Teaching secondary modern foreign languages

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Contents

Introduction

This free course, *Teaching secondary modern foreign languages*, will identify and explore some of the key issues around teaching modern foreign languages (MFL) in secondary schools. Engaging with these issues and debates will help you to reflect upon and develop your practice as a beginner teacher of MFL. You will also develop a greater awareness of the wider context of MFL education and how this affects teaching a language in the secondary school curriculum.

This course is based on a learner-centred approach to teaching, which is underpinned by a constructivist view of learning – the idea that students will construct knowledge and understanding for themselves as a result of classroom activities and experiences.

Now listen to an introduction to this course by its coordinator, Maria Luisa Pérez Cavana:

Audio content is not available in this format.

As you work through the activities you will be encouraged to record your thoughts on an idea, an issue or a reading, and how it relates to your practice. Hopefully you will have opportunities to discuss your ideas with colleagues. We therefore suggest that you use a notebook – either physical or electronic – to record your thoughts in a way in which they can easily be retrieved and revisited. If you prefer, however, you can record your ideas in response boxes within the course – in order to do this, and to retrieve your responses, you will need to enrol on the course.

This OpenLearn course is part of a collection of Open University short courses for teachers and student teachers.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- articulate some of the factors that have had an impact on how the importance of language learning is perceived
- list some of the ways that target language can be used to promote student dialogue
- identify strategies that can engage students and promote their motivation to learn a second language in the classroom
- outline creative approaches that can enhance students' experience in the MFL classroom
- classify strategies that promote students' metacognitive skills in order to further support students' language learning development.

1 Learning languages – teaching languages

As a beginner teacher of MFL you are already enthusiastic about languages and their importance. But is this the view of others? What are some common views of MFL and what are the implications for MFL teachers? What are your own views concerning the value of knowing a modern language? What messages are being portrayed around you – in the media as well as in the school curriculum? How do students perceive the importance of knowing a modern language? In this section you will consider how modern languages are perceived and think about how you might address some of the arguments against including MFL on the curriculum.

> ### Reflection point
>
> Before continuing, reflect on what has influenced your own views of language learning and how these views have developed as a result of your experiences.
>
> For example, why did you decide to study languages beyond secondary school? Which aspects of the subject made an impact on you and why? What areas of MFL learning have been important to you since you left school? In what way? Have any aspects affected how you think and act?

1.1 Becoming a teacher of MFL

You are already an accomplished linguist with a passion for the language or languages you have chosen to teach. Your knowledge base very likely includes the literature, way of life, people and cultural aspects of this language. This knowledge base will be one of your greatest assets as a teacher. As a beginner teacher you will need to think about how to communicate this enthusiasm for languages and how you will inspire students to follow your lead.

It will also be important to begin to develop a vision of the kind of teacher that you wish to become, making explicit your beliefs and attitudes as a teacher and, more specifically, as a teacher of languages. You will also need to think about how you will put those beliefs and attitudes into practice. This is not always easy given the demands of the school curriculum and the need to follow statutory requirements.

Some of the students you teach may not be as enthusiastic about learning a language as you. Indeed, MFL is one of the least popular subjects on the British curriculum – this can be seen in Table 1, which shows a continual decline in the number of students taking a modern language GCSE exam at the age of 16 since the beginning of the millennium.

Table 1 Percentage of students in year 11 (age 16) entered for a language GCSE

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
%	76	78	76	73	68	59	51	47	44	44	43	40

What are some of the reasons for this? If you work in a school, what is the view of students with regard to learning a modern foreign language?

Activity 1 will help you explore how to respond to student perceptions of the importance of knowing a second language and how to justify the inclusion of MFL on the curriculum.

Activity 1

Allow about 90 minutes

Part 1

Ask some students you know what they think it means to learn a language and how important they think it is to learn about MFL in school. How did the views about MFL differ between students aged 11–14, 14–16 and 16-18? What reasons did they give for choosing to study a language to exam level?

Part 2

Now watch the video below, noting some possible reasons for learning a modern foreign language. How could you use these in response to some of the students' views given in Part 1?

View at: youtube:TI53XC-6U9o

There are a variety of educational, social and commercial reasons for learning a language. You will now consider some of these further and how to justify the compulsory study of a language on the secondary school curriculum.

1.2 Why learn a modern foreign language?

A modern language is unlike any other subject on the school curriculum. In other subjects – such as maths, science or history – the students are, in a sense, learning about that subject. That is, they are learning facts and skills, as well as learning how to interpret and apply that knowledge to new situations.

In a modern language lesson, the students are not learning about the language, be it French, Spanish, German or Chinese. They are learning the language itself – how to understand it, how to produce it, and how to combine elements of it to produce new utterances, answer new questions and meet new situations. They are developing linguistic competence such as developing the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing the target language in a range of situations and contexts. They are also developing knowledge about language, such as grammar and syntax.

Students learning a language also develop other skills: they learn about cultural awareness and may develop an ability to see the world from different perspectives; they also develop creativity and problem solving as they find new ways of understanding and communicating a message. Learning a modern foreign language can also help students in the development of their mother tongue literacy skills, as well as other cross-curricular features such as numeracy and thinking skills.

Activity 2
Allow about 2 hours

Part 1

Discuss with other MFL teachers that you know, their views of the nature of MFL and how the curriculum supports this view. To what extent has their view of the nature of MFL been affected by the MFL curriculum? Does a 'communicative approach' amount to more than just asking the way to the Post Office or ordering a round of drinks in a café? What do the students' views indicate and what might be the reasons behind any difference between younger and older students' views?

Part 2

Referring to the statutory curriculum requirements of your nation, what do these communicate about the role of MFL in your context? What are the challenges of implementing the curriculum for MFL in your school context?

It is not always easy for MFL teachers to realise their beliefs about language teaching and learning in their school context. They may face a dilemma between their own ideal view and the reality of the classroom with many factors outside their control, such as timetable arrangements as well as statutory curriculum constraints (see Hemmings, 2006). The challenge to all MFL teachers is to engage students in the classroom and provide a purpose to their learning that will motivate them to continue studying a language for as long as possible.

2 How can the target language be used effectively in the classroom?

As you have seen, learning a language is not learning about the language but learning the language itself in order to communicate in that language. If this is the case, how can you as a beginner teacher create a more authentic context in the classroom for this to take place? One way of doing this is to use the target language as the main method of communication in lessons.

There is much debate regarding how best to implement this:

- How much target language should be used in a lesson?
- Is it appropriate to use target language in all circumstances?
- How should target language be introduced with complete beginners?
- How do you introduce new vocabulary about classroom routines?
- How should translation and code switching be used?
- What are the benefits of using target language as the main or sole means of communication in the classroom?

This section will address some of these considerations and help you to think about your own use of target language with students you teach.

2.1 The benefits of using target language in the classroom

Using the target language as the main means of communication in the classroom provides students with maximum opportunity to use the language for themselves. This view is supported by a number of researchers in MFL teaching and learning, including David Little (1995) and Hazel Crichton (2009).

Crichton suggests that high-level target language interaction is a way of ensuring that the students have to function at a certain basic level. She also suggests that this supports their acquisition of the language and allows them to communicate sometimes also using spontaneous language. She adds that using target language as the main method of communication can also act as a motivating factor for students as they successfully understand and communicate in the foreign language.

While recognising that a classroom context is not the most natural way of acquiring a language, Crichton suggests that it is still possible if the target language is seen as the normal means of communication by both the teacher and the students.

Reflection point

Consider how you have seen the target language used in classrooms that you have observed or worked in. How did the students respond?

2.2 Using target language to support all students in learning a language

Depending on your school context and amount of school experience, you may have come across a variety of different approaches to using the target language in the classroom, but what are some of the benefits of using target language as the main means of communication in the classroom? Some of the benefits include promoting independent learning, encouraging student talk as well as providing a unique context for students with English as an additional language.

Consider firstly, the role of target language in supporting students with English as an addition language (EAL). Using target language puts these students on a level footing with their fellow students due to the absence of English as the medium of instruction. Teaching strategies using target language which support all students including those EAL include:

- providing visual support to enable students to conceptualise information and learning tasks
- modelling a task, particularly pair and group work tasks
- providing examples of written work
- providing frameworks for writing and speaking
- introducing key vocabulary and phrases in spoken or written texts before students hear or read these
- using oral 'rehearsal' of written tasks in order to focus students' attention on the language required.

You may well have already begun to use some of these strategies in your own teaching. You may also have experienced that it is not always easy to remain in the target language to communicate with students throughout the whole lesson.

2.3 Challenges to using the target language

Although using the target language in MFL lessons is a way of supporting students' use of the language, one of the challenges for MFL teachers is ensuring they limit how much talking they do in the classroom. Even though you as the teacher may be speaking in the target language, it is more important that the students are speaking and communicating with each other in the target language. Many courses based on communicative language teaching (CLT) insist that teacher talking time (TTT) is counterproductive and that MFL teachers should reduce TTT because it:

- automatically limits the amount of STT (student talking time)
- results in long stretches of time in teacher-to-class mode, which can make the pace monotonous
- often means that the teacher is giving the students information that they could find out for themselves, thus making them less active and autonomous
- if the teacher takes the dominant role in classroom discourse, the students' role is only that of respondent – opportunities for developing speaking skills or spontaneous speech become limited.

Similar comments could be made where MFL teachers spend too much time at the exposition and explanation stages of the lesson rather than allowing students to practise and discover for themselves. This is particularly crucial if the students are to develop in oral confidence; it is far less intimidating to talk in the target language in a small group situation than in front of the whole class.

Over the past 10 years, there have been several projects and initiatives to encourage group talk and spontaneous student language in the classroom and the next activity will give you some ideas for promoting student dialogue and encouraging them to speak in the target language more than you as the teacher.

Activity 3
Allow about 1 hour

Watch the video clip 'MFL – implementing the group talk initiative and other strategies' and list the strategies that the teachers use to encourage student talk and the advantages for the students and the teacher. (Alternatively, you can read a transcript.) Complete these notes in a table like the one below (Table 2). The first row has been filled in for you as an example.

Table 2 Strategies to promote student dialogue

Strategies used	Advantages for students	Advantages for teacher
Pictures of clothes	Fashion – engaging topic	Spontaneous opinions
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*	*Provide your answer...*

You could also look for other ideas of promoting student talk on the internet. Type 'spontaneous talk in the languages classroom' or 'target language in the classroom' into a search engine and see what ideas you could use in your own context.

3 What strategies can be used to motivate students in the classroom?

This section will consider how to motivate students in language learning. You have already considered how using the target language can motivate students by creating a more authentic environment for learning, but what other strategies could you use? How do different teaching and learning strategies engage students in the classroom? In particular, you will consider how independent learning can act as a motivating factor, as well as which approaches and strategies can be used to achieve this.

3.1 Student strategies for second language learning

The ability to engage in independent learning – where students are not dependent on didactic teaching methods – can enhance their motivation levels when learning a foreign language. However, before they are able to learn a language independently, students need to acquire certain strategies. Rebecca Oxford (1990) distinguishes six main types of learning strategies for independent language learning:

1. **Cognitive strategies** that enable the learner to manipulate the material in direct ways.
2. **Metacognitive strategies** are employed to manage the learning process by the learners being more aware of the language-learning process.
3. **Memory-related strategies** help learners to link one item or concept in the foreign language with another, and to learn and retrieve information using different techniques.
4. **Compensatory strategies** help the learner make up for missing knowledge: for example, by deducing meaning from the context in listening and reading tasks.
5. **Affective strategies** have been shown to be significantly related to proficiency in second language acquisition. These include the ability to identify one's mood and anxiety level, talk about feelings and reward oneself for good performance.
6. **Social strategies** help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the target language.

> ### Reflection point
>
> To what extent have you observed students using these strategies in your own school context?

3.2 Promoting independent learning

Using learning strategies such as those outlined above implies an active approach to language learning, and has been closely linked to self-directed learning and learner autonomy (Holec, 1981). However, this does not occur spontaneously; students need

preparation for self-directed learning, including learning when and how to apply learning strategies such as those identified by Oxford.

How students develop those strategies is part of an ongoing discussion focused on the questions of whether strategy instruction should be integrated in lessons or taught separately, embedded in the language teaching materials or made explicit (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Depending on your context the statutory curriculum requirements may also favour one or other of these views.

This debate has produced several studies supporting either explicit or implicit strategy instruction. For instance, Holec et al. (1996) argue in favour of presenting learning strategies in a meaningful way within a communicative context for language learning.

On the other hand, Dörnyei (2005, p. 174) has pointed out the advantages of explicit learning strategy instruction, as it not only raises learners' awareness about language learning strategies, but also offers a wide menu of strategies for learners to choose from and encourages students to reflect on their strategy use. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) also argue in favour of separate instruction, where students can focus their attention on developing strategic processing skills rather than trying to learn second language content at the same time.

Consequently, when using language learning strategies in the classroom, it is important to consider whether to use them implicitly or explicitly, although this may also depend on the statutory requirements for your school context.

Activity 4
Allow about 1 hour

Watch the video 'One school's journey'. (Alternatively, you can read a transcript.) As you watch, note the implications for teachers when students use the independent approaches to learning. Use the following questions to help:

- How does taking an independent approach encourage the students to become more intrinsically motivated in their learning?
- What is the role of the teacher?
- How does the teacher model aspects of learning?
- What kind of environment has the teacher created?
- What do you notice about the layout of the room?
- How can you apply some of the principles you observe in this video clip in your own language lessons?
- How are the students able to develop the learning strategies identified by Oxford?
- Are there any activities that you could include in your lessons to further develop students' competency in applying these strategies?

Although not directly focused on independent learning in the MFL classroom, several key messages emerge for the MFL teacher from this video clip.

As the students become more independent learners, they will become increasingly intrinsically motivated and able to take greater responsibility for their own learning, In addition, as you help students to have a greater awareness of the learning process by teaching ways of thinking and learning, you will be supporting the development of lifelong learning strategies that they can apply across the curriculum.

There will also be more opportunities for creative teaching and learning to take place. This is the focus of the next session.

http://www.open.edu/openlearn/education/teaching-secondary-modern-foreign-languages/content-section-0?utm_source=openlearnutm_campaign=olutm_medium=ebook   Wednesday 15 April 2020

4 How can creativity be integrated into MFL teaching and learning?

Creativity is at the heart of teaching and learning a modern language. It can also contribute to motivating and engaging students in learning a language in a classroom environment. In this section you will consider what is meant by 'creativity' and what this means for MFL teaching and learning in the classroom. You will look at how creativity in language teaching can be used in practice, as well as how creativity can support independent learning and vice versa.

Reflection point

Before continuing, you might find it useful to reflect on your own views about creativity:

- What do you understand by the term 'creativity'?
- How does it relate to language learning?
- Have you observed other MFL teachers teaching creatively?
- Do you use creativity in your teaching?

4.1 Creativity: what is it and why use it?

Consider four ways in which 'creativity' can interact with general education in the classroom:

- creativity – behaving creatively
- creative teaching – teaching to support creative development
- teaching creatively – using your own creativity to develop lessons that interest and motivate students
- creative learning – learning to be creative and learning in creative ways.

One of the reasons for developing students' creativity is that it encourages higher-order thinking (see Doyle, 1983). In the revision of Bloom's taxonomy of learning, creativity is the most demanding and challenging of the levels of thinking, and supporting students to be creative helps them develop these higher levels of thinking. Being creative can also help develop students' self-esteem, which in turn can support the development of affective strategies as defined by Oxford (1990), which you considered in Section 3.

Creative learning can also lead to students' increased enjoyment of language learning and greater motivation, as well as increased potential for student-led and independent learning.

4.2 Creativity and language learning

As a beginner teacher you may well have already noticed the link between language learning and creativity, as communicative competence often involves activities where students need to use their imagination, e.g. in role play situations and other contexts of communicative, learner-centred pedagogies.

According to Stern (1975, p. 305), creativity is one of the four characteristics of the native speaker's knowledge or competence that speakers of a foreign languages should aim 'to approximate'. He refers to the creativity of language use in relation to the concept of language competence (p. 307), stating:

> Competence is dynamic and active and not mechanical or static. We don't handle our native language in a robot-like fashion as if we had swallowed a phrase book. We constantly adjust language use to novel situations and changing circumstances. We use the language for productive thinking.

More recent research studies have also reported on the relevance of creativity for second language learning, and, in particular, for language-learning success (e.g. see Dörnyei, 2005).

Fehér (2010) points out other elements of creativity, such as transition from one thing into another, transformation and open-ended activities: integral parts of the MFL planning process.

Activity 5
Allow about 1 hour

Consider the advantages of creative teaching in MFL. How can creativity contribute to:

- a sense of purpose for using the target language?
- creating opportunities to experiment with words, patterns and structures?
- developing student's confidence in using the target language?
- developing flexible thinking?
- greater cultural awareness?
- anything else?

Make a note of your thoughts.

By taking a creative approach to your teaching you will also include opportunities to relate the target language to a real-life setting, as you also include activities around authentic materials as well as activities that encourage learners to use their imagination by thinking, feeling and questioning.

4.3 Ideas for creative approaches in the MFL classroom

You may have already observed teachers in your school context using creative approaches in their lessons and you may have also begun to use some creative ideas in

your own teaching. Particular ways in which you could enable students to learn in a creative manner including using language in the following ways:

- **In new contexts** such as drama, role-play or designing posters (for example, a 'Wanted' poster).
- **With new media using**, for example, poetry or songs, recording jingles or dubbing a film/video clip, etc.
- **Creating materials and activities for others** such as booklets or games.

Activity 6
Allow about 2 hours

There are lots of ideas for creative MFL teaching and learning on the internet.

Visit the following website and note down any of the ideas for creative language learning activities that you could use in your own school context:

- [Edutopia: 'Authentic activities for the world language classroom'](#)

4.4 Challenges to taking a creative approach

Teaching creatively is not easy. You must be prepared to take risks and risk failure. You have to create an environment where students feel able to do the same. Risks may include giving greater autonomy to students, working in ways unfamiliar to them, or allowing them to deviate from your own intended learning objectives (see Fowler, 2013).

Activity 7
Allow about 1 hour

In Activity 6 you identified creative ideas that you could use in the MFL classroom. In order to implement these successfully you will need to think about how the students will respond and if there are any classroom management issues that you will need to consider.

Using the ideas you noted from Activity 6, complete Table 3 following the example in the first row.

When identifying classroom organisational or management issues in the fourth column, ask yourself the following questions:

- What kind of environment will be needed? Will I need to change the layout of the classroom or move outside the classroom environment?
- What resources will I need? How will they be used?
- How will I support the students?
- How will I manage the timing?
- How will I ensure that the overall aims of the learning sequence are achieved?

Table 3 Implementing creative activities

Creative activity	Possible student response	Possible effect on student learning	Possible classroom organisation or management issues
Create videos about the local area	Students will be drawn into the learning process through their own knowledge of where they live	Students will be motivated to engage on a deeper level with the topic	How many pupils in a group? What equipment will be needed? Where will recording take place?
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...
Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...	Provide your answer...

Since time, effort and risk are required to adopt creative teaching strategies, teachers also need to know how and when to be creative (see Beghetto and Kaufman, 2013) – including how to manage students and activities at each stage of this process.

However, teaching creatively will not only motivate students, but will also encourage their own creativity and keep you stimulated as a teacher. Creative teaching strategies can also help to promote positive student behaviour through increased motivation and greater student involvement in the activities.

Conclusion

In this free course, *Teaching secondary modern foreign languages*, you have considered the wider context in which second language learning takes place at secondary school level. You have also explored a number of approaches and strategies that can support students in moving towards autonomy and independent learning in the classroom. These include use of the target language as the main means of communication in the classroom and making creativity an integral part of the teaching and learning process in order to motivate and engage students in the language learning process.

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