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Language teaching after COVID: real world priorities

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Language teaching after COVID: real world priorities

By Chris Beighton and India Rusbridge

In his recent discussion of the [consultation about   in the teaching of Modern foreign Languages](), [Sarn Rich]() reminds us that learning lists of words and rules does constitute language teaching. The distinction between "cultural content" and " the language", he is right to point out, is a falsehood that risks being perpetuated by new developments in MFL teaching at GCSE level. This is part of [a current crisis]() in this area.

Our experience bears this out: new teachers are faced with a strong emphasis on techniques whose the main purpose is meet targets and pass exams. This emphasis is of course not new, and many will remember the "functional" "communicative" or "lexical" language teaching approaches from the 1980s and 90s which made similar claims: languages are best taught by reducing them to itemised, high frequency functions and their associated cues, chunks and frames. These can be easily taught and memorised by extensive practice, ensuring success and rapid gains in proficiency and confidence.

Post COVID, the popularity of such approaches may increase as teachers seek "solutions" to the COVID catch-up problem. Conti's "Extensive Processing Instruction (EPI)" is a likely candidate. Conti draws explicitly on approaches from the 1980s which promised, like EPI, to teach "real world communication" through "high frequency" language. Abstractions such as the labelling of parts of speech (verb, noun, preposition and so on) are abandoned in favour doing stuff with language that achieves actual, real-world goals. These are the things that students need to "master in the real world" or, Conti says, if we want to be more pragmatic – to pass the exams.

However, it is not clear that the language taught at GCSE qualifies as "real world". Anglicised pronunciation and syntax, nonexistent vocabulary and inappropriate slang are all examples that could be given from experience of observing MFL lessons. Then there are the incorrect usage and errors taught to unwitting students by teachers not always teaching their "main" language. Then there was the chief examiner whose pronunciation was so poor that native speakers couldn't understand them, and of course the discombobulation of GCSE candidates when faced with a word or phrase they hadn't previously been taught to regurgitate on cue. There is nothing "real world" about passing an exam when it comes to foreign languages.

We feel, ultimately, that learning language for the "real world" cannot exclude the cultural knowledge that gives it purpose in the first place. Understanding the links and differences

between languages is incredibly helpful in this sense. Similarly, inference skills, which are undermined by a purely functional approach, are crucial: language classes cannot afford to fail to teach students how to work out what new language items might mean. Finally, motivation must not be undermined: the trivialisation of language itself and the reduction of learning to the regurgitation of decontextualized chunks is unlikely to make the experience of language learning a memorable and useful one.