important factors in the teachers’ choices whilst planning and teaching: time, pupil participation, teacher’s objectives.

**Sheila**

The lesson slices have been taken from the lesson observation notes with Year 9 set 1 and Year 11 set 1 classes (they serve here to exemplify how I treated the slices from Julie’s and Caroline’s lessons, the texts of which are not reproduced here for reasons of space). In both cases the teacher is trying to make the pupils aware of a grammar point. (French with Y 9 set 1 and German with Y 11 set 1).

**Year 9.1**

- 9.58 ‘On commence avec un jeu de grammaire avec les noms, les adjectifs, les adverbes et les verbes’ (‘Let’s start with a grammar game using nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs’). Teacher gives instructions in the target language while pointing at and showing the worksheet. She looks at the class to see if all the pupils are with her. ‘Vous avez 5 minutes. Travaillez en paires ou seuls si vous préférez’ (‘You have five minutes. Work in pairs or on your own if you prefer’). The pupils are attentive.
- 9.59 Sheila gives an example with number 1. The pupils are quiet and working. Some on their own; some in pairs.
- 10.01 The teacher checks the answers; ‘Alex, combien de noms?’ (‘Alex, how many nouns?’), Alex replies ‘Three’. Teacher counts in French ‘un, deux, trois’, points at the nouns, and asks the others if they agree. The teacher asks Alex the numbers of the sentences and writes them on the board. Some pupils give a tentative answer.
- 10.02 ‘Peter, combien d’adjectifs?’ (‘Peter, how many adjectives?’) (same procedure as before). ‘Vous êtes tous d’accord? Non? Quel est le problème?’ (‘Do you all agree? No? What’s the problem?’). Teacher elicits from the pupils which words are the adverbs.
- 10.03 ‘Pourquoi?’ (‘Why?’). She sums up the bits of responses given by the pupils: ‘Les adjectifs décrivent le nom et les adverbes décrivent le verbe.’ (‘Adjectives describe nouns and adverbs describe verbs’.) The teacher continues eliciting answers from the pupils for the next 5 minutes.

**Year 11.1**

The teacher is correcting a task in which the pupils had been given nine sentences in German and they had to identify the tense of each sentence and tick the column '*Präsens, Perfekt oder Futur?*' ('Present, past or future?')

11.22 'First we are going to feed back on this exercise, then we'll do a quick listening. I hope you'll reach a 'C' on this. We'll do a Foundation and Higher 1 because some of you are beyond Foundation.

11.23 I want to see you actively marking your work. You self-assess. The teacher does number 1 quickly and asks Russell for number 2.

'Future'.

'Ja. Warum?' ('Yes, why?')

'Because ... werde?'

'Ja, gut'.

11.24 The teacher continues at speed. She asks individuals for their answers and then asks them why they have chosen that particular tense.

11.27 For sentence 8 she asks Ashley. He does not answer and looks hesitant. The teacher reads the sentence and asks what the tense is.

Ashley: 'Past.'

'Are you sure it's past? How do you know?'

Nobody answers.

'You should have something like '*ich habe*' and a past participle. This is a big clue for tomorrow [day of the mock-oral examination]. If I ask you '*Hast du ....ge....?*' it will be past.

11.28 The teacher urges the pupils on and asks another boy to read the next sentence.

'So, is it past?'

No answer.

'Well, tell me. Yes it is. Why? Has it got a past participle? Yes, show me where. No?... ' The teacher tends to answer her own questions all the way through.

**Comparison:****With Year 9**

- she takes time to look around to see if the pupils are all with her
- she re-uses a pupil's (Alex) answer to highlight the fact that he is right and to reinforce the notion of nouns for everyone ( 'Teacher counts 1,2,3, and points at the nouns')
- she then invites the class to react to this, thus responding to Alex
- she repeats the same procedure with another pupil (Peter)
- 'she sums up the bits of response given by the pupils' in order to re-formulate what she has elicited from them

The exchanges go from teacher to pupil, pupil to pupil, pupil to teacher, teacher to class, class to individual and teacher, teacher back to another individual and so on.

**With Year 11**

- she makes several recommendations about the mock oral examination
- she checks the answers given with three individual pupils but it is done very quickly and without trying to see if the rest of the class agree. Perhaps she thinks that she has trained them to self-assess. After all, they are more adult and should take more personal responsibility.
- she answers her own questions. It could be because the pupils are less prepared to answer, less confident with the work or extremely gifted. My impression was that they were not sure of the answers.

The pace at which Y 9 pupils and teacher move forward together seems to give the pupils more time to reflect on and to process the grammatical concepts being taught. In the Y11 lesson the time is used to check that the pupils can recall the formation of different tenses, but pressure appears in the speed with which this checking is done and the lack of time to wait for the pupils to respond.

In both classes Sheila calls on various pupils to answer her questions and tries to make them reflect on their reasons for their choices. In Y 9 the exchanges go to and fro between teacher and pupils and it can give the pupils a sense of ownership of the progression of the lesson. However, in Year 11 there is no such exchange and no time for individual pupils to respond to the teacher; one might say that the teacher is reminding the pupils of grammar points but as they are not new concepts it is not necessary to dwell on them even if the pupils do not seem to be quite sure of them. Whilst the explanations led to more interaction with Y 9, they became more of a teacher-led check-list with Y 11 set 1.

The objectives in Y 9 are to make the pupils understand grammatical concepts whereas, in Y 11, they seem to be to check that the pupils remember key points in order to obtain a grade C in the examination. The pupils are also likely to think of their GCSE and they may well appreciate that the reminders are good for them, but the approach may also be overwhelming and leave them as passive listeners.

**Julie:**

The two lesson slices were taken from Y 7 set 3/4 and Y11 set 2/2 ( my second lesson observation with the class), and in both situations the classes were engaged in a listening activity from an audio tape.

**"pressure appears in the speed with which this checking is done and the lack of time to wait for the pupils to respond"**

**"The objectives in Y 7 seem to be to ensure understanding of new vocabulary and to reinforce learning"**

**Comparison:**

**With Year 7**

- Julie takes time to check that the pupils are with her ('Any questions?' ...[looks around the class])
- she invites the pupils to participate and 'chooses different pupils every time'
- she gives them support and encouragement (smiles and nods) whilst the tape plays
- there is a bit of personal teasing and joking (about the drawings) with the class
- she praises the pupils
- the exchanges go from teacher to pupils and back to teacher time and time again with a high pupil participation. There is one instance of the exchange going from the teacher to the pupil and stopping there when Julie explains that they have 'to tick in the column' but this can also be seen as interactive teaching of how to use the worksheet to help make sense of what the pupils hear on the tape.

**With Year 11**

- there is a sense of urgency, partly due to the fact that Julie has tried to fit in many types of examination practice in the lesson. Any teacher, in any class would be affected by the lack of time but what could be different is the choice made by Julie to do the listening rather than check the previous exercise.
- Julie gives quick instructions
- she replies to Jo quickly but ignores the pupils who are not ready so as not to be diverted
- the activities are used for testing and exam practice
- the exchanges all go from the teacher to the pupils except the two instances when Jo asks questions.

With Y 7 Julie has time to praise the pupils and to joke with them. The progression seems to be in their hands. With Y 11 there is a sense of urgency in the teacher's pace and her tone when she replies to her pupils.

Y 7 appear keen to participate, which can simply be due to the pupils' age, but is likely to be encouraged by the teacher's waiting for them and giving them space to respond. When several Y 11 pupils ask for help Julie replies quickly, giving the impression that there is no time to waste.

The objectives in Y 7 seem to be to ensure understanding of new vocabulary and to reinforce learning. Corrections are used as part of the teaching. In the Y 11 class there is no new vocabulary taught and corrections are used for checking; the objective seems to be to get through the worksheet in order to gain as much examination practice as possible.

**Caroline**

The two samples involved a form of reading activity and pair work.

**With Year 8**

- Caroline explains what to do
- she does the first question as an example, i.e. teaching a new type of activity
- she moves round and helps the pupils for the next six minutes
- she speaks to individuals to show them how they move to the next stage
- she encourages the pupils
- the exchanges go from the teacher to individual pupils and back all the way through after the initial setting of the task where it is the teacher who speaks to the class.

**With Year 10**

- she praises for the previous week's work
- she makes recommendations about GCSE
- she announces the 'typical GCSE paper'
- during the next four minutes the pupils work on their own; (KS 4 pupils could be expected to work more independently)
- she helps the two pupils who check the meaning of words to work out the answer for themselves; this is an example of guidance rather instruction
- she checks the answers with the pupils
- the exchanges all go from the teacher to the class except for the instance where two pupils ask for help.

The teacher praises and encourages the Y 8 pupils whereas the Y 10 class is conducted in a more business-like way. This difference may reflect the greater maturity of Y10 and their own wish to prepare for as good a grade as possible as well as the need to use the time efficiently.

Both classes are on task and the teacher gives Y 8 a lot of individual attention while she moves round, whereas she allows Y 10 to work on their own more in an examination manner.

The teacher works with her Y 8 pupils, helping them to work out answers and to develop their reading skills like inferring meaning. The main objective with Y 10 seems to be to gain examination practice and for them to work through a reading paper. It is conducted as a test which prepares the pupils for what will be expected of them.

Overall points to come out of the lesson slices:

**Time:**

There is a sense of rush and lack of time in the KS 4 slices which may be linked to the change in the affective environment. In the lessons slices there are more displays of a warmer, more personal relationship (encouragements, dialogue, smiles and jokes) between teacher and pupils at KS 3 than at KS 4; this may reflect the change in the pupils' age and maturity. Older pupils can sometimes feel more self-conscious. It can also reflect the teacher's greater availability to respond to her pupils.

### Participation:

There is interaction in both KS 3 and KS 4 classes, but whereas in KS 3 the exchanges tend to go back and forth between teacher, individuals and the class, in KS 4 the exchanges tend to go from the teacher to the pupils. In the KS 4 samples, the three teachers' main preoccupation seems to be with the examination, and there is no time to wait for slower pupils (Sheila, Julie) or to re-use the pupils' contribution in a way that would help progression (Julie, Caroline). Sheila even carries on a monologue where she answers her own questions. In the slices of KS 4 lessons the listening and reading activities tend to be conducted like tests, which results in the pupils working on their own, whilst in KS 3 the teacher works with them as she moves round the class. In the KS 3 samples, during whole-class teaching, the teachers take the time to ask many different pupils thus encouraging wider pupil participation. In the KS 4 slices the main transformation (creation of new knowledge?) seems to be aimed at the GCSE results. It seems that the teachers' focus has shifted from the pupils to the examination grades.

### Objectives:

In the KS 3 samples it appears that each teacher is prepared to use her subject knowledge in a new way which acknowledges the pupils' contributions or their difficulties. In examination classes, it is not surprising to hear the examination mentioned but an excessive emphasis on it can take up time available for interaction with the pupils. The motive for action has become more the progression of the pupil as a candidate than as a language learner. The mediating role of the teacher between curriculum and the syllabus (Calderhead: 1984) seems to have become an instructional role in order to do what is necessary to obtain good grades. The lack of time felt in all three samples seems to be accompanied by a shrinkage of the space to respond creatively in a dialogue between teacher and pupil and that space seems to be filled by the examination requirements. Grenfell (1994) laments the similar influence of an overprescribed input.

## CONCLUSIONS

Within the sample analysed there appear to be clear differences between the types of interaction initiated by the teachers at Key Stages 3 and 4, with very different 'flavours' coming from similar kinds of activity. Many factors should be taken into account which can contribute to these differences: the pupils' age and maturity – older pupils could feel self-conscious about speaking; the pupils' competence in the foreign language; the pupils' confidence in themselves; group dynamics; the length of time each group has been taught by the same teacher; the time left before the pupils take their GCSEs; the numbers of boys and girls in each group; the expectations from each group; etc.

Caxton (2000) speaks of the need for the teachers to have space in which they can exercise their intuitive knowledge in response to their pupils, and Tochon (1993, p.158) refers to the interactive space

as essential if teachers are to make choices and be creative practitioners:

*Si toutes les règles sont fixées à l'avance (préprogrammées), le retour d'information venant des interactions n'aura pas d'effet.* (If all the rules are pre-programmed, the exchange of information coming from interactions will not be effective.)

In order to study the space available for interaction in MFL lessons, it has been necessary to focus on precise instances of interaction in a few lessons, which does not allow for generalisation but can give us a few clues about the way time and space are filled in some lessons by some teachers. The sample analyzed seems to indicate that the parameters within which the teachers are exercising their choices appear to be different across the key stages.

As Ellis (1990) and Van Lier (1988) point out, the categories used to analyse classroom interactions do not show how they relate to the pupils' actual learning and they do not say that certain types of behaviour are more or less conducive to learning, as it is likely that different types of teaching are needed by the pupils at different stages in their development. However, a study of the overall balance of teaching style used over a period of time could show whether the teacher's voice, in Wertsch's sense (1991), tends to become the examination's voice and whether the objective in KS 4 becomes coverage of syllabus rather than language teaching.

The analysis of the remaining data will be used to cast more light on the space for interaction in Key Stages 3 and 4. However, it was felt that the first results could be a catalyst for teachers to become alert to the potential differences in their own practice and the possible reasons for any limitations on their scope for interaction.

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**"In the KS 4 samples, the main preoccupation seems to be with the examination, and there is no time to wait for slower pupils"**



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## NOTES FOR CONTRIBUTORS

### Contributions

The Editors welcome previously unpublished articles, reports and other contributions which will further the cause of the learning and teaching of languages. These contributions are normally expected to fall into one of the following categories, although contributions of different lengths will also be considered:

- (a) Articles or reports of about 3000 to 5000 words. (Longer pieces may be considered subject to prior consultation with the editors.)
- (b) Shorter articles of up to 1000 words that might include items of information, notes on innovative classroom practice and discussion points (including those arising from previous articles).

An abstract of 200-250 words should accompany articles of 3000 to 5000 words and an abstract of approximately 100 words should accompany those of 1000 words.

Articles should be written in English and may deal with any aspect of FL teaching and learning, FL teacher education, contemporary language, literature and culture. Previously unpublished photocopiable classroom material to accompany the contribution (a worksheet, for example) is particularly welcome.

### Presentation

Contributions must be fully formatted, typed with double spacing and sent in on disk or as an email attachment (MS Word preferred), accompanied by 3 copies on paper and an address for correspondence. These should be presented anonymously for review purposes, carrying no indication of the author's name or place of employment. The latter details should be given in a covering letter. Remember to keep a copy of the article for yourself. Please give your article one title only, not a title and a sub-title, but do feel free to divide it up with (short) sub-headings.

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