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Creativity, challenge and culture in the languages classroom: a response to the Ofsted Curriculum Research Review

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Creativity, challenge and culture in the languages classroom: a response to the Ofsted Curriculum Research Review

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ABSTRACT

In this opinion piece we problematise foreign language (FL) learning curricula which are rigidly based on carefully sequenced input and constrained learning opportunities. Whilst an important component in language learning, language knowledge constitutes more than phonics vocabulary and grammar. Our stance is premised on the understanding that, whether novice or expert, an FL learner is not a 'tabula rasa'. In other words, every learner will have existing linguistic, social and cultural knowledge and skills, as well as cognitive and developing metacognitive resources which have the potential to both support and frustrate the language learning process. This, in turn, problematises a structured approach to teaching and learning which rests on carefully sequenced input, constrained learning opportunities and minimal exposure to unfamiliar language. We propose that FL curricula should be centred around opportunities to actively communicate in the language, supported by rich and plentiful input. We suggest that, to foster emotional engagement and intrinsic motivation, young FL learners should engage with cultural artefacts and authentic content in the target language. In addition, learning activities which offer both challenge and enough scaffolding to experience success are likely to support self-efficacy which is linked to motivation.

Overview

The Ofsted Curriculum Research Review for languages (Ofsted 2021, henceforth OCRR) puts forward factors which are likely to contribute to a high-quality languages education. This latest 'position statement' contributes to a plethora of historic initiatives in England both pre- and post-National Curriculum.[1] All these initiatives have sought to solve a historic dilemma of languages education for all pupils, which involves how to frame FL within mainstream education curricula and how to identify ways to improve FL provision and outcomes. Broadly speaking, there is evidence of slow improvement in provision (Dobson 2018) but England is still attempting to resolve a relatively unique problem of uptake of FLs at Key Stage 4 (ages 14–16) when study of languages becomes optional, leading to the GCSE examination at age 16. This political problem is arguably underpinned by a range of concerns, which have been fairly extensively documented in the wider research literature; in other words, the 'peculiar' English problem of 'lack of uptake' may need to be considered in

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the context of more global challenges for FL education. These concern progress and outcomes in classroom language learning (Graham et al. 2017), motivation for language learning (Graham et al. 2016), teaching, learning and assessment (Cable et al. 2010) and primary languages provision and pedagogy (Enever 2018).

The Ofsted Curriculum Research Review for languages (OCRR) seems to focus from the outset on a practical policy decision linked to uptake at Key Stage 4. The review notes that 'although languages as a subject is pressured, it is also pivotal to the success of the national English Baccalaureate (EBacc) ambition' (OCRR: 1) and a further two paragraphs under the heading 'The overall picture' (p.2) are devoted to the EBacc The EBacc initiative was launched in 2010 to encourage students to study a combination of more academic subjects (English, mathematics, a science, a language and a humanities subject) to GCSE. It was believed this would encourage uptake of languages but since 2016, the percentage of state school students taking the combination of subjects required by the EBacc has remained between 38 and 40%, with around 24–25% achieving this performance measure (GOV.UK n.d.). The government intention is to increase the percentage studying the Ebacc combination to 75% by 2022 and 90% by 2025 (OCCR: 2).

The OCRR states that, 'A failure to secure a good GCSE grade in a language is by far the most significant obstacle to achieving the EBacc' (p.2). Thus, the review seems to suggest that the practical issue of increasing EBacc uptake can be resolved by addressing some of the long-term, global issues for language learning in classrooms. Particular importance is given to systematic teaching of vocabulary, grammar and phonics, which is linked to progress. Other issues raised include motivation for languages study in anglophone contexts and successful implementation of FL education in primary schools. The OCRR focuses its attention on language learning motivation which, it argues, will be supported by 'success in learning and clarity about the next steps'. However, in our opinion, there is no causality between addressing important longer-term issues around language learning rationales and EBacc uptake, nor is it the case that language teaching in England is universally poor and therefore a reason for students not to take languages. Indeed, previous Ofsted inspections have naturally noted areas for improvement but have documented evidence of good FL practice (e.g. Ofsted 2011). The subsequent OCRR recommendations to support learning outcomes and an awareness of progress are operationalised in what seems to be a narrowing of the current languages curriculum, in terms of content and teaching/learning activities, with less focus on interaction and communication for a range of purposes, and a restriction on the use of authentic materials and culturally rich content as these, it is claimed, would risk 'cognitive overload'.

This direction appears to be closely linked to the recent review of the GCSE French, German and Spanish examinations. This was launched with an 'expert panel review' in 2019, followed by public consultation during the first part of 2021 (DfE 2021) and publication of the revised GCSE Subject Content in January 2022 (DfE 2022b). The latter document specifically sets out the 'learning outcomes and content coverage' for the GCSE examinations at age 16 but also implies changes to the way languages are taught in schools, through a washback effect for language study, not just at Key Stage 4 but also at Key Stage 3 (ages 11–14) and Key Stage 2 (ages 7–11).[2] This matters, arguably, particularly in respect of primary languages, which were made a compulsory part of the Key Stage 2 curriculum in order to improve motivation and language proficiency in the longer term (DfE 2013). Furthermore, numerous authors have noted that demotivation for language study sets in at Year 7, the first year of secondary school (Courtney 2017; Graham et al. 2016; Richardson 2014). The objective of the revised GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2022b) appears to be that if curricula and pedagogy closely reflect assessments, this will lead to improved results and a sense of progress for learners.

At one level, there is a plausible, instrumental rationale which is implicit in this endeavour. Firstly, school leadership, ever mindful of publicly available school performance ratings, are more likely to encourage students to take a language GCSE if the prospect of success is realistic. Equally, schoolteachers who are responsible for reporting GCSE outcomes for their subjects upwards to their school leaders are likely to be reassured by a more constrained examination, which is closely

linked to pedagogy. Indeed, such views could be reflected in the reportedly positive responses from teachers to the proposed revisions to GCSE Subject Content (DfE 2022a). However, it should also be noted that many teachers, researchers and professional bodies have expressed concerns about these proposals.[3]

To be clear, we agree that concerns around success rates at GCSE are entirely reasonable and have been documented by Ofqual, the government body responsible for regulating qualifications and examinations in England (e.g. Ofqual 2017). Statistical analyses have shown that it is more difficult to achieve higher grades in French, Spanish and German than most other GCSE subjects (He and Black 2019); such statistical trends then become 'baked in', because of Ofqual's commitment to ensuring comparable performance outcomes from year to year, to avoid criticisms of grade inflation and differences between examination cohorts (see Blow and Myers, this issue). Our concern is that amongst languages education stakeholders there are competing rationales about what will encourage uptake at Key Stage 4. Other investigations conducted by Ofqual have noted that, whilst subject difficulty is an important consideration for teachers in recommending subject choices at GCSE and A Level, students are more likely to be influenced and motivated by enjoyment and a curriculum that aligns with their goals (Ofqual 2017).

This leads to an important consideration which seems to be overlooked in both the revised DfE Subject Content and the OCRR, namely that curricula need to be underpinned by a rationale that is meaningful to both learners and teachers. Instrumental rationales for language learning in an anglophone context are notoriously problematic and have not been successful in increasing uptake (Mitchell 2002, 2014; Porter, Myles, Tellier and Holmes 2020), meaning that other rationales need to be considered. This is inherent in the Purpose statement for the National Curriculum for Languages (DfE 2013), where the rationale for language learning includes the encouragement of global citizenship, tolerance and empathy, as well as the potential for cognitive benefits. As we outline below, such a broader rationale, embracing the importance of factors extending beyond linguistic outcomes (Mitchell 2014), to us makes much more sense than one focused almost solely on the learning of grammar, vocabulary and phonics. We would agree entirely that attainment and a sense of progression are important considerations (Graham et al. 2016). However, we share the view of Biesta (2015: 79) that 'one-sidedness always comes at a price', in that it tends to ignore the rationales for language learning of two very important groups, namely learners and teachers. At least two studies of language learning across the primary to secondary transition attribute declining motivation in secondary school to a gap between what students feel is the purpose of language learning, and what lessons prepare them for (Courtney 2017; Graham et al. 2016). In both cases, that purpose for learners was to communicate with speakers of the language being studied. Learners in Graham et al. (2016) also reported valuing cultural and creative language learning activities at primary school, which were notably absent from their experiences at secondary school. Many learners, however, valued the greater sense of challenge they experienced at secondary school. At the same time, they wished it included 'more fun/games, more speaking/interaction and more group work' (Graham et al. 2016: 698). Turning to teachers, misalignment between curriculum reforms and teacher beliefs/rationales for instruction leads to poor implementation of the reforms and damaged teacher morale (Handel and Herrington 2003; Stein and Coburn 2008). A recent survey of 614 MFL teachers in England (Woore et al. 2020) showed they believed strongly that the two central purposes of language teaching are to develop learners' intercultural understanding and their ability to communicate in the language. Finally, in their review of the cognitive benefits of language learning, Woll and Wei (2019) point to the associations between language learning and creativity, and emphasise the importance of highlighting such cross-curricular benefits to promote positive perspectives on language learning.

It is the factors that extend beyond linguistic knowledge that we contend are missing, or at least lack emphasis, in the OCRR. We propose to examine them below through the 'three Cs' lens of: creativity, challenge and culture. We will suggest that these three aspects can acknowledge the importance of a sense of progress and its potential effect on self-efficacy (see Graham, this issue) and

Lanvers' (2011) view that rationales for languages other than English need to be different from rationales for learning English as a second/foreign language. We argue, conversely, that a narrow curriculum and scant emphasis on strategic skills such as dealing with unfamiliar language could result in lower pupil motivation and sense of achievement, and hence confound uptake at A level and beyond. That is not only because learners will enter Key Stage 5 (ages 16–18) without the necessary skills to engage with more demanding input, but also without the sense that language learning is worth 'doing'. In other words, even if there was some evidence of improved uptake at Key Stage 4 as a result of the new directions charted by the 2021 OCRR and the 2022 revised GCSE Subject Content, there is the real risk that uptake of languages would be adversely affected in post-16 education.

Creativity

Creativity is deemed a twenty-first century skill comprising developmental skills (e.g. learning to read and write) and innovation (Kupers, Lehrmann-Wermser, McPherson and Van Geert 2019). It is generally accepted that, whilst considered part of intelligence, creativity can be taught (Torrance 1972) and that risk-taking and collaboration are likely to foster creativity (Rotaru 2020). It has also been shown to develop, alongside vocabulary knowledge, through Key Stage 3 language teaching focused on personal and emotional engagement with authentic texts, but *not* through teaching focused just on grammar, phonics and vocabulary (Graham et al. 2020a). We therefore advocate that language learning should be an opportunity to experience creativity through engagement with rich and plentiful input and activities which encourage experimentation with output. In addition, opportunities to experience creative thinking skills and experimentation are likely to support intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Amabile 1990).

The OCRR implies that language should be experienced in a structured and systematic way. There is talk of 'building blocks' for learning, clarity about 'how to make progress' and 'developing ability step-by-step'. Whilst the review is keen to point out that 'curriculum is different to pedagogy' (p.6), we are concerned that, in practice, these requirements will be interpreted in a structuralist, piecemeal way with a tendency to focus exclusively on highly staged encounters with language and opportunities for language practice. At its most extreme, this would be reminiscent of a structural approach to language teaching, prevalent in the 60s, which was based in structuralist linguistics and behaviourist learning theory.

At the same time, the OCRR invokes 'cognitive' approaches to language learning (see Mitchell, Myles and Marsden 2019 for a full account) with the learning journey portrayed as transition from novice to expert through proceduralisation and eventually automatisation of language knowledge and skills. In essence, we would agree that much of classroom language learning is likely to involve some kind of explicit learning and/or memorisation through practice, and these are useful tools that practitioners can use to better understand and support the learning process. However, we would question how constrained learning opportunities should be during the transition to linguistic mastery which depends on learners being able to use language independently to understand and create new and spontaneous meanings. Unrehearsed, real-time interaction can and should commence in the early years of language learning.

Creativity and experimentation, in the OCRR, are framed as activities for 'expert' learners rather than novices. This is coupled with a rejection of inquiry-based learning for novices (supported by a reference to Kaluyga 2007) and a recommendation for explicit learning in the novice classroom (OCRR: 15). Linked to the idea of 'mastery before experimentation' is a more concerning, albeit implicit, stance that accuracy is key. Such a stance, Mitchell (2002) notes, is likely to lead to learning opportunities which eschew creative language use, risk-taking and complexity. Both stances run counter to understandings of learning in primary education and have implications for primary FL curricula and practice where inquiry-based learning is the modus operandi and explicit learning is feasible but with careful consideration of age (Roehr-Brackin and Tellier 2019). Instead, our central

contention is that mastery should act in the service of a specific communicative purpose; more specifically, that mastery and creativity, including freedom of language use, should evolve simultaneously rather than sequentially. This is because FL learners *are* expert users of language/s (they know how language works and understand communication) and we argue that this is what differentiates *language* learning from other types of learning. For learners who already have considerable expertise in mastery of at least one language (multiple languages, in the case of our pupils with English as an additional language (EAL)) we suggest that discovery through creativity and experimentation is a valuable tool. All language learning (of L1, L2, L3, etc.) is an interrelated phenomenon with one language supporting others, and multilingual and monolingual children can make effective use of these important resources in languages classrooms in order to explore and experiment with language.

Engagement in creative language use is supported by wide-ranging language learning and teaching theory as well as pedagogic advice. Classroom inspections have historically called for more creativity and imagination in secondary school classrooms for reading and writing (Ofsted 2011). Research suggests the primordial importance for teachers to provide 'conditions for success' (Hawkins 1981: 247), and that the route to fluency involves 'active use of the language for purposes that matter' (Hawkins 1996: 30). We contend that 'what matters' for teenagers and younger learners, is not necessarily the most frequent words of the target language but rather topics and ideas that they wish to articulate in it. Language *is* communication, after all.

Language teaching theory supports principles which recommend 'freedom of language use' which supports accuracy, complexity and fluency (Brumfit 1984). However, the OCRR also suggests that encounters with unfamiliar language and use of higher order skills such as contextual information and knowledge of the world rely on automatisation of language skills. We would suggest the contrary, that higher order skills can be invoked whilst learners are in the 'novice' phase of learning because learners' existing languages can, at times, be used to support the learning process. Concerns around 'overloading' and sequencing of lower and higher order skills could mean that learners never or rarely have the opportunity to explore and experiment with language in its widest sense. This, we argue, is likely to affect motivation for language learning and desire to continue with languages post-Key Stage 3.

Challenge

Linked to the idea of language mastery is the idea of accuracy. The OCRR (p.14) notes that expert use of language involves faster, more accurate and more reliable performances. The idea of accuracy can be linked to highly structured learning opportunities and implies limited challenge. This is because we know from research that when primary school children (or indeed, any other learners) use FLs in less structured activities, their work is likely to contain more errors in the initial stages (Porter 2014). Highly structured learning is also underpinned by the idea of 'overloading' and the OCRR encourages teachers to review the level of resources so as not to overload learners. This seems to rely on the suggestion that working memory is influential in learning but that it has limited capacity (e.g. Baddeley, Eysenck, Andersen 2020). Both these statements are true, but there are real questions around what might constitute 'overloading' if demanding and challenging activities are appropriately scaffolded and learners draw on their existing schemata.

Clearly, to use language independently learners need a base of sounds, vocabulary and grammar. Our reservations with the OCRR's proposals lie in the suggestion that learners should practise in fairly constrained activities, which are concerned with spacing of practice sessions and limited use of 'fixed phrases' with a focus on explicit grammar instruction and understanding of grammatical concepts. We argue that, on the contrary, manipulating written and spoken forms in active uses of language is far more likely to build accuracy than routinised, spaced practice sessions. We also note that 'fixed phrases' have been shown by FL research to be linked to increasing proficiency and to eventually be broken down by young learners hence providing opportunities for discovery and understanding of

grammar rules through use (Mitchell and Myles 2019; Myles, Mitchell and Hooper 1999). In other words, grammatical knowledge, essential in language use, should support communication rather than be an end in its own right and therefore should develop in tandem with meaningful and creative, freer communicative tasks.

Challenge in the form of problem-solving is an essential ingredient in the learning process, and indeed for the development of self-efficacy (see Graham, this issue). Challenge allows for independence and resilience and is likely to influence metacognition in the longer term. In July 2021, the Education Endowment Fund (EEF) conducted a metanalysis of 246 research studies (Murphy 2021) and found that explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies which also involved creating enough challenge to need to use these strategies, had high effectiveness for very low cost. They noted the potential for influence particularly with disadvantaged children who are less likely to use such strategies without support and explicit instruction.

The wider pedagogic literature suggests that challenge is directly linked to the development of metacognition (Diezmann and Watters 2000) and learner autonomy (Applebaum and Leikin 2014). Research, albeit in primary school mathematics classrooms, contends that children are mostly ready to embrace challenge, and recommends that complex concepts can be explored in a context where challenge is presented in a structured way (Goldenberg 2019). Furthermore, as outlined by Graham (this issue), learning how to undertake challenging activities through 'guided mastery' approaches within a framework of self-regulated learning is central to self-efficacy development in language learning. We suggest that learners should be given the opportunity to embrace challenge relatively early on in the language learning process. For example, encountering unfamiliar language in texts could present carefully crafted opportunities to model, explore and use reading strategies. Research in Key Stage 3 has already demonstrated that learners of French, especially those with lower levels of academic attainment, increased their self-efficacy levels when engaging with systematic and targeted strategy instruction coupled with challenging 'authentic' texts (Graham et al. 2020b). Macaro and Erler (2008: 116) recognise the importance of a curriculum which:

> … provides learners with a range of reading problems to be overcome via strategy use at a much earlier time, and which has higher expectations of what they can achieve in the first 2 years of their foreign language study.

Culture

The OCRR contends that culture is an important factor but interestingly, that the 'strengthened economic prospects' that are linked with linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness depend on a solid linguistic base (OCCR: 6). The argument is further made that linguistic proficiency will support the development of a 'more refined' cultural awareness although it is not clear what this means or how it is achieved. Perhaps it relates to historic perceptions that cultural encounters involved literature and therefore required high levels of linguistic proficiency (McLelland 2018).

We would argue that such a conceptualisation of culture runs counter to a 'languages for all' philosophy which was launched when comprehensive secondary schools emerged in the 1960s (Hawkins 1996; see Dobson 2018). Broader understandings of culture have since emerged, which involve the meanings of words and how they differ between languages, symbols, beliefs and traditions (Deoksoon 2020). Research has shown that language teaching for beginners (albeit adults) should present opportunities to explore culture as both a product and a process, which is only too often presented as confused with linguistic knowledge (Ros I Sole 2003). In other words, beginner learners should experience cultural artefacts as well as develop critical evaluation of such artefacts grounded in metacognitive skills of comparison, evaluation and reflection (Ros I Sole 2003). Appreciating one's own and other cultures also develops empathy and global citizenship (Sharpe 2007).

With linguistic and cultural diversity present in many primary school classrooms, multilingualism research has long advocated for teaching approaches to recognise and celebrate this kind of linguistic and cultural diversity in early years education (Busse, Cenoz, Dalman and Rogge 2019). Whilst

there is relatively little research exploring learning culture in beginner school FL classrooms, multilingual and multicultural schoolchildren are likely to be equipped with intercultural skills of reflection, comparison and evaluation as well as awareness of cultural 'products' (stories, habits, celebrations). We contend that, like adult beginner learners, school-based language learners are likely to arrive in the classroom with knowledge and skills they can utilise for developing intercultural awareness (Ros I Sole 2003) and therefore the teaching and learning of cultural awareness and intercultural understanding should be introduced early, regardless of linguistic proficiency (Radić-Bojdanić 2013).

Such opportunities, whilst acknowledged for the development of metacognitive skills, are also likely to contribute to language learning motivation. FL research has indicated that learners are keen to explore others' lives (Cable et al. 2010; Courtney 2017) and see engagement with cultural artefacts such as texts exploring French celebrities/sportsmen as a positive instructional tool (Woore et al. 2018). For adolescent learners of German and English in Hungary, motivation for language learning was strongly related to their belief in the importance of contact with people from other countries; that, in turn, was influenced by exposure to L2 culture, for example through videos, literature and music (Csizer and Kormos 2008). As well as metacognition there is evidence of increased socio-emotional development and outcomes in multilingual environments which have been found to support children's abilities to adapt communication skills depending on their interlocutor (Fan, Liberman, Kezar and Kinzler 2015; Gampe, Wermelinger and Daum 2019; Halle et al. 2014).

Conclusion

We suggest that addressing creativity, challenge and culture in languages education is likely to result in inclusive educational experiences. The 'three Cs' are also likely to increase motivation and the development of metacognitive skills which could support wider learning and indeed lead to a long-term love of languages and language learning. Based on research evidence, it is our view that languages policy and pedagogy should be designed with this aim in mind, above other more immediate concerns such as uptake at the end of Key Stage 3. An imaginative, engaging and exploratory curriculum, supported by opportunities for teacher professional development, will likely solve the more instrumental concerns around progression and motivation. At the same time, using languages as a vehicle for the development of metacognition, metalinguistic awareness and social development will acknowledge the knowledge and skills that school-aged learners bring to the languages classroom and support the development of higher-order thinking skills.

Notes

1. For example, 'Modern languages in comprehensive schools' (DES 1977), the 1988 Council of Europe Project 12 'Learning and teaching modern languages for communication', the National Curriculum MFL Working Group 1989-1990, National Curriculum revisions of 1995, 1999, 2007 as well as the Ofsted reports titled 'The changing landscape of languages: an evaluation of language learning (2004-2007)', and 'Modern languages achievements and challenges (2007-2010)'.
2. The Dfe (2021) consultation states that: 'Our ambition is to produce a subject content that aligns more closely with the Teaching Schools Council's 2016 MFL pedagogy review and, in doing so, ensure the subject content reflects research in language curriculum and teaching and make language GCSEs more accessible and motivating for students'.
3. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages noted in its statement (13 May 2021) on the draft MFL GCSE Subject Content review: 'The APPG MFL has been struck by the number of teachers, school leaders, linguists and education experts contesting the theoretical basis for the reforms' https://appgmfl-gcse2021.weebly.com/uploads/2/6/3/4/26348628/appgmfl-gcsereview21.pdf. See also Schools Week, 25 November 2021 https://schoolsweek.co.uk/rethink-flawed-mfl-gcse-reforms-heads-and-exam-boards-urge and response from Association for Language Learning https://www.all-languages.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/ALL-full-response-to-DfE-GCSE-MFL-subject-content-proposals-FINAL.pdf; https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/News/Press%20releases/2021-GCSE-MFL-Subject-Content-Joint-Statement.pdf. It is also interesting to note similar concerns were expressed following Ofsted's Curriculum Research Review for mathematics on

behalf of the Association of Mathematics Education Teachers (AMET). The Association of Mathematics Education Teachers - Correspondence (ametonline.org.uk)

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