‘MFL – implementing the group talk initiative
and other strategies’ transcript

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STUDENTS: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: Invitation.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: Nice exchange.

STUDENT: Learning a language is harder than some other subjects. I think they have to make it more fun.

STUDENT: I think we learn better because it's more active and more enjoyable.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: It's as if you're actually just having a normal conversation with your friends, but in a different language.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: To see the kids using language in this very spontaneous and authentic way, it is thrilling.

NARRATOR: Wildern School is one of the largest in Hampshire. Like many schools, it's had to adapt to attract pupils to the now non-compulsory MFL courses it offers. Like most schools, GCSE results got better when the MFL courses became optional in 2004.

Since then, by researching and implementing a handful of simple strategies, year on year, it's results have kept improving. Over a six year period, results improved by almost 40%, peaking in 2008 with just over 90% of pupils attaining A star to C. So how have they achieved this?

HAZEL MAIR: To raise achievement, we needed to really think about raising motivation. And what we needed to do was to make languages a department that children wanted to be in, and to be seen to be in.

Traditionally, drama and art were the cool departments. Everybody wanted to be there. We needed to make languages something that children could be part of, both in and out of the classroom.

STUDENTS: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Ofsted has regularly targeted speaking as the least well-developed of language skills.

HAZEL MAIR: The GCSE Speaking Exam is probably one of the hardest exams the pupils have to sit, and it is very daunting. And the problem is even if you work really hard and you're a really studious pupil, you can't just go away and revise your speaking.

NARRATOR: Wildern recognised a need for improvement and created an award-winning and hugely successful scheme to tackle it.

TEACHER: Did we get some interesting talk going there? Yeah?

NARRATOR: It's called group talk, and it focuses on pupil's ability to interact in target language.

NARRATOR: Topics are hotly debated within small groups. And pupils confidently give their opinion on a range of subjects.

NARRATOR: Debates are kicked off using a number of different stimuli. And topics are chosen that are relevant to pupils.

STUDENT: Recently we've been doing – and talking about clothes and fashion and stuff like that. So, you'd like that so it's easy to talk about that.

STUDENT: You're talking about the stuff that you would usually talk about anyway, so we may as well do it in German.

NARRATOR: All MFL classrooms had to be rearranged to make them more conducive to group talking.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Once given a starting point, groups are allowed to progress their own topics, under a watchful eye.

GREG HORTON: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: I actually find I'm much more fully aware of their speaking potential and competence than I ever was in the past, because what group talk allows you to do is actually visit particular tables and gain a pretty good insight into individual capabilities with speaking.

GREG HORTON: If talk about kids off task, we generally know in a classroom which tables those are. And that our role to actually go and gee those tables up in a positive way, and keep them on task.

JAVIER RODRIGUEZ: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

JAVIER RODRIGUEZ: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Group talk is now at the heart of language teaching. And new staff arrivals are quickly helped to incorporate it into their own lessons.

JAVIER RODRIGUEZ: Well, at the beginning it was a bit sort of scary, it that's the adjective I can use. Because I didn't really know what sort of structure to follow to make sure that I use this group talk properly. But it was a question of building up this sort of sentences, and from sentences we got into the sort of more complicated structures.

GREG HORTON: For new teachers, they've got the experienced practitioners around them, like myself and the others in the department, who are – for whom group talk is actually, you know, everyday classroom teaching now. It will feature in a lot of lessons.

So we do a lot of peer observations. OK, new staff will be able to go and see it in action straight away. A new member of staff, I would guess, would have a pretty good idea and would be doing it with their classes within the first term of teaching.

NARRATOR: Groups are given cue cards to help them progress the conversations. Staff have moved away from traditional teaching tools and found more fun items to stimulate debate.

JAVIER RODRIGUEZ: If you have a look at the top shelf, this is what every MFL school department store cupboard will look like. This year we've got a budget of about 500 pounds. And we haven't spent one single penny on textbooks. And we believe in investing in resources which promotes active and dynamic learning.

These wigs, they are fantastic. When we are teaching household chore, we have items like this, like a Hoover. This, an iron, and we are in business. Absolutely love it.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: It's easier because you're able to help each rather than just try to do it on your own and get stuck.

TEACHER: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Group talk is used by year seven pupils in a simple form, with progressively more complicated linguistic structures introduced throughout key stage three and four. Starting the pupils' group talk education early on has also been part of the reason the school has seen a marked improvement in their pupils' GCSE Speaking Exam.

GREG HORTON: Although, when you see it happening, it looks very unstructured, seemingly – like anything in languages which has that end result – there's actually a hell of a lot of structure and thinking and planning – careful planning – that goes behind it. So we have a clear progression chart of stage one, stage two, up to stage four in group talk.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: I think it'll be a lot better with our exam. We'll be a lot more comfortable with the speaking part, because doing as much as we do, we still end up doing writing and listening because we're listening to him and listening to each other. So that's still the listening side of the exam. And speaking it, we're a lot more confident.

GREG HORTON: What we see before us now, produced by a lot of hard work, is actually very inspiring. To see the kids using language in this very spontaneous and authentic way. It is thrilling. And it's certainly put something back into my career.

TEACHER: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Key to the success of new strategies has been a consistence of approach across the department.

JAVIER RODRIGUEZ: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: If it was not done as a department, it will fall flat on its face because kids change teaches, they move from one environment to another.

HAZEL MAIR: We pool our ideas, and we share our good practise. We're a very young and dynamic department. And lots of people are into the new technology.

HAZEL MAIR: I might even go to interactive resources, DVD, listening, audio-visual material, but also to props, things which really bring the language alive.

TEACHER: [NON-ENGLISH]

HAZEL MAIR: The pupils love the whiteboards. When you do a whiteboard activity, they all have their hand up, and they love to come and actually move the words around, and work things out. It's great for putting things in order, for thinking skills. And because it's bright and colourful, it really attracts their attention.

NARRATOR: The department has also made a concerted effort to target the cohort of pupils known to show less interest in MFL courses.

TEACHER: Who has an idea?

GREG HORTON: My theory, whether it's right or wrong, is that, as a general rule, the girls will learn anyway. So that's not – because that's a generalisation. But if we look to the boys, if you don't get the boys on your side, OK, they won't learn as a matter of course, regardless of styles.

NARRATOR: To fully engage boys, the MFL teachers have taken active learning to extremes.

GREG HORTON: Like any teacher, one of our major hurdles to overcome is the idea of tense. I thought, yeah, we need to walk the timeline. We're walking forward into the future, we're walking back. We need points of time like next week, next year, yesterday. And the kids actually need to walk that timeline.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Another popular activity with the pupils is the time ballet.

GREG HORTON: I mean, telling the time. We all know, we try and teach it to some kids in year seven in the foreign language and they're struggling with it in English. It's a difficult area. Classes would just demand to do the time ballet at the end of a lesson. It's fantastic.

STUDENT: I think we learn better because it's more active and more enjoyable. And if it wasn't as active, then you'll probably go a bit off task.

GREG HORTON: [NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENTS: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: And it's very important to have motivational moments that kids remember. And if they remember motivational moments, they will work much harder and do the boring stuff along the line as well. We all know that motivation leads to improved results. So active learning, as well as achieving something in itself, does provide a lot of motivational moments for covering the boring stuff later, getting kids on your side, if you like.

[NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: Competition and challenge are also key tactics in the battle to get boys on board.

GREG HORTON: Invitation.

STUDENTS: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: [NON-ENGLISH]

Our motto is competition and challenge, not chore.

[NON-ENGLISH]

STUDENTS: [NON-ENGLISH]

GREG HORTON: [NON-ENGLISH]

We may leave vocab alone for a fair amount of time, and then suddenly, I will select, say, 40 words, and say, right, here's the challenge. Without doubt, I've got kids knowing words that I never would expect them to know, and using it in their work. It's fantastic. And that's all through the idea of challenge and competition to motivate the learning of words.

STUDENT: If I know we're competing against each other, it almost like gives us more reason to want to learn.

STUDENT: An incentive to learn.

STUDENT: An incentive to want to win and learn the words, and keep it – it keeps it in our head.

NARRATOR: These strategies are not just about making the lessons more fun though. They've had a direct impact on boys' attainment.

GREG HORTON: At Wildern School, it's still quite an achievement that we are getting parity in the performance of the boys and the girls. In fact, I mean, in my subject, German, the boys actually outperform the girls in the last couple of years.

STUDENT: [NON-ENGLISH]

NARRATOR: For resources to help incorporate this style of teaching and the department's top tips on how to improve MFL GSCE results, visit www.teachers.tv.

HAZEL MAIR: It's really about understanding why children need to learn languages. It's about giving them the bigger picture, and a feel for what a language looks and sounds like. And what it's like to be part of an environment where different languages are spoken, rather than just trying to be successful in your classroom.