

On Target: Progression in modern foreign language teaching and learning

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Abstract

Pupils do not automatically progress in their foreign language learning. It is a process that needs to be carefully oriented and scaffolded by the teacher. My concern in this article is to explore the nature of such scaffolding that I relate to the definition of very precise learning objectives and the concomitant establishment of pupil learning targets. I suggest that motivation is a crucial feature in such a framework of goal-oriented teaching and learning.

Resumen

El progreso del alumnado de lengua extranjera no se produce automáticamente, sino que necesita una cuidadosa orientación y una planificación progresiva por el profesor. La preocupación de este artículo es explorar la naturaleza de esa planificación progresiva que relaciono con la definición de unos objetivos de aprendizaje muy definidos, así como el establecimiento paralelo de objetivos de aprendizaje de los alumnos. Considero la motivación una característica fundamental en este tipo de enseñanza y aprendizaje orientados a los objetivos.

Introduction

Modern Foreign Language (MFL) teaching and learning, especially for younger learners, is often hall-marked by a lively approach that is centred on pupil participation, with vibrant and enthusiastic teacher role-models, totally focused on engaging the pupils' attention. Indeed, it often occurs to me in my privileged position as teacher educator when observing teachers in their classrooms, that in no other subject do teachers invest so much time and energy in "*son et lumière*", shows in order to provide varied, relevant, meaningful and, of course, *fun* learning

for their pupils. It is not surprising that MFL teachers suffer pre-mature burnout and experience high mortality rates! The teachers' efforts are commendable but are not always matched by parallel efforts on the part of the pupils. Whilst there are many reasons for this, some of which I will discuss in this article, I believe a main flaw of the ever shifting pedagogy of MFL teaching and learning (for centuries we have endured methodological pendulum swings in an apparently never-ending and continuing search for the "right method") is the lack of in-built progression in our planning sequences. This is often reflected in a rather unsequenced *chunk* approach to language teaching and learning. It is an approach that leaves pupils unaware of the overall orientation of their learning, unaware of what they are aiming for, both short term and longer term, unable therefore to sense a feeling of making progress, or of curriculum progression that would give such powerful feedback for further learning. Lee, Buckland and Shaw, for example, interviewed 62 English pupils in the 13-14 years age range, (thus, in their third year in the secondary cycle), and concluded:

The pupils have a limited view of the nature and process of learning a foreign language. This emerges through their inability to talk, other than in vague terms, about what they are intended to learn, what has been learnt, and the extent to which they are successful in their learning, based on clear evidence and an understanding of what is going on (1998:58).

I suggest that the current climate of educational target-setting, a borrow from economic discourse, can be useful if applied in a pupil-friendly way to pupils' learning, especially in conjunction with teachers' specification of clear learning objectives. It is the exploration of such specificity in pedagogical and psychological terms that is the focus of this article.

Defining learning objectives

Whilst teachers are aware of the "big picture" of learning i.e. they are aware of the examination syllabus and sometimes work within a scheme of work or/and follow a course book that is compatible with the syllabus, it is the "small picture" of the individual lessons both as single learning opportunities and as part of a unit of learning that has most meaning to pupils. The daily/weekly timetable is, after all, how the pupils experience their learning. The teacher's role in apportioning and measuring this learning as accurately as possible is crucial in order to plan for

progression. Let us at this point move towards the construction of a lesson beginning with what practical language items we want to teach in order to exemplify this procedure.

We need lessons to be varied, relevant and interesting, but we also need them to be focused and targeted at specific learning objectives. Many lessons plans –I speak from the experience of observing over 700 lessons– specify only very general aims e.g. “food and drink” as a topic, rather than a clear specification of exactly what food and drink items in a topic domain that must include thousands upon thousands of items. Closer interrogation of a teacher claiming to be teaching “food and drink” will, for example, uncover that the precise specification boils down to a very restricted number of food and drink items, possibly in the region of 6-10. This is entirely concomitant with the amount of new input we can reasonably expect pupils to memorise and hopefully internalise, if we follow, for example, Miller (1956) who suggested that there is a *magical* number of 7 (plus or minus 2) items that can be readily processed by the brain.

Vocabulary or notional items are in themselves insufficient in a lesson plan, although they provide the content. We also need to know the grammatical structures that will frame the input, thus allowing the lexis to be manipulated. No lesson will contain the same menu of skills for we vary these according to the stage of instruction, sometimes emphasising the receptive skills, sometimes the productive. Nonetheless, we need to be clear about the emphasis for each lesson and once again, specify which skills we are developing and for what purpose in order for an appropriate lesson sequence to be constructed around this specification. A defined content and specification of skill emphasis will enable us to plan the sequence of activities and to decide on the actual tasks.

As experienced teachers will know, and trainee and newly qualified teachers will need reminding of, the learning objectives need to be further articulated in terms of differentiated needs in order to provide for any *special* learning need of individual or groups of pupils and also in terms of formative and summative assessment opportunities of learning. To return to the questions of learning objectives, let us take by way of an example a lesson intending to teach and practise items of clothing linked to colours, the latter notion already known to pupils. For a 45-minute lesson

the specification of learning objectives that I articulate in terms of performance objectives, might look like the following example:

By the end of the lesson, it is expected that pupils will be able to:

- understand 6 colours in context with 6 items of clothing through listening and reading exercises
- combine 3 colours with 3 items of clothing as a minimum in structured oral production
- extend the minimum 3 spoken utterances into sentences beginning with “I wear...” and say such a sentence correctly at least once
- write the oral version down, with teacher support if necessary, having seen at least 2 correct written models on the board or OHP
- know something about fashion in the target culture.

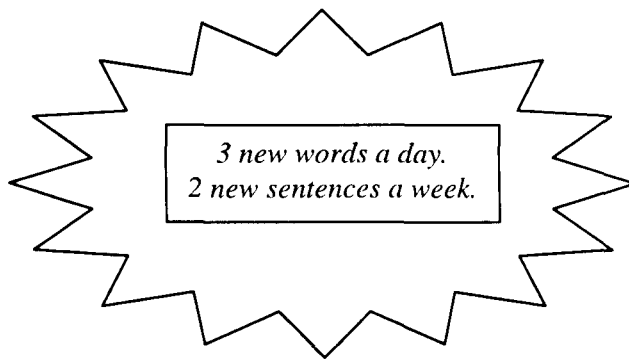
As this is an introductory lesson as far as the items of clothing are concerned, I emphasise skills of intensive listening followed by speaking in a real context i.e. pupils describing the clothes they are wearing and by extension their favourite weekend clothes, especially if they are wearing a dull school uniform. In other words, I aim to turn the linguistic objectives into relevant language use by the pupils so that they can say, and perhaps write, something meaningful to them.

I am also giving the lesson a cultural frame and specify this as a learning objective too. Research, e.g. Oxymoron (1998), clearly indicates that the cultural input needs to be consciously planned if it is to be more than incidental and anecdotal. As I wrote:

Where [the teaching of culture] was identified, it tended towards vagueness or superficiality appearing almost as an afterthought and focusing on touristy or questionable 'special events' (Jones 1998:54).

How then might such detailed planning be useful? The usefulness of this detail of planning serves two very important feedback functions. Firstly on a pedagogical level, it provides the teacher with a route to learning that can be assessed both discretely and holistically. The overall evaluation at the end of the lesson when considering the evidence as to whether the intended learning has taken place, will

inform the teacher about the success or otherwise of the teaching and learning in this lesson. Secondly, clear, irrefutable feedback can be given to the learners as to what extent their targets for learning that will have been negotiated with them at an appropriate point have been achieved. The most enticing foreign language classrooms are a profusion of cultural images and linguistic support such as key target language transactions hanging from the ceiling and common verb paradigms on the wall. There would also be space for the pupils' learning targets, for example, written by the pupil on a piece of card, cut into an interesting shape, dangling on a length of string or ribbon as in the example below.



Motivation and goal-oriented learning

Positive feedback for learning is a very powerful motivation and is allied to goal theories that have become very influential in the last decade. Dörnyei, reviewing the research and literature, posits that there are four mechanisms by which goals affect performance. These are:

- 1. They direct attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities at the expense of actions that are not relevant.*
- 2. They regulate effort expenditure in that people adjust their efforts to the difficulty level required by the task*
- 3. They encourage persistence until the goal is accomplished.*
- 4. They promote the search for relevant action plans or task strategies. (2000:26).*

As Dörnyei asserts, the goals are not only ultimate, long-term goals but also “standards by which to evaluate one’s performance providing a definition of

success” (ibid.). This is very important for classroom-based language learning where the prospect of mastery must seem very distant indeed for many pupils. Thus, the setting of “proximal subgoals”, i.e. short term and medium term objectives, will undoubtedly provide the motivating force needed for pupils in their rather long distance journey to language mastery, establishing benchmarks of progress along the way, thus providing critical feedback for learning. It is strange to me that teachers who can usually well articulate such benchmarks do not always share them with the learners. Educational research has found in several instances that the majority of pupils in any ordinary class do not fully understand why they are involved in any particular learning activity. As Lee et al. wrote:

The pupils lack a clear view of what learning a language really means. They are unclear about what they are supposed to gain from their lessons’ (op.cit.3-4).

Let us reiterate, then, the need to establish not just clear and specific targets, but ones that challenge, are relevant and meaningful to the learners. This has profound implications for teachers planning both short term and long term, especially for the planning of progression.

Progression: from the familiar to the unfamiliar

Progress must surely involve moving from the familiar and relatively simple to the less familiar and more complex in a learning trajectory which teachers can use to help maintain the interest and motivation of their pupils. Progress refers to the pupils’ gains in knowledge, skills and understanding. Progression is the element in the planning process that enables learners to progress and that promotes “*growing competence that is as much concerned with the process of learning as with assessing the result*” (Modern Foreign Languages. The National Curriculum. 1999). Progression relates to the quality of the curriculum that enables pupils to build on what they have learned and is concerned with shifts along various continua that would include:

- range of vocabulary
- complexity of structures
- competence in the skills
- increasing accuracy
- socio-linguistic adaptability

- more advanced learner strategies
- a shift from dependent to independent use of language
- confidence and enjoyment in foreign language use.

In England, the government has introduced a “literacy” initiative that has required primary schools and, as of September 2001, secondary schools to develop and deliver a particular content in a preferred way. This is to say that a “literacy hour” is compulsory in all primary schools every day whilst secondary schools for the age range 11-14 must implement whole-school strategies on a whole school basis. Whilst this is primarily but not exclusively aimed at English (mother tongue) teachers, MFL teachers (and indeed teachers of all subjects) are required to consider “literacy” as a cross-curricular learning opportunity. Teaching strategies proposed include directing “*to ensure pupils know what they should be doing*”, modelling, scaffolding, explaining, questioning, guiding exploration and discussing (Literacy Strategy 1998:8), a very familiar repertoire to MFL teachers. MFL teachers can easily interpret the requirements and what I suggest might be of particular use is the continuum of *word-sentence-text* that is a key feature of the working strategy. This involves moving pupils rapidly from vocabulary lists to their manipulation in sentences and in texts of all kinds. Pachler suggests a whole sale re-think of methodology to incorporate this principle:

It would seem therefore, that a re-examination of the current aims of FL teaching in secondary education is desirable and that there is a need for the inclusion of thought-provoking texts and contexts which allow pupils to perform tasks that make appropriate cognitive demands and emphasise creativity, moving learners on from single –word and short-phrase transactions and interactions’ (2000:31).

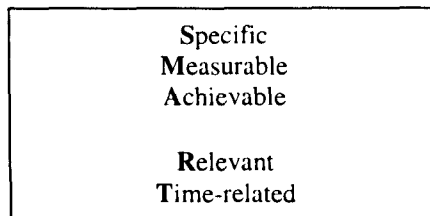
Teachers’ planning will need to take on board these continua and plan, for example, appropriate activities that in early stages provide maximum support and extensive and intensive practice of familiar language in short bursts. As confidence and competence are developed, planning will focus more on enhancing more independent learning, combining the familiar with new lexis and grammatical structures, and involving the learner as an active participant in the process.

Progression can be developed thematically on a spiralling basis, broadening context on all axes of teaching and learning. Thus, for example, the familiar topic of “personal details” would move, I suggest, from a very simple naming and identification procedure at the first stage to richer descriptions involving future

plans, e.g. careers, on subsequent re-visits to the topics. The English National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages defines 8 level descriptions for each skill area, into which progression is in-built (and, incidentally this is the sort of levelling exercise any group of language teachers can undertake). What teachers often struggle with is exactly how to plan for pupils to move from one level to the next. What I am suggesting is that close attention to the learning objectives greatly facilitates this exercise since these objectives can be matched to the levels and suitable activities planned to move pupils on to another level. Without such detailed scrutiny, the exercise is much more difficult to do. Above all the pupils need to know what they must target to enable them to move to the next level. As Dörnyei insists, this makes the pupils focused in their learning. It also provides a focus to track and assess learning

Tracking progress and monitoring

I mentioned earlier the issue of pre-planning for formative assessment. Readers will certainly be familiar with these constructs. the degree of specificity I am urging should enable teachers to keep details of individual pupils' progress towards and hopefully beyond their learning targets, especially where these are SMART targets. What are SMART targets? They are:



SMART targets can provide data, qualitative and quantitative according to the assessment methods used, that will enable a re-focusing of future targets for future learning. Such data also provide a good class overview where pupils' progress can be compared; they also provide learning management data enabling classes to be compared. Target-setting is most certainly a useful monitoring device for teachers and for subject leaders and since it involves prediction and reconciliation of targets, locates itself into a culture of learning improvement. Target-setting is useful for pinpointing under-achievement in pupils i.e. those pupils who fail to "hit target"

and special support can be negotiated with the pupil according to need. Individual target-setting is an effective way of enabling pupils to experience a measure of control and of ownership of their own learning, especially important in MFL learning where, as commented, previously, the ultimate goals are so often several years distant and where motivation may flag. In their list of 12 suggestions for motivating language learners, Williams and Burden (1997:141-2) include the following:

- *Discuss with learners why they are carrying out activities*
- *Involve learners in making decisions related to learning the language*
- *Involve learners in setting language-learning goals*
- *Give feedback that is informational.*

This kind of discussion would go some way to help clear the *fog* engulfing those pupils interviewed by Lee at al. exemplified in a quote from one pupil who said “*Copying, not learning. Don’t know what it means or how to pronounce it*” (op.cit.:24).

There can be no doubt that progression is a feature of effective learning. Progression, we have asserted, involves moving from the known to the unknown and the teacher’s role is to construct a firm bridge. It is natural to be a little anxious about the unknown, about the awaiting challenge, for as Holmes (1994:34) writes:

We are all reluctant to some extent to step outside the circle of existing experience...There is much to be gained by involving learners, discussing ways to improve the quality of their learning environment and negotiating ways in which to promote more spontaneous use of the target language.

Creemers’ seminal study (1994) of effective teaching found certain dimensions of teacher behaviour to be crucial in promoting effective learning. One such *behaviour* involved the setting of clear goals, in one sense restricting the possible range of goals and thus placing emphasis on basic skills, cognitive learning and transfer. The use of “advance organisers” –and the establishment of prior learning objectives is one such “advance organiser”– was also found very helpful to pupils in the focusing of their learning.

Concluding remarks

Learning, then, it seems to me, is about moving but interconnected targets. Pupils need to be helped to develop a repertoire of learning strategies from which they can select in order to achieve their targets. Targeted and focused learning does not exclude flexibility for as the comprehensive planning document, The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages insists, teachers and learners need to develop an awareness of “*the possibility and acceptability of different outcomes as opposed to learners (perhaps subconscious) striving for a single ‘correct’ outcome*” (2002:163). The paradox of a structured learning approach is in its linguistic empowerment enabling the pupil to be creative in language use from a secure knowledge basis.

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