Target Language, Collaborative Learning and Autonomy

Ernesto Macaro

Target Language,
Collaborative Learning
and Autonomy

MODERN LANGUAGES IN PRACTICE 5
Series Editor: Michael Grenfell

Target Language, Collaborative Learning and Autonomy

Ernesto Macaro

For Jules

Contents

Acknowledgements

Many colleagues and friends have helped with the development of this book. I am especially grateful to Ros Stacey for the insight and the tact that she brought to the collection of data for the Tarclindy project. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Irene Beatty, Julie Macaro and Kim Brown for their various contributions to the project.

I am indebted to Cynthia Martin, Wasyl Cajkler, Brian Richards and Janet Mellor for their comments and criticisms on the manuscript. Without their patience and, dare I say, perseverance, I would not have had the confidence to present it for publication. In this respect I am also indebted to Michael Grenfell, the series editor.

I was enabled to carry out the research and to write this book by the University of Reading Research Endowment Fund and I am grateful to the university for its generous award.

I would also like to thank Anne and Yves Feunteun, Alain Mathiot, Franco Greco, Edvige Costanzo and Gary Chambers for providing me with both written and oral information from the mainland about national curricula and teaching practices.

I owe a special debt to my friend and former colleague, Chris Leach, with whom I have had many illuminating conversations on language teaching and learning.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank all the teachers and pupils who welcomed us into their classrooms and who gave up their time to fill in questionnaires and take part in interviews.

Although so many have contributed to this book, the responsibility for any of its failures is entirely my own.

Reading, UK
Spring 1996

Glossary

A level: External Examination generally taken by 18 year olds.

ALL: Association for Language Learning (in the UK).

AOE: Areas of Experience (in the NC, see POS).

AT: Attainment Target (in the NC) describes levels that pupils should reach.

Carousel: Where a class is divided into a number of groups (usually three or four) and these are offered a circus of activities in the same lesson.

CILT: Centre for Language Teaching and Research. A government funded organisation which supports language teachers and learners.

Comprehensive: A school which does not select pupils at entry according to ability.

DES: Department for Education and Science (now DfE).

DfE: Department for Education.

GCSE: General Certificate of Secondary Education. External examination (national) which 16-year-old pupils first took in 1988.

GOML: Graded Objectives in Modern Languages. A school or regional system of continuous assessment.

Grammar School: A school which selects pupils at entry according to ability.

HMI: Her Majesty's Inspectors.

HOD: Head of Department (or subject), responsible for all aspects of organisation of the subject.

INSET: In-service training.

KS3: Key Stage 3. Years 7, 8, 9. The first three years of secondary education.

KS4: Key Stage 4. Years 10 and 11. The final two years of compulsory education.

LEA: Local Education Authority.

Middle Schools: Some pupils transfer from middle school to secondary schools at end of year 7, year 8 or even year 9.

Mixed ability: Where a class is not selected according to the perceived ability of the pupils in that subject.

NC: National Curriculum.

NCC: National Curriculum Council set up to introduce NC.

O level: External examination replaced by GCSE. In MFL had strong grammar-translation basis.

OFSTED: Office for Standards in Education.

OHT: Overhead Transparency used on overhead projector.

POS: Programmes of Study (in the NC) describe what pupils should study, including AOE.

PSE: Personal and Social Education (Not an NC subject).

SAT: Standard Attainment Tasks (in the NC). Tests set to examine AT levels at end of KS3. Not in MFL.

SCAA: Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority.

Top set: Where a year group is divided up according to ability in a particular subject.

Year 7: Pupils aged 11 approximately. Most schools transfer from primary at this stage.

Year 8: Pupils aged 12 approximately.

Year 9: Pupils aged 13 approximately.

Year 10: Pupils aged 14 approximately.

Year 11: Pupils aged 15 approximately.

Year 12: Pupils aged 16 approximately.

Introduction

Whilst there is a wealth of literature on second language acquisition (SLA) and second language learning this has tended to concentrate on:

(1) The learning of English as a foreign language.
(2) The learning of English as a second language for the purposes of communicating in an English-speaking community.
(3) Adults learning a foreign language (FL), or second language.
(4) Research in classrooms where the learning of English and, to a lesser extent other languages, is perceived by the learners as an essential part of their education.

This literature has emanated, for the most part, from the United States, Canada, Australia and Scandinavia. As a result, research into language learning may seem to have little relevance to some categories of FL teachers in the 11–16 secondary context. One aim of this book, therefore, is to help fill a gap in the literature by attempting to redress this imbalance in favour of EFL whilst at the same time not marginalising or denying the value of previous research and the role it can play in improving FL learning. Thus, as the reader would expect, the book combines an analysis of general L2 learning theory with FL practice. However, it sets out to do this within a recognisable educational framework. That is, one where political decisions and socio-cultural influences are recognised as having a real impact on teaching and learning. The book takes one nation's educational context (England/Wales) as a framework within which to evaluate studies in language acquisition and language learning. It endeavours to operate, therefore, as a case study for other FL learning contexts. In order to break down some of these situational barriers, the book often references across the learning contexts.

The research, the teacher training and the in-service training I have been involved in over the past three years clearly demonstrates that the implications of the National Curriculum for MFL in England and Wales are only now being understood. Assessment and the rediscovery of creative writing are not featuring as prominently as was at first thought. Teacher and pupil use of the target language *is*. Teachers have

become increasingly aware that the relationship between the language that learners are exposed to and the development of their language proficiency is crucial as a background to any debate about approaches and methodology. However, the relationship between L2 input and L2 acquisition is too complex and unresolved to be examined only at the level of *quality* (e.g. input modification) as has generally been the case in the literature. Teachers' beliefs and actions regarding their *quantity* and distribution of target language need to be examined in the context of the 'modernist' approaches associated with communicative language teaching. Analysing the issue of quality and quantity of L2 input is a first step therefore in bringing together the fields of SLA and FL pedagogy. It is also one of the key elements which has to be examined within the socio-educational context in which it operates. In addition, teacher use of the target language cannot be divorced from current shifts towards less teacher-centred approaches. What are the implications for use of the L2 for teachers wishing to minimise the didactic nature of their role in the classroom? Can collaborative learning be encouraged in an atmosphere which excludes the mother tongue? Is foreign language provision's main objective to teach a language or does it also aim to prepare young people for future language learning?

The above are pedagogical concerns which, in recent years, have often been expressed to me by colleagues in modern languages departments. It has become evident that what is needed is a thorough reappraisal of L2 use within a syllabus design which promotes collaboration between learners, encourages independent learning tasks and leads to learner autonomy. The discussions with colleagues contributed greatly to the decision to carry out a research project at the University of Reading between 1993 and 1995. This book is therefore able to base itself on an empirical study of language teaching and learning in English schools as well as the author's own experience as a teacher and observer. It compares this data to other studies attempting to answer the same research questions in similar or different learning contexts. It relates principles resulting from the investigation to potential good practice in the classroom and good practice in the realm of managing change. It suggests avenues for future research and indicates a need for materials in a number of areas. At the end of Chapters 3 to 6 there are practical suggestions for teacher development. These can be used in pre-service, in-service and departmental training sessions.

The Tarclindy[1] Project

The research project's principal aims were to investigate four aspects, and their inter-relationship, of the National Curriculum (England and Wales) for Modern Foreign Languages. These were

(1) Use of the target language by teachers in order to carry out the business of lesson management and content delivery.
(2) Use of the target language by pupils as evidence of ongoing language acquisition.
(3) Collaborative learning through pair work and group work.
(4) Independent learning.

The project investigated the aspects via four sources:

(a) teacher attitudes and reactions;
(b) observation of classroom practice;
(c) learner attitudes;
(d) in-service training (INSET) providers: practice and beliefs.

Peripheral to this investigation, some small-scale action research cycles based on teaching techniques were planned and trialled. These are described briefly in Chapter 5.

The project began in 1992 with a pilot of the research instruments related to teachers. These were trialled with colleagues in England and, in order to broaden slightly the conceptual context of the study and to make comparisons, with teachers of English in Italy (Macaro, 1995). The project proper then started in 1993 and was funded by the University of Reading's Research Endowment Fund. This enabled a second researcher to devote time to the project. The project was completed in June 1995.[2] A detailed description of the project including research instruments[3] is given in the Appendix. As constant reference is made throughout the book to this project, readers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with this section before proceeding.

The Tarclindy project is a substantial study of target language use and effect involving high levels of triangulation. Attitudinal data, descriptions of beliefs and observation of practice provide a solid context in which to conduct the debate. What is of course missing from the project is any psychometrically acceptable measures of language proficiency related to L1/L2 distribution in the classroom. This would help to put some of the final pieces of the jigsaw in place. If this were based solely on teacher styles, however, the number of variables connected with any such test would be enough to deter any but the most determined and highly resourced investigator. Anything more

rigorously experimental would be difficult to justify on ethical grounds. How many parents would agree to let their children be taught by a quantitatively different method to the rest of the children in the school? Yet a measurable causal link between quantity of teacher input and, say, vocabulary acquisition, would be welcome. On the other hand, as Paulston (1990: 191) points out, we need qualitative *and* quantitative approaches to understanding language acquisition and that any reliance on quantification and psychometrics, however rigorous, is not sufficient. The research strategy of the Tarclindy project concentrates on what practitioners say they believe and do and what observers say the practitioners do. Given the constraints, variables and difficulties attached to pre-test and post-test experiments on so fundamental a dependent variable as L1 and L2 use, it may be that this attitude-observation approach will provide the only reliable or achievable indicator for the optimal use of the target language for some time to come.

Structure of the Book

The results of the Tarclindy project are disseminated throughout the book according to the way that they inform relevant issues as they arise in specific chapters. The first two chapters are context-setting in that they provide a background, both national and international, to the main themes investigated in Chapters 3 to 6. Chapter 7, before offering some conclusions to the debate, reminds us that teachers are individuals with personal agendas and values. The following is a more detailed description of the chapters of the book.

Chapter 1 examines the educational framework within which language teachers in England and Wales have been operating since 1992 and compares this with frameworks and guidelines in other European countries. It notes that this framework is concerned much more with teaching and learning than with syllabus content. It asks what routes of inquiry and debate might have led to the design of this framework, shows how it was presented through official documentation and outlines the status and functions of agencies which were and are in place to ensure its implementation. It outlines the most salient issues related to teaching, learning and testing as contained in the official documents and examines the nature of INSET provision in its attempts to address those issues. It examines the difference between a general approach to language pedagogy and a prescriptive methodology. The chapter concludes with speculation as to the necessity for such a framework and the assumption of deficiences in classroom practice

which the framework would appear to be making.

Chapter 2 explores the international phenomenon known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It identifies a number of interpretations which teachers have made of this approach. It suggests that a communicative approach implies an eclectic taxonomy of learner activities in the classroom as well as different principles guiding the sequencing of those activities. This diversity necessitates a sophisticated level of teacher reflectiveness and integrity if s/he is to operate effectively in the enormous number of different national and international contexts in which CLT is being adopted. It asks whether teachers in the English FL context in 1992 were operating at that level of sophistication. Were they selecting appropriately for language learning, or were they selecting merely for the purposes of motivating reluctant learners? A brief examination of theories of motivation is undertaken and related to the secondary FL context. The chapter concludes with a suggestion that a number of concerns related to the eclecticism of CLT may have been justified.

Chapter 3 is in two parts. Part 1 describes the behaviours and language prevalent in the FL classroom. It explores the artificiality of the classroom, the artificiality of the teacher as the main input source, and the complexity of classroom discourse. Can teachers in the secondary FL context maintain a 'total immersion' atmosphere by pretending to be someone they are not? Is this pretence undermined by other, sometimes conflicting, inputs? By analysing a number of categories within teacher input itself, the chapter delves deeper into the complexities of classroom discourse: *message and medium oriented* input; *classroom language* and *content language*. Against this background, the argument of L1 exclusion is brought into focus. Part 2 explores the teacher's use of the target language. A number of studies are examined which demonstrate that recourse to L1 by teachers is an international phenomenon. In what aspects of teaching does recourse to L1 most occur? Are the variables to do with the experience of the teacher or the age, ability and socio-cultural background of the class of learners? Is another variable the teacher's ability to modify his/her L2 input? If so, can this technique be taught to teachers and can we be sure, in any case, that *comprehensibility* is the same thing as *comprehensible input*?

Chapter 4 investigates the person on the receiving end – the learner. What can SLA research tell us about how secondary FL learners actually learn? To what extent is L2 learning like L1 learning? Can the degree of 'likeness' inform the L1/L2 distribution debate? Implications are drawn from this discussion about overarching principles of language teaching and learning. These are compared to the views

expressed by young learners in the Tarclindy project. Do they get frustrated and confused when faced with teacher L2 input? What *strategies* do they use to try to understand? To what extent should they be allowed to negotiate meaning? If negotiated meaning implies early language production, should learners be forced to speak in L2 from the start? What evidence do we have that *interaction*, including learner-initiated interaction, is a necessary added ingredient for language *acquisition* and development? If learners use strategies to try to understand the teacher, it would suggest that they are actively involved in the learning process. Should other types of strategies be encouraged and should they be explicitly taught? What are the implications of this for teacher L2 use? The same questions are applied to the notions of predisposition to language learning and to informing learners about pedagogy. The chapter concludes with guidelines for optimal teacher use of L2.

Chapter 5 attempts an audit of the different ways learners in the secondary FL context collaborate. The chapter examines to what extent the beneficial outcomes of pair work and group work outweigh the possible detrimental effect of not receiving teacher input and teacher feedback. The chapter goes on to examine the strategies which learners can deploy in order to achieve or enhance interaction and communication. Do these strategies actually help the internalisation of a language system? What kind of interaction amongst learners is both achievable and at the same time beneficial? The chapter examines the Tarclindy data in order to ascertain to what extent teachers feel they can give learners in collaborative situations freedom to manoeuvre, whether there is a conceptual difference between pairwork and groupwork, what factors render this type of collaboration most successful and whether L1 or L2 should be used to prompt interaction among learners. Finally, the chapter reports briefly on a collaborative learning 'cycle' which formed part of the Tarclindy project.

Chapter 6 examines the various influences and different labels which have been attached to the notion of learner *autonomy*. It argues that we should be placing at the forefront a functional definition of autonomy which promotes emancipation from the classroom. The Tarclindy project data is examined to illuminate what are teachers' perceptions of autonomy, to what extent they are involved in promoting it and how much INSET they have received in this, as yet, underdeveloped aspect of language teaching. Can independent learning situations create the necessary conditions wherein individual differences are catered for? Can independent learning and autonomy be linked to what we know about age-related development? An age-

related graduation towards learner autonomy is proposed as a model. Using a concrete example of a planned *unit of work*, the 'Practical ideas to try out' section asks to what extent can this functional autonomy be promoted in the learner by changing our teaching approaches?

Chapter 7 describes the teachers from the Tarclindy project as case studies. It suggests that examples of practice, to have credibility, should contain more than brief decontextualised descriptions of class activities. The book concludes by asking whether a national methodology, such as the one proposed by the National Curriculum for England and Wales, was desirable either from the point of view of the teaching profession or from that of the language learner. It suggests that, in terms of managing pedagogical change, valuable lessons can be learned from the case study contained in the book.

A note on terminology

To reduce some of the 'fuzziness around the edges' (Phillipson *et al.*, 1991: 43) of L2 research I propose the following definitions of the various types of L2 learning situations:

EFL1 – where all the learners in the classroom do not share a common L1 (and do not live permanently in the target country).
ESL1 – where learners do not share a common L1 (but live in the target country).
ESL2 – where learners do share a common L1 (but live in the target country).
EFL2 – where communities of learners do share a common L1 (but where English (L2) has a particularly special status – for example, India, Denmark).
FL – where learners share a common L1 (and do not live in the target country – for example Italians learning English, English learning French).

The above categories are neither exhaustive nor watertight. They would, however, seem to draw reasonable boundaries for the purposes of making major distinctions between learners. When no distinction is being made I will use the term Second Language Learning/Learner (or L2 learning).

A note on the style of the book

When I first started writing this book I set myself a number of objectives in terms of communicating with the reader – for example to

avoid obscure terms, and to explain all technical terms. The book, after all, is not intended solely for 'experts in the field'. Far from it. I am now aware that this has not always been possible because of lack of space, for which I apologise. As a recompense I have provided a Glossary of British educational jargon and acronyms. I have also given in italics those terms which are used commonly in L2 literature in the hope that a baffled reader will at least be able to follow them up, without difficulty, elsewhere.

I have quoted teachers and pupils at length throughout the book. Given their energy and commitment to providing the data for the Tarclindy project I find this much more justifiable than my own summary of their views, anxieties and aspirations. I believe it also makes for a much more accessible and ultimately much more human piece of writing.

Where there is an implicit or explicit criticism of classroom practice this is made in the full knowledge that it is also a criticism of myself as a former and, occasionally, current practitioner. It is certainly done with precisely the humility often missing from 'official pronounce-ments' about good practice.

I have endeavoured to avoid the use of passives. An exception to this is in the description of the Tarclindy project in the Appendix and where in the main body of the book I felt it might endanger the anonymity of teachers or schools. Apart from in these instances, I believe a reader is entitled to know who the 'agent' is who is making a claim or a statement. Where the use of 'I' would have become excessive, I have used 'we' suggesting an exploratory journey together. I hope the reader will, as I have done, find the journey illuminating and worthwhile.

Notes

1. Tarclindy: affectionate abbreviation of target language, collaborative learning and independent learning.
2. There are two aspects of the project which are continuing: the action research cycles (described in Chapter 5); the attempt at a more sophisti-cated model of FL lesson description enabling a more accurate study of recourse to L1.
3. The teacher questionnaire is reproduced in Chapter 7 in the course of the description of three teachers' practice and beliefs.

1 A National Curriculum or a Framework for Methodology?

If a group of Modern Languages educators, in any country, were to sit down now and start to plan a national syllabus in their subject for pupils during the years of compulsory education, where would they begin? Would they begin by asking themselves 'Should our youngsters learn a second language'? Or would they assume that the importance of learning a language other than one's own was self-evident and concentrate on 'for what purposes learn a second language'? Would they stop to question the concept of 'one's own language' first, ensuring that for their country the concept did not hold a number of unjustifiable pre-suppositions? Would they then proceed by matching the purposes they had come up with against a list of potential languages to be taught? Having selected a number of languages, they might then attempt to define the levels of competence one might reasonably expect from learners of differing abilities or success rates. Would they then start the slow, laborious process of what that syllabus might contain: words, expressions, idioms, structures, topics, being careful that the content matched both the purposes and the levels of compe-tence?

Or would they come to the conclusion that this was far too complex and take a completely different tack? Would they disregard the content and start with what research says about how learners learn a second language? Here they might meet a bit of an obstacle. Not many linguists would want to fly in an aeroplane designed around the absolute certainties found in second language acquisition literature! But being practical people, the group would probably 'get down to it' and select bits and pieces from that literature which seemed reasonably OK. These bits might or might not conflict with one another. However, having taken this course of action, there would be nothing left but to soldier on. At this point, having made a stab at how learners learn, would they then turn their attention to how they should be taught?

Regardless of which of the two directions the group had embarked on, someone in the group might just pull them up short and start asking questions like: What sort of people are we? What political or ideological impetus might be guiding our decisions? Are we motivated by the interests of the nation? Are those synonymous with the interests of all the youngsters? What professional background might affect the judgements we are making and is that background the same for all of us? Is there a general consensus amongst practitioners about the direction we're taking? Are we sufficiently active if not expert in the field to be designing this syllabus? These questions might lead the group of educators to halt what they were doing and attempt first to research what the national consensus actually was on a potential national syllabus.

One of the conclusions of that investigation might be that there is a need to bring the fields of language acquisition, language pedagogy and language planning much closer together. Another conclusion might be that we must consider the specific nature of each language context and make the value judgements of the language planners explicit (Phillipson *et al.*, 1991: 45). This view, to some extent, echoes Paulston (1990: 187) who points out that national language policies are not based on research but primarily on political and economic grounds and that unless we account for the factors that lead to particular forms of language education we will not understand the consequences of that education.

In this chapter we shall be examining one nation's programme. We will examine the planning and implementation of the National Curriculum (NC) for Modern Languages in England and Wales.[1] We shall discuss to what extent this is a curriculum about *how* learners should learn rather than *what* they should learn and to what extent it is a programme *about the way* teachers should teach rather than *what* they should teach. This is not to pre-suppose that the *what* is more important than the *how*. Indeed it may well be that a curriculum, acting as a scaffolding structure for a national methodology or approach, was the direction that the planners needed to take. We will also examine how national agencies have combined in England to plan, implement and help deliver the NC. We will compare this structure with curriculum design and implementation in other countries. The questions raised will hopefully be of use to language curriculum planners elsewhere. For readers unfamiliar with education in England and as a reminder to those who are, we will start by examining which are the English agencies officially concerned with modern languages education and what is their function in relation to the NC.

The Status and Functions of National Agencies

In England, the Department for Education (DfE) replaced the Department of Education and Science (DES) in 1992. These departments are the ministerial institutions charged with carrying out official government policy on education. For the National Curriculum (all subjects), however, the National Curriculum Council (NCC) was set up by the then DES in order to oversee the design and contribute to the implementation of the NC of which Modern Languages officially came on stream in 1992. The first cohort of 11-year-olds started to learn a foreign language within the framework of the NC that year. Readers will thus be able to deduce that as I write (1995) not all pupils in compulsory education are learning within that framework. This is not an inconsiderable difficulty in discussions about content, methodology and policy both here and in ML departments in schools. At its inception it was envisaged that the NC would safeguard against overspecialised or idiosyncratic teaching and reduce the incidence of incompetent teaching (NCC, 1989). However (apart from the case of MFL, as I shall argue), the NC has not been particularly prescriptive about teaching methods.

The Secondary Education Assessment Council (SEAC) merged with the NCC in October 1993 to become the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA). The chairman and the authority members are appointed by the Secretary of State for Education. Thus the Authority is now not only in charge of the curriculum but it is also the agency in charge of all assessment and examinations. That is not to say that it sets the examinations or tests but that it accredits all submissions from a number of independent examining boards. Exams are set externally and linked directly to the NC's attainment criteria. We examine proposals for these below.

The Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) is a government appointed agency in the sense that it is financed by central government and private teams of inspectors apply to be trained and assessed by OFSTED. Registered inspectors can subsequently tender to carry out inspections in schools. Reports resulting from these inspections are in the public domain. Indeed, they can be accessed on the Internet. These reports may well be an important factor in guiding parents' choice of school for their children. OFSTED inspectors have a well documented framework of inspection criteria. However, the guidance for subjects in general states:

> Teachers' work in the classroom will take many different forms, and it is important that judgements about effectiveness of teaching are

based on its contribution to outcomes and not on inspectors' preferences for particular methods. (OFSTED *Handbook*, August 1993, part 4: 50)

The supplementary guidelines regarding Modern Foreign Languages, on the other hand, are much more prescriptive. Under the heading 'Quality of Teaching' we read:

Teachers should insist on the use of the target language for all aspects of a lesson. (OFSTED *Handbook*, section 37)

One of OFSTED's briefs is to ensure that the National Curriculum is being delivered. Thus, if that curriculum specifies the application of a particular methodology, the inspectors will be required to comment on whether that methodology is being applied. It is therefore not uncommon in inspection reports to attribute poor learner performance directly to a teaching approach with statements such as: 'the ML department has a policy on the use of the target language in teaching all aspects of the lesson. This is not consistently applied' (OFSTED, 1995).[2]

Local Education Authorities, having been by and large stripped of their former mandate as providers of education have, as we shall see, had an advisory/assisting role in the implementation of the NC rather that an influential one in the design of it. Responsibility for implementation of the NC rests squarely with the governors and teachers of the school.

The proposals for the MFL National Curriculum underwent a consultation exercise, carried out by the NFER/NCC[3] with teachers and other interested bodies. This resulted in the Consultation Report (NCC, May 1991). Examination of that document (in this and subsequent chapters) suggests that the validity of both the process and analysis of that consultation is questionable.

Judgements and Values in the National Curriculum

Statements about purposes

Some of the judgements and values inherent in the NC can be traced in the statements about what the purposes of learning a foreign language are. In order to understand fully the pedagogical implications of these here and in subsequent chapters, I list them fully:

- to develop the ability to use the language effectively for the purposes of practical communication;

- to form a sound base of the skills, language and attitudes required for further study, work and leisure;
- to offer insights into the culture and civilisation of the countries where the language is spoken;
- to develop an awareness of the nature of language and language learning;
- to provide enjoyment and intellectual stimulation;
- to encourage positive attitudes to foreign language learning and to speakers of foreign languages and a sympathetic approach to other cultures and civilisations;
- to promote learning of skills of more general application (e.g. analysis, memorising, drawing of inferences);
- to develop pupils' understanding of themselves and their own culture: (DES 1990a: 4; DES, 1990b: 3)

The fact that comments from the Secretary of State together with comments from '650 organisations and individuals' produced no changes whatsoever in the 'Purposes' from the Initial Advice (DES, 1990a) to the 'Proposals' (DES 1990b), might suggest an unprecedented and perhaps complacent consensus in a country not renowned for its language learning prowess. However, if we take the purposes individually it is actually very difficult to disagree with any of them. They are all very laudable aims. The problem arises when we take them as a whole or in juxtaposition to one another, when in fact we attempt to prioritise. For example, should we give more curriculum time to skills needed for 'further study work and leisure' or to 'encouraging positive attitudes' to foreigners. The two are of course not mutually exclusive, but the first emphasises instrumental goals and personal gain whilst the second emphasises international understanding and a predisposition to language learning. Should we concentrate on 'effective but practical communication' or on 'the nature of language' and other 'skills of more general application'? Again, these are not mutually exclusive but problematic if one is trying to establish whereabouts in the continuum between formal analysis of the language and functional use one wants to direct one's teaching.

Statements about pedagogy and good practice

The proposals state that within departments there should be consistency of teaching approaches (DES, 1990b: 58). It points out that, whilst we should not be seeking uniformity, learners in a school become confused when confronted with wide differences of approach.

It does not make clear whether there should be consistency *between* departments of schools with, for example, varying socio-economic intakes. It then lists 14 characteristics of good practice. As Westgate (1991) also points out, a number of things are unclear about these characteristics: who says they are good practice?; do they have a theoretical base?; do any conflict with one another?; what is their relative importance to one another?; as a set do they add up to a recognisable method or approach? If so how many can you take away before the whole edifice comes tumbling down?

There is not space here to examine all these characteristics[4] so we will confine ourselves to the three most relevant to this book. The first is:

- Characteristic 10.7: the target language is the normal means of communication.

In terms of official documentation it is illuminating to trace back the origins for the wording of this characteristic. In a draft statement of policy the DES (1986) advocated that:

> from the outset, the foreign language rather than English should be the medium in which the classwork is conducted and managed.

It is interesting that this statement appears in a document which also suggests that part of England's poor showing in foreign language learning may be attributable to the way that foreign languages have traditionally been taught. What is confusing is that the document is published in precisely the year when the first cohort of students are embarking on a new course leading to a new examination at 16: the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), later to be much attacked for its extensive use of L1 for assessing comprehension (see below). It would be important to clear up the confusion not because of the machinations of one country's bureaucrats and educators but because of what it implies about language pedagogy's historical development. It would be helpful to know whether 'traditional' refers to vestiges of a grammar-translation method or whether it is to do with teachers using too much L1 in an eclectic communicative approach. The question of target language use is raised again in DES (1987):

> In the classroom the foreign language should be the natural medium for teaching and learning

No explanation is given as to why the qualification 'natural' has been added. The paragraph in which it occurs clearly advocates the benefits of 'maximum exposure to L2 within the pupils' grasp'. Does the

addition thus derive from 'natural' language acquisition hypotheses (see Chapter 2)? Is it about L2 learning being like L1 learning (see Chapter 4)? Is it to do with teachers and learners feeling comfortable using L2? Whatever the reason, it is noticeable that it is deleted the following year in *A Statement of Policy* and we return to:

> From the outset, the foreign language rather than English should be the medium in which classwork is conducted and managed. DES (1988: 12)

From now on the documentation appears to take much more confident plunges into second language acquisition literature:

> In communicating people interact with each other, negotiating meanings together thus affecting the way they each speak think and act. Communicating in a foreign language must thus involve both teachers and pupils using the target language as the normal means of communication. DES (1990b: 6)

The circularity of the above logic has already been signalled (Macaro, 1995). We can only conclude that what was meant here is that *learning* to communicate in L2 can *only* be achieved if teachers and learners practise doing so all the time. This interpretation is supported by the statement later in the document:

> The natural use of the target language for virtually all communication is a sure sign of a good modern languages course DES (1996b: 58)

We thus have the strongest expression of the L2 use issue through the reappearance of the word 'natural' and the additional 'virtually all'. I hope that the reader is sufficiently convinced of the power of the framework for implementation of the NC as described above, not to think that I am just playing around with words here. These are vital concepts both at a theoretical level and at a practical level and form much of the basis of the discussion in Chapters 3 and 4. Interestingly, the 'Advice' and the 'Recommendations' which followed from the 'Consultation' make only one reference to use of the target language, promising, instead, further clarification in the 'Non-statutory Guidance' (NSG) described below. Some may speculate as to precisely what status this vital methodological aspect has at this stage of the setting up of the framework. Has the 'virtually all' directive become non-statutory, in other words at the discretion of the individual teacher? Far from it. The reasons for this assertion are threefold. Firstly, 50% of the programmes of study, that part referring to listening and reading

comprehension, are to be demonstrated via the use of L2. Since the other 50% is speaking and writing, which are obviously to be carried out in L2, we are still left with virtually all, L1 being designated only for the purposes of interpreting for others. Secondly, the Programmes of Study (POS) are mostly about the pupils' target language opportunities, not about words and phrases (see below). Thirdly, the quality of pupils' learning is to be judged, amongst other things, by the *quantity* of teacher use of L2:

the increased use of the target language by the teachers led to improved standards. (OFSTED, 1993b: 5)

and by the *comprehensibility* of the teacher's L2, as in this report by OFSTED on language teachers' performance (a Summary of Inspections) in 1993/1994:

Pupils were able to follow without difficulty lessons competently conducted in the target language (OFSTED, 1995: 5)

The Non-Statutory Guidance (NCC, 1992) provides a lot of useful and practical advice on using the target language in the classroom.[5] More importantly, for the purposes of later discussions, it shifts the emphasis to pupil use:

The NC ... extends opportunities and experiences for **pupils** (their emphasis) by promoting maximum use of the target language (NCC, 1992: B1)

We have therefore moved in this document from 'virtually all' to 'maximum' use. It also recognises that random use of L2 without recognition of learners' existing competence is inappropriate (NCC, 1992: C2). In a subsequent (non-statutory) publication (NCC, 1993: 1), the wording is again altered to:

optimum use of the Target Language by teachers and pupils is a central aim of modern foreign languages in the National Curriculum.

We have looked at this documentation in some detail because I shall be using the definitions *virtual, maximal* and *optimal* as a basis for discussing teacher L2 use in subsequent chapters. Note, however, the emphasis placed on the classroom. A central aim of the NC is stated not in terms of producing good linguists (outcomes), or of developing awareness and attitudes but in terms of observable processes in the classroom. One interpretation of the above quote might be that success

in language learning is dependent on the successful application of a given methodology.

Let us now look at another of the 14 characteristics of good practice.

- Characteristic 10:1: (where) Learners often work co-operatively in groups.

Where does this belief come from? The series of official documents referred to above in the target language discussion also contain statements about the value of pupils talking to one another rather than simply reacting to approaches from the teacher. The advantages of this collaborative learning are stated in terms of:

- giving pupils greater opportunities for oral practice;
- opportunities for more spontaneous use of the language;
- opportunities for negotiated learning;
- greater flexibility for the teacher.

As we shall see in Chapter 5, this characteristic finds much greater substance in second language acquisition research than 10:7. However, it still raises many questions about pedagogy. In which language are pairs or groups of learners expected to organise themselves? What questions does it raise about: the age of the learner in relation to the types of tasks proposed; the relation of the task to the level of language competence needed to interact in order to perform the task? What theoretical assumptions does it make about the quality of learning from fellow learners' language, the role that feedback makes in testing language hypotheses, the fossilisation of error? A detailed discussion of these issues is to be found in Chapter 5. The last of the characteristics of good practice we will examine in detail is:

- Characteristic 10.14: (where) Learners become increasingly independent in their work.

Unlike 10:13, the issue of developing learner independence does not have as lengthy an official pedigree as the first two. Although there is a reference in DES (1987: 19) to moving beyond the stage of practising language in situations closely controlled by the teacher, it is not until DES (1990a: 131) that a clearer and more comprehensive definition of independence is arrived at. It is expressed in terms of:

- coping with unrehearsed situations;
- using more than the teacher as a language source and resource;
- learners being able to plan work on their own;
- learners choosing a topic or aspect to be studied.

This independence, we assume, is seen as independence from the teacher within the context of the classroom. We can make this assumption because homework in England plays a comparatively insignificant part in the learning process. I would estimate that the average weekly modern languages homework given to 'average' learners in year 8 to be about 30 minutes a week. This would hardly seem sufficient for it to be a context in which to develop the skills required for learner autonomy. We can assume that activities, such as planning work independently and discussing/choosing topics to be studied ('from quite an early stage' DES, 1990a, b), are to be carried out in L2. These issues are discussed in Chapter 6 and an attempt is made to link the three characteristics (target language use, collaborative learning and independent learning) via an age-related curriculum model.

If the above are statements and structures within which learning and teaching should occur, what does the framework say about 'content', about *what* learners should learn?

Statements about programme

In the DES Proposals (1990b) Programmes of Study (POS) are divided into two parts: Part 1: Opportunities, competencies and strategies; Part 2: The Content of Modern Language Courses. Part 1 is essentially yet another detailed exposé of the characteristics of good practice. The competencies which the programme is looking for in learners and the strategies they are expected to develop are directly linked to the 'frequent opportunities' which teachers are expected to offer them. They are described as 'skills and processes', 'comprehension and communication strategies' (DES, 1991b: 34). These opportunities are none other than defined classroom activities:

> seek and give information; give and receive explanations and instructions. (DES, 1991b: 34)

If these skills are to form part of a compulsory programme of study rather than a description of desirable outcomes, it becomes clear that, when combined with other aspects described above, what we are dealing with here is a highly prescriptive programme based on a highly defined teaching approach. It does, moreover, differ considerably from similar documentation in other countries (see below). When this prescriptiveness is underpinned by the 'virtually all' use of L2, any claim that it is a general approach rather than a clear method becomes untenable. A consequence of this prescriptivism can be illustrated with

a frivolous example. If a teacher found that s/he could successfully bring about an outcome such as 'spontaneous speaking skills ... initiating as well as responding to discourse' (DES, 1991b: 34), via a process of hypnosis, s/he could not be said to be teaching Part 1 of the National Curriculum programmes of study because s/he would not be providing 'frequent opportunities' for that kind of activity in the classroom.

In Part 2, the POS are about language content in that they describe the seven topic areas through which the above activities are to be experienced. (DES, 1991b: 39). These are virtually the only stipulation that the NC makes about what to teach, the 'language content' to be taught. An important point to signal here is that DES 1990a and DES 1990b do not have a reference to 'the language of the classroom' under Area A: Everyday Activities. This area 'concentrates on descriptions and narrations of specific activities and transactions which learners are likely to engage in, in their everyday lives'. It does indeed include school life but this is about language which can be used in communicating with youngsters from the target countries: timetable, lunch, preferences, etc. The recommendations for programmes of study, as arrived at in the Consultation Report (NCC, 1991) on the other hand, contain such a specification for the first time: 'Pupils should have regular opportunities to explore in the target language topics which deal with activities they are likely to engage in at home and at school,' this should include the *language of the classroom* (the wording is the same in DES, 1991). Is it possible that this addition came as a result of a request from teachers during the consultation period? It would seem unlikely. There is certainly no mention of such a request in the summary of the 'consultation'. The consequences of this addition, however, are enormous. The language that the teacher uses with the pupils becomes a formal part of the programme and is to be tested (see below and also Chapter 3 for a discussion on the nature of classroom language).

We have seen that both in the pedagogy and programme related elements of the NC framework, by far the greatest emphasis is on how teachers should set about teaching. What do the documents say about what learners should achieve?

Statements about outcomes and attainment

It is a feature of the NC in England that outcomes are expressed in terms of 'attainment targets' (ATs), of which in MFL there are four, corresponding to the four language skills. These targets are sets of

statements of what learners should be able to do in order to attain a particular level. The DES (1990b) version has 10 levels.[6] The statements have no language content. They are, again, observable 'performances' which learners can either do or cannot do. I have at times felt this was like watching two actors on television talking with the sound turned off. In AT1 (the ability to understand the spoken language) for example, learners, in order to demonstrate level 2 competence, need to be able to respond to short phrases, instructions and information in familiar contexts, given visual support and repetition. (DES, 1990b: 16) This level then differs from other levels not in terms of what language (words and structures) is being used but in the fact that the phrases will be *short*, they will be about *instructions and information*, they will be set in *familiar contexts* (language and topics already encountered) and they will be given with *visual support and repetition*. Among the examples given are 'write that ... (pointing to board) into your books' and 'press this key (pressing key of a computer keyboard)'. This clearly is an assessment of competence in *classroom language* rather than of language competence projected to a future encounter with someone from the target country. Moreover, if this *classroom language* is being assessed, then it must be taught in a fairly prescribed way because we cannot separate the assessment of the 'performance' from the activity in which that 'performance' takes place. As if to emphasise that language competence will be evaluated through a process of observing certain (but not all) manifestations of performance, the OFSTED (1993a) observation guidelines confidently state that: 'good learning is characterised by a readiness to work in the language'.

Despite the revisions carried out to the NC attainment targets by SCAA (1994) and DfE (1995), revisions which transformed the level statements into level descriptors, this notion of the link between *what* is assessed and *how* the teacher teaches persists.

The last foundation stone in the NC edifice is the way in which learner skills (particularly listening and reading) will be tested.

Testing in the Target Language

The National Curriculum framework foresaw that all testing at the age of 16 (Keystage 4/GCSE) would be done in L2. The Consultation Report (NCC, May 1991) refers to the survey of teacher attitudes to this issue carried out by the NCC/NFER. A question put to teachers in this survey was whether they agreed with 'the use of the target language in relation to SATs' (Standard Attainment Tasks – or tests) (DES, 1991: 68). One of the key changes teachers were being asked to comment on was

target language testing, i.e. testing listening and reading comprehension *through L2*. The consultation document reports that 'there was no consensus on the use of the target language in SATs: 24% agreed, while 16% disagreed' (DES, 1991: 11). What did the other 60% of respondents feel? Did they partly agree? If so, was there any qualitative follow up? Did they not reply to this question? If so, the presentation of the statistics is misleading. Yet on the basis of this very consultation process, the issue of target language testing seems to have been resolved in that we read:

> the target language must be considered the main language medium in which students will respond and express themselves, except where an interpreting exercise may require use of L1. The form of a Target Language exam assumes also rubrics in the TL. (Key Stage 4 criteria for MFL, SCAA, 1994)

There is scant reference in second language acquisition and pedagogy literature as to whether testing should be carried out in L1 or L2. Where it is mentioned, the issue tends to arise in discussions in journals on language testing, the arguments centring on validity, reliability, practicality and interpretability of answers. These themes, nevertheless, are the gauntlets thrown down by Brian Page (1993) and Woods and Neather (1994) in their almost acrimonious debate over target language testing. The Page v. Woods and Neather debate goes something like this:

Page: Tests have got to measure what they set out to measure. If the candidate misunderstands the L2 rubrics it invalidates the whole test.

W&N: GCSE L1[7] rubrics are silly anyway. They can be made simple and accessible in L2.

Page: Yeah, so simple and accessible that they lead to the setting of unimaginative tasks!

W&N: No they won't; look at the International GCSE and EFL exams.

Page: Look, if the questions are in the TL, the candidates will just lift the answer out of the text. It's not real comprehension testing.

W&N: You're getting hung up on questions, Brian. We've been using pictures and visuals successfully for ages!

Page: Where?

W&N: The International GCSE of course! Anyway, while the less able may only be able to recognise the right bit in the text, the more able can do lots of other things like deducing and reformulating language and drawing inference and evaluating.

Page: But that's my point! What will the test do other than test language manipulation and written language production? And don't tell me they're going to ignore errors in L2, that's impossible, too many grey areas between inaccuracy and lack of comprehension. And you're the ones that are hung up – hung up on mixed-skill testing. We do lots of single skill activities in the real world. Nothing wrong in that!

W&N: Oh dear, oh dear, so behind it all really there's the 'let's get back to translating' … that's the hidden agenda. Well, no way, Brian … that's absolutely not on.

Page: No hidden agenda. I'm just talking about authentic tasks and, Lord knows, it's taken time to get those introduced into the classroom and in exams.

W&N: Don't talk to us about authentic tasks. The rigmarole examiners have to go through to set authentic tasks is ridiculous. What's needed is educationally valid tasks. Maybe authentic texts but not necessarily authentic tasks. There's lots to choose from.

Page: Where?

W&N: The International GCSE and EFL. Also you might care to read a doctoral thesis by a certain C. Woods …

The tongue-in-cheek presentation of the above arguments *(pace* Page, Neather and Woods!) should in no way lead us to devalue the importance of what the authors are saying nor their genuine conviction. However, it is one thing to bat opinions across the net of a language journal, it is another when those opinions run the risk of becoming unquestioned official beliefs. Neather *et al.* (1995) were commissioned by SCAA to carry out a project on the testing of reading and listening without the use of English (L1). The authors of this document, from the outset, maintain their conviction that target language testing is desirable, feasible and reliable. They argue that the GCSE has had the undesirable effect of justifying or even increasing the amount of L1 use in the classroom. This view is supported by what a considerable number of teachers said in the Tarclindy interviews.

   Neather *et al.* (1995: 6) point out that 'apart from traditional tests of translation, foreign language examinations in other countries also concentrate on target language testing'. The authors do not, however, divulge which countries they are referring to nor the percentage of marks awarded for translations. They also agree with the thrust of this chapter that: 'the most important feature of the National Curriculum in MFL has been the emphasis on increasing the use of the TL in the classroom' (Neather *et al.*: Introduction) and that the syllabus of the NC

is 'a recommended methodology' (Neather *et al.*: 6). They argue, quite logically, that if the NC's prime objective is to bring about a change in teaching styles then the exams at the end of the programme must reflect that objective. Unfortunately the authors confuse this objective with the function of their report which is to examine the feasibility of testing through the target language. They do not set out to test *whether* target language testing is possible but to *prove* that it is. They recognise that the new comprehension exams, particularly at the lower end of the ability range, will have to contain many more multiple choice and true/false type tests. However, instead of arguing that these types of tests are an unfortunate consequence of wishing to create a more desirable backwash effect, the authors try to justify them with, for example, the following:

> no pupil in the current trials, or in a wide range of true/false tests with which the authors of this report have been associated, has ticked all the items of a task as true or false. Yet that would be the obvious response of a candidate with no idea and a determination to take the game of chance to its logical conclusion (Neather *et al.*: 13)

Clearly this would be a form of logic operating totally independent of human nature! Nevertheless, since the authors make a strong claim as to the validity of their tests it is upon these that we should judge them. Given the lack of space here I shall only concentrate on the reading tests which the authors claim are *less* problematic or even 'successful'. In other words, we will not examine the listening tests which the authors, in their conclusions, themselves describe as problematic. Pupils in the study were given a series of reading texts with questions and activities in L2. Rubrics were in L2. In order to ascertain whether L2 rubrics would invalidate the test (because pupils would not even be able to understand what the task was) they were also given L1 versions of the rubrics to refer to if they needed them. At the end of the tests, pupils were asked a number of questions among which were whether they had guessed any of the answers and whether they had used the L1 version of the rubrics. Readers interested in the issue of validity would do well to consult the original. However, the following give an idea of the findings:

Section 1, test 1. *Au restaurant* (text-only multiple choice). At least 20% of pupils found the L2 rubric 'difficult'. (N.B. respondents were not given a 'did not understand at all' category to choose); 45% claimed to have guessed some of the answers.

Section 2, test 2. *Béchamel Sauce* (picture to statement matching). As