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Connecting research into pedagogy with foreign language teaching: A perspective from NCELP

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Professional development often focuses on the demonstration of new tools or ideas for teaching, rather than informing teachers of the latest *subject-specific* research into best practice. This article discusses the National Centre for Excellence for Language Pedagogy's (NCELP) efforts to connect teachers with pedagogical research findings and provide support for interpreting the relevance of the research for curriculum design, classroom practice and teaching resources. The article reflects on the structure and impact of NCELP's professional development programme over the course of the past two and a half years from February 2019. The DfE-funded Centre for Excellence aims to develop greater teacher knowledge and confidence in delivering the recommendations of the 'Modern foreign language [MFL] pedagogy review' published by the Teaching Schools Council in 2016. To this end, the Centre has worked with a network of language education researchers, expert teachers and teacher trainers to deliver a substantial programme of research-informed subject-specific professional development. One key aim of the programme was to establish reliable core knowledge in MFL teachers about the teaching and learning of phonics, vocabulary and grammar, thereby promoting students' achievement, motivation and creativity with the language (French, German and Spanish). This article reflects on key features of this programme, describing the process of training 18 specialist teachers in residential sessions and workshops and guiding them in their bespoke support of teachers in their own four Hub Schools.

<A>The challenge of accessing high-quality subject-specific research on pedagogy

Foreign language (FL) teachers enjoy a number of continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities. However, an enduring issue is the disconnect between FL teachers and the latest peer-reviewed research into pedagogy; findings do not progress from the research paper into the classroom, despite the potential for research to be a 'powerful transformative force' (Borg, 2010, p. 391). The 'Harnessing educational research' report stressed that teaching needs to be a 'research-literate profession' (The Royal Society, 2018, p. 10) and that 'high-performing education systems emphasise evidence-informed teacher self-improvement' (The Royal Society, 2018, p. 51), with ongoing benefits for schools, teachers and students. This article reflects on NCELP's work to connect teachers with subject-specific pedagogical research and provide support for interpreting it for practical

purposes for curriculum design and in the classroom. While fine-grained data on the long-term effects of the CPD have not yet been collected for public dissemination, we hope that this 'perspectives' article serves to raise awareness about a 'Hub model' of working at the interface between research and practice.

Though researchers have found that there are 'generally positive perceptions of research' (Marsden and Kasprowicz, 2017, p. 613; Nassaji, 2012), teachers struggle to access subject-specific research. Difficulties include: 1) practical constraints (e.g. lack of time due to professional commitments or funding to attend events); 2) limited physical and conceptual access to the research itself (being unable to access journal articles and not understanding the academic language); and 3) negative views of research (teachers believing that research is out of touch with classroom realities or contradictory, or considering that their own experiences or those of fellow practitioners are of greater value) (for evidence, see for example Borg, 2010; Marsden and Kasprowicz, 2017; Medgyes, 2017; Plavén-Sigray et al., 2017; The Royal Society, 2018). These issues mean that research into FL pedagogy is not 'the only or even the principal source of information' for teachers or teacher educators (Lightbown, 2000, p. 454). Understandably, few teachers read academic articles directly, and the limited access to research that is reported is mostly via colleagues, relatively lightly peer-reviewed language association publications, conferences or accredited professional development courses, which normally focus on ideas from teachers' own experiences (Borg, 2010; Marsden and Kasprowicz, 2017). To improve this situation, research needs to be 'accessible – physically, conceptually, linguistically and practically – credible, usable, and interesting' (Borg, 2010, p. 419; see also Cordingley and National Teacher Research Panel, 2000). Perhaps more importantly, there also needs to be a 'reciprocal relationship' (Marsden and Kasprowicz, 2017, p. 614) between researchers and teachers. A common recommendation is an increased role for 'research mediators', who can play a 'key role by monitoring, reviewing and synthesising evidence' (The Royal Society, 2018, p. 52), and for the publication and dissemination of freely available research summaries in which findings are summarised in an easily understood language and format, with their relevance to classroom practice made apparent (Cordingley and National Teacher Research Panel, 2000; Marsden and Kasprowicz, 2017; Plavén-Sigray et al., 2017). This article illustrates these ideas (reciprocal research-teacher relationships, research mediators and accessible summaries) by presenting one perspective on how research findings may be used directly with teachers at CPD events.

<A>The role of NCELP brokering between research and practice in a 'Hub model'

NCELP was founded in December 2018 in response to the 'MFL pedagogy review' (Teaching Schools Council, 2016) and is funded by the Department for Education. It works with a network of nine Lead Schools in England, each with two specialist teachers (STs) and four Hub Schools. The STs have been trained by NCELP to deliver support to the schools in their Hub. NCELP aims to:

1.   <NL>connect classroom practice and research to give teachers confidence in understanding and delivering the recommendations of the 'MFL pedagogy review'

2.   develop curriculum and pedagogy, with resources to deliver them
3.   improve intrinsic motivation and increase GCSE uptake.<NL>

This article focuses on the first two of the overarching aims of NCELP, as these relate to research-informed CPD.

<A>How NCELP extends the reach of research into the classroom

NCELP has used several approaches to narrow the gap between high-quality academic research and teaching practice. Specifically, NCELP has drawn on international, subject-specific, peer-reviewed research that is relevant to our specific low-exposure context (with about 450 hours at secondary school on average), to produce free:
- <BL>schemes of work (SoWs)
- lesson resources
- tests
- CPD
- 'rationale' documents laying out research-informed principles.<BL>

<A>*Database of accessible summaries of research*
To make research accessible, NCELP has used a unique database known as OASIS (Open Accessible Summaries in Language Studies). OASIS aims to address some of the causes of the gap between research and FL teachers and teacher educators. The database provides freely accessible one-page summaries, written in non-technical language, of research articles on various aspects of language learning and teaching that have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals. These summaries are usually written by the research article's original authors (or, if not, approved by them). At the time of writing, there were 674 summaries on OASIS, a total of 21,279 downloads and 1,057 Twitter (@OASIS_Database) followers. By 5 March 2021, language teachers or instructors were responsible for 36.3 per cent of the downloads, students for 26.4 per cent and university academics for 12.2 per cent. Further research is needed to assess the use made of the summaries, but it seems that a growing number of teachers are taking advantage of OASIS.

Many resources on the NCELP Resources Portal have a URL link to specific summaries held on OASIS, which in turn are linked to the original tools used to collect the data (via IRIS), making unique, concrete connections between research and classroom resources. In addition, the summaries have played a pivotal part in the CPD sessions. The NCELP team selects relevant summaries and the teachers read them before or during the sessions, which are then followed by questions or short reflective activities related to the summaries. It is important to note here that mediators (in the case of NCELP, our research and teacher education specialists) are needed to select the summaries for discussion. Further investigation is necessary to gauge the extent to which teachers go on to explore other summaries independently.

<B>*Professional development sessions*
NCELP uses CPD to connect practising FL teachers with subject-specific research through an extensive training programme for STs. This began with a two-day briefing and training residential course in February 2019, followed by

three further residential courses in September 2019, February 2020 and (remotely) September 2020, plus two one-day events that took place over the same period. These events brought together a network of language education researchers (from the Universities of Newcastle, Oxford, Reading and York) and expert teacher-researchers and teachers (from the Cam Academy Trust and Harris Federation). The key themes covered in each of the residentials were then explored in more depth via a two-year programme, beginning in March 2019, of eight three-hour follow-up sessions delivered to STs by NCELP colleagues. These were in the form of CPD 'half days' run in schools (prior to the pandemic) and online (during the pandemic).

In turn, this training helped Lead Schools to set up Teacher Research Groups (TRGs) for their Hubs, which developed their understanding of FL pedagogy through reviewing the existing evidence and developing their practice in light of this research. Sixteen such TRG meetings have taken place since March 2019. From this platform, and drawing heavily on the resources created by the NCELP resource developers, the STs worked with their Hub Schools to develop SoWs (adopting the NCELP SoW or adapting their own), lesson plans and teaching methods and resources to better align pedagogy with the recommendations of the 'MFL pedagogy review' (Teaching Schools council, 2016). This cascade approach has seemed to position teachers in the Lead Schools as experts and thus empowered them to own the work in order to share it with their Hubs (for which we present early evidence in the concluding section).

Each half day and TRG meeting had a specific focus, such as phonics, vocabulary, grammar, meaningful practice, assessment, motivation, curriculum design, the nature of practice or use of the target language. The sessions began by developing an understanding of relevant research evidence, focusing on theories of learning that are relevant to the learning of foreign languages in the limited exposure setting in England. Key principles of learning and teaching were highlighted and relevant OASIS summaries were given as reading prior to and during the events. The discussions not only drew out classroom implications, but also invited critique of the research's aims, design and methods. One aim was to empower teachers to become more confident consumers of research so that they can better question advocacy about pedagogy or subject content that may not be evidence-informed.

For example, the TRG on 'Meaningful Practice' (May 2019) presented theories that propose that learning involves establishing declarative knowledge followed by proceduralisation and automatisation. While acknowledging that the research base is far from 'complete' and is not always conducted in contexts identical to the teachers' own, it was nevertheless possible to extract broad guiding principles about the importance of providing frequent, spaced and meaningful practice, so that students can understand, embed and retain knowledge in the long term, including how and roughly when the material should be revisited. The session provided regular intervals for teachers to consider links between the summaries of research and the teachers' own work. Sample classroom resources in French, German and Spanish demonstrated how the language features to be learnt can be made

essential ('trapped') for task completion (as compared to activities that allow guesswork or provide too much scaffolding). Teachers were encouraged to video lessons where meaningful practice occurs (though this was seldom taken up) and use bespoke lesson discussion schedules (which were used occasionally). At the end of the session, they were advised how to cascade their new thinking and research-informed material to colleagues.

Successes and challenges of the CPD programme

Evaluation of success has largely been via survey. Brief (five- to ten-minute) surveys were conducted at the end of most sessions (residentials, half days and TRGs), either in person or using Qualtrics for some of the online sessions. This provided some feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the CPD. (Non-responses were systematically followed up to maintain a high response rate.) Teachers were surveyed on their confidence with understanding the research and their willingness to use the new approaches. Teachers at Hub Schools routinely reported high levels of confidence with their understanding (often over 90 per cent reporting 'confident') in these end-of-session surveys and many reported that the programme helped them to use the principles in their own lessons and to disseminate them more widely. In addition, large-scale surveys across the network of schools have been carried out at three points. These elicited broad indicators of: a) the teachers' confidence in delivering the recommendations of the pedagogy review; and b) their perceptions of how helpful the resources were in supporting teaching. Although details of the data are beyond the scope of this article, overall confidence was reported by 84 per cent of teachers in the first iteration and 91.6 per cent in the most recent (June 2001); perceptions about helpfulness of the resources were 93.35 per cent in the first iteration and 90.4 per cent in the most recent.

In addition, valuable qualitative data has been gathered via open text comments on the surveys or from unsolicited materials submitted via email or provided in conversations. A small selection of this data can be found in the testimonials on the NCELP website. For example, Sarah Shaw, an MFL teacher at Cardinal Hume Catholic School, discussed creating a resource for 'la Princesse au Petits Pois' (The Princess and the Pea) using methods discussed in the CPD. Further research into scrutinising teacher confidence with pedagogy research is needed, including assessing familiarity with and actual understanding of research, prior to and after sessions, which we hope to undertake next year.

However, some teachers acknowledged that they found it demanding and time-consuming when they were asked to create resources that align with the principles. Thus, early in the programme it became obvious to NCELP that, to fully support teachers, NCELP had to fully resource its SoW. Years 7 and 8 are now complete, and Year 9 will be completed by mid-September 2021. There are now 1,452 teaching resources, 415 teacher training materials, 103 assessment materials and more, totalling over 2,000 files, available for free on the NCELP Resource Portal. The portal had seen over 149,000 downloads by mid-June 2021.

STs now report that NCELP approaches are the most prevalent and reliable in Hub Schools that have moved away from their existing SoW and are fully adopting the NCELP SoW. Furnished with the SoW and resources, teachers could much more easily bring the research-informed approaches into the classroom. Adapting existing SoWs based on current textbooks was problematic, as topics drive the selection of vocabulary and grammar, rather than its usefulness (frequency) or core grammatical progression. A project teacher describes the issue:

> <Q>'I feel confident in teaching grammar; the only problem is the topic-based curriculum, which limits the opportunity to systematically revisit and implement the grammar in different functions. This can hinder students' competency in grammar, particularly mid-low prior attainers.' (Teacher in an NCELP network school)<Q>

Although STs reported that NCELP principles are most consistently embedded where schools have fully adopted the NCELP SoW, given the time pressures faced by teachers, moving to a new SoW was a source of anxiety for some. This was particularly the case in schools where top-down policies were not clearly subject-sensitive (such as whole-school policies on homework, assessment, lesson structure or technology). In addition, there was some reluctance to move away from approaches that had been used for many years, particularly in the early stages of the CPD programme.

In terms of the release of STs to deliver the programme of CPD, in some cases, timetabling has allowed STs to have a dedicated day each week, which was reported to work well. However, STs cited more challenges when their time was timetabled in smaller pockets across the week or not at the same time as their ST counterpart in the same school, reducing opportunity for dialogue. COVID-related pressures and other school circumstances have presented other difficulties in arranging CPD delivery, though video conferencing facilitated the delivery and accessing of sessions in most cases.

We acknowledge that the kind of self-report data described above cannot serve evaluation of the CPD programme as robustly as other kinds of data. Other informative data would include direct observation of lessons (which was carried out to some extent by some STs, but was significantly restricted by the pandemic) and substantive tests to elicit teacher knowledge and, ideally, resultant development in the knowledge of the pupils themselves.

In sum, we found that enabling research-informed approaches to reach the classroom faced a number of challenges, including: insufficient initial resourcing of ideas from research; top-down school policies that do not provide sufficient room for subject-specific pedagogies; legacy practices entrenched in textbooks and classroom routines; and teacher time being spread too thinly across the week.

<A>Early positive signs, ways forward and concluding remarks

We have provided a descriptive account of the CPD in the first two years of the project from February 2019 to date. In this current third year, NCELP has been guiding STs in delivering bespoke in-school support of Hub Schools, as they customise CPD to meet their local Hub Schools' needs. STs are guided by a monthly call with colleagues in NCELP, which helps to ensure continued engagement with research-informed approaches. Critically, Lead and Hub Schools continue to receive funding to allow teachers the time to participate in the project.

More data is needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the NCELP CPD programme in linking research and practice, as this project is in its early days and the sample of schools is still relatively small. Nevertheless, as noted above, survey data from 166 NCELP network teachers provides early positive evidence, with 91.6 per cent reporting confidence in delivering the recommendations of the 'MFL pedagogy review', and 90.4 per cent reporting that the NCELP resources were helpful or very helpful in supporting their teaching.

More anecdotally, and perhaps predictably, it seems that confidence might be higher and attitudes more positive in the schools that have actually adopted or adapted the NCELP SoW and resources. Attempting to marry NCELP SoWs with existing SoWs, especially when the SoWs are based upon textbooks, has proved challenging. This is due to NCELP's prioritisation of a principled selection of core grammar and vocabulary and meticulously planned sequencing and revisiting of content, which is not explicitly tracked in a sufficiently fine-grained way in current textbooks.

Nevertheless, there are several signs of positive engagement with the programme. For example, a number of STs delivered CPD at the NCELP conference in November 2000, attended by over 200 teachers and teacher educators from outside the NCELP network. Furthermore, 16 of the original 18 STs actively sought to continue their involvement with NCELP from December 2021 to December 2022. That is, they all applied to deliver five 2.5-hour sessions per term to teachers outside the NCELP network. As there was little to no personal incentive for the STs to do this (recompensed only with the equivalent hours' release from the classroom), it arguably represents an endorsement of a Hub-style cascading model as a motivating source of learning and development for teachers. Indeed, some STs have already created their own bespoke teacher support programmes.

Thus, overall, at this early stage, the cascade model seems to have connected teachers with pedagogical research findings and enabled the research to influence curriculum design and classroom and assessment practices. This model could perhaps be adopted in other subject areas. It is important to acknowledge, though, that the investment would be considerable, particularly if this investment was to include an equivalent database of subject-specific peer-reviewed openly accessible summaries of research (such as OASIS). The collation of this research evidence-base has been a key feature in, from our perspective, influencing the practice and thinking of teachers, teacher educators and policy-makers, as well as those working for NCELP. However, we end by emphasising that a research

evidence base can only give us rationales, broad principles and 'prototype' examples of how ideas from research might be operationalised in practice. What really made the difference, from our perspective, was having the capacity to run mutually informative training events and develop off-the-shelf resources to show how findings could be operationalised in concrete terms in the classroom.

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