

RIGOUR IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

From "Languages in Scotland - What's the Problem?", The Royal Society of Edinburgh, 2006.

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The focus of the conference papers is very much on public policy, and on adults' experiences in using a foreign language; there is almost nothing on what a Modern Languages curriculum should contain, and why learners might be expected to find languages intrinsically interesting. If they don't find them intrinsically interesting, then the falling uptake is perhaps not surprising. I should like to comment on this from my perspective as an independent teacher of adult language-learners.

Most of my pupils say that what was missing from their school syllabus was rigour and hard facts. This lack shows up in Richard Johnstone's somewhat surprising list of things that we don't do in the current "drip-feed" model: we don't help learners to develop knowledge about language (which he says is fundamental to learning any foreign language); and if they do acquire knowledge about the structure of the language we don't encourage them to apply it, but instead assume that they will "somehow spontaneously internalise" it. We should be concerned about this lack of requirement for explicit knowledge. No-one, for example, would say that we could teach driving without explaining the controls of the car or giving instruction on the Highway Code - it would be a recipe for disaster.

In the less physical world of language learning, this removal of any serious language-manipulating content disadvantages the students in two ways. The first is that it demotivates pupils by giving them nothing to grapple with. There is no set body of knowledge to master, no specified route through the material, no way of knowing whether you're succeeding or not: it all turns into a lottery. The second effect is that we leave pupils with no insight into how language works, and no ability to continue learning by themselves. For example, I sometimes ask my prospective pupils, Why does "Mary loves John" mean something different from "John loves Mary"? What is it that creates the difference of meaning? Those who say that the difference is created by word-order understand something about how language works, and are more likely to succeed than those who say (for example) that it all depends on the emphasis. This is the sort of knowledge we are losing when we throw out rigorous learning. Language is not just an accumulation of things you can say: if it were, it would be impossible to learn, since we can't predict what we're going to want to say. Language is also, and primarily, a system that creates meaning by combining comparatively few phonetic, syntactic and lexical items, and what we should be teaching is the ability to manipulate these items to create any meaning the pupil might wish to convey. There is no reason why we shouldn't use the pupils' first language to demonstrate that language works like this, no reason not to use an interlanguage to describe how the foreign language does it ("I brush to-myself the hairs"), and no reason why we shouldn't call all this "grammar". At the end of the day it is this body of "knowledge about language", and the application of it, that creates proficient users of a foreign language. Moreover, it's by showing them how to learn and apply this body of knowledge that we enable pupils to continue learning languages on their own account, and it's that opportunity that we're denying them if we don't teach these techniques.

One of the problems with rigorous material may be that it polarises students, separating rather clearly those who can do the stuff from those who can't, and this may make it unwelcome to learners as well as to educators. The desire to avoid this problem has produced a disconcertingly unhelpful body of adult language-learning materials - glorified phrase-books and conversational CDs - that imply that the learner can just listen and absorb. It's as if the producers of these materials are afraid of frightening their customers with any real challenges. The ducking of challenges also perhaps accounts for the minimal demands and low standards found in adult leisure classes.

One of my students, a young plumber, had a terrible shock when he found that French verbs not only take pronouns in front but also change at the end. He exclaimed "What a sh*te language!", and gave up. But this was surely the beginning of wisdom - he'd discovered that different languages work in different ways. If he'd known that from schooldays, he might have got on better as an adult.