

Listening to learners' voices: on task knowledge in language learning

Terry Lamb, University of Sheffield

1. Introduction

This article focuses on one aspect of a larger research project carried out in a secondary school in England, which explored the relationships between motivation and learner autonomy in language learning. After a brief contextualisation and description of the research, the article turns to a rich description of learners' constructions of language learning, in particular the nature and purpose of language learning as they believe it should be and as they experience it in their classrooms. The article concludes that we have much to learn from listening to our learners' voices, and that we need to find ways of involving them much more in their language learning experiences.

2. Context

The background to this research is the increasing concern in England regarding pupils' learning of modern languages in secondary schools. The learning of a foreign language in fact only became compulsory here for most students aged eleven to sixteen in the 1990s, and in many ways this was not an easy process. This is hardly surprising, however, given the context in which language learning exists, with generally negative attitudes towards the need to learn languages, poor levels of adult proficiency, and less than ideal teaching conditions (for example, children start language learning later than other subjects, and timetable time in schools is often insufficient compared to other European countries, or oblivious to the most appropriate conditions for language learning such as length of lesson) (Chambers, 1992; Milton and Meara, 1998; Pachler, 2002; Saunders, 1998). In fact, it could be said that the language teaching profession did remarkably well under these circumstances, given the exponential increase in numbers learning languages up to the age of sixteen (Mitchell, 2002).

Changes at Key Stage 4, effective from September 2004, made language learning an 'entitlement' rather than a compulsory part of the curriculum for pupils aged fourteen and upwards. This new policy was partly a result of the Government's perception of language learning as difficult and unpopular (DfES, 2003: 22).

It is clear then that motivation is a key issue for the future of language learning, and plays a central role in the languages strategy for England (DfES, 2002). It is, however, important to explore assumptions of unpopularity and difficulty in order to find ways forward.

3. The research

Given this background, one of the aims of the research project from which this article is drawn was to explore the issue of motivation in language learning in a large urban comprehensive school in the North of England (over 1000 students aged 11 to 16). The school offered opportunities to the students to learn either French or German as a foreign language. Depending on which teachers had taught them, the students also had some experience of flexible learning; in German in particular, a sophisticated system had been developed several years earlier which enabled students to carry out independent learning activities (including pair and group work) in order to practise the language, according to their individual needs, after initial whole-class presentation practice. This was managed primarily through the use of Study Plans, which students could use to

select activities to match their individual learning objectives, and student record sheets, which students used to plan their work, setting themselves targets to be achieved independently, as well as to monitor their progress through a combination of self-assessment and teacher assessment (Lamb 2003). However, with the departure of certain key members of staff who had developed this, students' experience of this mode of learning was becoming patchier.

My commitment was to understanding language learning from the students' perspective, specifically gaining insights into the following main question: What relationships are there between learners' constructions of language learning and their motivation in this urban secondary school?

In order to explore these relationships, I defined 'constructions' as both meta-cognitive knowledge (based on Flavell's (1979) person, task and strategic knowledge as a basis for self-regulation) and understandings of self-management (based on Wenden's (1991) self-management strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluation). The focus of this article is on the students' task knowledge only; in other words, I shall be exploring the following sub-questions:

- i) How do the learners construe the task (i.e. the nature and purpose) of language learning, both generally and in their own experience, including how it relates to their own lives?
- ii) How do they construe the individual tasks involved in language learning, and how might this inform the ways in which they take control of their learning?

The study was broadly ethnographic in nature, and included classroom observation of a range of classes and teachers, but the data referred to in this article data was collected by means of a series of focused group conversations (FGCs) (Lamb 2005) with students aged thirteen and fourteen. All FGCs were recorded on both audiocassette and video.

With regard to the sample of students, it is important to state that the aim was

"not to infer but to understand, not to generalize but to determine the range, not to make statements about the population but to provide insights about how people perceive a situation" (Krueger 1994: 87).

It was therefore important to provide opportunities for as wide a range of students to voice their perceptions as possible, and for this reason, quota selection was used (LeCompte and Preissle 1993: 72-3), i.e. selection according to gender, languages learnt, range of ability, level of motivation, and experience of different language teachers. Reputational case-study selection was also used (ibid.: 76-77), selecting some individuals who were at the extremes of ability and levels of motivation. The four groups which took part, each consisting of six students, were therefore organised as follows, using grades and teacher recommendation to aid selection:

Group A1: low achievers, motivated ('The Grafters')

Group A2: low achievers, less motivated ('The Angry Victims')

Group B1: high achievers, motivated ('The Sophisticates')

Group B2: high achievers, less motivated ('The Frustrated')¹

¹ It was never intended to name the groups; however, during the process of analysis it emerged that each group had a particular character of its own, and it seemed appropriate to name them

Each group met six times, each time focusing on different aspects of metacognitive knowledge and self-management. A range of methods were used in order to access the voices, including pair and group work, projective techniques (LeCompte and Preissle 1993: 164), and methods drawn from cognitive interviewing (Geiselman *et al.* 1984). Examples of interview questions are given in Appendices 1 and 2.

4. Learners' voices: Task knowledge

Drawing on Flavell (1979, 1981), Wenden (1996: 235) defines task knowledge on two levels: "general knowledge about the subject matter of learning and the way to approach it and specific knowledge about the nature and demands of a particular task". According to Wenden's (2001) study of meta-cognitive knowledge, task knowledge is the most complex of the three categories of person, task and strategic knowledge, involving knowledge about purpose, type and demands, and skills of analysis and monitoring. This knowledge is then used to enable the learner to select a learning task, suggesting that self-management decisions involved in planning, monitoring and evaluating learning are all based on task knowledge (Wenden, 1995). As such, it is important to gain insights into the knowledge base of learners with regard to the broad and narrow understandings of task in order to explore their understanding not only of what they are doing, but also why they are doing it, and how this relates to their motivation to learn.

Each group will be analysed in turn. The first part of each analysis focuses on the pupils' general constructions of language learning, i.e. what it is and what the purpose is. This is approached via a range of research tools (see appendices 1 and 2), including brainstorming, concept mapping, a questionnaire and projective techniques. By asking pupils to imagine a languages classroom of the future, for example, insights are gained into what pupils believe language learning should really be like. The first part also includes insights into the pupils' own constructions of the overall language learning process as it is manifested in their classes, and their preferences in terms of whole class, group or independent work. The analysis of these constructions in particular offers an opportunity to understand motivational issues such as relatedness, for example with regard to how the language learning experience in school relates to the pupils' beliefs about the nature and purposes of language learning in their lives.

The second part of each analysis focuses on pupils' constructions of language learning tasks. This will include a focus on the nature of choice, including the pupils' rationale for choosing particular tasks (if they do choose), offering further insights into how this may contribute to the pupils' sense of control over their learning.

Drawing on the analysis of person knowledge, a distinction emerges between the learners' metacognitive knowledge and their beliefs, terms which are sometimes used interchangeably (e.g. Victori, 1999). Knowledge is viewed as that which is within their close experience of language learning in school, whereas beliefs describe broader personal theories of what language learning should be like.

In order to respect the voices of the learners, the conversations have been transcribed as accurately as possible, using the local dialect. Quotations include reference to the FGC from which it is taken, e.g. 9A1FGC4 indicates that it was the fourth FGC, taking place in Year 9 with Group A1.

4.1.1 The Grafters' task knowledge (general)

For the Grafters, language learning is a practical task, which enables the learner primarily to speak another language and understand what someone is saying, useful in transactional situations such as getting lost abroad and emergencies, rather than for activities such as reading stories or watching films. It is therefore particularly important to learn how to ask questions, though Louis claims several times that these are not taught:

Louis: [...] they just tell you t'answers, they don't... 'cause like if you went up to a person and you wanted to ask a question you wouldn't know how to because they just give yer t'answer. They don't give you t'question. (9A1FGC2)

Language learning is construed as a difficult task, with listening being a particularly difficult skill. The pupils therefore suggest that it is best started "when you are a baby" as soon as "you can understand" (Helen and Carol, 9A1FGC1). It is also suggested that some languages are more difficult than others, so pupils should be offered a choice, including Italian and Spanish.

The main reason for learning a language is to travel or live abroad, to visit friends or family or to spend holidays. There is also a possibility of using it in some jobs e.g. translators, receptionists and "holiday reps". For this reason, however, Carl suggests that languages should not be compulsory, as he does not consider them relevant to the pupils in this school:

Carl: Cos you're not exactly like going to go working over there are you. Not like us. Well, I don't think we will anyway. So if we learn it all and don't do anything about it, it's a waste of time isn't it? (9A1FGC1)

When asked to think about the languages syllabus, the Grafters seem satisfied with the order in which they had covered different topics. They find it useful and motivating to begin by learning how to describe their own lives.

Though satisfied with the topics, by Y10 the pupils are nevertheless disappointed by what they are able to do with the language, and appear to have had unrealistic expectations of their ability to converse:

Helen: I would have expected to learn a bit more.

[...]

T: What would you expect to be able to do that you can't now?

Carol: Have a conversation without having your book.

Louis: or stuttering.

Helen: Try and speak a full conversation with somebody else in French with no English. Like cos when your teacher says, have a conversation in French, you do it in English cos you don't know the words. (10A1FGC6)

According to the group, they learn very little about France or Germany and, though they do not feel strongly about this, they suggest the following topics: towns (on video), shops, money (which they have never seen in school), fashions, alcohol, and "culture", construed by Peter as "people, statues...".

When asked to design a languages classroom of the future (in FGC3), their ideas were similar to their current experience, including resources for independent learning, though they did suggest a 'digital wordsign', i.e. "them signs where words go across".

When asked to develop a concept map of the way in which a unit of language learning is organised, this group is able to construct a sequence of activities moving from teacher-centred to independent work. They are able to identify advantages and disadvantages of whole-class, group and individual work and, although they think that teacher-led activities had greater potential for 'fun' (especially flashcard work), none of them said that this was their preferred way of working. A possible explanation for this is to be found in their self-confessed difficulties with concentration, which links with their appreciation of variety, and clear breaks between different activities. They also comment frequently that teachers talk too much, which means that they "switch off" (Helen, 10A1FGC6). One cause of this, in their perception, is that teachers do not answer their questions effectively, "cos you ask one small question and they go through it all o'er again" (Carol, 9A1FGC4). Hayley suggests the use of reference sheets instead, which corresponds with some of the group's liking for independent work, as it allows them to "get their work done", without being distracted, and with greater understanding. For Nadia, it also allows the teachers to understand and monitor more accurately their pupils' learning:

T: What's the point of the independent work then? Why do you do it like that?

Nadia: Cos then it gives teachers an idea about how you're going on, cos when the whole class is doing it teachers don't know whether they're like saying it and whether they understand it, and when you do independent work they know. (9A1FGC3)

4.1.2. The Grafters' task knowledge (specific tasks)

When asked to describe the kind of tasks they carry out independently, these pupils immediately begin by categorising them according to listening, speaking, reading and writing. They then proceed to brainstorm these tasks, mentioning eight speaking tasks (six of which are whole-class activities), six writing tasks, two reading tasks and two listening tasks. Following this, pupils are asked to consider what they would like to be able to do in the foreign language, and are offered a list of specific skills to stimulate the discussion (see Appendix 3). Most of these they find very important, and they add some general skills themselves (understand people, have a conversation) as well as some specific topics (sex, drugs). Unfortunately, the only task pupils are able to identify which matches up with these specific skills is letter writing, and the pupils are not able to propose any additional independent learning tasks.

Responses to the question regarding how they choose tasks to do in independent work (FGC4) offer no insight into pupils' understanding of the specific purpose of tasks. Most pupils admit to choosing the easiest tasks, even when they know they are capable of more demanding ones, in order to get rewards (gold slips). In most cases, decisions are not made in relation to any objectives. For example, Peter simply does "whatever comes out of the box".

It appears that, for at least some of these pupils, it is important to have some level of choice in what they are learning. In support of independent learning, Helen says:

Helen: [...] It's cos it's like different from listening to t' teacher. You can, say if you've got a choice between things, you can pick a choice, which you'd like prefer, whereas like if she says, right you're doing some tasks, you might not want to do that [...] (10A1FGC6)

However, Peter's comments suggest that such choice needs to be based on an understanding of why the task is being chosen for it to be motivating:

Peter: No, it just bored us. It bored me anyway.

T: Right. Why was that?

Peter: I don't know. It just used to be like, getting us task out o' t' box, get a mark for it and then just get bored with it. (10A1FGC6)

Having earlier claimed to prefer working on his own, but also to selecting tasks at random, Peter does not enjoy doing the tasks which are seen as a mechanistic activity, without purpose.

4.2.1. The Angry Victims' task knowledge (general)

Language learning is construed by 9A2 largely as a negative. The pupils agree with Candice that it is "a load of crap" which involves the pupil in writing meaningless words:

Candice: You don't even know what you're writing in your book. It's like you're just looking through, and they tell you to write and like you can't cos you don't know what it means. (10A2FGC6)

It consists of bewildering processes which, for the pupils, say more about the teacher than about learning. For example, the new French teacher, who is Welsh, apparently asks the class for the meaning of French words because (in their perception) she herself is inadequate in English:

Candice: Like, she'll ask us what it means. Like she'll say it in French and then we have to look it up for her in English. She's not English, she doesn't know any English, hardly any English, does she? (9A2FGC5)

This extends to the content of language learning as seen through the topics, which are either not clear to them or introduced in an apparently random sequence. This is construed by the pupils as a result of lack of teacher organisation, leading to chaos:

Candice: [...] I don't even know what topic I'm doing now.

[...]

Penny: The teachers should be organised as well.

[...]

T: You said organized as well?

Penny: Yea, that's what Miss C was like. She knew what she were on about but everything was all o'er t'show. We were doing cars one minute and t'next minute beds, bedrooms and that. And that's what our Y7 and 8 were like. (10A2FGC6)

Language learning is perceived as a monotonous experience, mainly involving copying:

Penny: Everything's boring. How they explain. Everything's boring. We do t'same over and over again. We do like, t'same page of writing all the time and we already know it and they go through it again and make you all copy it out again, so you've got it about five times written all out in your book. T'same things over and over again. (9A2FGC3)

In the pupils' perception of their experience, little speaking is involved in language learning. Furthermore, languages are very difficult, "cos you just can't learn it in two seconds" (Darren, 9A2FGC2).

When asked to consider the purposes of language learning, however, the pupils speak in terms of contacts with speakers of other languages, largely through speech. Luke even admits to having relatives in Spain, and others speak of other potential contacts, though there is some suggestion that they will never use another language themselves as they do not speak to native speakers even when they are abroad. Given this, the pupils feel that it is pointless learning how to use the telephone, for example, as they would never do that in Spain, apart from phoning an English person.

For the Angry Victims, Spanish is a more useful language to learn, as they are more likely to go to Spain than France or Germany and because more people in the world speak Spanish. Indeed, for these pupils, a languages syllabus would enable pupils "to choose the language that we want to learn" (Penny, 10A2FGC6), possibly on the basis of experience of more than one (Candice, 10A2FGC6).

When asked to think about the content of the syllabus, the group begins by listing topics they already do. When they move onto food, this sets in chain a conversation in which deeper-seated beliefs are revealed. They begin by suggesting that it would be better to learn how to say the kinds of food which they usually eat, such as McDonalds, and they become quite animated at the possibility of ordering pizza over the telephone. This eventually leads to a remarkable discussion which is worth quoting at length as it contains much evidence that listening to the pupils' voices offers useful and sometimes unexpected insights into the ways in which they could be more motivated:

Penny: Have German people coming in every so often.

Darren: Yeah have German people coming in.

Candice: Have an interview with them.

Penny: Yeah, interview. And see what they think. Or about three of 'em in. And you just have to write what they're on about.

[...]

Penny: I wouldn't start bringing German people in till about Year 9 cos then you know, well not everything, but most things.

Candice: Well I think we should have a residential trip, as a languages group in France. Like a weekend.

Penny: I think we should have trips and stuff.

Candice: For like a weekend, a week.

Penny: That'd be mad that! Just learning German all week. I think you'd learn a lot actually. And we had to speak in German. And you had to copy out t' dictionary.

T: Would you do it?

Penny: Aye. I would. I fancy doing it!

T: But you don't like German so why would you spend a week doing German?

Candice: Cos it's fun!

Penny: I don't know. I like sausages!

Luke: Them sausages are horrible!

Penny: They're not!

T: But Candice, if you don't like French ...

Candice: I think it'd be fun!

T: ...wouldn't your idea of spending a weekend speaking French be a nightmare?

Penny: Yeah, if you went on one of them weekends and you had to make your own food and that and you had to go and buy it yourself and ask in t'new money. That'd be right fun!

Candice: Summat different.

Darren: Yeah, but half of 'em would start speaking English.

Candice: Yeah but you could say, if you speak English then you've got to go back home.

Penny: Yeah, you'd just have to copy out o' t'dictionary. [...]

Candice: Or you have to sleep on your own.

Penny: And then you have a disco. Gotta have a disco at t'end of it.

Candice: And you have to go to t'thingy.

Penny: German theme parks. They're wicked them. Have you seen t'rides what are in Germany? Right good 'uns. (10A2FGC6)

Here we find potential for greater motivation, with the pupils expressing a more positive construction of Germany than had been expressed until this moment. We even find an awareness (amongst some of them) that stereotypes are due to ignorance:

Candice: Yeah, see what t'actual people are like because they call German's nazis and things like that.

[...]

Penny: You don't know what Germans are like do you really. (10A2FGC6)

Finally the discussion moves onto the expectation that they should be able to have a fluent conversation:

Penny: Talk proper full-on German. I'd like to do that, talk full-on German. It'd be right good that. (10A2FGC6)

When asked to design their classroom of the future in FGC3, the pupils not surprisingly dispense with the teacher, replacing her with televisions and computers which offer immediate help when required. What is very revealing is the need for immediate contact with situations in which they are able to communicate, as revealed by the group's proposals for a German switchboard displaying information about vacancies, friends and penpals, and "one of them virtual realities (pointing at his drawing) so you can go to Germany and things" (Darren, 9A2FGC3).

Pupils' descriptions of the way in which teachers introduce new language at the start of a unit of work again reveal the gulf between teacher objectives and pupil understanding of the classroom processes. Candice construes her French teacher's actions as pointless:

Candice: [...] We just write them down and she'll just get some more...and she'll tell us to write them down...and she'll repeat herself and repeat herself and repeat herself, that's all she does, repeat herself. She does your head in! (9A2FGC3)

The pupils do not suggest, however, that they want easy work, but simply work they can do. Penny and Candice actually complain that one teacher made the work too easy for them, and that this also led to problems in the classroom:

Penny: When we had Miss C she used to give us work that a one year old could do or summat. It was too easy so everybody started trashing t' classroom and that. We did, chucking paper and pencils at her, all t'lads did. T'work were that easy!

Candice: Done it by t'time she'd handed 'em all out! (9A2FGC3)

When (occasionally) able to identify more positive experiences, however, the pupils are able to discuss complex issues such as target language use, though, as can be seen here, not always with consistency:

Candice: You know like, when you do t'register and you have to say 'oui madame'. Well she doesn't! You just say 'here' and she doesn't say nought! And I think that's right sad cos I think you should act and speak all in French and that.

[...]

Penny: You know one o' t' classes, as soon as they walk into t' language classroom they're not allowed to speak English at all. They did it wi' us a couple o' years ago. It were all right actually – a bit hard for us, but you got done if you spoke English. You had to speak German all t'time. (10A2FGC6)

These pupils express a dislike for whole-class work as they claim not to know what is going on. Luke believes they “get more work done” in independent work though they find this more difficult as they are not supposed to talk. Generally, although pairwork and groupwork are not allowed very much in their lessons, it is the preferred way of learning as they can “put ideas together” (Luke) (9A2FGC3).

4.2.2. The Angry Victims' task knowledge (specific tasks)

For these pupils, individual learning tasks are yet another piece of evidence that they do not know what they are doing. When asked to describe what they do in such tasks, the first responses are “copy”. Together the pupils describe tasks covering the four language skills, but only manage to recall two listening (Language Master and listening to the teacher reading), two speaking (Language Master and pairwork), two reading (wordsearches and crosswords), and two writing tasks (copying from the board or the textbook, and making posters). The discussion list of specific purposes for language learning produces more negative than positive responses, though those involving contact with foreign people are considered more important. Unfortunately, pupils are unable to see any connection between any of these purposes and the actual tasks done (apart from shopping), and are also unable to think of alternative tasks.

The question regarding reasons for choosing specific tasks is somewhat redundant given that the pupils say that they hardly ever do them.

There is some suggestion that content is important. Tasks aimed at reading newspapers are pointless (“Don't even read them o'er here!” Luke, 9A2FGC4), and others are perceived as more difficult (e.g. Penny finds pets easier than bedrooms 9A2FGC5).

However, choice is important to these pupils, as revealed in this next extract:

Penny: [...] Then you could pick and do it in turn like that; do it from t'hardest to the easiest or whatever. Pick what you want so you don't have like t'same, t'hardest all the time. So you could mix 'em up. It would be done quicker that way.

T: What would make you do it more quickly that way?

Penny: I don't know. And I could do some o' t'hard ones first and then do t'quick one, I don't know, because I could choose what I want. Ones what I fancy.

Candice: I think it is easier...

Penny: Like a listening, or reading or writing.

Candice: ...if you choose what you want to do like. If they have a list and say...

Penny: Still do t'same in the topic and that, but give you sheets and say, pick whatever you want. We used to do it...

Candice: Will you shurrup talking!

Penny: No, I'm talking! And we did loads of work.

Candice: If they like put a list up and you had to pick one. That would be good that, cos you are picking what you want to do not what the teachers' tell you to do. You're doing all different to all t'other people, and I think it's a change.

T: Would you not just sit and have a chat?

Candice: No.

Penny: And that would make you learn more because usually if you are doing all t'sheet, all the class are doing the sheet, you don't know what to do so you just copy off somebody else. But then if you're doing all different, you can't really then. (10A2FGC6)

Luke and Darren both agreed with the points made in this conversation, which suggests a clear need for real opportunities for choice according to criteria such as language skill and level, and an understanding of classroom dynamics. It also suggests, however, the need to support pupils' choices by reinforcing the rationale for choice in general and for choice of specific task.

4.3.1. The Sophisticates' task knowledge (general)

This group construes language learning very broadly. For these pupils, languages can have practical value, being used in the present on school trips or to help their parents get by on holiday, and it can also be related to future aspirations:

Mark: We're more like involved in Europe now and like when you get a job a lot of people deal with foreign countries so it can help you when you want a job. (9B1FGC1)

However, Jodie (9B1FGC3) reveals that for her it is also intrinsically worthwhile, as it is different from other subjects "cos you're speaking a foreign language and it's something new to you". For these pupils, a language can be pleasurable (or not) because of the sound, as revealed in a lengthy discussion in FGC3:

Jodie: It sounds right nice when you speak it. Sounds right good... I think it's easier than German cos it sounds nice and you want to speak it but Germans are all (spitting noise)... (9B1FGC1)

French and German are nevertheless construed as difficult to learn: learners bring no prior knowledge to the subject unlike in other subjects ("like you're starting from scratch when you start learning German" (Jimmy, 9B1FGC3)); it involves thinking about two languages (Jodie); and the language itself is complex:

Jimmy: You know like we have 'their' and 'there' with two different spellings, German has one of them for every word, like there's three different types of 'the'. Three different types of 'a', ein, einen and eine. Gets you all confused when you're only used to one. (9B1FGC3)

It is also something which parents do not know, making homework difficult.

For this group, as with the others, the main purpose is to be able to speak, and this should be the focus of learning:

Jodie: If you go to France...

Annie: ...you need to be able to speak.

Jodie: ...and you go into a shop you can't write something down and hold it up. You've just got to ask them. But if you get a job when you're older and you're speaking on t'phone and ordering stuff to somebody abroad, you've got to speak to them, you can't write it down. (9B1FGC2)

Jodie suggests another purpose for language learning when she argues with Jimmy about the importance of being able to make foreign guests welcome when they come to England:

Jodie: They might be coming over to sell you some pants or summat and you want to welcome them so you get a special offer. It's not always that they come to work here. (9B1FGC4)

However, too much concentration on practical reasons for learning a language may be counterproductive. Jodie tells us that her brother and his girlfriend who had taken GCSE two years earlier have forgotten everything now and would not use it even if they went to France "because they'll look stupid" (10B1FGC6). In any case, it is not essential as most people speak English:

Jimmy: There's that many talking English.

Jodie All t'French people and everybody talk English so... It's good to learn a language but you don't need it really. (10B1FGC6)

Possibly referring to his own experience with his parents' bilingualism, Mark introduces a qualitatively different perspective in his contribution to this conversation when he suggests that speaking the language facilitates the development of relationships:

Mark: [...] Cos when you go abroad, like Spanish people especially, if you can make one word in a language they'll talk to you in fluent English. But if you just try and make them talk to you in English they just pretend that they don't know what you're talking about. It's t'same in all t'countries. (10B1FGC6)

This perspective occurs again when the group is asked to think about the Y7 languages curriculum, suggesting that more general conversation and less transactional language would be useful:

Mark: I think general conversation, I don't think you do enough because if you met someone...because you're more likely to talk to a younger person than you are an adult and I don't think you learn enough to be able to say something to someone. All you learn is hello, how are you and that's it. You don't learn enough to take your conversation further.

[...]

Jodie: [...] We just seem to focus on going to a tourist office, things that you're never ever going to do.

Mark: As a child you wouldn't really go into a tourist place and ask for information. (10B1FGC6)

Suggested alternative content would support this by providing the learners with knowledge about the countries, such as history, geography and general knowledge (monuments, footballers etc) to enable them to have a conversation:

Mark: In France, people are going to talk about what's happened before in their country and you don't understand. You're never even told things that happened. [...]

Jimmy: I think if we had two lessons a week and we had one on like the actual language and one on the background of the country or something. [...] like learn history in Y7, 8 and 9, or you could, like geography, you could take French geography, or German geography.

Jodie: Learn where places are, where places are situated and stuff like that. Cos you can't use it without. (10B1FGC6)

The group's vision of language learning begins in primary, where they believe that taster courses would enable them to "get started straightaway" in secondary school, enable them to learn more (Jodie, 9B1FGC4) and reduce the stress of coping with a new subject (Jimmy, 9B1FGC4)

Their classrooms of the future revealed a need for direct contact with people in other countries. Unlike the Angry Victims, they did not picture a teacher-free classroom, though the teacher appears to take on a monitoring role (using a 'master control') whilst learners work flexibly and independently in soundproofed booths on a range of tasks, including working with videos and 'fact-files' about the countries, and with the aid of computers to help them learn. They envisage various ways of establishing immediate contact with the target language countries: a helicopter to take them to different countries; immediate 'phone-to-phone' contact with France or Germany; and a 'transporter' which "whisks you off to anywhere in the world – like Star Trek" (Jimmy).

In the concept mapping activity, this group reveals a sophisticated grasp of the language learning cycle, including recognition that they need to revisit language constantly in order to revise it (an objective construed as boring repetition by others). In fact, they complain that in Y9 there is not enough recapitulation. In this next conversation, they reveal their belief that it is important to take time to become familiar with language, and emphasise the need for lessons to be driven by pupils' learning rather than by the syllabus. They are aware that teachers themselves are constrained by external requirements, but suggest that focusing too much on these can be counterproductive:

Jodie: In Y8 we did each topic for like a month or so. They just drummed it into you. And all t'stuff from Y8 I can remember, but t'stuff from Y9 it's like you do like Lost Property and we'll write it all out and then t'next day we'll be onto going places or summat like that, and it doesn't sink in.

Annie: In Y8 she used to do cards, flashcards, and do it every time.

[...]

Jodie: Yeah, it's better not to cover as much and know it than cover everything and not know it.

[...]

Jimmy: I know teachers have to do the National Curriculum, teach it all, but I think they should just cut the National Curriculum down, take the most important bits out of it and spend more time teaching that [...]
(9B1FGC3)

Possibly for this reason, pupils prefer to be able to work at their own pace, either in groups or individually, and have choice in what they do. Jodie talks about the benefits:

Jodie: I think you learn a lot independently because you're doing it yourself, [...] you go at your own pace and like, when you're copying stuff off o't'board, you're trying to do it neat, you know if it's your red book, but you're going too fast and you can't keep up sometimes. So doing individual tasks, you should be able to like work at your own pace and if you wanna do it, you do it. If you're just gonna mess about, more fool you, you're not learning. So it's your own fault. (9B1FGC4)

4.3.2. The Sophisticates' task knowledge (specific tasks)

Although the group did not speak about large numbers of tasks (five speaking, two listening, five reading and three writing), this was because they described them at length and in detail, offering their perspectives very readily. There is evidence that the tasks are seen in terms of their purposes, and that pupils are able to evaluate them on the basis of authenticity and personal relevance. A discussion about the nature of questions asked after reading passages is one example of this:

Jodie: [...] ... then read it and then you get questions like, where does Marion go Saturday morning, stuff like that.

Lucy: Pointless questions.

T: Why do you say they're pointless?

Jimmy: Because they're not real. (9B1FGC4)

Authenticity also extends to the nature of the audience. Annie finds it easier to write letters to her French penfriend than to an imaginary person "because I actually know her and I know what to say to her, so it's easier" (9B1FGC4). Similarly, Jimmy describes a cartoon strip he produced for the local Festival of Languages:

Jimmy: Once I felt I was really using it when, we were doing this thing for the University and we had to do either a cartoon strip, or a letter. We had this like Star Trek type cartoon strip that got put in the University so I felt that I was really using it. [...] It had to be good so people could understand it. So that was the first time I ever thought I was really using it not just for the sake of it. (9B1FGC4)

The need for authenticity, however, does not extend to listening tasks, with sound effects being criticised because they exacerbate the difficulty related to poor recording quality, and fast speech being perceived as inauthentic.

Pupils identify many purposes for using languages, and evaluate tasks according to how helpful to learning they are, though Jimmy reminds us that it is also important that they are enjoyable:

Jimmy: Put it this way, vegetables are good for you but you never eat them; they're boring. [...] They should be both: good and helpful. If it's fun but not helpful there's no point doing it. If it's helpful but not fun it's too boring. (9B1FGC4)

This is the only group to suggest additional tasks, and these involve "finding out as much information as you can about the country" (Jodie, 9B1FGC4) rather than the tourist-eye view which is the only way in which countries are portrayed in textbooks:

Jodie: They just show you like someone coming across from Europe where someone says 'can I take your hand luggage and case, and stuff like that'. (9B1FGC4)

For this group, decisions about which tasks to do are related to their individual targets:

Jodie: Yeah, you've got to reach your targets.

Lucy: Like you have this sheet and it's got all t'task numbers on and say, by t'end of this topic you've got to have done seven speakings, five writings and that, and you just choose. (9B1FGC4)

However, this discussion is curtailed by the realisation that they no longer do many tasks in Y9, which most of them regret as they appreciate the benefits of independent learning and the choice that this entails as described above.

4.4.1. The Frustrated's task knowledge (general)

These pupils construe language learning as an activity which enables communication with speakers of other languages either at home or abroad. However, there is some disagreement about whether or not it is important, as only "like one third out of everybody in t'world's gonna go abroad" (Mick, 9B2FGC1). There is no consensus as to when a language should be learnt, with some suggestion that it can wait until college when the most appropriate language for a particular job (possibly Spanish) can be learnt.

According to these pupils, the most important skill in language learning is speaking. The comparative importance of speaking over writing is neatly expressed by Mick:

Mick: You can speak writing but you can't like write speaking. If you go abroad you can't write down what you want. You have to say it. (9B2FGC2)

However, language learning for these pupils appears largely to involve writing, and this means mostly copying from the board or writing what they are told to write, and then, in Y10, revision and tests. In this way, language learning is construed as different from other subjects. Given that this group in particular constantly expressed a desire to produce language "from us own heads", they find this unsatisfying.

When invited to suggest alternative topics for Y7, the group largely stays with the topics they have covered, "just different order" (Mick, 10B2FGC6), though there is a strong

belief that they should do more “normal talk” (Steve), defined by Mick as “have more conversations”, such as “talking about what was on last night” (Steve) and “what we did” (Mick). Of course, this would imply an earlier introduction of the past tenses, meaning that “you’d have to get t’word order right I suppose” (Steve), confirming the group’s often repeated concern with putting the language together creatively. However, by Y10, all state that they would have expected to achieve more by this stage.

In terms of content, Steve would like to do something like history or sport, learning “how the language came about...all the different people and races and that”, and Lorna wants to learn about the daily lives of young people (10B2FGC6). They also suggest that watching French television channels would be useful.

The pupils’ classroom of the future includes two main features. Firstly, the desire for authentic experience is echoed once again in the incorporation of virtual reality, robot teachers, and computers which “can show you anywhere in the world”. Secondly, their frustration at not being able to regulate their own learning in order to remember the language is reflected in this group’s suggestions for ways of putting it directly into their heads:

Steve: You can go into hospital and they’ll give you a drug...and you put these helmets on that’s full of information, and it just puts it straight into your brain, like leads into your brain through the computers.

T: Is that while you’re asleep?

Steve: Yeah.

Andy: You’re strapped into a chair with a computer all wired to you, and it gives you all t’information. [...]

Mick: You’re listening to a tape about French while you’re sleeping, and virtual reality, and then there’s a computer that links you up to other planets so you can get advice from, from people. (9B2FGC3)

Although these pupils offer detail when discussing the language learning cycle, there is little discussion of *why* they do the various activities, though understanding purpose is important to Steve, “cos if they didn’t understand why, they’d just write it down and forget it”. Instead they again offer a picture of copying and repeating, which they find pointless. They are aware that this does not engage their brains, which is of course a major concern for this group.

As may be expected then, none of this group prefers whole-class work apart from flashcards. They select independent work as their favourite part of the cycle, because “you’re thinking about the stuff, that’s what teaches you” (Annie), and because “you can work at your own pace – you can just go and get a dictionary to help you” (Lorna) (9B2FGC3).

4.4.2. The Frustrated’s task knowledge (specific tasks)

It is interesting that this group, which is so concerned about remembering language, recognises independent learning tasks as an opportunity for practising “all the stuff you’ve been doing” (Steve, 9B2FGC3). Unfortunately, however, FGC4 was held in difficult circumstances, and this may have led to the poor response to the brainstorming activity about tasks. The pupils were aware of the four skills, but only referred to five task types overall. When asked to consider what purposes they would like to be able to use their languages for, they generally prefer anything which relates to meeting and talking to

foreign people, though they offer a number of additional purposes such as reading road signs, sorting out money abroad, asking people questions and listening to important news.

All pupils prefer to be able to make choices about their work, based on level and interest. The level they choose is related to their targets which they enjoy setting for themselves in order to be able to select appropriate ones. Furthermore, Andy says that choice encourages them to work harder (FGC4, FGC6). Lorna (10B2FGC6) does, however, argue for some teacher involvement in target-setting in order to ensure that they are not choosing tasks which are too easy.

Interest is the other factor involved in choosing tasks, with speaking tasks being considered interesting. Unfortunately, pupils again affirm that they do very few speaking tasks, despite their importance to learning ("cos if you say a word you'll remember it better than writing it down" Andy, 9B2FGC4). They are, however, disparaging of tasks which are perceived as being divorced from reality, such as describing a weekend in terms of "saying what you haven't done - there's not very much point is there?" (Andy, 9B2FGC4). This also includes activities such as shopping, "Cos if you go into a supermarket or something you can just pick it up and put it inside and just carry it with you ..." (Steve, 9B2FGC4).

Despite the lack of authentic, enjoyable tasks, however, there is a general endorsement of independent learning amongst this group, provided it is organised well. As Mark and Steve say:

Mark: It's makes you feel like they trust you and think that you are responsible.

[...]

Steve: Gives you a bit of freedom, rather than competing with everyone else. (9B2FGC4)

5. REFLECTIONS

Though the four groups have quite different constructions of language learning, based on different aspects of acquired task knowledge and beliefs about the nature of language learning, there are some interesting commonalities. Firstly, for all of these groups, language learning is construed as a difficult task. For all except the Grafters (who have modest expectations and respond to the difficulties with bored resignation), the difficulties seem to lie in the mismatch between their beliefs about what they should be able to do in a language on the one hand, and their knowledge about what they actually learn to do in school. This reinforces the anger of the Angry Victims and the frustration of the Frustrated, and leads the Sophisticates to indignation. In addition, it may be that expectations of what it is possible to be able to do in a foreign language are linked to pupils' only experience of using a language, namely their mother tongue, and that this contributes to demoralisation and lack or loss of motivation.

Secondly, a broad range of purposes for language learning are articulated by the groups, but they all share a belief in the importance of speaking, albeit in different contexts and in different ways. The Grafters appear to be content with the transactional nature of their learning, though the other groups in various ways and degrees want to learn how to hold conversations with their peers from other countries. Linked to this, some groups propose a radical change in content, enabling them to learn more about the countries of the languages they are learning in order to have something to talk about.

The Sophisticates, the Frustrated and, unexpectedly, the Angry Victims appear to be particularly motivated (or in the case of the latter potentially motivated) by the prospect of getting to know young native speakers personally, and this is reflected in their designs for the classroom of the future as well as a desire for authenticity in tasks. Purely instrumental approaches to teaching and learning could, in such circumstances, contribute to feelings of disappointment, dissatisfaction, and alienation, either because the prospect of travel or work abroad does not relate to the pupils' own lives, or because they believe that such needs can best be fulfilled when they are needed, either to allow for an appropriate choice of language, or to avoid learning something which will be forgotten before it is needed.

Thirdly, there appears to be broad agreement that independent learning is the most useful mode of learning. Reasons for this vary, and most are related to some form of control: for the Grafters, it is easier to control themselves, as they have problems concentrating when the teacher speaks too much; for the Angry Victims, it is synonymous with working with friends and as such offers an opportunity to be less restricted by the teacher and to find solidarity with allies, either for mutual support with learning or as a respite from boredom; for the Sophisticates, it offers increased responsibility for learning and better opportunities to have individual needs met, for example with regard to pace, thereby enhancing control of learning; for the Frustrated, it affords the same advantages as it does for the Sophisticates, and also means that they have to think more about what they are doing, engaging their brains, offering a greater opportunity for control of their cognitive skills.

In terms of differences between the groups, there are clear variations in motivational orientations (see, for example, Gardner and Lambert (1972)). The Grafters appear to be mainly instrumentally motivated, though there is a sense that working or living abroad is alien to them. The Angry Victims, despite apparent demotivation, surprisingly reveal integrative tendencies eventually. The Sophisticates reveal strong elements of both intrinsic and integrative motivation, with some instrumental motivation present in a qualified way. The Frustrated surprisingly reveal a strong sense of integrative motivation, though this is frustrated by language learning as it is manifested in school.

Levels of congruence between knowledge and beliefs also vary, though for most groups there is a strong incongruence between what they believe language learning should be about (and what kinds of tasks will contribute to it) and their knowledge of what it is like in their context. This may stem from a need to discuss what can realistically be achieved in school, or from an inappropriate, unsatisfactory curriculum.

Finally, apart from the Sophisticates, most groups appear to have limited understanding of the nature and purpose of individual tasks. The implications of this is that teachers need to be much more explicit in explaining *why* learners are carrying out particular activities, even in whole-class work, as well as encouraging pupil evaluation of and reflection on the effectiveness of learning tasks.

6. Conclusion

Listening to our learners' voices offers us unique insights into the ways in which they construe language learning. We have seen above that they have much to tell us about the task of language learning and what they expect of it, and about the different activities and tasks which they find, or would find, interesting, useful and relevant to their lives. We see that poor motivation can have less to do with learners' own beliefs than with the type of experiences they have in our classrooms. Yet the lessons we learn from them are not unreasonable or unmanageable. They simply require some reflection on

the nature and purposes of the languages curriculum as it manifests itself in our schools. They also require further involvement of our learners in the learning process, including articulation of learner beliefs and objectives, consultation on curriculum content and classroom activity, discussion of task knowledge (both in terms of what is realistic and achievable and how this links in to broader expectations, and in terms of the nature and purpose of individual tasks and how they contribute to learning), and opportunities for choices to be made.

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APPENDIX 1

Meeting 3: Task knowledge - Part 1

A: Introduction (2 mins)

1. Collect lesson evaluations.
2. Today's meeting is a bit different. I'm interested in finding out what you want to learn in languages, and how you like to be taught.

B: Opening question (3 mins)

1. Where do you usually go on holiday?

C: Introductory questions (5 mins)

1. Have you been on a school trip? What do you think of them?

D: Transition question (5 mins)

Brainstorm about languages:

Supposing you were making a poster to encourage others to learn a foreign language, what would you say is enjoyable? Then useful? Any other reasons why some people enjoy learning them? (Prompts: Think about the language itself, then tasks/activities.)

Now why do some people hate languages? (Prompts: language itself, its usefulness?) (Why are they sometimes the most unpopular subject? Are they really less useful than others?) (If problematic, ask about tasks too).

E: Key questions (20 mins)

1. Think back to the last unit you completed before Christmas. Let's try to describe step-by-step what happened in the lessons to help you to get to know the new topic.
 - a) What was the topic?
 - b) What happened in the first lesson for you to meet the new language?

- c) What happened after you had met the new words?
 - d) Who worked hardest at each stage? (Add T for teacher or ST for Student)
 - e) At which parts did you find yourself working hardest?
 - f) Which part did you find most enjoyable? (Add smiley faces)
 - g) In which parts do you learn the most? (Add ! or !!)
2. How does this compare with other subjects? (If it is different which suits you best? Do you understand why it is different?)
 3. In groups, imagine you are in some future time when the world is so small that you have to learn a language to survive. You'd really want to learn one then. Now draw the ideal languages classroom of the future.
 4. Present it to the others.

F: Final questions (10 mins)

1. Onto flipchart paper - advantages and disadvantages of working as a whole class, in small groups, and independently.
2. Which do **you** prefer? What do you like about it?
3. Which do you like least? What do you not like about it?
4. In every week (2hrs 30 mins), how much time do you think should be spent on each type of activity?

For next time:

1. Bring example of task done recently - also exercise books.
2. Continue with lesson evaluations.

APPENDIX 2

Meeting 4: Task knowledge - Part 2

A: Introduction (2 mins)

1. Collect lesson evaluations.
2. Background information sheets from 9B2.
3. Future meetings: one per group before half-term. Rest after.

B: Opening question (3 mins)

1. In turn, say what you would like to be doing in ten years' time.

C: Introductory questions (5 mins)

1. Do you know someone who does that activity? If so are they good at it? What are they like (appearance, personality, way they work)? (If not, imagine what they would be like).
2. What would you do to make sure you were good at your job? Do you do this for your school work? Why/why not?
3. You all have different ambitions. What should a school do to prepare you for these? Should a school just prepare you for work? Anything else?

D: Transition question (10 mins) (flipchart paper)

1. Brainstorm tasks/activities you do in class and for homework in order to practise listening, speaking, reading writing. (Be as specific as possible eg not just working in pairs, listening to cassette, but what exactly do you do?).
2. Which do you like doing/not like doing? What is it about them that you like/dislike? (eg helpful? fun?)
3. If not already covered, which do you find helpful/less helpful?
4. If not covered, ask about relative importance of helpfulness for learning, fun, practice or productive activities (give examples), activity itself or content.

E: Key questions (20 mins)(re purpose of task)

1. i) What would you like to be able to do with your languages? (What skills would you like to be able to develop?)
ii) After initial response to this, show examples on handout. Ask for further comments/ideas. (Handout adapted from IATEFL worksheets, 1997)
iii) If you were a teacher, what kind of tasks/activities would you give your classes (apart from the ones already mentioned above) in order to practise these skills?
2. i) Look at tasks brought by students as examples of their work (possibly in exercise books). Are they good or bad tasks? What is it about them that makes you say that? What are they for?
ii) Look back at brainstormed list. What are the activities for?

F: Final question (10 mins)

When doing independent work, how do you decide to do one task as opposed to another?

For next time:

1. Bring example of task done **well** recently - also exercise books.
2. Continue with lesson evaluations.

APPENDIX 3

What skills do I want to be able to use my languages for?

I want to use French/German ...	very important	important	not very important
1. to buy things abroad			
2. to speak to new friends from abroad			
3. to read newspapers and magazines			
4. to understand television and radio			
5. to watch foreign films			
6. to read stories			
7. to be able to speak on the phone			
8. to make foreign guests feel welcome at work			
9. to write to friends			
10. in case of emergency abroad			
11.			
12.			
13.			
14.			
15.			