

Dialogues

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Making language learning make sense at the National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy

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In this article, members of the National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy ...

In November 2016, the Teaching Schools Council published the [Report of the MFL Pedagogy Review](#) (Bauckham 2016). The report drew on research into foreign language learning and teaching and on the knowledge and experience of a wide range of experienced practitioners. It noted that only one in three pupils achieves a languages GCSE at grade 4 or above and that fewer than half of pupils even take a language GCSE. Poor motivation in studying a language is partly associated with pupils feeling that the language is too hard (Taylor & Marsden 2014). That is, feeling a sense of progression is important for learners, and for many learners this sense of progression is currently lacking. This suggests that the type of pedagogy used has an important role in motivating pupils, to give them that sense of progress.

The National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy (NCELP, www.ncelp.org) has been funded by the Department for Education (DfE) and the University of York to help put into practice the recommendations of the MFL Pedagogy Review in French, German, and Spanish teaching across 45 secondary schools in England. The NCELP approach to pedagogy is research-led and practice-informed, taking into account the time-poor context of FL learning in English classrooms. The pedagogy helps pupils establish, early in their course, a robust knowledge of basic vocabulary, grammar, and the sound and spelling systems (phonics). The pedagogy then reinforces this knowledge via planned practice in meaningful activities.

There is notable synergy between NCELP's approach and language awareness (LA) approaches, involving the analysis of patterns to understand language more deeply, and including all language data: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and meaning. We conceptualise the LA endeavour as careful, purposeful looking and listening, with a view to 'getting under the skin' of language.

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The recent MFL Pedagogy Review recommendations include (amongst others) principles for teaching phonics, vocabulary, grammar and their combination in meaningful practice. In this article, we focus briefly on each of the three pillars – phonics, vocabulary and grammar – and their resonance with LA.

Phonics

The LASER manifesto highlights the importance of phonics, in particular the explicit teaching of the sound-writing relationship, and laments its disappearance after KS1 in English schools. The Pedagogy Review supports the ‘direct and systematic teaching of phonics in the new language’ whilst noting that this practice is still relatively rare. NCELP’s pedagogy is supported by modest yet compelling research findings about phonics in a FL (e.g. Woore et al. 2018) that:

- teaching phonics develops phonological decoding;
- without explicit phonics teaching, decoding may be limited and progress slowly;
- the ability to decode is associated positively with motivation;
- decoding enables learners to access new language autonomously and accurately;
- phonics teaching supports vocabulary learning, which is key to making progress in language learning;
- the time spent on teaching phonics does not seem to delay progress in other areas, e.g., reading comprehension.

The approach aims to increase learner confidence and independence in pronunciation, speech and writing, and lead to more effective vocabulary learning. Informed by principles of difficulty and frequency and by practitioner knowledge, a selection of specific sound-symbol correspondences (SSCs) is explicitly taught. The SSCs are isolated during presentation and embedded in a ‘source’ word for initial practice. Further practice in SSCs is provided via a further set of ‘cluster’ words, chosen for their high frequency (see below). SSCs that often cause confusion for first-language English speakers because of phonemic proximity (e.g. *ou* and *u* in French) or graphic similarity (e.g. *ll* and *l* in Spanish) are contrasted for intensive practice in listening, reading aloud, and transcription tasks.

Vocabulary

Space permits only a brief description of three of the principles that inform NCELP’s work on the teaching and learning of vocabulary: the frequency principle, with a particular focus on a high-frequency verb lexicon; the selection of mixed word class (e.g. nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.) sets of vocabulary for teaching; and the development of vocabulary knowledge using patterns in cognates and word families. The core aim of these three principles is to make language learning make sense for learners, recognising the need to make the most of every opportunity for learning in this time-poor context.

The MFL Pedagogy Review states: “Vocabulary to be taught should be informed by frequency of occurrence in the language, and special attention should be paid to common verbs in the early stages ... A consequence of not attending to frequency of occurrence in vocabulary choice is pupils realising that they cannot say or understand basic things in the language.” To date, there has been little explicit attention given to the frequency of vocabulary in FL curriculum design in England. Whilst the notion of ‘common words’ has always been present (in awarding bodies’ documents, textbooks and teachers’ minds), deciding which words are ‘common’ has been based on teacher intuition and existing conceptualisations of ‘topic-based’ vocabulary. Thus, GCSE vocabulary lists produced in books or by the awarding bodies (e.g. Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA)) are largely based on topics and include a large proportion of relatively rare vocabulary. To address this concern, NCELP selected lists of the most frequent 2000 words for French (Lonsdale & Le Bras, 2009), German (Jones & Tschirmer, 2006), and Spanish (Davies & Davies, 2018), explaining [the rationale for their selection and use](#) (Avery et al. 2019). Based on these sources, we have compiled a series of frequency-tagged vocabulary lists. Our lists indicate the frequency of the words on the vocabulary lists produced by the afore-mentioned awarding body, but also indicate the many high frequency words not included in its lists.

NCELP’s vocabulary lists can inform the selection of vocabulary for teaching in various ways. Highly frequent words are not ‘topic-specific’, so teachers can use our lists to make links between different topics or semantic fields. In addition, using the full NCELP list organised ‘by topic’ allows teachers to build mixed word class vocabulary lists, based on the highest frequency. For example, a set of 10 words for Year 7 Spanish pupils to learn, when embarking on the theme of describing an area, might be as shown in the following table:

	Word	Frequency ranking	Word class (part of speech)
1	<i>la plaza</i> ‘square’	806	noun
2	<i>la iglesia</i> ‘church’	437	noun
3	<i>el teatro</i> ‘theatre’	605	noun
4	<i>ser</i> ‘to be’ (permanent attributes)	7	verb

5	<i>grande</i> ‘big’	66	adjective
6	<i>pequeño/a</i> ‘small’	202	adjective
7	<i>estar</i> ‘to be’ (location and temporary attributes)	21	verb
8	<i>cerca (de)</i> ‘near (to)’	1042	adverb
9	<i>lejos (de)</i> ‘(far (from))’	833	adverb
10	<i>el museo</i> ‘museum’	1114	noun

Furthermore, the NCELP lists can be used to teach knowledge of word patterns. Deepening vocabulary knowledge by understanding word patterns has particular resonance with LA. The AQA specification expects that pupils will be able to understand, in both speech and writing, words that share systematic similarities (cognates and near-cognates) across English and the target language. Although these words are not explicitly listed on AQA’s vocabulary list, such words *do* feature on NCELP’s list of words as they are among the 2000 most common words. As such, the NCELP lists can be used to design activities that encourage pupils to notice patterns in the language and relate these to English. This sort of learning supports the kind of flexibility of thinking that is needed to succeed in the higher GCSE reading and (perhaps to a lesser extent) listening exams. Exams include forms (inflectional or derivational variants) of words that learners may not have met and are not on the examination boards’ vocabulary lists, thus learners’ ability to identify these variants and understand the ‘root meaning’ of unfamiliar words is important.

A key NCELP innovation is the connection between phonics, vocabulary and grammar through the focus on frequency. Developing grammatical knowledge requires noticing how the system works *across* the lexicon (not just in specific, routinised phrases). The NCELP verb lexicon enables learners to create their own sentences and increases their ability to manipulate verbs.

Grammar

Learners benefit from plenty of opportunities to practise noticing and understanding grammar in ‘input language’, i.e. in listening and reading activities. Currently, learners are often asked to move quickly from an explanation and brief recognition tasks to spoken and written production. NCELP’s pedagogy includes an additional, intermediate stage of input language processing tasks, in which the noticing of grammatical forms and the recognition of their associated meanings (or functions) are essential. This has been shown to help learning.

Secondly, many learners benefit from a brief explicit description of the grammar being taught *before* practice. There is evidence that this speeds up learning. It also may compensate for learners who tend not to analyse or break down language themselves (learners with lower ‘analytic ability’). This deductive approach may not fully align with some interpretations of LA, which might purely advocate ‘rule discovery’ and ‘pattern spotting’. Whilst inductive approaches may help sometimes, our approach takes into account the time-poor classroom and the wide range of analytic abilities in classes. It also fully embraces the idea that in the longer term, deductive approaches help develop inductive skills, as proficiency increases and other languages are learned. But, most importantly, we draw on the body of research that suggests that learning is not affected too much by whether a description of the language comes ‘before’ or ‘after’, or is provided by the learner or the teacher, but by the type and amount of practice.

Third, NCELP is creating teaching activities that focus learners on grammar features that are particularly difficult to learn, drawing on a significant and compelling body of research. Grammar features under focus are those with low perceptual salience (i.e. they are difficult to hear in speech or notice in writing) or low communicative value (i.e. they often co-occur with other language features that reduce the chance of learners’ attending to them). For example, in a sentence such as *J’ai fait mes devoirs hier* (‘I did my homework yesterday’), the adverb *hier* is more likely to be taken as the cue to meaning ‘happened in the past’ than the auxiliary verb *ai* is.

Fourth, we encourage teachers to draw on knowledge about the first language (L1) and to enhance this knowledge. The pedagogy is both informed by and promotes knowledge of the grammar of the L1 (in this case, English), and sometimes involves an explicit juxtaposition of English structures and those of the target language. This aligns with LASER’s aspiration that grammar taught in L1 classrooms might usefully be recycled in the FL classroom, enhancing the teaching and learning of both.

Concluding remarks

Driving NCELP’s approach is the aim of tapping into a connection between deeper understanding of language, learning, and motivation. NCELP aims to develop FL pedagogy by increasing transparency for learners, enabling them to understand patterns, make links within and between languages, tackle head-on what is most difficult, and connect form and meaning securely and with increasing confidence. One of our overarching ambitions is to improve language curriculum design and pedagogy, leading to high uptake and greater success at GCSE. In so doing, we are very much in tune with LASER’s assertion that “A framework for understanding and enjoying language is a tool for the whole of one’s life.”

Further reading

Davies, M. & Hayward Davies, K. (2018). *A Frequency Dictionary of Spanish: Core Vocabulary for Learners* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Jones, R. & Tschirner, E. (2006). *A Frequency Dictionary of German: Core Vocabulary for Learners*. London: Routledge.

Lonsdale, D. & Le Bras, Y. (2009). *A Frequency Dictionary of French: Core Vocabulary for Learners*. London: Routledge.

Taylor, F. & Marsden, E. (2014). [Perceptions, attitudes and choosing to study foreign languages in England: An experimental intervention](#). *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 902–920.

Woore, R., Graham, S., Courtney, L. Porter, A. & Savory, C. (2018). [Foreign Language Education: Unlocking Reading \(FLEUR\): A study into the teaching of reading to beginner learners of French in secondary school](#).

About the authors

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