

# My thoughts on language learning and teaching: Interdisciplinary Project Report for the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages

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**Abstract:** This article is an edited report on what I have learned about language teaching methods through researching the subject for the Interdisciplinary Project part of the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages. I offer my views on why the UK seems to be behind in language learning, why the focus of our curriculum seems inappropriate and present an analysis of my survey results. I also propose some common language learning principles that we could use in everyday teaching.

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**Keywords:** motivation, fluency, language learning techniques, language teaching methodology

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## Introduction

At the beginning of my sixth and last year in secondary school I decided to take on the Scottish Languages Baccalaureate. I knew it would be a challenge but I was sure that it would allow me to improve important skills, particularly in research and independent learning. I decided to study how languages are taught in different countries. The topic has always interested me because I never really understood how people have learned English fluently in contrast to us learning another language. As a result of my investigation I think I have a better idea.

I believe that one reason is that learners in non-Anglophone countries have an extra motivation. They seem to think they will not be understood in the wider world unless they have at least *some* knowledge of English. Nevertheless, although this motivation appears to be prevalent in classrooms in other parts of the world and hence the minds of pupils, I still find that there are always some pupils who simply enjoy languages and are really good at them whereas others just don't care. However this does not mean that the less engaged pupils cannot speak the language.

Within my recent classroom experience I have observed, that when learning the basics pupils are less receptive because most of them are reluctant, and even embarrassed, to act like a small child and repeat words and numbers in order to increase their vocabulary (although in my view by not repeating words aloud they miss a crucial part of language learning that our brains are virtually wired to do). However, it seems that this initial reluctance then leads to a wider lack of motivation which could be the explanation as to why there are only have a few pupils in a language class (and I count myself amongst these) who appear to have a "knack" for learning languages. In my view, however, it's not about being somehow more gifted in languages. Rather, the earlier we begin to learn languages in a fun and interesting environment the less pupils say that

languages are difficult thus discouraging them from continuing their studies. Although arguably language learning *is* difficult this does not need to be so directly addressed. Languages are skills and just like any skill there comes a time when it becomes quite difficult but each of us can overcome this difficulty and move on to the next level. However, according to Williams et al (2002), pupils in the UK are not willing to confront these challenges, i.e. they are not motivated to continue with languages. A quote from a pupil included in an article by Jones & Doughty (2015) hints at another reason:

*It's good starting to learn [a modern language] earlier so you're not playing when you get to high school.*

This suggests that an early start to language learning is not enough. Pupils would also like to be continually challenged in their language learning.

## **My investigation**

### **History of language teaching techniques**

In terms of my Interdisciplinary Project, my first steps were taken mid-October when I began my investigation into the history of language teaching techniques. I found the background information presented on the website created by Jill Kerper Mora (online) easy to understand which allowed me, someone completely new to the field, to understand the basics. I was surprised to find that many of the techniques listed are still used today, the main four being the following:

1. Reading approach
2. Audiolingual approach
3. Communicative approach
4. Functional-notional approach

According to Mora (ibid), the reading approach is useful for those who do not travel abroad or for whom reading is the one usable skill in the target languages. It focuses firstly on the reading aspect and secondly on improving the learner's knowledge (current and/or historical) of the country where the target language is spoken.

The audiolingual method evolved from the so-called direct method (where all instruction is in the target language) whereby students essentially to listen to, repeat and then learn by heart grammatically correct phrases in the target language. The teacher (but not the learner) may use the mother tongue at his or her discretion.

The communicative approach revolves around the idea of slowly encouraging pupils to communicate in the target language, starting with yes or no answers, and through a long transitional process, build up to more elaborate utterances.

The functional-notional approach is a specific form of the communicative approach. In this method language is broken down into understandable, context-specific chunks. The teacher creates vivid situations that include details of things like where and when the

conversation takes place and what subject is being talked about. This role-play technique creates a uniquely immersive experience for the pupils within a controlled environment, to help build confidence.

Finding out about all of these different techniques was a revelation as I thought that there were only limited ways of learning a language. From my experience in school, most language learning should be done through reading passages and answering questions or answering questions on a pre-recorded dialogue.

### **Surveys**

After reviewing carefully what I had learned I constructed a survey for S3 pupils in my school that allowed me to gain an insight into their thoughts on whether or not we should use these approaches more often. I also sent my survey to a Professor at Strathclyde University and asked him to distribute it among his learners.

I received 20 responses from students at various stages of their university career, and who originated from across the UK. The 60 school pupils comprised of two 3rd year classes at my school all of which completed the survey. Both of these groups contribute to the overall result of the survey. According to the responses the majority of pupils learn the basics in secondary school at the age of about 12-13.

These findings are in contrast to those of my other survey in which I received 80 responses from people who had studied English as their second language, in another country. They consisted of 10 language assistants and 70 pupils (59 from France, 9 from Spain, 5 from China, 2 from Italy, 2 from Germany and 3 from Latin America) and the results were acquired by sending my survey link to the relative embassies and also getting in touch with my town's link school in France, Andernos-les-Bains.

In the countries listed above, the schools begin the introduction of languages as young as age 6 which arguably gives the pupils an early understanding of the inner workings of the target language even though they may not be able to speak it completely fluently. Abroad, these early years' classes comprise mainly of games and songs which further aids the previous point about how it gives them a strong base for continuing to learn. Fortunately, the Scottish Government has plans to give every child in Scotland the chance to learn an additional language from Primary 1, and a further language no later than Primary 5 by 2020 (Scottish Government, 2012)

However, in my view at the moment our languages classes are too full of perfecting the skills for the test (reading, listening etc.), but only listening can be practiced when engaging in conversation. Both listening and speaking skills are absolutely imperative to language learning because it allows us to acquaint ourselves with the language's syntax which can then be transferred to the other two skills learned in secondary language education- reading and writing. When a child learns their mother tongue which means of learning do they engage in first? They hear the words (listening) and then practice repeating them (speaking) until they innately understand the word's meaning. Only from there do they begin to read and write.

Data to support my view can be seen in the responses to my survey (cf. Appendix 1) in which I ask in what situations students (UK-based) learn vocabulary best. 56% of respondents said that they memorised words better when using them in speech and conversation. I believe that this is because it is how our brains have learned our first language. For example, when learning how to speak with an accent the pupil should listen to native speakers (for our mother tongue this would be our parents) and then repeat them in our own time in order to say them correctly and be understood.

This same information is reiterated in another response where over 50% said that they learn best in an environment in which they are surrounded by speakers of the language. 60% said languages are learned better after you have stayed in a country where the target language is spoken.

Lastly, around half of the UK survey participants felt that it would be better if the majority of the lessons were taught in the target language. This makes sense as it means that they can listen to the syntax and natural flow of the language and copy it to ensure a higher feeling of fluency.

From comparing my two previously mentioned surveys it seems as though foreigners learning English find it harder to speak the language and understand people talking to them whereas the majority of UK pupils say the most difficult part for them arises even before the conversation has initiated. They struggle “finding the confidence to use the language”. This may be a reflection of our classes which are a reflection of our culture. For example, when we are on a bus we do not tend to engage in conversation with the stranger next to us. By contrast, I have found during my stays in Europe that people, particularly in France and Spain, are more likely to talk to you, even if it’s only about the weather. They certainly start conversing more confidently than a native English speaker would. This lack of confidence is then transferred into the classroom where we tend to read and listen to pre-recorded tapes of people that are occasionally of native speakers and do not do much in order to purposefully use the language in the classroom.

I wonder also if this is a reflection of the teacher’s own self-consciousness in using the language. For example, some teachers will not willingly even use native language assistant’s mother tongue, which would help with their own learning, and some only use language assistants to translate words during a class lesson. Surely language assistants have so much more to offer!

In contrast, 44% of Scottish student sample (from university and secondary) said that they would like the whole, or most of the class to be taught in the target language.

### **Interviews with native speakers**

Two of my proudest moments during my research were maintaining intellectual conversations in both French and Spanish during my interviews with my school’s language assistants. During these conversations I asked them questions on what they thought about using more of the target language in class and they both said that we do not do enough of this in Scotland as in France and Spain this is very frequently done.

This leads back to my first point: Are we starting language learning too late? Certainly it would be better to start acquiring languages at a younger age as it means we are developing the skills needed to learn languages and also learning basic vocabulary and constructs that save time later on when lessons should be focused on more advanced skills like speaking or reading and complex structures like subjunctives or forming gerunds. However, language can, of course, be acquired at any age.

### **Participatory Investigation**

To further this point I have been going through a few different self-teach courses for a few different languages and the best one to date that which I am using for Catalan as it encourages that you listen to the audio given first at least two times before trying to read the words and memorise them. This in turn helped me memorise these words by priming my brain to recognise them (through hearing them) and then I could actively recall them better afterwards.

Of course there is no one correct way to teach a language. Rather, pupils should be taught in multiple different ways in order to give an all-round experience. However in my opinion the preferred order would be one which mimics learning one's native tongue i.e. hearing words and phrases and repeating them and only then learning to read and write them and use them in one's own sentences.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In conclusion, we can see that currently pupils in UK schools start learning additional languages a lot later than our foreign counterparts and this may be the reason that we fall behind in the language learning race. Next, we can argue that teachers need to work on building the pupil's confidence as many pupils find that they have confidence problems. Improving this may need to start by the teacher themselves becoming more self-confident which means they will start speaking more in their target language to ensure maximum increase of the pupil's self-belief. Moreover, it actually seems that because other languages are introduced so early in other parts of the world it aids in creating a more receptive student when it comes to further study of languages. The 1+2 initiative is therefore a welcome strategy because it should become easier to develop pupils that genuinely enjoy the language as they will be able to have their "child-like" way of learning taught to them at a suitable age that won't lead to embarrassment. Contrary to popular belief, the survey conducted shows that many pupils say that they learn better when surrounded by speakers of the language and feel they would benefit from a higher percentage of their classes being in the target language. Furthermore, it is evident that there are many efficient ways to learn but the only way to find the best one for you is to experiment and adjust existing ones in a way that suits your preferences. This may be anything from simple rote memorisation techniques or creating a dance routine that associates movements with vocabulary.

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## **Appendix 1: Survey Questions**

### **1. Survey Questions for University and Secondary Pupils in the UK:**

Where are you studying?

How do you feel you learn vocabulary and language in general, best?

What do you do to further your knowledge of the language?

In what kind of environment do you learn best?

What aspects of language learning do you find most difficult?

If at all, how do you overcome these difficulties?

Do you find it easier to learn the language if you have been to the country and used it?

Would you find it beneficial if the whole class were taught in the target language (if not already)?

### **2. Survey Questions for Language Assistants and Pupils Overseas:**

What country do you come from?

What languages did you learn at school?

At what age do pupils start learning a foreign language, in your country?

What aspects of language learning do you find most difficult?

In your country, were languages taught differently between primary and secondary? If yes explain further

In your opinion what percentage of a lesson should be taught in the foreign language?

Why do you believe this? Explain briefly

Are your foreign language students more proactive in their learning or are they more inclined to wait for instruction from the teacher?

