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Breaking down the barriers

Improving accessibility to improve language learning

Language learning can open up a world of possibilities for students, not just during their school journey, but in their future lives too – so how can educators improve accessibility to ensure every child experiences languages as a fully inclusive subject?

In this collaborative article, past and present teachers, experts and students share their views.

Tackling misconceptions

"There are misconceptions around language learning."

– Raul Ramirez, former Language Lead

Learning a language can be challenging whatever a student's ability, but there are many misconceptions around language learning that schools can work to tackle, and thus help make the subject more appealing to a broader range of students.

One of the top misconceptions? That languages are "too hard" – a statement that almost 3 in 5 students agreed with when recently surveyed by Pearson.1 Of course we cannot downplay the challenges of learning a new language from scratch. Instead, what we can do is explore why our students are feeling this about MFL compared with other subjects, and why they might therefore not feel confident enough to study languages at GCSE.

Tackling a lack of confidence

"Students need to notice and feel their progress."

– Esmerelda Salgado, Advanced Skills Teacher

The big question is "What motivates students?" Over the years, especially as a former department head for MFL, I have turned that question round and asked many students: "What is it about languages that may put you off?" Especially boys. I always get the same answer: "After years studying a language, I cannot speak it, or I feel I don't make progress."

The fact is, we end up loving the things we are good at, so we need to show students their success. In doing this we can increase their confidence to speak and enable them to notice and feel that progress.

Great teaching, where activities are not too easy, neither too difficult, but just right,

will spontaneously help our students make progress. I call this The Goldilocks Effect. The principles I work from also build on the importance of giving students sufficient time to practise retrieval, creating space for them to ask questions and making it easy to get the help they desire.

My top tips for better inclusivity and engagement:

- Create memorable, sticky lessons, with high expectations and lots of retrieval practice.

- Continue to reward accurate, correct answers – and adapt questions for different students and levels.

- Ask students: "What have you understood?" versus "Have you understood?" This means asking learners to tell you exactly what they got from your lesson and reteach, if necessary, any gaps in subsequent lessons.

- Involve everyone in activities with tools like mini whiteboards, or quizzes using easy-access digital resources.

Tackling 'it's not for me'

"We can help bridge the 'cultural capital' chasm with a click of the mouse."

– Rebecca Waker, Subject Advisor for Pearson

As someone who worked as a teacher in MFL for almost 10 years, the accessibility issue is a major one for me – but I'm glad to have seen that language learning has become more accessible than ever before. Thankfully, classroom work needs no longer rely on students (or teachers) taking holidays, bringing back anecdotes and resources, and speaking foreign languages elsewhere. Today, thanks to the internet, we can help bridge the 'cultural capital' chasm with a click of the mouse.

Bringing those real-world elements into the classroom gives every student a chance to see what's out there, to understand different cultures and communities, and to foster their respect and curiosity in MFL.

Parental and community support make for a very stable, positive foundation too. In fact, any adult – whether they be family, friends, acquaintances or influencers – can be a great role model for all types of young people, whenever they're willing to share their positive experiences of languages, or even to give learning a language a go themselves. Making mistakes in their own language learning is important for adult learners to demonstrate: nobody becomes proficient in a language without using the wrong words, phrasing or pronunciation. That kind of access and visibility can be everything.

"We recently doubled the number of students choosing MFL."

– Raul Ramirez, Former Language Lead

We knew we needed to improve the subject's exposure to improve take up, plus maximise any opportunity where students were in contact with languages, and promote language learning in more ways than one.

When all students see that studying a language can have a positive impact on their lives beyond the school gates, that of course boosts their engagement – whether that's through a school trip overseas, a new partnership with a university, opportunities with businesses in your local community (you might try asking a local international restaurant for a lunch deal where you can bring students, for example), or sharing exciting information and opportunities in assemblies with guest speakers and other topics that make languages real for every student.

Utilising parents' evenings or 'Options Evenings' (if your school is lucky enough to have time for these) is also invaluable. This is a great opportunity to explain to parents, ideally in front of their children, how relevant language learning is.

"Having content that is relevant for students, for their age, for their environment, for where they live, and the content being really tailored for them to fit with the global world that we live in, because we have the chance to be in a world where we can access everything... and it does help with the motivation for students."

– Alicia Blanvillain, Head of French.

Tackling anxiety around assessments

"Rooted in learned language knowledge, our assessments are transparent and accessible, allowing all students to showcase their language skills."

– Katy Lewis, Head of Languages, Pearson

We spoke to 200 Pearson Edexcel and AQA students to determine exactly what they need to have an accessible and successful exam experience, they told us:

- 94% of learners would prefer to know their speaking theme two weeks in advance of the exam, instead of finding out on the day

- 87% prefer to listen to the recording in the listening exam three times, instead of twice

- 87% of students prefer to have the opportunity to practice reading the sentences of the Read Aloud before the test

We found that the speaking exam is the language exam most students are nervous about so we needed to address this. Students can now choose their thematic context two weeks in advance, not on the day, allowing students to prepare and practice, giving them an element of control.

For the read aloud exam, prep time is now given in a private examination space, giving students the opportunity to practice tricky words, repeat words and phrases and hear the words on the page.

In the listening exam, we now play the recordings three times, allowing students to listen on the first recording, answer the question on the second and check their answer on the third.

For the writing exam, we now offer colour pictures for the descriptions which was requested by students during our research, as they are clearer and offer students more to write about.

We have worked hard to ensure our assessments are compassionate and consistent, assessments that allow all students to showcase their language skills with no guesswork or surprises. By doing so we can make language exams less intimidating and by that, increase their confidence.