DEVELOPING CLASSROOM LANGUAGE
Hilary McColl & Susan Thomas
SALT Conference, November 2015

Handout 1

INTRODUCTION

…the teacher should conduct the lessons in the target language as much as possible; it should become the accepted medium for classroom language.

The Modern Languages Excellence Report, 2011, page.23.

Almost five years on: IS this now the norm? Our recent experiences lead us to believe that, although most people agree it would be 'a good thing' if we could make more use of the target language, it is proving difficult to do.

When we have asked teachers why they think that is, we receive various answers. We have met young teachers who say things like: 'everyone says we should do it more, but no one tells us HOW!' More experienced teachers have told us they *want* to do it, but just don't have time to do that as well as cover the syllabus requirements. And they point out that there is no specific requirement that they should do so, and there's no specific test.
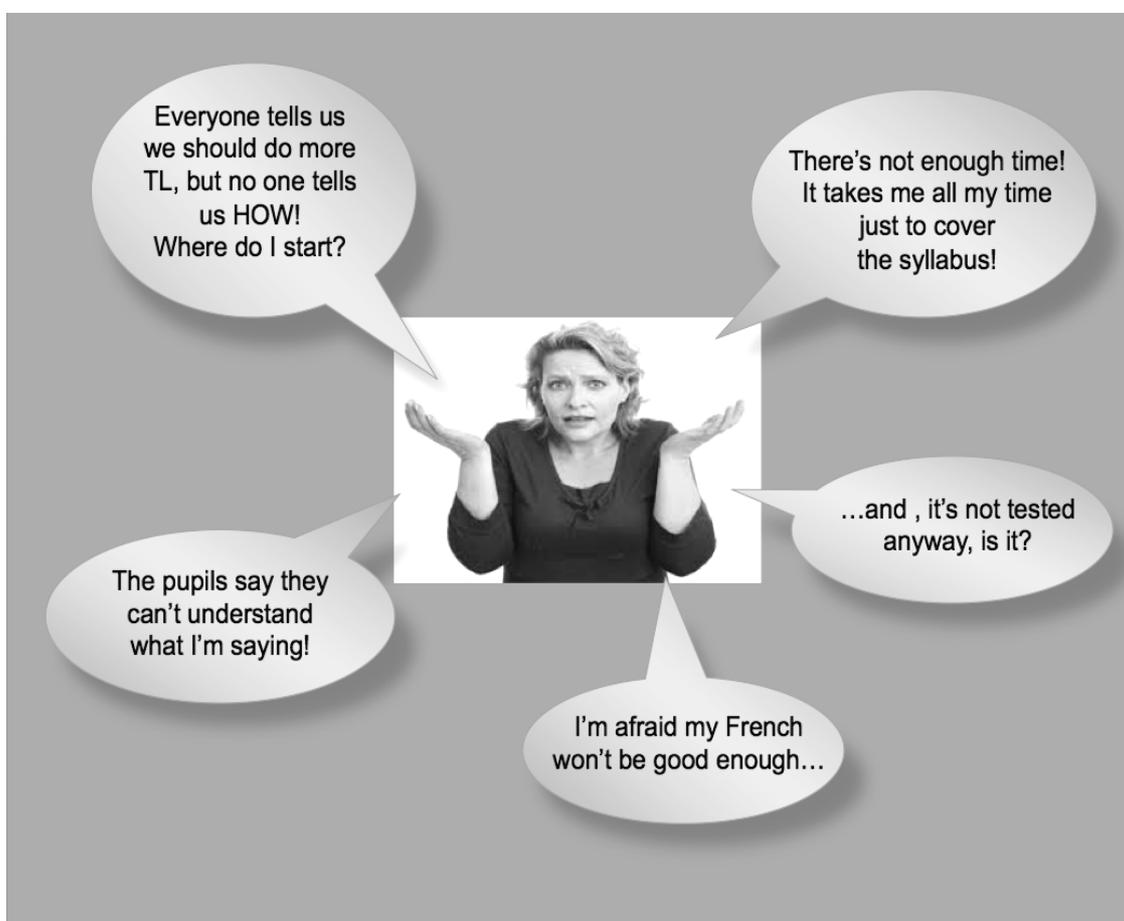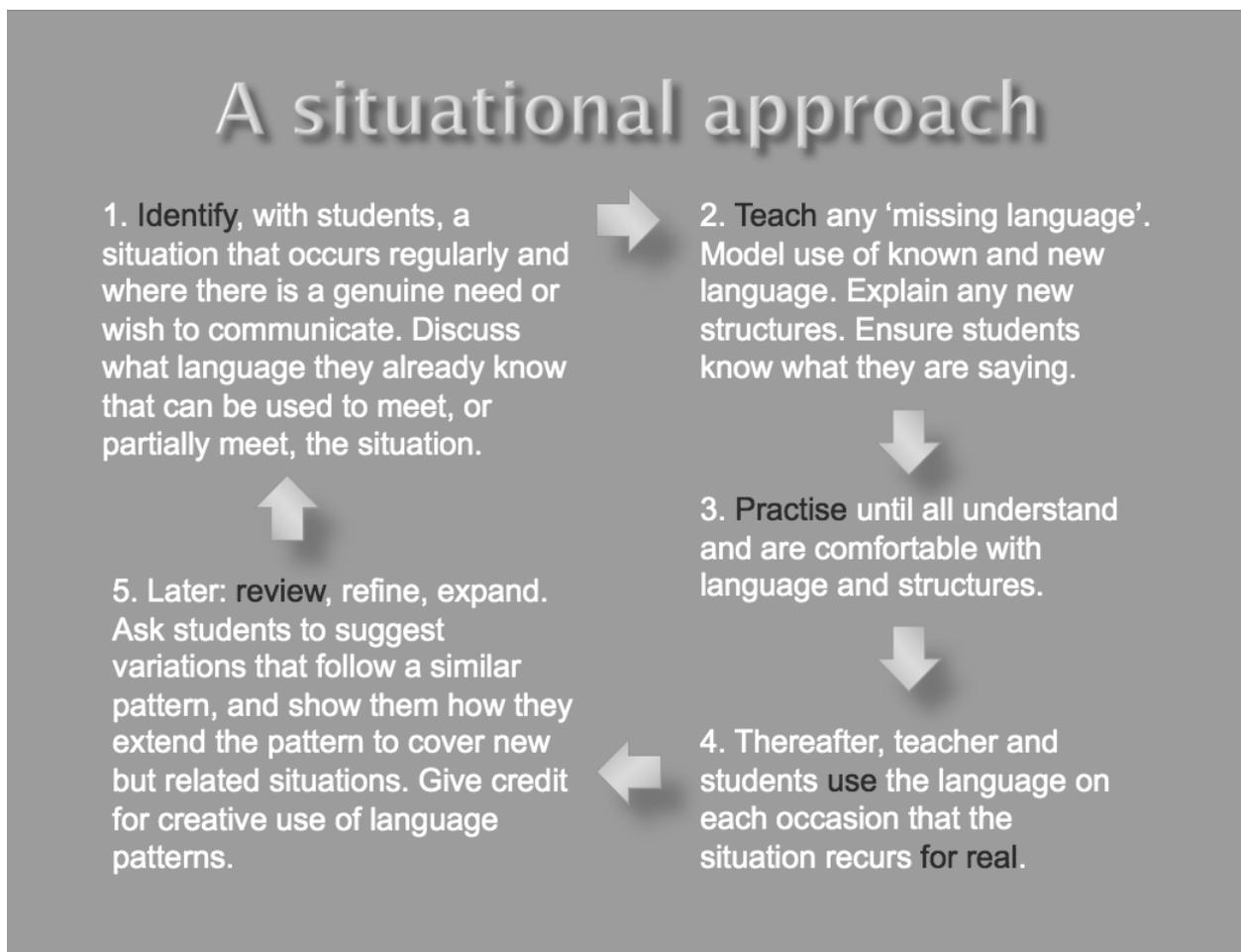

When we looked at existing advice and resources, we realised that the first problem is not how to do it, but deciding what exactly it is we are meant to do. What do we actually mean by 'classroom language'?

For example, text books and web-based resource banks are full of activities introducing classroom objects: there are flashcards of individual objects, worksheets requiring labels to be attached, invitations to recite what can be found in the classroom, etc. But little or nothing in the way of phrases to communicate anything of significance about those objects. In all of these activities, the language required to complete the tasks is determined by the creator of the materials of by the teacher. It is 'teacher-mediated' language.

We also found a bias towards what we called 'teacher talk'. Giving instructions, controlling behaviour, fulfilling routine tasks. Again, teacher-led situations.

So we began to compile lists of the things learners really want and need to say to the teacher and to each other in the course of their work together in the classroom, and to consider how we might develop a gradual and systematic programme that would incorporate these ideas.

This led us towards what we called a 'situational approach'.

A situational approach

1. Identify, with students, a situation that occurs regularly and where there is a genuine need or wish to communicate. Discuss what language they already know that can be used to meet, or partially meet, the situation.

2. Teach any 'missing language'. Model use of known and new language. Explain any new structures. Ensure students know what they are saying.

3. Practise until all understand and are comfortable with language and structures.

4. Thereafter, teacher and students use the language on each occasion that the situation recurs for real.

5. Later: review, refine, expand. Ask students to suggest variations that follow a similar pattern, and show them how they extend the pattern to cover new but related situations. Give credit for creative use of language patterns.

As we developed these ideas we began to see how the language used in common classroom situations can provide an early focus for understanding grammatical terms as well as establishing a bank of familiar language patterns which will serve as models for more formal and extended study of grammar at later stages. We wondered if this would make it easier for learners to see 'grammar' as a set of useful tools for their own use, rather than as teacher-led exercises from the text book. It will be interesting to see if this proves to be the case.

We also wondered if this approach, focusing on the functional use of language, might reassure teachers who feel that they don't have time to teach 'classroom language'. We have begun to think about how to integrate the development of target language use with the requirements of the syllabus, so that teachers and students would not feel they were being asked to do something extra, and possibly peripheral. We have also thought very hard about how learners could be more involved in the process.

As our work progressed we became convinced that, far from being an optional extra, developing use of the target language is in fact crucial to the development of language teaching generally; that failure to use the target language for spontaneous oral interactions in the classroom could be regarded as language teaching's most wasted resource. We saw how important it is to engage learners, and how, by empowering them to make purposeful,

personal use of the target language in common everyday situations, they begin to see themselves as effective communicators and grow in confidence and motivation.

SOME PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THIS APPROACH

'Teacher talk' is not enough. We need to listen to what it is that learners themselves want and need to say. Identify, with their co-operation, frequently recurring language. Make notes, use your notes to identify language-rich situations you can use in your teaching. Encourage learners to use the new language whenever that situation recurs.

In the early stages of language learning there is a tendency to 'keep it simple'; to teach lists of nouns (pictures of classroom objects, for example), and ask questions like *Cest-ce que c'est?* expecting: *C'est un… / une…* in reply. For reading practice we ask learners to label images correctly. For writing we ask them to complete sentences like: *Dans la salle de classe il y a…*
This is classroom language, of course, and good as far as it goes, but does it go far enough? Is it real? Does it arise out of need to communicate in real situations? Nouns simply allow us to say WHAT we want to talk about. If we want to convey messages about them we need to say more.

For example…

Instead of teaching just *un/une* or le/la teach *mon/ma/mes ton/ta/vos* as well. There are all sorts of things you can say about a pencil (or any other classroom object that convey real messages, but if you and your learners are to make use of that potential, they also need to know the range of words needed in order to make sentences using the nouns.

That's not to say you teach them all at once, but you think first about how you intend to use them and to introduce them with those words. *Mon/ma/mes* and *vos* are potentially more useful than *un//une*. Talking about MY (real) pencil is more engaging than talking about some notional pencil that belongs to no one in particular.

An additional advantage: experience suggests that learning and using *mon* or *ma* works better than *un* or *une* as a spur to memory. Later on, even when a youngster can't remember intellectually whether crayon is masculine or feminine, asking whether *mon crayon* on *ma crayon* sounds better, their aural memory will tell them it's *mon*, and therefore masculine. (of course, it's not foolproof, but it helps).

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Extracts from Reading University's Research for Language Teaching
(our emphases)

¨… learners' motivation for language learning would be better protected though activities that promote <u>meaningful communication</u> …

¨… activities that motivate learners the most – those based on interaction, creativity, cultural contact and <u>purposeful communication</u>

¨…forms encountered/used frequently will be easier to learn… how much regular practice will learners get?

¨… strong bonds with the relevant articles

¨… an approach that involves a lot of practice with strong form-meaning links will help to overcome lack of fluency

¨Familiarity with a wide range of expressions provides a realistic core of language from which to draw examples for grammatical study.

To read the full report, go here: http://pdcinmfl.com

Extracts from Zoltán Dörnyei's article:
Communicative teaching in the 21st Century: the 'principled communicative approach' *Perspectives – Fall 2009 – Vol.XXXVI, n.2 [p36]*

… mere exposure to L2 input accompanied by communicative practice is not sufficient, and, therefore, we need explicit learning procedures – such as focus on form or some kind of controlled practice – to push learners beyond communicatively effective language towards target-like second language ability.

… the search for ways of integrating explicit learning processes in Modern language teaching methodology does not mean that we should regard these processes as replacements of implicit learning. Instead, the real challenge is to maximise the cooperation of explicit and implicit learning…

To read the full article, go here:
http://www.zoltandornyei.co.uk/uploads/2009-dornyei-persp.pdf

Follow-up

Websites:
(1) You can explore general TL issues further at:
http://languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/targetlanguage.html

(2) On http://hilarymccoll.co.uk/classroomlanguage.html you will find some ideas and resources to support classroom language development. We shall post today's resources there and add to these over time.

Email:
If you have questions or comments about today's workshop, if you would like to contribute to the websites, or if you have suggestions for other ways we can help, please get in touch by email: h.mccoll@clara.co.uk

Survey:
In the absence of recent research in Scotland, we would like your help to find out more about how people are using the target language. The attached survey can be filled in anonymously and put in the box on the MLG stand today, scanned and returned by email, or posted to Hilary McColl, c/o Scottish CILT, Lord Hope Building, Room LH232, Level 2, 141 St James Road, John Anderson Campus, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G4 0LT. You can find extra copies on the classroom language website page if you have colleagues willing to fill them in too.

(Note that the survey can also serve to profile current practice as part of your own developments.)

About the speaker

Hilary McColl taught French in secondary schools for thirty years before her increasing deafness led to her being seconded to look particularly at languages and special educational needs in Scottish schools. Following that secondment she started a website <http://languageswithoutlimits.co.uk> and ran various CPD events. She now writes and provides online support for learners with ASN, their parents, and teachers with an interest in language learning and inclusion.

SURVEY – Developing classroom language
(tick all that are appropriate, add to the lists as needed)

1. PUPIL TALK

When speaking to me, earners use TL only when required to in the course of a formal language activity		
Learners speak to each other in TL only when required in the course of a formal language activity		
Learners use TL when they speak to the teacher	all of the time	
	most of the time	
	some of the time	
	occasionally	
	never	
Learners use TL when they speak to each other	all of the time	
	most of the time	
	some of the time	
	occasionally	
	never	
Learners respond to TL	by carrying out TL instructions from the teacher	
	when required by the language activities set	
	to answer TL questions asked by teacher	
Learners initiate TL	to ask the teacher questions	
	to ask for permission, help, etc.	
	to collaborate in work with other pupils	
	to discuss their work individually with the teacher	
	to chat to other pupils	
	to chat to the teacher	

2. TEACHER TALK

I use TL only when teaching specific points or correcting an item of language		
When speaking to the class I use TL …	all of the time	
	most of the time	
	some of the time	
	occasionally	
	never	
When speaking to individual learners I use TL …	all of the time	
	most of the time	
	some of the time	
	occasionally	
	never	
I use TL in order to…	teach new vocabulary etc.	
	ask 'test' questions to check understanding etc.	
	give instructions for learners to follow	
	enforce discipline	
	to carry out routine activities	
	answer questions asked by learners	
	speak to individual learners	

Survey

In the absence of recent research in Scotland, we would like your help to find out more about how people are using the target language. The attached survey can be filled in anonymously and put in the box on the MLG stand at the SALT Conference on 7/11/15.

Alternatively, it can be scanned and returned by email to h.mccoll@clara.co.uk, or posted to Hilary McColl, c/o Scottish CILT, Lord Hope Building, Room LH232, Level 2, 141 St James Road, John Anderson Campus, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow G4 0LT.

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Thank you for your help!