Nonsense in any Language

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Does the 'cap fit' in NZ? Or is this a warning for the future? We'd like to read your reactions

Modern language teaching, in which 'having a go' is emphasised rather than mastering basic grammar, leaves pupils unable to have an intelligent conversation and needing remedial lessons at university, says James Atkinson

The standard of modern language teaching in schools has declined dramatically in the past 10 to 15 years. In particular, the great majority of those now taking French, German or Spanish at A-level, including many who are awarded grade A, have such an inadequate knowledge of basic grammar that they are incapable of tackling the simple translations that used to be set at O-level.

A few years ago, not only would these students have been unqualified to study the language at university, they would even have been considered unacceptable on a sixth form language course. At my university, tests using old O-level papers have demonstrated that, halfway through an honours degree, not more than 10 per cent of language students can reach a satisfactory standard in the

O-level translation exercise. Many among the 90 per cent who are unable to do so came to us with an A grade in the language they are studying.

One of the main problems here is that the failure of schools - usually in response to diktats from on high - to base language study on a solid grammatical foundation deprives students of the capacity to help themselves, because they are unable to use either a dictionary or grammar and syntax intelligently.

The result is that, unless lecturers close their eyes to the enormity of the deficiency, university language tuition consists largely of teaching elementary concepts that should have been mastered in the fifth form. Some of them, alas, have often still not been grasped when the student graduates.

These facts are well known to every university lecturer in every modern language. Generally, however, lamentations are voiced only in private. A

few years ago, members of most modern language departments used to admit with, amused resignation, that they were providing remedial classes for the more linguistically backward among their freshers. Nowadays, when almost all

language students need such classes, not just in their first year but throughout their course, silence reigns.

The conveyor-belt mentality that has dictated the university funding policies of successive governments has led vice-chancellors to impress on their staff that student numbers are all important. The threat of job losses - and often of complete closure - now hangs over the majority of modern language departments. In these circumstances, quality is only of marginal importance,

and nobody wants to appear to be rocking the boat by publicly admitting that standards are falling.

Much the same is true of the A-level examining boards, which are guilty of debasing their "gold standard" still further with the new AS and A2 levels.

In the present decline, it is surely significant that in each of the past three years, more As were awarded at A-level in French, German and Spanish than any other grade. In German last year, those awarded A grades represented almost 30 per cent of the total entry - nearly double the overall average for all subjects.

The distorted system for awarding grades has other alarming consequences. The spread of achievement covered by the A grade now ranges from brilliance to near-mediocrity, whereas the C grade is often confined to a few percentage points, which means that the difference between a B and a D might be very slight indeed. It is easy to imagine how this might affect university admissions. The main cause of this catastrophic decline in standards was undoubtedly the

inauguration, in the Seventies, of the Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), which was designed to provide some sort of qualification for those lacking the ability and the motivation to attempt O-level courses.

Although the CSE may have been politically expedient and socially desirable, the primacy of its principles and practices in its later merger with the O-level to produce GCSE ensured that those who could and should do better were deprived of the opportunity to prove their worth. The resultant general "dumbing down" affected the whole spectrum of language

teaching.

The GCSE in modern languages, which has now unfortunately become the only means of access to languages in the sixth form and beyond, not only fails to provide a foundation for advanced language study but actually constitutes an obstacle to it.

First, the GCSE's ethos is dominated by the popular myth that, because all human beings speak, everybody is capable of mastering a foreign language. While it is true that everybody can learn to speak another language as well or as badly as he speaks his own, one must surely doubt whether the ability to handle the restricted linguistic code of the completely uneducated represents any educational or intellectual achievement.

Certainly, the most basic language skills can be all important, and in life and death situations can even avert disaster. But so also can the ability to ride a bicycle or a horse or drive a car. However, nobody would seriously suggest that these accomplishments represent educational or intellectual values that would justify their inclusion in the school curriculum.

In modern languages, just as in mathematics and many other subjects, attainment of degree-level competence should require above-average intelligence. However, while in mathematics it may be arguable that the path to advanced study passes through the basic achievements of GCSE, where the brilliant budding mathematician may be able to distinguish himself, in modern languages this is demonstrably not the case. Here, GCSE provides little indication of either intelligence or aptitude because everything that might distinguish between the potentially gifted linguist and the hopeless plodder is deliberately omitted.

The "have-a-go" approach, intended to bolster confidence and encourage fluency, is a seriously detrimental practice. It constitutes a major hindrance to any future progress, since it firmly establishes a series of pernicious habits, later to be laboriously unlearnt, and instils a profound disregard for morphology and syntax, subsequently extremely difficult to eradicate.

It is this sloppiness, encouraged by GCSE and later contaminating A-level, that explains why first-year university students often, with disarming innocence, express a preference for writing their essays in "French". They then submit several pages of gibberish in which at least every other word is so wrong that it appears almost futile to make corrections, since it would be necessary to return to the earliest school work and begin all over again. The "have-a-go" approach is also associated with a perversion of the principle that communication is the all-important function of language.

When, as is all too often the case in schools, "communication" is restricted to the most basic expression of a restricted linguistic code, the person able to go into a cafe abroad and stammer out the foreign language equivalent of "me want cup coffee" may well feel that, as his announcement is clear and unambiguous, it should be considered as 100 per cent correct.

Why try harder, especially when little opportunity is given for more sophisticated dialogue? In addition, the emphasis on oral communication can lead only to looseness and incorrectness of expression when it is deprived of the support of a sound grammatical foundation.

Another factor associated with the collapse of standards in modern language teaching is the aversion to translation on the grounds, supposedly, that it is artificial, since most people speak without being able to translate. Clearly, if the object of modern teaching methods is to cater equally for all abilities, and to try to disguise any differences in intelligence, then it is understandable that translation - the most intellectual of language exercises - should be discouraged.

The fact remains that the ability to translate is indispensable in the bilingual or plurilingual context that is now influencing Europe's educational priorities. Nevertheless, many universities have seen fit to exclude translation exercises from modern language degree examinations.

According to the recent Nuffield Languages Inquiry - which makes not a single reference to the decline in standards - the "objectives and approaches of GCSE and A-level syllabuses have been more closely aligned over the last 10 years". One of the saddest results of this alignment is the increasing elimination of literature from the syllabus. A-level pupils now generally find it difficult to understand the elaborated linguistic code used by the great writers.

The linguistic incompetence that results from modern teaching principles inevitably has repercussions in the universities. Admitting students who lack the intellectual qualities to undertake a degree course has led to the creation of lightweight, undemanding components and modules in areas in which the staff have no expertise or research experience, and which, by their weighting in the final degree computation, tend to obscure the poverty of the linguistic attainment.

So, what is to be done? According to the Nuffield inquiry, we should be pressing for ever greater provision to enable more and more people to undertake earlier and earlier the study of more languages. However, the debased teaching now usually on offer leads to the kind of language

smattering that will satisfy the needs of holidaymakers and not much else, and in 90 per cent of cases is dropped at the first opportunity. Instead, consideration should urgently be given to the possibility of providing for the needs of those pupils who might be able to specialise later in languages. That means establishing language instruction from the earliest stages on the sound morphological and syntactical foundation that alone will ensure a supply of competent linguists.

Clearly, it will now be impossible to match the standards of the past, but it may well be that a more challenging modern languages curriculum in school could attract a larger number of brighter pupils, who certainly have no opportunity to shine under the current system.

In the present sad state of affairs, pupils and teachers merit great sympathy. In the main, pupils work hard and conscientiously, and do not deserve to be so shamefully misled. Teachers, dedicated to their subject and to their charges, are in no way responsible for the current erosion of standards.

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