**Grammar in MFL teaching revisited**

**Lynne Meiring and Nigel Norman**

University of Wales Swansea

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**INTRODUCTION**

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). (page 58)

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.' (page 59)

in the attainment targets, progress to the

higher levels can only be achieved through an

understanding and application of tense forms, for

example: (JP note, this article is outdated in terms of NC docs but this point still holds true – see AT levels above 5).

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. (page 63)

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. (page 64)

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. (page 64)

**Formative assessment and the learning and teaching of MFL: sharing the language learning road ma with the learners**

**Paul Black and Jane Jones**

King's College London

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Following research by Black and William (1998) showing that formative assessment can improve results in formal tests, formative assessment has become a feature of several national and regional initiatives.

Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability or of ranking or certifying competence.

An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information to be used as feedback, by teachers, and by their pupils in assessing themselves and each other, to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes 'formative assessment' when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs. (page 4)

Thus the starting point for a classroom activity may be a question formulated by the teacher to ascertain the pupils' existing understanding of a topic. This implements a first principle of learning, which is to start from where the learner is (page 4)

Demanding questions require time for the learner to work out an answer, so the teacher ought to wait for some time before expecting a response. (page 6). JP Note- backed up by observation evidence that shows AD waiting some time and repeating question until almost all hands in class are up!

The teacher's role when formative questions are asked is to act as a facilitator and to encourage pupils both to try to answer and to listen carefully to the answers from their peers. This is vital in the MFL classroom where attentive listening is necessary to promote taking turns appropriately, and thereby to help development of listening skills. Peer discussion plays an essential part in creating such an environment. If pupils can first discuss their responses to a question within a small group, they can explore, articulate and check ideas before they reveal their group's combined effort to the whole class. When pupils are uncertain, the individual learners

reporting on behalf of a group will feel less inhibited about expressing tentative ideas.

More generally, in a classroom culture that encourages best efforts and does not penalise mistaken or erroneous ones, pupils will feel encouraged to 'have a go' and to signal to the teacher their current level of understanding either after peer discussion, or where a rapid check is appropriate, through such methods as thumbs up or traffic

lighting. This provides much more reliable feedback to the teacher than a sea of vaguely nodding heads and forms in itself, an extended opportunity for target language use. (page 6)

Extending answers – who can add to that? Do you agree? Can anyone improve on that answer?

Thus, marks give no formative feedback and emphasise competition rather than personal improvement, whereas

comments can be formative and so ensure that written work contributes to learning. (page 7)

Developing effective self-assessment is an essential part of managing one's own learning.(page 8)

Another example of peer assessment involved Year 7 pupils assessing, as a class activity, letters that had been drafted for homework in French. The teacher first agreed the criteria with the pupils, then in pairs they discussed each other's letters and exchanged ideas. This made for a very good use of learning time and validated the homework immediately. (page 8)

Back on target: repositioning the status of target language in MFL teaching and

learning

Lynne Meiring a; Nigel Norman a

a

University of Wales, Swansea

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See PAchler 2000 p. 22-37.

In relation to using L1 as a means of making sense of a foreign language:

Macaro (2000: 177) summarises the potential benefit to learners of L 1:

1. Beginners use the L1 to help them decode text.

2. Beginners and more advanced learners use the L 1 to help them write text.

3. L1 tends to be the language of thought, unless the learner is very advanced or is in the target country. (page 29)

BUT

Krashen (1988) said: ‘natural approach’ (acquisition rather than learning) needs TL use exclusively. To which Ellis (1990:60) reponds: "learners are capable of learning and using metalingual knowledge to a far greater extent than Krashen allows for" (Ellis, 1990: 60). (page 29)

Acquisition, the natural approach and maximum exposure to the target language must allow for learning strategies, which may also embrace form-focused instruction, conscious, appropriate use of the mother tongue (L1) and the consequent connections and associations to be made between L1 and L2. Whilst accepting the significance of the role of the mother tongue it should not negate the benefit of what Macaro refers to as the "optimal use position", nor as an open invitation to indiscriminate use of L1.

**BUT**

Empirical evidence referred to by Macaro (2000: 184) supports the benefits of **pupil** use of target language: 'Only through the learner using L2 can s/he achieve strategic communicative competence', and he reaffirms 'a basic belief that learners' use of the L2 is conducive to successful learning' (2000:183). (page 29)

On the one hand, it would appear that the principle of exclusive target language use overlooks the value of mother tongue in developing language awareness and in helping to make sense of the learning process. Learners need to have recourse to a range of strategies which include comparison of L1 and L2. On the other hand, research is inconclusive on the benefits of teacher use of target language. Clearly current methodology is shifting to embrace both L1 and L2 use, and it is necessary to develop appropriate strategies to respond to this shifting emphasis.

There is clearly a need for strategies to encourage pupil use of the target language. Within the context of language practice in the classroom this is relatively unproblematic, and can range from basic repetition drills to more sophisticated information-gap activities. (page 30)

James et al 1999:2 in ….this article: even the most enthusiastic pupils rarely use the target language spontaneously amongst themselves. (page 30)

Macaro (2000: 177) suggests three distinct reasons for judicious use of L 1: Beginners use the L1 to help them decode text. Beginners and more advanced learners use the L1 to help them to write text. L1 tends to be the language of thought, unless the learner is very advanced. He therefore concludes that "It would be unwise to recommend the total exclusion of the L1 from the foreign language classroom."

He argues for the complementary and interdependent nature of L1 and L2: Employing the mother tongue...is entirely compatible with extensive use of the TL, which is being complemented, rather than undermined by cross-lingual comparisons. (ibid.) (page 32)

In setting out a rationale of the benefits of teaching learners in the language they are learning Halliwell and Jones (1991: 1) give three reasons:

• they need to experience the target language as a real means of communication;

• if we teach them in the language they are learning we give them a chance to develop their own in-built language learning system;

• by teaching through the target language we are bridging that otherwise wide gap between carefully controlled secure classroom practice and the unpredictability of real language encounters. (page 33)

Similarly, it is necessary to give status to target language use in the classroom, since it manifestly diminishes L2 if the most significant utterances are spoken in LI. (page 33)

Effect of TL use on behaviour:

Macdonald's assertion (1993: 7) that:

• most enforcements of discipline can be carried out effectively in the target language;

• it can be an advantage, as it can defuse the situation and turn it into a learning situation;

• it will ensure that pupils find it more difficult to argue;

• the tone of voice will make it clear that you are angry. (page 33)

Increase in f requency use of instructions and reprimands – have a set of phrases you use and build these up.

Macaro (2000:184): Only through the learner using L2 can s/he achieve strategic communicative competence. The over-arching pedagogical tool should, therefore, be learners' use of the target language, not teacher use of the target language. (page 34)

we would therefore offer the following recommendations as useful guidelines:

• systematic use of the TL for simple classroom instructions, commands and routines;

• measured use of L1 for clarification and comparison with L2 to develop language awareness (see NC (2000) key stage 3 Programme of Study Focus Statement, p.6 and NC (England 1999), key stages 3 and 4, PoS, p. 16);

• maximum use of teacher TL to improve learners' pronunciation, develop problem- solving and enable learners to deal with the unpredictable;

• visual support to accompany use of the TL to motivate learners, increase cultural awareness and define meaning where direct translation is unclear or ambiguous;

• optimal use of TL to convey to learners that the foreign language is a genuine vehicle of communication, rather than merely a tool for intellectual activity;

• increase exposure to TL to promote confidence and facility with listening (widely perceived by learners as the most difficult language skill);

• greater contact with the TL to facilitate experimentation with language, and attendant learner autonomy.