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The Space Between

Shared understandings of the Teaching of Grammar in English and French to year 7 Learners: Student Teachers Working Collaboratively.

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Abstract

In this article, we describe a small scale research project in which an English and a French student teacher on our Postgraduate Certificate of Education course work collaboratively to develop their personal knowledge and understanding of grammar and its role in teaching both subjects to 11 year old learners in an English comprehensive school. The project begins with university-based discussions about the role of grammar in language learning as expressed in a number of government documents and professional journals and continues in school with lesson observation by students of experienced teachers and of each other. Ways in which the cross-language focus beneficially influenced their classroom practice are suggested. The article concludes with the discussion of a number of issues about planning for language development and teaching about language across the curriculum which arise from the project and makes some modest proposals for a way forward within government policy which remains separatist.

Introduction The belief that language specialists in secondary schools should work collaboratively has been around for at least a quarter of a century. We take the title for our article from a collection of papers published in 1974 entitled 'The Space Between: English

and Foreign Languages at School'. The papers resulted from a conference organised by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) a year earlier which brought together English and foreign language teaching specialists from nine local education authorities in the North West of England with the aim of exploring common interests in the teaching of language including ways of planning the language curriculum in an integrated way. The 'space between', an expression used by Eric Hawkins at the conference, referred to (amongst other things) the absence of any sort of liaison between teachers of English and teachers of foreign languages in secondary schools. Other reports and initiatives since the early 1970s have also explored links across the language curriculum. The Bullock Report (A Language for Life 1975), whilst not making explicit English and foreign language links, promoted 'language across the curriculum' policies for which all secondary subjects should be responsible and the establishment of the National Congress for Languages in Education (NCLE) in 1976 created a national forum where all concerned with the teaching of English, second and foreign languages could discuss common issues.

In the field of foreign languages, many initiatives to make explicit links between English and a foreign language have revolved around Hawkins' (1984) concept of a co-ordinated modern 'trivium' of mother tongue/ awareness of language/foreign language. Courses in 'awareness of language' (defined by the NCLE as 'a person's sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language') aimed to make explicit and conscious in pupils the knowledge and skills they have acquired through experience and develop their powers of observation and analysis (NCLE Papers and Reports 6 1985: 7). In the field of English, from the 1970s onwards, discontent at grass roots level with the narrow scope of traditional grammar teaching (sentence parsing) brought about a more broadly based language awareness or 'knowledge about language'(KAL) approach (Burgess and Hardcastle 2000). Two major

contributions to this more expansive view of grammar came from the English inspectorate (DES 1984, 1986).

Unfortunately, this shared concern to develop learners' understanding of how language works, has been unco-ordinated and generally haphazard. The advent of the National Curriculum in 1988 provided the ideal opportunity to bring together the two language areas. The government, however, took a compartmentalist approach to curriculum organisation and each specialist group worked in isolation from the other. The Report for English (The Cox Report 1989) and the Report for Modern Foreign languages (The Harris Report 1990) treated knowledge about language quite differently. The English Report devoted a whole chapter to the issues; the Modern Languages Report paid them scant attention (Brumfit 1995). Major in-service initiatives concerned with the implementation of the National Curriculum such as the Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) Project (1989 - 1992) and well received publications which resulted from it (Carter 1990, for example) were confined to the English curriculum. In the more recent past, a small number of conferences organised by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and CILT with the QCA have brought together specialists from the two fields* but government publications continue to promote a subject specific approach – see The Grammar Papers (1998) and Not Whether But How (1999) which relate only to English matters. The consequence is that departments continue to work in isolation from each other (McCarthy 1997) and, as Mitchell, Hooper & Brumfit pointed out, pupils in English and foreign language classrooms receive 'largely unrelated messages' (1994:14) about KAL; classroom practice is 'varied, even idiosyncratic' with 'little common ground across the language subjects' (1994:19).

The space between, then, continues to exist. For the most part, English and foreign language departments remain ignorant of what the other is doing. This is as true for university departments of initial education as it is for departments in secondary schools (for an exception to this, see Pomphrey 1997, Pomphrey & Moger 1999). As lecturers in a

university department of education working with secondary English and foreign language teachers of the future, we felt the time was right to begin some modest collaborative work and grammar provided our unifying link. By grammar, we mean those aspects of KAL which are called variously *language form* (Spada 1997), *language as a system* (Linc Project 1989) and *language structure* (QCA 1998), namely:

phonology, word classes, word formation and patterns of vocabulary, function and effect of words in sentences, sentence structure, function and effect of phrases and clauses, punctuation, text structure and organisation.

In the teaching of both English and foreign languages, the role of grammar is under scrutiny. After a period of relative exile, grammar is currently seen as playing a supportive role in improving language work and this is an aspect of subject knowledge (DfEE Circular 4/98) that our students must develop. Furthermore, for the first time, secondary subject departments have access to the detailed documentation from which primary school teachers work in delivering the grammatical content of the National Literacy Strategy. In other words, both English and foreign language teachers have a common base on which to build and develop learners' grammatical understanding.

Our research context. The award of Qualified Teacher Status requires that student teachers provide evidence of secure knowledge and understanding of their subject area and their ability to apply that knowledge in the classroom. Knowledge about grammar and the role it can play in pupils' learning is part of this subject knowledge. In English but not in modern languages, the Teacher Training Agency has laid down a National Curriculum for Initial Teacher Education (DfEE Circular 4/98 Annex F) which sets out specific requirements relating to knowledge about grammar for student teachers. In both fields, the role of grammar has long been the subject of heated debate. The pendulum of change, having swung to the two extremes of all grammar and no grammar, currently hovers around the

mid-point, opinion being that grammatical knowledge can support and enhance learners' understanding and use of language. Hudson (2000) reviewing the research evidence on the relationship in a first language between conscious knowledge of grammar resulting from formal teaching and improved writing skills concludes that the available evidence supports, much better than is commonly supposed, a positive correlation between the two. The research literature he reviewed strongly supports the inclusion of both morphology and discourse grammar alongside the traditional focus on syntax. This more inclusive view of grammar teaching is, of course, reflected in the government's National Literacy Strategy (NLS) (DfEE 1998) in its focus on word, sentence and text level grammar work. Research by Myhill (1999) into 14 to 16 year old secondary school learners' writing in English demonstrates in practical ways how grammatical knowledge can support language work and help to improve writing.

In the field of second/foreign language learning, a state of the art article by Spada (1997) reviewed all the research into the effects of teaching which draws learners' attention implicitly or explicitly to language form in either spontaneous or pre-determined ways. She concluded that such teaching (or form-focused instruction) was beneficial, possibly particularly so in communicatively-based classrooms, a conclusion also reached by Ellis (1995).

Language students, then, are training at a time of paradigm change when established departments and experienced teachers in both curriculum areas are facing the same fundamental issues about which aspects of grammar are useful, about what grammatical progression means, about how grammatical work can be integrated into topic and text-based work, about what metalanguage is useful. Moreover, many of these students may well have been educated in a 'grammar-free'era. They feel insecure about their own knowledge of grammar and they have little experience of form-focussed instruction.

A final aspect in the context of our research is the NLS launched in state primary schools in England in September 1998 as part of the government drive to raise standards in reading and writing. The literacy strategy has a large grammatical component and secondary teachers can acquaint themselves with the grammatical work primary school pupils have encountered at word, sentence and text level and what metalanguage they have been exposed to from the NLS Framework for Teaching. The 11 year old secondary pupils taught by our students had experienced just one year of the NLS in the final year of their primary school.

Our research project: Current models of initial teacher education are extensively school-based, students teachers spending one third of the 36 week year based in an institute of higher education and two thirds in school. Our project spanned 1½ terms in all, from the beginning of the academic year in the Institute of Education to the end of the first block teaching practice when students returned to the Institute for a period of review and further input. We worked with two students based in the same girls' multi-cultural comprehensive, a school chosen because the English and foreign languages departments had already planned occasional joint departmental meetings to review the implications of the primary literacy strategy and because it was open to the sort of research questions we were asking. It was agreed that year 7 (11 year olds in the first year of the secondary school) would be the focus of the students' attention and that each student should have allocated time on her timetable for observation of lessons in the other curriculum area. Our broad research interests are concerned with the teaching of grammar in each curriculum area and the potential for departmental collaboration to support learners' understanding of grammatical concepts. In this very modest investigation, our research questions were these:

- What do our two students understand by the word *grammar* in their own and then each other's curriculum area and what role do they think it can play in their teaching?
    - In what ways is this dual perspective apparent in their teaching?

- What are the benefits to our two students of working collaboratively?

Our project had four stages. Stage 1 was concerned with getting students to have an understanding of current debates about grammar as a tool for learning as expressed in government documentation and profession journals (see Appendix 1). Stage 2 was concerned with understanding the practical issues in teaching in the classroom and revolved around observations at a number of levels. Student teachers began by observing experienced teachers in both curriculum areas and later observed each other teaching the same year 7 class. Students kept observation notes which formed the basis of discussions in school and later at the Institute. Stage 3 was concerned with student teachers planning lessons for the class which drew on their understanding of the content and delivery of both subjects. Stage 4 took place at the university at the end of first block teaching practice and was concerned with review by the students in terms of personal development and reflection by tutors on the wider implications of the findings.

Our findings

Stage 1: Understandings the issues

Our two students, Susanne, the French specialist and Anna, the English specialist, had both identified at the end of their advanced level studies at school gaps in their knowledge of grammar as well as interests in language study or linguistics which they had sought to address in different ways. Susanne had worked her way independently through the grammar book recommended by her university before she began her degree course and Anna had elected to include in her degreee a module on the History of English language which provided her with in-depth knowledge of the workings and history of the language. We had, then, two students who were open to the potential of grammar study to help secondary school learners. They were asked to read the articles in Appendix 1, make notes on their own understandings of the issues raised and use the notes to present their understanding to

university tutors. The readings were taken from documents produced by the QCA or from professional journals and were about the teaching of grammar in either English or foreign languages.

We were impressed by the response of both students to the literature. As products of what they saw as a 'grammar-free'schooling, they were open to the benefits and security which grammatical knowledge might provide. The readings helped them to appreciate issues in both curriculum areas and also to synthesise a number of points relevant to both. For example, they identified as shared dilemmas:

- the issue of how far implicit knowledge of language structures acquired and developed informally should or could be articulated explicitly
- the danger of boredom through grammar grind versus the security of knowing why and how
    - the question of ad hoc treatment of language forms versus systematic coverage.
    - the question of what progression in grammatical understanding might look like for pupils and the ways in which a syllabus might plan for this.

They also felt a sense of pattern was essential to learning in both languages and were attracted by the idea of learners investigating language for themselves rather than being drilled or taught rules. A technical vocabulary seemed to them to be useful for facilitating discussion about language.

Stage 2 – observation in school

Stage 2 of our research involved students observing teaching in each curriculum area in school, initally experienced teachers and eventually each other, and talking through issues based on their observation notes. At the end of the Christmas term, they returned to the Institute to share their experiences and ideas with us. Our discussions at this stage revolved around the following observations based on the students' school observations and discussions:

French works from word up to sentence level. When learners are first presented with new vocabulary, words are segmented to help pronunciation. Oral drilling helps to assimilate pronunciation and meaning. The grammatical focus is on morphology such as, for example, the agreement of adjectives. There seemed to be very little focus on sentence building and very little reading of texts.

In **English**, the starting point is work with texts although pupils are often presented with sentences from which they study particular words. No attention is paid to pronunciation even though it was felt that some learners would benefit from it (many learners in the school have languages other than English as a first language). When the grammatical focus was on adjectives in English, it revolved around choice and effect. It was, as Susanne pointed out, like the sort of work French Advanced Level learners are able to engage in. In English, very little attention was paid to morphological aspects of language. Agreement of verb and subject was cited as an example by the students where this might be useful. The students' observations confirmed the findings of Mitchell et al (1994), namely, that in foreign language classrooms, attention is focused on morphological aspects of grammar while in English, it is focused at the level of whole texts and the distinctive characteristics of language genres. It is significant that when their findings were presented at a joint English/foreign language departmental meeting, it was clear that some experienced staff were unaware of these subject differences in the teaching of language.

In both curriculum areas, there was no explicit grammatical syllabus in the Scheme of Work. In English coverage of grammatical items was approached opportunistically: as occasions arose for enhancing the reading of texts or improving writing, attention was given to grammatical forms. In foreign language lessons, attention was given to grammatical forms as they arose in age-related Topics (My Family, my Hobbies, for example). English

and foreign language colleagues had no knowledge of the syllabus, the grammar or the metalanguage used in each other's department.

As tutors, we felt that the students had benefitted from this observation period not only because they had had the opportunity for continuous access to the other curriculum lessons, something which experienced teachers find difficult to organise, but also because they had had to think more than their peers about grammatical issues in their own subject specialism. They were more aware, more sensitive and more knowledgeable. This heightened awareness was evident in the lessons we observed after Christmas, two of which we describe below.

Stage 3 University tutor observations in school

Ideally, this stage of the project would have involved student teachers working together in some complementary way on a particular grammar point (adjectives might, for example, have been a possibility for a year 7 group) and making cross references to each other's work in lessons. The inflexibility of departmental schemes of work precluded such close collaboration. Students were able, however, to draw on their stage 2 experiences in planning and teaching their own classes and we report here in detail on a French lesson and an English lesson with the year 7 class in which the experience and understanding students had gained through peer observation and discussion of things grammatical were evident. In both lessons students sought to make explicit and conscious pupils' existing knowledge and skills and drew their attention to formal aspects of language. This was an approach rarely seen in student teachers who were not part of the project. In both lessons, the grammatical focus was at word or sentence level: the introduction of nouns in a new topic in the French lesson; in the English lesson, the use of adjectives, nouns, noun phrases to dramatic effect in 'Hamlet'. In French, pupils compared French/English sounds and intonation patterns; in

English, pupils concentrated on rhythm, stress, on the effect of Shakespeare's choice of words and language change.

The French lesson was concerned with the introduction of a new topic, Sports, and the initial presentation of 10 new nouns (for example, le football, le judo, l'athlétisme). The lesson proceeded through oral presentation, oral practice, written forms, listening to the tape, learning vocabulary for homework. What interested us was the way in which the student drew on learners' existing knowledge of English, inviting them to make comparisons between sound, spelling and intonation patterns in English and French. For example, when learners had seen the list of nouns in written form, she drew their attention to differences in sounds in French where words had the same written form in English. She asked them to demonstrate orally the difference between the English and French 'j' sound in (le) judo and between 'th' in 'l'athlétisme / athletics'. She asked them about the different intonation patterns between the English and French '(le)football' '(le)tennis' and '(l')athlétisme / athletics. Throughout, the approach was investigative on the part of the learners rather than didactic on the part of the teacher. This significant 'language awareness' aspect to the lesson had, of necessity, to be conducted in English. The rest of the lesson was conducted in French.

A further feature of the lesson which interested us was the student's use of metalanguage – *noun, gender, masculine, feminine, accent, pronunciation, syllable*, *cognate*. These were technical words she believed learners understood either because she had used them in previous French lessons or because she had heard them used in English lessons. Whilst learners were writing, we asked individual pupils if they understood what the teacher meant by '*noun*', a term we chose because it features in the NLS and as such, we felt would have been encountered by pupils prior to year 7 in the secondary school. The range of responses was interesting but not surprising. One pupil gave the definition '*name, place, thing'*;

another replied that it was a word they used in English lessons all the time; another explained that her English teacher used it often in class and when commenting on her work. These pupils agreed it was a useful term to have because they '*knew what the teacher was on about'*. They were not, however, quite sure how nouns worked in French. '*It's weird in French… 'cos it's all sports and actions'*. Other pupils were far less secure in their knowledge of the term and offered '*a describing word?', 'a doing word?'*. Another pupil admitted she did not know what a noun was but this was not a problem and did not prevent her following the lesson. We comment later on this difference in understanding between learners.

The focus on oral work in French to help the assimilation of new words and to build confidence in pronouncing new sounds was an aspect of foreign language learning that the English student commented on. She felt that links with foreign languages and home languages (many pupils in London schools speak languages other than English at home) could effectively be incorporated into English department units of work on accent and dialect and this consideration of the sounds of a language was part of the "Hamlet" lesson we observed. Pupils were studying Gertrude's description of Ophelia's death working from both a prose version and the original verse. They spent time listening to Anna speaking the verse aloud, looking at adjectives with varying numbers of syllables and experimenting with the stresses of the lines. In addition, Anna foregrounded the way Shakespeare creates a powerful poetic description by piling up the nouns and two-word noun phrases, many from the natural world. Their task was to make a mural by filleting the speech for these salient descriptive details and using them as labels to make a collage. It is not a unique approach: English teachers are experienced in encouraging students to discuss the ways in which literary effects can be analysed in terms of semantic features. But what is interesting here is Anna's focus on sounds and rhythm and on the way the intensely moving effect of Gertrude's elegy is achieved largely through a steady acccumulation of nouns and noun

phrases. She offered the pupils a re-written version where she had substituted for Shakespeare's list an alternative, 'updated'version of the noun phrases – 'pure girl' instead of 'chaste maid' and so on. Anna's purpose here was three-fold: to consider language change, to consider the effectiveness of Shakespeare's choice and to teach explicitly a grammatical item, namely the noun phrase. When asked for their responses, the pupils seemed to handle confidently the concept of grammar as being partly a choice which a writer or speaker has available in the language: you can play around with nouns, move them about in a sentence, even put them in a strange place if you're Shakespeare. In discussing the lesson with her afterwards, it was clear that, like Susanne, Anna felt that the students enjoyed a puzzle-solving, investigative approach to grammar work and that some joint planning of a grammar-based approach between the two subject areas would be well worthwhile.

Stage 4 - reflection

Stage 4 of the project took place at the end of the first block teaching practice. Students were asked to think about their readings, discussions and teaching experiences and to note observations which seemed significant to them. The English student felt that learners in English lessons could well benefit from intensive oral practice of the sort she had seen in French; work at word level in English focuses on the written, not the oral, word. Pupils in English need to know that it is acceptable, indeed productive, to practise the pronunciation of problematic words. She had found that explicit discussion of grammatical points, grounded in concrete examples, had helped less confident writers to improve their work.

The French student felt that modern language teaching needs to cover more work at sentence and text level. Both agreed that a core of grammatical terminology, used consistently by both departments, needed to be identified and that consideration needed to be given to how much metalanguage is helpful, when and to whom. The problematic nature of narrow

definitions (adjectives are describing words, for example) was acknowledged but it was also agreed that a narrow definition can be helpful as a springboard to more complex discussions over time. Where pupils speak languages other than English as a first language, language awareness activities should make reference to these other languages.

At the end of the project, the students felt they had a 'heightened awareness of the issues' we had been trying to address. They were beginning to get a perspective on each subject area and were prepared to import ideas that seemed worthwhile into their own teaching and try them out. They could appreciate the benefits which collaboration between language departments would allow.

Wider implications of the findings

As tutors in Higher Education working with secondary language teachers of the future, we wanted to "reduce the space between" by investigating ways in which our students might begin to work together to make sense of new ways of thinking about grammar which are proving a challenge for the most experienced teachers. The background literature to our project reports on the different messages about language relayed to learners in English and foreign language lessons (Mitchell et al 1994) and argues the case for collaboration (Hawkins 1999, Pomphrey 1997,Pomphrey & Moger 1999) but we found no reports on English and foreign language teachers working together to implement National Curriculum language requirements. In spite of the long-standing joint seminars between English and foreign language student teachers at the University of North London (Pomphrey & Moger 1999), Pomphrey admits that school-based collaboration has been very limited and difficult to measure (Pomphrey 2001). The project reported here represented for us, a window on what and how student teachers might learn from each other in school. We were privileged to work with two excellent students who were motivated, analytical and reflective and who learned from each other in a constructive way. Of course, as student teachers they had time

to observe lessons in each other's department, to read, to think and talk about what they observed. They were also open to new ideas and willing to see other perspectives.

Our project is small scale and we make no claims about its generalisability. It provided us with some idea of what might be achieved when English and foreign student teachers work together and gave us a starting point for future joint projects. However, we believe that our project raises a number of issues about the language curriculum at a national level. First, there is the common but unshared debate about grammar in secondary language departments where English and foreign language teachers are wrestling with similar issues. In the light of this common ground, it is regrettable that there is so little interdepartmental dialogue. Interdepartmental co-operation could, for example, lead to joint responsibility for reinforcing grammatical concepts encountered in the primary school and would have helped our French student to understand her role in developing learners' understanding of nouns, adjectives and verbs. Grammar, however, is only part of the picture. At a higher level, issues about the secondary language curriculum as a whole need to be aired and it is to a discussion of these that we turn in this final section of our article.

Since our project ended, the NLS has been extended to the school secondary sector. All 11, 12 and 13 year old learners now follow a centrally organised programme of literacy development (Key Stage Three National Strategy 2001). As in the primary strategy, the syllabus includes work at word, sentence and text level. It was with a depressing sense of déjà vu that we noted the absence in the National Strategy of any reference to *foreign* language learning and the particular benefits of cross-language transfer and comparison (even though all 11, 12 and 13 year olds are required to study a foreign language). This absence is all the more striking given the requirement that the secondary literacy strategy is implemented *across the curriculum*. The English department will be responsible for the major input but all departments must contribute to the cross-curricular priorities outlined in

the Literacy across the Curriculum file. Of course, the modern languages department will be part of this cross-curricular work but as the only department in addition to English which teaches learners *about* language as well as *through* language, it has a significant contribution to make beyond other departments. This contribution is most effectively made through the collaboration with the English department. The extension of the NLS into the secondary sector presented an ideal opportunity to provide learners with a centrally guided 'coherent language apprenticeship' (Hawkins 1999: 124) which would have required language teachers to break away from the cultural and structural confines of their subject and work collaboratively. By focusing almost exclusively on the meeting of reading and writing targets in English, the strategy takes too narrow a view of language development.

A major shortcoming in the NLS as we see it stems from the absence of an explicit theoretical framework for language development. Such frameworks are often absent from government documentation although it is sometimes possible to 'position' the text and infer which theories have been influential. The NLS for both primary and secondary sectors makes no reference to any particular theories of reading or language development. Reference in the NLS Framework for Teaching (page 4) to pupils not learning 'to distinguish between the different sounds of words simply by being exposed to books' and in the Key Stage 3 National Strategy (page 3) to 'writing helping to sustain and order thought' are unattributed. An exception to this is the reference to the links between exploratory talk and thinking from Mercer's (2000) book (Key Stage 3 National Strategy page 56).

Similarly, in the revised National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages 2000, we find no explanation for the importance given to the teaching of target language grammar even though this aspect of foreign language learning has been out of vogue for more than a decade and was minimised in earlier versions of the statutory orders. Of course, as is often the case with government reports, an unspecified theoretical base can be underpinned with

equally vague ideological supports. Teachers might well suppose, for example, that the resurgence of grammar in both English and foreign languages learning is part of the on-going rhetoric about raising standards through a return to 'basics' and 'traditional methods'. In reality, there is research evidence (see for example, Hudson 2000, Myhill 1999 and Spada 1997) which suggests that the study of and talk about the formal aspects of language can have beneficial effects on pupils' learning. In foreign languages, explicit teaching of grammar can be interpreted as an important (and welcome) shift away from the dominance of acquisition-based approaches and an acknowledgement of the contextual and cognitive differences involved between acquiring a mother tongue at home and learning a foreign language in a classroom.

Whatever the theoretical or ideological underpinnings of the NLS, the major thrust in the early years of the secondary school is on reading and writing in English and in particular on technical accuracy in writing. This is partly a response to the concern that standards of writing at the later stages of the primary school are not keeping pace with improvements in reading. It is also part of the government campaign to improve national standards of literacy. However, a more comprehensive theoretical framework would have a more complete model of language which acknowledged the contribution of *all* language study to pupils' language development and clarified the interdependent nature of first, second and foreign language learning. The example of grammar will illustrate our meaning. The NLS in primary and secondary school will provide year 7 learners with a grounding in grammatical concepts and a language for description at word, sentence and text level which teachers can draw on in foreign language lessons to facilitate talk about the new language and understanding of its grammar. In turn, the study of a foreign language will open learners' eyes to language difference at many levels (phonological, morphological, syntactic) and this is something to which English teachers can refer. This cross-language referencing can only take place, however, if teachers in the two subjects have some understanding of the approach taken by colleagues in the other language areas and have some vision of how the different aspects can come together to offer a coherent framework for learning.

At a more abstract level, the interdependence of the two curriculum subjects may be understood by reference to the development of metalinguistic awareness in the learner. Becoming literate requires of the learner that she 'conceptualise language' (Roberts 1992:19), disembed it (Donaldson 1978), detach it 'from its context of immediate experience' (Wells1981:241) and it is this ability to look at language in a decontextuliased way which prepares the ground for tackling a foreign language in 'context-reduced situations' (Roberts 1992: 20). The relationship between the two languages, however, is possibly more reciprocal and less linear than this. As Pomphrey & Moger (1997) suggest, it is the knowledge of a language other than the first which helps learners to stand back and look at language structure in an abstract way which in turn facilitates talk about language as a system. Learning a foreign language, then, contributes to learners' understanding of the way *languages* work. As one pupil in the French lesson on sport said to us: "We can say 'skating' but not 'judoing' in English. And we can say 'I like to run' or 'I like running'". This wider understanding of the way languages work is essential for learners in UK schools for whom it is impossible to predict future foreign language needs but it requires, as Hawkins (1999:140) points out, 'far more attention to cross language comparisons and more *talk about* language than has been the fashion' (our italics). Reflection on and explicit talk about language is seen, in cognitive psychology, to have the potential to enhance conceptual understanding. This explicit talk may take place between teacher and learner or between learners and is a tool for learning. Research by Swain and Lapkin (1998) within the Vygotskian paradigm suggests that collaborative dialogue about language provides the occasion for second language learning or, as Donato (1994) puts it, the construction of co-knowledge which in time, the individual learner makes his own. Such an approach might be seen as conflicting with the current National Curriculum requirement in modern foreign languages that the foreign language be used extensively by teacher and learners but it does

have the potential to 'intellectualise' foreign language study which has been for some learners in recent years, little more than the rote learning of tourist phrases.

In spite of the lack of guidance from government policy, we believe that more than at any time in the past, it is both desirable and possible for language teachers in secondary schools to collaborate in the teaching of knowledge about language. The primary literacy strategy provides a common basis on which to build and the requirement that all teachers should be teachers of literacy provides the impetus to talk to each other. Effective collaboration will require a shift in traditional subject cultures but we believe there are modest and manageable ways to work towards such a shift. Observations of each other's lessons and the exchange of schemes of work are a starting point which would lead to discussions about the role and treatment of grammar in each subject. Such joint activities are possible under the provisions for in-service training related to the implementation of the secondary literacy strategy. However, to be successful, these activities must be underpinned by the belief that collaboration is indeed worthwhile. This is where our new entrants to the profession could take the lead.

Notes:

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i. *February 1999: 'The teaching of grammar in English and MFL (Modern Foreign Languages). An event organised by QCA in London*

ii. *September 1999: 'Literacy and MFL'. A conference organised by CILT & QCA at Nottingham unversity to launch four literacy/MFL school-based projects.*

iii. *November 2000: 'Literacy and MFL'. A seminar organised by CILT & QCA in London to report back on the school-based projects.*

A written report on the projects is now available through the CILT website www.cilt.org.uk

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i. *For details of English/MFL student teacher collaboration at the University of North London, see the articles by Pomphrey (1997) and Pomphrey & Moger (1999).*

ii. For details on secondary school English/MFL collaboration, see the web-based report from CILT referred to above.

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Appendix: Readings from government documentation and professional journals given to students at the beginning of Stage 1 of the project

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