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How do we talk about grammar and texts?

Teachers of English and Foreign Languages share their views and approaches

The latest version of the National Curriculum for England creates an ideal moment for teachers with a focus on language to come together and exchange experiences and views on common issues in our programmes of study. Ideally this will result in shared, joined-up understanding for teachers, and positive outcomes for learners and users of language, whatever that language might be.

This article was written by representatives of ALL (Association for Language Learning) and NATE (National Association of Teachers of English) together with CLIE (Committee for Linguistics in Education).
A longer online version is planned.

The teaching of grammar figures in the Programmes of Study (PoS) for both MFL and English. For MFL at KS2 the PoS requires pupils to use their knowledge of grammar, to “explore the patterns and sounds of language”, to “understand basic grammar” and to understand “how these [languages] differ from or are similar to English”. For English, the grammatical requirements for KS1-2 are defined in much more detail, with an Appendix and a glossary devoted to grammar. The Appendix lists forty technical grammatical terms which pupils are expected to know and be tested on in the KS2 Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar tests. Secondary MFL teachers will be especially interested to observe those in bold.

KS1-2 English: Terminology for pupils to know and understand

- **noun, adjective, verb, modal verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction**, determiner, **pronoun, possessive pronoun, relative pronoun**
- compound (word), suffix, prefix
- **singular/plural; tense (past/present); active/ passive; statement/question/ exclamation/ command**
- word family, ambiguity, synonym, antonym
- **word, noun phrase, clause, sentence**
- **subordinate clause, relative clause, direct speech**
- **subject, object**, adverbial
- cohesion

The English PoS for Key Stages 3 and 4 puts emphasis on understanding, studying, analysing and discussing grammar, while in MFL KS3 pupils are expected to ‘use accurate grammar’ even when they ‘write creatively’.

KS3-4 English

... consolidate and build on their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary through

- studying their effectiveness and impact in the texts they read;
- **drawing on new vocabulary and grammatical constructions from their reading and listening, and using these consciously in their writing and speech to achieve particular effects;**
- analysing some of the differences between spoken and written language, including differences associated with formal and informal registers, and between Standard English and other varieties of English;
- using linguistic and literary terminology accurately and confidently in discussing reading, writing and spoken language.

The similarities between the curriculum demands on MFL and English are striking. Both subjects give equal value to spoken and written language and to formal and informal language; and the English PoS even suggests that non-standard varieties are worth studying. Both subjects give pupils authentic texts to study, including literary texts; and both present grammar as a tool for studying, analysing and understanding the different grammatical patterns in these texts. And although both set somewhat higher expectations than in the past for grammatical accuracy, they also respect teachers' concern that grammar teaching should focus on growth rather than on avoiding errors.

In both subjects, teachers are aware of research that favours explicit teaching of grammar, but are also wary of a wholesale return to the the grammar-translation method in MFL and to parsing and analysis in English. Moreover, in both subjects many teachers had very little formal training in grammar either at school or at university-

Similarly, teachers in both curriculum areas try to find authentic texts that are likely to motivate pupils, to provide relevant linguistic experience and to be worth analysing. Even teachers' methods for exploring texts in class are similar; for example, both MFL and English teachers use a method (called 'transposition', 'textual analysis' or 'textual intervention') in which pupils explore linguistic differences between genres as a preparation for converting a text from one genre to another (e.g. from a spoken interview to a written one). And in both subjects the linguistic analysis of texts is combined with active engagement through manipulation and production of new texts.

But of course there are also fundamental differences in a typical student's knowledge of English and of any MFL as well as in the amount of classroom time available. A KS2 class teacher may be able to build MFL teaching on what she knows of pupils' developing understanding of Literacy, but at KS3 joined-up teaching is harder, English has more curriculum time and MFL learners may have a change of language.

These differences call for different approaches. For example, MFL teachers need to build vocabulary at the same time as grammar and so may encourage ‘personalisation’, where learners adapt a text such as a letter to their personal needs or ‘performance’ where learners recite a short text such as a poem from memory. In both cases, the learner’s production stays close to the model. In contrast, English focuses on higher-level skills; for example, the study of ‘authorial craft’, applies a ‘linguistic lens’ in the close reading of a text with a view to learning more general strategies.

The similarities, however, are certainly worth discussing, and could lead to collaborative planning and teaching, in which English and MFL colleagues guide the same class through similarities and differences between their respective languages; for instance, teaching could consider how the languages distinguish subjects and objects (using word order or case) or statements and questions (using word order, intonation or other devices); or it could focus on the linguistic characteristics of some genre, such as formal and informal letters. Joint planning could benefit the MFL teaching by linking to the pupil’s rich knowledge and understanding of English; and the benefit for English teaching would lie in the discovery that some of the linguistic conventions that we take for granted are in fact arbitrary, and that increasing pupils’ awareness of the conventions in another language can enrich the understanding and appreciation of their own.

We are sure there must be others thinking along these lines. Please share with us any examples of good practice that you know of where teachers of English and MFL are collaborating.

Contact: ?