

WHY AREN'T THEY LEARNING? - SOME COMMON BARRIERS

Removing unnecessary barriers can have a marked effect on motivation and attention to learning. Of course there may also be other barriers inhibiting a pupil's motivation to learn (physical, emotional, social etc.) but we have little or no control over these. The best we teachers can do is to ensure that the curricular barriers, at least, are minimised. Failure to address these issues leaves the root cause of some difficulties unchanged and a downward spiral of low attainment. Repeated failure to succeed results inevitably in low motivation.

Some common barriers which hinder learning

With the help of Support for Learning staff, some of the more common difficulties encountered by pupils in MFL classrooms have been identified. here they are, in order of prevalence:

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

Removing or reducing barriers

Once the barriers have been recognised, strategies can be devised for minimising them, or, even better, removing them altogether. With them out of the way, more effective learning can take place.

The striking thing about these barriers is that they 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 students do not, in fact have overwhelming difficulties with the language, but only with our failure to recognise what is hindering them from learning as well as they might?

Support for Learning staff are often adept at identifying potential barriers and can provide a valuable service to MFL departments, providing 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 who have built strong traditions of working with Support for Learning staff to remove unnecessary barriers report improvements in behaviour and motivation, leading to improvements in attainment. With the barriers taken care of, strategies for improving learning have a better chance of success.

The following pages offer suggestions for tackling some of the most common barriers.

REDUCING OR ELIMINATING CURRICULAR BARRIERS

extract from "Modern Languages for All", Hilary McColl (David Fulton 2000)

It is evident, then, that identifying and responding to individual difficulties cannot be carried out by anyone other than the class teacher. Yet many subject teachers have not had the opportunity to become skilled at identifying the precise nature of difficulties other than linguistic ones. He/she may be well aware that a particular student has not succeeded in learning what was expected, but may not know why, or what to do about it. Exhortations to 'try harder' or to 'concentrate', for example, are unlikely to be effective strategies unless backed up by more practical ones. More of the same is rarely the answer; what is needed is a reappraisal of the task which considers whether it is indeed essential for the student to undertake it at all. If it is deemed to be essential then an alternative approach which would be within the student's capabilities may be possible. In some cases providing additional support may allow the student to achieve success. Support may take the form of human assistance (a teacher, support assistant, or another student) or an additional resource such as a help sheet or technological aid.

It is worth bearing in mind that the existence of barriers creates problems for the teacher as well as the student, for special measures must be adopted which will allow the student to negotiate the barrier. It is much simpler if the barrier can be removed; no further support is then needed. It may be possible to avoid certain activities altogether, if they are not fundamental to the learning goal. Only if the barrier cannot be removed is support required.

The next few paragraphs offer some thoughts on barriers commonly encountered by modern language students and measures which might be adopted in order to deal with them. However, it is important to treat these as examples only. They are not necessarily the problems faced by the students in your class today. Only teacher and student can determine precisely what the problems are and devise appropriate strategies for overcoming them.

Copying from the board

That copying from the board should be cited as the single most serious challenge faced by students experiencing difficulties in the classroom comes as a surprise to many modern language specialists, so it is worth considering the following points:

- Learning difficulties are often associated with low levels of literacy. Copying from the board involves both reading and writing.
- Handwriting is more difficult to read than printed text, and capitalised handwriting most difficult of all. Sometimes, students are unable to read what the teacher has written.
- Some students have fine motor difficulties or defects of vision which may not be obvious to the teacher but which make the physical effort of copying a laborious and unrewarding exercise, producing results which are unreliable, unattractive and, often, illegible. Added to this is the need to constantly relocate the point one has reached on the board (and there is no marker), decipher the teacher's handwriting, change focus from the board to the script and, while doing all this, try to copy accurately words which are perhaps new and possibly unfamiliar.
- If the class sits in groups around tables, copying from the board may involve turning round to see the board before turning back to write. This is physically tiring for all, and may be disorientating for some.

- There may be time constraints which prevent a slow reader/writer from completing the work set.

For some students, therefore, copying from the board is difficult and demotivating, and the results may not be usable. Before asking the class to copy from the board, consider:

- Is there an educational reason for asking all students to do this? (or is administrative convenience the reason?)
- What will the resulting script be used for? And will a poorly copied script be usable for this purpose?

What solutions might there be?

- Is there another way of providing all or some of the students with their personal copy of the work you want them to record, thus making the copying task unnecessary?
- Failing that, would it be possible to provide temporary copies which could be placed alongside the student's script, thus making the copying task easier?

With careful planning it may be possible to circumvent or eliminate this barrier altogether. If it is indeed the major hurdle faced by some members of a class, it makes sense to start here.

Writing

Writing is the next most serious challenge in some classes, for reasons similar to the ones given above. This is not to say that we should not ask the students to write, but that we should examine carefully the reason for each writing activity. Is the goal we have in mind appropriate for each student? Could that goal be achieved by other means?

Following oral instructions

The frustration experienced by modern language teachers often arises from a lack of awareness about what can and cannot reasonably be expected of the students in our class. This is most obvious, perhaps, in the expectations we have of students' ability to understand and carry out our instructions, even if those instructions are in English. According to learning support teachers, it is not just a question of students not listening. Many students with learning difficulties are incapable of remembering multiple instructions and then calling them to mind in the right order as they carry them out.

Students can be supported in a number of ways. For example:

- Make instructions as simple and straightforward as possible.
- Give no more than one or two instructions at a time.
- As well as giving the instructions orally, write them up on the board so that students who forget can quickly see what they have to do next. Better still, make them available individually to the students who need them so that they can tick off the different stages of the task as they are completed.
- Make it permissible for students who have particular difficulty remembering what they have to do to ask another member of the class to remind them.

- Use a hand-held tape recorder or Dictaphone to record the instructions as you give them to the class, then give the recording to whoever may need it to serve as a reminder².

Following written instructions

Although written instructions are less ephemeral than spoken ones, we need to be sure that they are set out clearly, and are stated in language which is not too difficult for the learners for whom they are intended.

If instructions are given in the foreign language, make sure that all students have been taught what they mean and can verify those meanings if necessary. Include commonly used instructions along with wall displays of classroom language, preferably associated with a drawing or icon to serve as a reminder.

If you routinely provide your class with notes to collect in a reference jotter or file, include a page of these commonly used instructions, along with their English equivalents or graphic explanation. This would also be available for use at home and serve as a reminder of what is to be done.

When setting out written instructions, whether on the board or on a worksheet, make the process clear by making each step into a separate sentence and setting them out in a numbered list. Teach those students who have particular difficulty keeping on track to tick each stage as they complete it.

The above points are particularly important with regard to homework. Homework should never be set unless all students are familiar with the way of working you are proposing and understand exactly what they are expected to do. Students often take words very literally: if you tell a student to "look over that work again tonight", you shouldn't be surprised if he/she does just that! Students should be clear about what is to be learned, how it is to be learned, how they will know when they have learned it well enough, and how their learning is to be used or tested. Where parents' support is available, it can be useful to show them strategies which they can use to help their child. With foreign languages, in particular, parents often feel at a loss as to how to help.

Having the confidence to speak the language

Confidence cannot be achieved by exhortation. The only way in which most of us can be persuaded to speak is if we are more-or-less sure that what we are going to say is correct, and if we know how to pronounce it. Those who learn quickly and have a good ear will soon arrive at this situation. For those who learn more slowly, have a poor ear, and are used to getting things wrong, confidence will be hard to come by. More often than not, such a student is never sure if what he plans to say is correct or not, and so the risk he takes is all the greater. He will be prepared to take this risk only if he is confident that what he says will be received with pleasure and respect rather than ridicule.

Much will depend on how the input stage is handled. New material should be introduced in short, clear, meaningful 'chunks', with plenty of opportunities for students to hear the new language and to try it out for themselves. 'Public' performance should not be required until confidence at the input stage has been established.

At a later stage, confidence will be enhanced if the student has previously been set attainable goals, knows exactly what is expected of him, has been given as much time as he needs to learn,

practise and revise the words from which his utterance is built, and has experienced praise for his achievements along the way. Even then, he may need more support than you are accustomed to giving the other students. Perhaps he needs to be coached in the use of set phrases, perhaps he needs a prompt sheet.

The key to confidence is experience of success. The only way to ensure that the student will be successful is to provide all the help he/she needs, and to offer praise for what is achieved, even if it is not all that you – and the student – had hoped for.

- **Learning and remembering vocabulary**

Learning a foreign language inevitably means learning lots of new words and structures and being able to recognise or recall them at a later time. The effective linguist also needs to be able to use the learned material in new ways and in new situations. Some students may have specific difficulties in these areas. They can take in only small chunks of new information at a time. The process which transfers new knowledge into long term memory may be inefficient; or the reverse process, recalling learned information, may cause problems. In very many cases, learning vocabulary will require considerable mental effort and even then a student may experience only limited success. This does not mean that it is useless asking for vocabulary to be learned, but it does mean being aware of the need to agree with the student which vocabulary he needs to learn (include some words he has suggested, which relate to his own interests) and being very clear about the purpose of the learning activity. Some practical measures are discussed below, but there are many more possibilities.

- Provide as much time as is needed for achieving the goal agreed and be prepared to offer a variety of ways in which the materials can be learned. For example: for some students it will be easier if items can be presented in a way that makes visual sense, rather than in a list. A labelled diagram or picture, for example, or a layout of words which makes clear the relationships between words.
- If the students have to learn which words are masculine, feminine or neuter, then group similar words together and preface them with the article the students are most likely to use in the current topic.
- If English translations are not provided, make sure the students know what the words mean or have some way of checking words whose meanings they have forgotten.
- Make sure the students know *exactly* what you want them to learn. What will you expect them to know at the end of the learning session: the meanings? the sounds? the spellings? Will they just need to be able to recognise them, or will they need to be able to give the words in the foreign languages? Will they be asked to match picture and text?

Students also need to know how words and phrases are pronounced. Some students will need this repeated many more times than you can afford to provide yourself. How will this support be provided? There are a number of options, some of which will be more suitable than others given the conditions under which the learning will be done. For example:

- Arrange learning in pairs or groups, making sure at least one member of the group is likely to have accurate recall.
- Provide a copy of the list on tape.
- Prepare appropriate cards for use with a Drake Language Master®

Do not expect students to copy word lists from the board. Contrary to popular belief, this does not help struggling students to learn. The physical task is so demanding that no attention can be given to recognition of letter patterns or spelling. In any case, the end product is likely to be unusable. *No student with writing difficulties should be expected to learn from material he himself has produced.* Give him/her a textbook, a sheet you have prepared or, as a last resort, a carbon copy produced by another student whose handwriting is easy to read.

If you are preparing topic sheets, help sheets or similar, it is worth paying attention to the way in which the words and phrases to be learned are set down. Many students with special educational needs have difficulty with alphabetical order, so they will need to be arranged according to some other logic which is of more help to them as they attempt to store these new words in their memory.

Many people who have difficulties with text learn better if other visual clues are provided. Labelled drawings or diagrams, for example; captions, flow charts, boxes, grids. If gender is important, make sure words of same gender are grouped together or can be underlined in colour.

Coping with grammar

This is a complex issue which requires careful thought and planning. Grammar is an important tool for understanding and producing language and will certainly be needed by those students capable of proceeding to a high level. Understanding and consciously using complex structures may not be achievable by all students. Most, however, will be able to recognise and use some familiar structures correctly if enough opportunities for practice can be given, and many will be able to recognise patterns of language and to produce new examples of those patterns using known vocabulary.

Knowing what can be expected of a given student may help teachers to decide how to present matters involving the structure of the language; to prioritise the structures to be learned by different members of the class, and to determine what tasks can fruitfully be set.

Providing students with an "aide mémoire" into which they can stick pre-prepared and carefully designed notes of core items can lead to significant improvements in ability to cope. Such a system provides the student with his own ready-to-hand reference material and a clear idea of his learning goals. If topic lists and structures are stuck on left hand pages, personalised adaptations of the material can be worked up by the student, perhaps with teacher support, to serve as source of prompting and revision as required as the topic progresses or at a later stage. If carefully thought out, copies of the same sheets can be used from year to year, leaving spaces on the sheet or blank pages in the jotter for students to add their 'personal' items.

Coping with assessment

For many students it is not so much the learning experience which causes panic and despair, but *testing*. Tests can create enough anxiety to hinder effective learning. However, it has been shown that students progress better and are better motivated if they receive regular feedback which is individual and interactive.

For the benefit of all students, not just those with special educational needs, we should consider carefully why we carry out different types of test, whether they are all necessary, and whether some of the outcomes which we are currently achieving through testing could be achieved more

effectively by other methods. Time spent testing and marking represent time *not* spent interacting with students. The key to reducing both the student's anxiety and the teacher's administrative work load, is to emphasise learning rather than testing. Some successful strategies are listed below.

Tests are sometimes used by teachers as a way of motivating students to learn (vocabulary, for example: "Learn those words tonight because I am going to test you tomorrow.") Apart from the motivation being questionable, this approach does not ensure that effective learning actually takes place; at the next lesson, a time-consuming, possibly demotivating activity will be necessary in order to establish whether the homework has been done. During this activity no new learning will take place, but the teacher may have more marking to do.

This is not, of course, to say that there should be no testing, but that we should be careful not to *over test*. 'Continuous assessment', where there can be a temptation to record achievement on every task, can seem to the student like continuous testing, even though the teacher may not intend it to be seen in that way. Over testing can lead to acute anxiety which can itself be a barrier to learning. We need constantly to keep in mind the principle that assessment should inform teaching and support learning, not undermine it.

Teaching students techniques for monitoring their own learning can help to reduce the incidence of formal tests. This is particularly useful where new learning is being consolidated and the teacher wants to ensure that the student is sufficiently familiar with the new language to use it actively and confidently. By giving *the student* this responsibility, the number of tests to be marked by the teacher can be reduced, and learning should become more effective.

Peer monitoring is an extension of self monitoring. Students work together in pairs or in groups and are responsible for each other's progress. If the task takes the form of a game, for example, a student who has difficulty with a particular point is coached by the rest until all can successfully fulfil the requirements of the game. At that point, you can either accept their judgment that the learning goal has been achieved or you can ask for achievement to be demonstrated by seeing the game or task repeated. Either way, the heat is taken off the student who experienced most difficulty, and your intervention is less likely to be viewed as a 'test', since the students carried it out themselves. The activity emphasises learning, which is the student's responsibility, rather than testing, which is the teacher's. To a certain extent, this involves students in teaching as well as learning. Many students find they enjoy this and it can lead to marked improvement in self-esteem. They will, of course, also be developing important social skills, and the teacher may wish the acquisition of these skills to feature amongst the agreed goals for the pair or the group, for a while at least.

Providing support

So far, most of this section has dealt with identifying barriers and planning measures for removing or reducing them. A further, very common strategy, of course, is to provide whatever support is needed in order for the student to successfully overcome the barrier confronting him/her. This support may take many forms, for example:

- Using computers or assistive technology to fulfil a function which is difficult or impossible for the student otherwise.
- Providing human support for interpretation or to compensate for physical difficulties.
- Providing additional teaching in order to fill a gap in prior learning, or so that a student can acquire an essential skill.

- In modern languages, in particular, there is often a need for additional support to enable students who are experiencing difficulties to consolidate recent learning through practice more extensive than that normally afforded to the rest of the class. In some cases this can be provided at home.

A further, common use of human support is to make it possible for a student to undertake easier work than that done by the rest of the class or group, or to work at a different pace. Whether such additional support is inclusive or divisive will depend on many factors whose validity can be judged only in specific situations. Perhaps the key principle to keep in mind is that *as far as possible* the aim of any additional support provided will be to enable the student to participate in the same activities and to attain the same goals as the rest of the class or group. In providing equality of opportunity we must not lose sight of the aim also to provide equality of attainment.

Attitudinal barriers

Lastly, we need to be aware of the danger of interposing our own barriers between learners and their potential learning. Believing that a particular student cannot or should not be learning a foreign language, for whatever reason, will inhibit the search for solutions. Similarly, the *student* who is allowed to develop that belief is less likely to succeed. Focusing on barriers should provide an external, impersonal and non-threatening focus for consideration by learners and teachers alike.

The importance of recognising and dealing with barriers

Where barriers can be removed completely, no additional support is required. Where they can be reduced, the amount of support will be required but less than would have been the case if no effort had been made. It makes sense, therefore, from the point of view of both teacher and student, for each situation to be examined carefully.

Experience shows that where language learners are offered appropriate courses and effective teaching, they enjoy the experience and are keen to demonstrate their skills. Foreign language learning, for them, is as 'easy' as any other subject. Foreign language learning is perceived as difficult when the factors impeding learning are not recognised and dealt with. In such situations, learners soon lose hope and interest.