

What is language learning for?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe 2001), to which each member country's language qualifications are now linked, states in its introduction that 'the aim of language teaching is to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned' (Introduction, p.4). But there is surely more to it than this. What about the learners for whom we know that foreign language learning will be a struggle and that they may never be described as 'competent and proficient', perhaps even in their own language?

Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe, speaking in Strasbourg on September 24th 2004 in a speech to mark the European Day of Languages, thought the aims were much broader:

Language learning is a powerful tool for building tolerant, peaceful and inclusive multicultural societies. The experience of learning a new language helps to develop openness to other cultures and acceptance of different ways of life and beliefs. It raises awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and promotes tolerance of people with a different lifestyle.

Catherine Ashton, UK Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the School Standards Office, in her foreword to the MFL Strategy for England (DfES 2002) iterates the same thought:

Languages contribute to the cultural and linguistic richness of our society, to personal fulfilment, mutual understanding... we must recognise language skills as central to breaking down barriers both within this country and between our nation and others (p.4)

The Executive Summary of the same document puts it even more strongly:

... language competence and intercultural understanding are not optional extras, they are an essential part of being a citizen (p.5).

The report of the Ministerial Action Group on Languages (Scottish Executive 2000) which forms the basis of the national policy for modern languages in Scotland, in developing a rationale for language learning, expressing a similar view, also recognises that some learners will achieve only limited language competence (my emphasis):

*...languages at school has an essential role to play in preparing all students for citizenship of the wider society. If it helps them become sensitive to the languages and culture of others and develops in them sufficient confidence and competence to be able to use their languages, **however modestly**, in their interactions with other citizens, then we believe they are more likely to understand others and to be respected by them. In this way the wider society becomes more open, democratic and inclusive (p.13/14).*

It is reassuring to find that these views expressed by policy makers are firmly endorsed by teachers working closely with our young people. After detailing strategies that can help

children on the autistic spectrum to succeed in foreign language learning, the North West Regional Special Educational Needs Partnership (DfES 2004) recognises the fact that:

Although visual aids and firsthand experiences help the pupils with asd to know the context of the target language, it will be almost impossible for them to understand the perspectives and possible different viewpoints of the people (p.23).

Nevertheless, they conclude their document with a firm statement:

It is important, however, that they are given the opportunity to learn about other cultures and countries in order to be able to see themselves as citizens of the world as well as their own immediate communities (p.23).

Implicit in all of the views quoted above is the notion that language learning fulfils its purpose only when it is viewed as **communication** and is set in the context of **community**. Who would deny that in today's troubled world such attitudes and predispositions are highly desirable for all our young people regardless of ability or disability, and not only in the international arena, but **at home as well**? If we truly believe that language learning has such a purpose, and that it is the gateway to the acquisition of these values, can we justifiably exclude *any* of our young people?

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A document disseminated to all Scottish secondary schools a few years ago summarised the views expressed by teachers in the special schools that had been visited (McColl, Hewitt and Baldry 1997):

Pupils with special educational needs are citizens too; indeed, it could be argued that they more than most need a clear sense of themselves in community. Without an awareness of themselves and of the close and local communities to which they belong, the idea of a European community can have no meaning.

The first step, therefore, in developing a European dimension for pupils with special educational needs, will be to ensure that, for all pupils, the school ethos and the curriculum exemplify and promote an awareness of oneself in community, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails.

For some pupils, the community will be their immediate environment; for others it will embrace the many interlocking communities, including Europe, which make up our modern world. For most, the programme will include an opportunity to become familiar with the culture and language of some of our European neighbours. (Section 1, p.11)

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...as one teacher who works in a special school reminded us recently (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2005):

My pupils began with only the haziest understanding that they live in a country called Scotland and that they speak a language called English. Only after investigating a country in depth did they begin to move towards a notion that there might be lots of other countries. It was only when we began to look for a second country to investigate that the notion of Europe and Scotland/Britain within Europe could be addressed in any meaningful way. (Part A, p.14)

This links very closely with the question of identity, suggesting that some of our learners may never come to a clear understanding of themselves and their place in community until they have an opportunity to compare their lives with those of people elsewhere.

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To quote the recent EU report again:

...success [in foreign language learning] extends beyond communicative competence and includes other significant educational domains and key competence-building areas involving personal and social development... [It] is not a question of foreign language learning for the sake of learning a language, but foreign language learning as a platform for enhanced education and personal development. (Executive Summary)

Communication.

Although opportunities to learn the foreign language are included in the broadly based courses mentioned above, they may not be, in the first instance at least, their prime focus. The special school teacher quoted above also says:

When I introduced modern languages into the curriculum of my pupils 'communicative competence' in any language other than English was not one of my goals. It was the first learning outcome [comparing communities], not the second, that drew me in. I only became interested in Outcome 2 [language learning] when I saw how motivating it was for my pupils to begin to communicate for the first time in a language other than their own. (Part A, p.5)

What this seems to suggest is that meaningful language learning experience is more difficult to provide when the foreign language is taught simply for its own sake, devoid of cultural context ...

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Here are some of the things I feel we need to do, urgently:

- We need to clarify our aims and expectations and say whether they are the same for all language learners.
- We need to debate and then state clearly what we think the benefits of language learning are, and to design courses which explicitly address the full range of those benefits.
- In doing this we need to be prepared to go beyond considerations of communicative competence in the target language, and accept that not all of the benefits will be linguistic ones.
- We need to be more aware of individual learning needs and to accept that we may need help to understand these before we can provide effectively for the wide range of abilities and disabilities which characterise our learners.
- Young people need us to set them 'do-able' tasks and to be prepared to provide whatever support they need in order to experience themselves as successful language learners.
- We need to link language learning to local as well as more distant communities in order to bridge the gap between familiar and more 'alien' concepts.