Reflections on the Modern Languages Excellence Report of 2011: Increasing Classroom Language as a First Step towards Communicative Competence

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Abstract: What exactly is meant by the term 'classroom language'? Why are language teachers in Scotland exhorted to do more to implement curricular guidelines in this respect, even though it is not an element that is tested? How might teachers develop their language programmes to accommodate greater use of classroom language? More importantly, how do we persuade our learners to actively use the target language for their daily interactions in the classroom? The author reflects on these and other related questions arising from a re-reading of the Modern Languages Excellence Report, published by Scottish Government in 2011.

Preamble

Do your learners sometimes seem reluctant to communicate? But listen to them as they come into the classroom. If you let them, they would never stop talking! True, they may be speaking English at that point, but they clearly have a strong urge to communicate with each other, and perhaps also with you. That urge to communicate is a resource we can use to good effect in the Modern Languages (ML) classroom if we can find a practical way to harness it.

Policy and practice

The Modern Languages Excellence Report (Scottish Government, 2011), in considering best practice, urges 'maximum exposure to and use of the Modern Language ' and refers to this as 'the key resource'. It advises '…the teacher should conduct the lessons in the target language as much as possible; it should become the accepted medium for classroom language.' (ibid: 12)

That was in February 2011. So, almost five years on, is this now the norm? Is the target language now regularly used for general classroom communication including routine functional tasks? It is difficult to know for sure, since there seems to have been little recent research to systematically examine this aspect across schools. In Scotland, for example, Hazel Crichton's doctoral research study (2010) focused on the work of only four teachers considered to be examples of good practice in the use of the target language. The aim was to identify the strategies these professionals used 'to engage secondary school learners in interaction in the target language with the objective of

developing their communicative competence' (2010: ii). Crichton also quotes Gatbonton & Segalowitz (2005: 325), who - based on earlier research studies from the 80s and 90s in different parts in the world - claim that despite teachers' professed belief in the benefits of using the TL in the classroom many do not do so in practice. Interestingly, the more recent findings from Michael Lynch's doctoral research (Lynch, in press) report a similar disjuncture between theory and practice. In his investigation, using data gathered through an online questionnaire issued to all ML teachers in Scotland, Lynch highlights 'the continuing gap between what initial teacher education advocates in respect of TL use and what qualified teachers say they do.'

Our Investigation

A few years ago I teamed up with a colleague who does supply teaching in ML departments in England. She reports a similar dearth of target language use in the schools in which she has worked. We have asked ML teachers, student teachers and teacher trainers what the problems are. Anecdotal evidence gleaned informally from these exchanges suggests a similar perception is widespread (NB: All quotations have arisen in personal conversations). Student teachers told us:

> *Everyone says we should use the target language more, but nobody tells us how.*

More experienced teachers have said,

> *There's not enough time. It takes me all my time just to cover the syllabus.*

Some teachers have reported that they lose confidence and motivation (their own as well as the learners') because students complain that they don't understand what they (the teachers) are saying. Some teachers fear that their own linguistic skills will not be good enough. Others have offered as justification:

> *Well, it's not tested anyway, is it?*

Overall we noted a clear tendency amongst teachers to refer to classroom language solely in terms of 'teacher-talk' (see below). Crichton (2010: 294) offers the following explanations for non- or minimal compliance based on her review of the literature:

> *…teachers may lack the confidence to use more than minimal quantities of the target language, either due to fear of not being understood and therefore losing control of the class, or because of a lack of knowledge of the kind of language that may be effective in engaging learners in interaction.*

She suggests that some teachers may be 'unsure how to go about it'.   Lynch (in press) reports that newly qualified teachers seemingly found it 'difficult to use TL for discipline, grammar teaching, explaining things and for social chat'. He also cites 'time pressure', 'heavy workloads' and 'pupils' resistance to new ways of learning'.

What is 'classroom language'?

In collecting these comments my colleague and I discovered differing views on what is meant by the term 'classroom language'. It appears to mean different things to different people. For some, 'target language' and 'classroom language' meant the same thing. For some teachers it meant maximising the number of activities in which learners' experience or use of TL (i.e. listening, reading, writing and talking the modern language), in contexts that are as 'authentic' as it is possible to make them within the confines of a classroom. However, restricting TL to curricular or topic activities prepares learners for communication in an imagined future (probably abroad), or asks them to describe aspects of their personal lives, which may be the last thing they want to do in public. It is 'communicative language' but it is not what we understand by 'classroom language'.

Our understanding of the term 'classroom language' takes us closer to the wording used by the authors of the Modern Languages Excellence Report which recommends that the target language 'should become the accepted medium for classroom language' [p.23]. In other words, we take it to mean that the business of the class, the operational situations that arise in the course of language learning should be conducted in TL. These are however precisely the situations in which, it appears, many ML teachers still prefer to use English.

For other teachers we have spoken to, 'classroom language' means all of the above, plus the teacher using TL as the medium of instruction. Sometimes this works well, particularly with more able groups and with older learners, but even when it works, the focus seems to be on the teacher as role model, on learners listening to 'teacher-talk'. Sometimes teachers told us they had tried this approach and found it too difficult for learners who became discouraged or even alienated. They had reverted to English to explain grammatical points, or to enforce discipline, for example. In many classes, it seems, English is often, still, the predominant language heard, with TL being used chiefly in the course of set curricular activities.

Other teachers paid lip service to classroom language by greeting the class in TL and using it to carry out certain routine activities, like calling the register, but then reverted to English (or other L1) for managing learning. Almost all the teachers we spoke to focused on 'teacher-talk', with learners' input being minimal: responding to greetings, for example, providing the date in TL to be written up on the board, responding to their names at roll call, or following instructions.

For us, then, 'classroom language' means language generated by the teacher or by individual learners to meet an immediate, practical purpose, in response to a situation that arises in the classroom in the course of the lesson, or by a desire to engage in spontaneous 'social' language with the teacher or other members of the class. The 'linguistic event' may be initiated by the teacher who needs to give instructions, advice or information; or it may be initiated by learners who wish to communicate with the teacher or with classmates about matters arising in a specific situation. We mean language that has a purpose; language which has the potential to empower learners to say what they need or want to say here and now, in real situations that concern them;

language that allows learners and teachers to say the things they want or need to say anyway, but currently tend to say in English.

Addressing teachers' (and learners') concerns

Practice language v. applied language

Why should we encourage this way of using TL in the classroom? In the face of the difficulties that appear to be overwhelming teachers, why should we bother? The Modern Languages Excellence Report, in a reference to Principles and Practice (LTS 2009: 12), points out that:

> *Successful approaches support the development of young people's 'communicative competence' so that they are able to use and enjoy the language effectively in real situations and for a range of relevant purposes […]*

We accept that using TL instead of English with teacher and fellow learners in the classroom is not 'real' in the sense that using the language with a native speaker would be real, but then it is rare for learners to experience that sort of reality anyway. What they are doing for most of their time in the languages classroom is practising language which they might eventually use in a real situation. In other words, the situation may be realistic but it is not yet real. Even if we manage to persuade them to describe their families, their opinions, their bedrooms, etc. Those are not 'living situations' where learners feel the urge to communicate those ideas. They are simulations. The language they use is still practice language.

Situations that arise in the classroom are real now, and require, sometimes urgently, to be expressed. If we cannot communicate that reality in the language we are learning, why are we bothering to learn the language? Is it only for use in simulated situations? If learners cannot confidently apply the language they are learning to simple, repetitive, familiar situations now, what are the chances of them being able to do it when they eventually get the chance to speak to a native speaker, in an unfamiliar context, maybe several years later?

Lack of time

There is never enough time, is there? So why waste time speaking in English if it takes no more time to say it in TL (eventually). Gradually learners will become increasingly familiar with a range of useful structures and, through frequent repetition, develop an ear for what sounds right, so that when it comes time to make a more formal study of a particular grammar point, learners are already familiar with some examples and more easily able to accept and absorb a more detailed exposition. Arguably this will save time in the long run.

Developing a feel for language

Many would argue that ML is a difficult subject because of the need to learn and remember lots of vocabulary; to understand and be able to reproduce complex

grammar – but they overlook the opportunities offered by classroom language: A chance to use again and again common everyday language in a range of familiar situations. By these we do NOT mean learning lists of nouns in response to stacks of flashcards (e.g. *Qu'est-ce que c'est? C'est un…*), but learning structures that allow learners to say what they need to say about those objects that they use most frequently (e.g. *Je n'ai pas de crayon. Mon crayon est cassé. Je peux avoir une feuille de papier? Je peux aller aux toilettes? On est à quelle page?*)

Motivation and engagement

Learners sometimes try to provoke us by asking, repeatedly, why they have to learn a modern language. They cannot see the relevance to their lives of what they are being asked to do, even though we label some of it 'personal language'. Classroom language, on the other hand, as we are interpreting it here, is clearly relevant: it relates to what learners themselves want or need to say now. So if we can explain how important it is to have a go, get used to using the language (like learning to swim? – no point in just reading about it, you have to jump in and have a go, in a safe, supported environment at first). We sometimes forget that most learners are thrilled to hear themselves speaking another language; they just sometimes lose heart because it takes too long to get to that stage. We have to find ways of empowering them, right from the start, to use the new language to make things happen; to experience using language for a purpose. If they have a problem and can solve it by using this new language it is hugely motivating.

What can we do about it?

Zoltán Dörnyei, in describing what he calls the 'principled communicative approach' (Dörnyei, 2009) makes the distinction between implicit and explicit learning. He concludes that 'simple exposure to natural language input does not seem to lead to sufficient progress in TL attainment for most school learners' and that 'explicit learning procedures – such as focus on form or some kind of controlled practice' is required (ibid: 35-36). He emphasises a need to 'search for ways of reintegrating explicit learning processes in modern language teaching methodology' … the challenge being, he says, 'to maximise the cooperation of explicit and implicit learning' (ibid: 36). This suggests that 'teacher talk' is not enough; that explicit teaching and focused practice are needed if learners are to gain sufficient confidence to generate the language they need to express what they genuinely want and need to say.

You may agree with these ideas but struggle to see how you can put them into practice. We have already seen how some teachers have tried and abandoned the attempt. So here are some ideas to consider alongside your own.

- Don't wait until you think your learners know enough of the language. Start right away but start small, add new phrases gradually, and without ever ignoring what has gone before.
- Consult the class. Tell them what you want to do and why. Ask them to suggest some situations that occur frequently in the classroom, where they have to speak to someone. Identify one situation to start with. Teach them what to say. Practise it. Explain the

vocabulary and the structure. Make sure they know what they are saying. Once they are happy with the item, ask them to use it from now on instead of English. When they do, offer praise (in TL, of course), encouragement, reward, whatever it takes.

- Once that is happening, ask how the idea can be expanded. Can learners use the same structure with different words to create similar utterances to meet to new situations? Help them to be creative with what they already know, or to ask for new words to fit into the structure. Maybe take the opportunity to teach some elementary bilingual dictionary skills.

- Your development programme needs to be as clear and structured as any other aspect of your language teaching. Set goals that are achievable, and stick to them.

- Link these goals to situations rather than topics, and involve learners in setting, monitoring and recording achievements.

- Don't teach chunks of language 'parrot-fashion'. Make sure learners know what they are saying and how the language works. This will give them an early focus for understanding grammatical terms as well as establishing a bank of familiar language patterns that will serve as models for more formal and extended study at a later stage. Hopefully, this will make it easier for learners to see grammar as a set of useful tools for their own use, rather than a set of teacher-led exercises from a text book.

- For learners with additional learning needs Support for Learning teachers advise limiting the amount of new language introduced at any one time, increasing opportunities for repetition, keeping concepts simple, using real rather than imaginary examples. All of this advice can be applied to a careful development of classroom language. My experience with such learners suggest that they are eager and proud to show off what they can do once they are familiar enough with the material to be confident that they will get it right.

- Provide a way for learners to record the classroom language learned and encourage them to personalise it. Keep your own record of the situations covered so that the information can be passed on to the teachers who will inherit your learners and their classroom language skills.

A progressive, situational approach

When we presented our ideas at the 2015 Annual Conference of the Scottish Association for Language Teaching (SALT)[1] we suggested that the Excellence Report's use of the word 'become' in the recommendation that TL should 'become the accepted medium' allowed for a progressive approach. We proposed a five-point cycle based on frequently occurring classroom situations:

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[1] http://www.saltlangs.org.uk/

1. IDENTIFY, with learners, a situation that occurs regularly and where there is a genuine need or wish to communicate. Discuss what language they already know that can be used to meet, or partially meet, the situation.
2. TEACH any 'missing language'. Model use of known and new language. Explain any new structures. Ensure learners know what they are saying.
3. PRACTISE until all understand and are comfortable with language and structures.
4. Thereafter, teacher and learners USE THE LANGUAGE FOR REAL on each occasion that the situation recurs.
5. Later: REVIEW, REFINE, EXPAND. Ask learners to suggest variations that follow a similar pattern, and show them how they extend the pattern to cover new but related situations. Give credit for creative use of language patterns.

Thereafter, the cycle begins again, with a new situation. Above all, we stressed that the focus of efforts should be on learner involvement because '*the single most influential factor on a young person's perception of a subject is their own personal experience of it in the classroom. (*Modern Languages Excellence Report, 2011: 12)

How does this help?

Placing the emphasis firmly on learners' need to communicate, and empowering them gradually and systematically to apply TL learning to those communicative situations, may allow some of teachers' main concerns may be met. For example:

- It provides a starting point for teachers who say they don't know where to begin, regardless of age or stage or ability of learners; it provides a source of ideas about what to tackle next, after greetings and registration routines have been dealt with, and it provides a progressive, cumulative programme of practical language acquisition.
- It provides for explicit teaching, focused practice and regular opportunities to apply the language learned, thus creating a familiarity with common structures and facilitating a feeling for what sounds right.
- Time is not wasted because, once learned, TL simply replaces English (or other L1) in situations which would occur anyway. Time spent on initial teaching of items is not lost because the system creates, over time, a bank of familiar lexical items and grammatical structures which can supply starting points for more formal studies.
- It provides a framework within which to 'grow' use of classroom language, with the ultimate goal of reducing or eliminating use of L1. There is no risk of learners being left behind since all contribute and practise regularly; all get a chance to initiate language and become confident enough to do so.
- Classroom situations examined for communicative potential can include discipline, rubrics and other language for organising learning, and eventually review and assessment of work.

- By establishing a collaborative ethos with and between learners, teachers who are non-specialists, or who are not confident of their own command of language can learn along with the learners where necessary. New language required can be sought by learners as well as the teacher, and added to the class's store.

- In mixed ability classes, more able learners can be encouraged to research and initiate language to enrich classroom situations; less able learners, who may have difficulties with abstract concepts or simulated scenarios will benefit from regular repetition in familiar situations.

- Learners will experience language use as *cause and effect*: their utterances will produce outcomes which have immediate effect on what happens next. This can be stimulating for learners and motivate further learning.

- Learners become used to hearing themselves using TL and expecting others to do so. The spin-off for formal TL studies generally can be substantial.

We believe that our ideas chime well with the eight research-based principles for effective teaching and learning of languages identified by Professional Development Consortium in Modern Foreign Languages (PDC-in-MFL), and in particular the last one, which in their view underpins all the rest:

> *The principle focus of pedagogy should be on developing language skills and therefore the teaching of linguistic knowledge (knowledge of grammar and vocabulary) should act in the service of skill development not as an end in itself. (PDC-in-MFL, online)*

What next?

For me, now, that means developing these classroom language ideas further, continuing to talk to teachers about what they agree or disagree with, and about what help they need. Currently I am working on development materials for use with groups of teachers and/or learners. For the colleague with whom I have been working, it means continuing to develop teaching resources based on everyday classroom occurrences. With comments about lack of time in mind, we are also developing ideas on how to integrate classroom language development with the syllabus requirements of topics and grammar, so that teachers and learners can appreciate how these aspects of language learning inform and support each other. Our hope is to convince more teachers that making an effort to develop classroom language systematically, far from being an optional extra, is in fact crucial to the development of their language teaching generally.

As the Excellence Report (2012:12) reminds us:

> *The single most influential factor on a young person's perception of a subject is their own personal experience of it in the classroom.*

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