

## MAXIMISING POTENTIAL: Points for reflection: UNIT 1

### WHY AREN'T THEY LEARNING?

Some pupils are learning Modern Languages happily and successfully, while others of similar ability are struggling or have become alienated. Why?

One of the characteristics of classes where learners are having fewest difficulties is the way teachers plan differentiation, or, more exactly, what they consider as the starting point for planning.

When planning differentiation, we can ask ourselves two questions:

1. Why are some pupils not learning better than they do, despite my best efforts?
2. How can I help them to learn better?

We often start with Question 2, but this may allow some basic problems to go unrecognised, and these will interfere with any measures we adopt in response to Question 2.

We really need to start with Question 1: Why aren't they learning **now**? What's stopping them?

#### What are 'barriers to learning'?

Some of the difficulties facing learners arise not because they **can't** learn what we want them to learn, but because they can't learn it in the **way** we want them to learn it. Sometimes we unconsciously erect barriers which make language learning seem more difficult than it needs to be.

Often, we modern language teachers do not recognise these barriers. The trouble is, if we are not aware of the barriers we can't do anything about them, we just assume that it is the language that is too difficult for them. Yet this is rarely the case. At least in the early stages, the target language and the concepts that make up our programmes of work are **not** too difficult for most learners. So what **is** the problem?

#### Some common barriers

Support for Learning staff working on earlier projects identified some of the more common difficulties encountered by pupils in modern languages classrooms. They rated the barriers in order of importance as regards the need to deal with them.

Here they are, in order of importance. Many pupils find these activities very difficult:

- copying accurately and/or legibly from the board
- following instructions, spoken or written
- keeping an accurate record of vocabulary, etc
- keeping up with the pace required
- concentrating for the necessary length of time.

Support staff also listed as significant barriers to learning:

- poor relationship with the teacher
- low self-esteem ('This is too hard for me. I can't do this. No point in trying.')

## **Isn't the language just too hard?**

Modern language teachers are well aware of the situations described above, but sometimes they assume that these difficulties arise because the language being too demanding for the pupils concerned; that the **language** causes the difficulties.

What the authors of Maximising Potential have discovered through their work with schools is that cause and effect are the other way round. By putting in place measures to help pupils with the barriers identified, **their ability to cope with the target language improves**. Sometimes their use of English improves too.

## **How can we identify barriers we can't see?**

Barriers like those listed above may be invisible to modern language teachers, but the effects they create and the behaviours that result are often very plain to see.

When learners are experiencing difficulty with the work that has been set in the Modern Languages classroom, the signs are usually quite obvious.

### **In listening work, pupils:**

- keep losing the place on the tape
- are unsure what they have to do
- say they can't understand what is being said
- fail to complete answer sheets, guess, or get most answers wrong, etc.

### **In oral work, pupils:**

- rarely volunteer an answer
- when you insist, can't answer or give a wrong answer
- answer yes or no, but can go no further
- appear not to have understood the question
- participate reluctantly in pair work
- may use English instead of the target language
- can't remember any of the needed words or phrases, etc.

### **In written work, pupils:**

- fail to complete the work
- produce work that is illegible
- misspell a high proportion of words

### **In general pupils:**

- are unable to follow directions
- behave aggressively
- are reluctant to co-operate
- express indifference
- offer passive resistance
- are easily distracted, restless
- try to distract others, etc.

## **Interpreting unwanted behaviour**

Sometimes learners prefer to take avoidance strategies rather than admit to what they see as their failure. Teachers need to recognise the fact that these strategies, particularly ones which manifest themselves as misbehaviour, often mask pupils' underlying difficulties. It is important to recognise

that behaviours such as reluctance to learn, inattention, and lack of co-operation often signal the existence of low self-esteem arising from curricular barriers which could be reduced or eliminated.

## Do you recognise these behaviours?

Whilst most modern language teachers do recognise these behaviours, they don't always realise that that these behaviours can be the **result** rather than the **cause** of difficulties that pupils experience. We tend to say things like: 'If they would only concentrate... If they would only try harder... If they would only pay attention... then they would do better.'

## Tackling the barriers

So we have to dig deeper. **Why** are they behaving like this? If it's not the language itself, it may be the way we are teaching it. If you are seeing a lot of this behaviour, then it's worth considering as a possibility.

In all the cases the authors have observed or heard about, when curriculum development along these lines has been tackled, learning behaviour has improved, and for many pupils, that means behaviour per se has improved.

## Implications

Tackling barriers doesn't solve all the behaviour problems, of course; many pupils will still struggle with physical, emotional, social and other conditions that affect motivation to learn. The best that modern language teachers can do for pupils is to ensure that the **curricular** barriers, at least, are minimised. This can have a marked effect on motivation and attention to learning. Failure to address curricular issues leaves the root cause of some difficulties unchanged. This can cause a downward spiral of depressed self-esteem, poor motivation and low attainment. Repeated failure to succeed inevitably results in disaffection and reluctance to learn.

## Benefits

When we recognise the true barriers, we can devise strategies for minimising them or removing them altogether. Then more effective learning can take place.

The striking thing about these barriers is that they often seem to have little or nothing to do with language learning per se, but everything to do with the mechanics of the classroom. Could it be that some pupils do not, in fact have overwhelming difficulties with the language, but only with the difficulty **teachers** have in recognising what is hindering their pupils from learning as well as they might? The schools we have worked with show that this may well be the case; that the answer may lie in modifying the **approaches** teachers use, rather than in changing the level of language on offer.

## How support staff can help

Support staff are often adept at identifying potential barriers and can provide a valuable service to modern language departments. They can provide a realistic starting point for planning differentiated strategies which can quickly improve learning, not only of pupils who were obviously struggling, but for many others, too.

Departments which work well with support staff to remove unnecessary barriers report improvements in behaviour and motivation that eventually lead to improvements in attainment.