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Lots of games and little challenge –A snapshot of modern foreign language teaching in English secondary schools

Abstract

The number of pupils learning modern foreign languages beyond the age of fourteen has fallen substantially over the last decade. Among other reasons, shortcomings in teaching methodology have been blamed for this situation. The methodology has been accused of applying the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach in a selective way and not providing pupils with a sense of progress and achievement. As there is little empirical evidence from modern foreign language classrooms, this study set out to investigate current teaching practices and evaluate the claims made about the application of CLT. Fifteen lessons in German, Spanish and French at KS3 were observed and the classroom activities were analysed for their focus on meaning and the opportunities they afford for the active use of the target language. The findings show a predominance of teacher-led and controlled activities, which required minimal language production by the pupils. The only traces left of the CLT approach were pseudo-communicative 'fun' activities which functioned as a disguise for form-focused exercises. Although this was a small-scale study, the findings suggest a culture of low expectations which poses little intellectual and linguistic challenge to pupils.

Introduction

England has experienced a rapid decline in the number of pupils learning modern foreign languages (MFL) since the UK government's decision in 2003 to remove MFL as a compulsory subject from Key Stage 4 (KS4; age 14-16). According to a recent report commissioned by the British Academy (2013), the number of pupils taking GCSEs [General Certificate of Secondary Education; exam taken at the age of 16 in England and Wales] in a foreign language has fallen from 78% in 2001 to 43% in 2011, with the majority opting out at the end of Key Stage 3 (KS3; age 11 – 14). As a result, there is a deficit in foreign language proficiency in the workforce at a time when global demand is rising (British Academy, 2013). This situation not only affects England's international competitiveness and workforce mobility, but also the national economy. According to a survey of employers in the UK (CBI/Pearson, 2012), 68% are dissatisfied with school and college leavers' foreign language skills, and more than 20% feel that this affects their business. In terms of young people's opportunities, the short period of language learning has a negative effect on the development of intercultural competence and the ability to compete in the global market. The current pattern of MFL study also contributes to the social divide in England, as grammar and independent schools maintain relatively high levels of participation, while in less privileged schools far more pupils discontinue language learning at the end of KS3 (Tinsley and Han 2012). Policies aimed at promoting MFL study, such as the introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) in 2011, in which a foreign language at GCSE is required, have not succeeded in a longer-term increase of students learning languages beyond the age of 14 (Lanvers and Coleman 2013).

There may be several reasons to explain the discontinuation of MFL study after KS3 by the majority of pupils. These include public attitudes towards foreign languages which are negatively influenced by xenophobic and Eurosceptic sentiments in the mass media (Coleman 2009), a widespread view that the role of English as a global language makes knowledge of other languages irrelevant, as well

as the perception that languages are more difficult than other subjects (Pachler 2007). Another reason is the dominant MFL teaching methodology, which has been accused of failing to engage pupils (e.g. Norman 1998; Pachler 2000). As Macaro (2008) argued, many pupils lose motivation early on in KS3, because they are aware of a lack of progress and their inability to interact in the target language. While it is difficult to change external factors such as public perceptions, aspects of teaching methodology, such as curricular content or classroom practices, can be improved, if necessary. Although many scholars have criticised the MFL teaching methodology, there are only a few studies in which actual classroom practices were observed. The aim of the project reported here was to investigate MFL teaching practices at KS3, as this is the crucial period when pupils decide whether to continue language study, and analyse their effect on pupils' learning and motivation. We observed and video-recorded 15 lessons in German, Spanish and French and conducted in-depth interviews with the participating MFL teachers. In this article, I focus on the classroom activities and the opportunities they afford for pupils to actively and productively use the target language. Before discussing the classroom data, I provide some background information on MFL teaching methodology in English secondary schools.

Communicative language teaching in the National Curriculum
MFL was included in 1992 as a foundation subject into the new National Curriculum (NC) framework for KS 3 and KS 4 , making language learning compulsory for all students aged 11 – 16. The first policy document of the National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages (NCMFL) (DES/WO, 1991) as well as its subsequent versions, followed the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which regards communicating in the target language as both the means and the goal of language learning. Although CLT was not explicitly mentioned in the NCMFL documents, this orientation was obvious in in the educational purposes stated in the original policy document, and in the associated Programme of Study (PoS). The first of eight educational purposes is 'to develop the ability to use the language effectively for purposes of practical communication' (DES/WO 1990,3), and, as Mitchell (2003, 18) explains in reference to the 1999 version of the NC, the PoS 'clearly encourage maximising learners' involvement in meaningful target language use'.

The CLT approach promotes an emphasis on meaning-focused interaction in the target language, the choice of topics and activities that resemble real-life communication, the use of authentic texts and tasks, and a focus on the learning process itself (e.g. Nunan 1991; Mitchell 1994). While CLT is not a uniform method and has been implemented in various versions across different contexts, the NCMFL's adaptation has been accused of representing a particularly narrow understanding of communicative competence and drawing 'on a rather selective interpretation' of the original principles (Block 2002, 20). This 'partial' and 'rather simplified version' (ibid.) has been blamed for over-emphasising speaking drills while at the same time failing to develop linguistic competence (Klapper 1997, 1998; Meiring and Norman 2001), knowledge about language, learner autonomy and intercultural competence (Pachler 2000). Furthermore, the teaching methodology is seen as failing to motivate pupils. Various motivation studies carried out in the first ten years since the inception of the NCMFL (e.g. Chambers 1999; Graham 2002) revealed that MFL was the least popular subject and pupils found language lessons boring and repetitive. As Mitchell (2000, 288) explained, 'the curriculum may be too narrowly focused on pragmatic communicative goals, so that insufficient educational challenge is offered, with negative impact on pupil motivation'. Bartram (2005) found that pupils' attitudes towards learning French were negative because their use of language was limited to specific phrases prescribed for narrow communicative situations. In a review of the

situation of language learning in English schools, commissioned by the government, Dearing and King (2007) criticised the lack of engaging curricular content and the fact that 'the present GCSE does not facilitate discussion, debates and writing about subjects that are of concern and interest to teenagers' (p. 11).

While CLT has generally been regarded as an approach that motivates learners because it offers topic relevance and learner choice, the continuing disengagement with language learning by English pupils indicates that the NCMFL version does not have this effect. In the next section, I discuss in more detail the critiques of this version in relation to grammar teaching and classroom activities.

Grammar and activities in the NCMFL
Grammar teaching was marginalised in the early versions of the NCMFL. This may be related to the misconception that beset CLT in its strong version, namely that instructed foreign language learning works in the same way as first language acquisition, and that learners would acquire grammatical structures implicitly from target language input. At the time of the NC's implementation, however, second language acquisition theory had recognised the need for 'focus on form' (Long 1991) alongside the focus on meaning. The initial avoidance of explicit grammar teaching in the NCMFL can perhaps also be explained by the curriculum designers' attempt to avoid the dull exercises and drills of previous teaching methods in order to make language learning more attractive for pupils. Dullness seems to have persisted, however, although in disguise. Grenfell (2000, 24), for instance, pointed out that 'materials are often apparently lively and attractive, but beneath the colour and the glitz frequently lie acts of repetition and rote-learning just as monotonous as any language-lab drill'. At the same time, mixed messages emanated from the NCMFL: while grammar teaching was not addressed in the PoS, the associated attainment targets and level descriptors reflected 'a central preoccupation with accuracy in learner production' (Mitchell, 2003, 18). As a result of this discrepancy, and in order to comply with inspectors' expectations of accuracy, MFL methodology took a phrasebook approach. Mitchell and Martin (1997, 23) found in a study of French lessons in English secondary schools that 'learners were explicitly taught a curriculum consisting very largely of unanalysed phrases' which were 'memorised and rehearsed unaltered'. After much debate took place throughout the 1990s, later NCMFL versions introduced some explicit teaching of grammar; interestingly, the attainment targets stated in the most recent one (DfE 2013) focus mainly on linguistic competence.

As CLT's goal is to prepare learners for communication in the real world, it has been recommended that classroom activities resemble the communicative events in which learners will eventually participate (e.g. Nunan 1991). Furthermore, topics and activities should be perceived as relevant and personally meaningful by learners, encouraging them 'to take part in meaningful interpersonal exchange' (Richards 2006, 22). CLT's theoretical underpinnings understand interaction in the target language, involving the negotiation of meaning and the production of comprehensible output, as essential in language learning (e.g. Long 1985, Swain 1985). To achieve interaction in the classroom, information gap activities, games and role plays have been promoted; it has also been stressed that learners need to be given choice of response and opportunities to say what they want to say (e.g. Littlewood 1981).

The NCMFL's anticipation of pupils' future language use in the real world was reflected in seven 'Areas of Experience' including 'Everyday activities', 'Personal and social life', and 'The international

world' in the original policy document (DES/WO 1990, 27), and these areas have persisted to determine the topic choice in the MFL curriculum. The associated activities are based on topics and situations which 'they [pupils] are likely to engage in at home and at school' (for the area of 'Everyday activities', p. 27) or which resemble 'their experiences of travelling or staying abroad' (for the area of 'The international world', p. 29). These topics and activities have since dominated the textbooks used at KS3[i]. However, many of these situations are unlikely to be ever experienced by pupils. For instance, typical activities presented in KS3 textbooks require pupils to tell target language speaker about their hobbies and daily routines or explain what their bedroom looks like; others portray pupils as tourists, requiring them 'to order meals they are not going to eat, plan journeys they are not going to make and hear about people they are not going to meet' (Grenfell 2000, 24). Andon and Wingate (2013) discussed that many topics presented in KS3 textbooks (e.g. self, family, home, or body) are not only uninteresting, but even face-threatening to adolescents, and therefore counterproductive to meaningful communication.

It has been argued that pupils would find their real context, that of learning a language, more meaningful for communication than the 'simulated "real life" situations' (Block 2002, 19) prescribed by their textbooks and resulting classroom activities. Van Lier (1996, 127) asserts that 'the traditional language lesson of the grammar translation type' might have greater authenticity than 'some of the so-called communicative classrooms'. In a similar vein, Cook (2010, 149) explains how translation can be 'truly communicative'. If the situation and process of language learning was accepted as an authentic topic of classroom communication, activities could justifiably deal with the language system, as well as the cultural and pragmatic differences between the L1 and L2. The challenges of learning a different phonetic system, difficult grammatical structures, and unfamiliar vocabulary could be legitimately acknowledged and addressed. Mastering these challenges might give pupils a greater sense of achievement than participating in what Pennycook (1994, 311) described as 'the empty babble of the communicative language class'.

Relatively little is known about the extent to which MFL teachers in the English school system are aware of the CLT principles and have been trained to apply them. Klapper (2003, 33) claimed that 'most language teachers' understanding of it [CLT] remains fuzzy'. As the CLT approach is only implicit in the NCMFL documents, it is possible that it has also not been given much attention in teacher education. Even if teachers had a full understanding of CLT and wanted to follow the approach, the existing mismatch between the classroom practices recommended in the PoS and the accuracy-focused attainment targets would make this difficult.

Rationale for this study

Much of the critique of the NCMFL methodology was conceptual or based on the authors' experience as teacher educators, rather than on systematic analyses of classroom practices. There are only two studies in which observations of MFL lessons in English secondary schools are reported. Of these, D'Arcy (2006) focused on teacher behaviour, while, more relevant for this study, Mitchell and Martin's (1997) study was concerned with classroom interaction, and teachers' practices in relation to their beliefs. One category of analysis in Mitchell and Martin's research was the balance between form-focused and meaning-focused activities, and the researchers found that much more lesson time was spent on linguistic practice than communication. This finding, obtained in the early

period of the NCMFL, provides some evidence for the 'partial' understanding of CLT in the English school system.

The critical debate about the teaching methodology emanating from the NCMFL, which lasted from the 1990s to the 2000s, has somewhat ebbed away in the last decade and given way to increasing concerns about the language learning crisis and its educational and economic effects (e.g. Coleman 2009; Lanvers 2014). The absence of recent classroom research and the resulting lack of insight into contemporary teaching practices motivated this study. We[ii] were interested in the extent to which the current MFL teaching methodology is still, almost 25 years after the introduction of the NCMFL, influenced by CLT and if that is the case, whether the approach continues to be partially understood. In view of the decreasing participation in MFL study beyond the compulsory period, we wanted to investigate the existing MFL classroom culture and consider how it may contribute to pupils' disaffection.

The objectives of the wider research project were to compare MFL teachers' principles and classroom practices, and to examine classroom interaction with a focus on the opportunities for pupils to use the target language productively in 'meaningful interpersonal exchange'. In this article, I present the analysis of the lesson data in relation to these opportunities. I address the following research questions:

1. What was the proportion of meaning- versus form-focused activities?
2. Which types of activities were used to create opportunities for pupils to use the target language in a meaningful context?
3. What kind of language was used and produced by pupils?

Methodology

Between late 2012 and early 2015, we observed fifteen KS3 lessons in German, Spanish and French in six state-maintained schools in London and Outer London boroughs. Table 1 shows the distribution of languages and year groups. As it is not easy to recruit participants, we had to take the opportunities offered to us and could therefore not achieve an equal number of observations per language or year. The eight teachers who participated in the project were recruited through recommendations from a language advisor and teacher educators in our department. The research was conducted in full awareness of the fact that this small and self-selected sample would provide only a snapshot of teaching practices rather than generalizable findings. The fifteen lessons were video-recorded, and the recordings were supplemented by the extensive field notes we took during the lessons.

Table 1: Observations per language and year

Language	Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
German	1	5	2
Spanish	-	1	3
French	2	-	1

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of the 15 lessons was carried out, based on the interactional observation framework COLT (Communicative Orientation of Language Teaching) (Fröhlich et al., 1985). Interactional frameworks have been criticised for treating classroom language as isolated occurrences of verbal behaviour rather than as discourse reflecting social and cultural practices (e.g. van Lier 1988; Kumuravadivelu 1999). However, to answer the first research question, a numerical analysis of occurrences was needed to determine the amount of classroom time allocated to various types of activities. Part A of COLT is concerned with classroom events and consists of five categories. For our project, COLT's categories 1 'Activities' and 3 'Content' were combined into one, and the analysis was based on the following categories:

1. Activity and Content: a) type (e.g. translation, game, procedural directives); b) form-focused versus meaning focused
2. Classroom organisation: whole class activity; group/pair/individual work
3. Modality: language skill involved in activity (i.e. speaking, listening, reading, writing, or combination)
4. Materials: a) type (e.g. text, audio); b) source (e.g. textbook, teacher-designed); c) use (e.g. highly controlled, minimally controlled).

In this study, I focus on categories 1 and 2 to investigate how much classroom time was spent on meaning- and form-focused activities. For the qualitative analysis of the activities, I used COLT's Part B, which is concerned with the communicative features of verbal interaction within classroom activities. Part B consists of seven categories (Fröhlich et al., 1985: 55 - 56). In order to answer research question 3, I chose the five categories that pose specific questions relating to learners' use of the target language:

1. Do learners use the target language actively and creatively, or only in a controlled fashion?
2. Is the information requested in an information gap activity genuine, i.e. not known in advance?
3. Do learners produce sustained speech, i.e. 'engage in extended discourse or restrict their utterances to a minimal length of one sentence, clause, or word' (Fröhlich et al 1985: 55)?
4. Do learners initiate discourse?
5. To what extent is there a restriction of linguistic form in the classroom interaction (ranging from requested production of specific forms to language use with no expectation of any particular linguistic form)?

The video recordings of the 15 lessons, which lasted between 40 and 50 minutes, were first transcribed verbatim. Next, information from both the recordings and the field notes was filled in a matrix in which a row was assigned to each activity. The columns described:

1. Time spent on the activity
2. COLT A categories: Type/content of activity, classroom organisation, modality, materials
3. Teachers' use of target language; types of responses to pupil utterances
4. COLT B: Pupil's language use/ level of restriction.

Each activity was then analysed and coded, before common patterns between activity types were determined. Three lessons were jointly coded by the two researchers to ensure reliability. Due to a

technical problem, one lesson (German/Year 9) was not video-recorded, and as the time was not consistently kept in the field notes, this lesson is not included in the quantitative analysis.

Findings

The following critical analysis of the teaching methodology observed in the 15 lessons should at no point be understood as a critique of the teachers, who were all experienced, enthusiastic and participated in our research because of their interest in MFL teaching methodology. Before the analysis of the activities, it is useful to consider the topics to which the activities were linked. In most lessons, the topics were determined by the KS3 textbooks and fell into the areas of 'Everyday activities', and 'Personal and social life'. Three lessons were not centred around a topic but focused entirely on grammatical structures (prepositions in Spanish Y9, future tense in Spanish Y8, and word order in German Y7). The remaining 12 lessons showed that everyday activities and personal life topics were more prevalent in the earlier years of MFL study, while topics concerning broader societal issues (the environment, defenders of human rights, and films) were dealt with in Year 9. The topics addressed in Year 7 and 8 were, as the information in the parentheses in the following list shows, mainly used for linguistic practice: food and drink (German Y7 to practise lexical items and the accusative case), daily routines (German Y8 to practise lexical items and naming the time), professions (French Y7 to practise lexical items and the absence of the indefinite personal pronoun), hobbies (French, Y 7 to practise lexical items and use of infinitive after expressions such as j'aime), holiday plans (Spanish, Y8 and 9 to practise the use of future tense), describing a friend (German Y8, Spanish Y8 to practise adjectives and adjective endings), preparing a party (German Y8 to practise lexical items and the accusative case) and activities on a train journey to Cologne (German Y8 to practise lexical items and perfect tense). Several of these topics would be unlikely to appear in pupils' natural conversations; nevertheless, they are potentially useful for communication in the classroom, if the teachers create activities in which pupils can relate the topics to their personal experience. However, as shown in the parentheses above, the topics were just used as a context for the practice of vocabulary or grammar. By coincidence, 14 lessons were concerned with the revision of previously introduced linguistic items, and only in one lesson (Spanish Y9) was new content, i.e. a set of eight prepositions, presented.

Meaning-focused and form-focused activities

To investigate the proportion of meaning- versus form-focused activities, the first step was to look at the amount of time spent on activities by the category of classroom organisation, as it can be assumed that group/pair work is more often used for meaning-focused interaction than the other categories. The same may be assumed of 'games', an extra category which was added to the conventional ones of 'Teacher-led/whole class', 'Group/pair work' and 'Individual work', because games were a dominant feature in the observed lessons. This category includes all activities which were explicitly announced as games by the teachers. The amount of time per activity type was calculated for each individual lesson, then added up for the fourteen lessons included in the quantitative analysis and, for the percentage, divided by the overall recorded time of 625 minutes. Table 2 shows the types of activities as well as the time and percentage of the overall time spent on them.

Table 2: Types of activities in KS3 MFL classrooms

Classroom Organisation	Teacher-led/whole class	Pair/group work	Individual work	Games
Activity (minutes spent)	Question/answer (130)	Exercises from textbook/ worksheet/slide (41)	Matching words/true-false/ Fill the gap (38)	Various types lasting from 2 – 16 minutes
	Instructional talk (60.5)	Construct sentences (controlled) (19.5)	Construct sentences (controlled) (16)	
	Checking answers after exercises (46.5)	Discussion (18.5)	Write down rules, learning objectives (11)	
	Listening comprehension (24)		Translation (2)	
	Asking pupils to chorus words/phrases (17.5)			
	Asking pupils to read aloud (11.5)			
Overall time /percentage	**290 minutes 46.4%**	**79 minutes 12.6%**	**67 minutes 10.7%**	**91 minutes 14.6%**

The overall time spent on the activities, shown in the bottom row in Table 2, adds up to 527 minutes. The remaining 98 minutes of the recorded classroom time were spent on various forms of classroom management, such as settling pupils down at the beginning of the lesson or after an activity, taking the register, or handing out materials.

Even a superficial glance at Table 2 suggests a dearth of meaning-focused activities. Teacher-led activities accounted for almost half of the overall lesson time, and most of these activities either did not require any target language use by the pupils (e.g. instructional talk) or required only regurgitation (e.g. chorusing words or phrases). Only 12.6% of the time was devoted to pair and group work, and within this category, there was no instance of the type of activities which are recommended in CLT for creating meaningful interaction, such as information gaps or role plays. Furthermore, a large part of teacher-led activities consisted of instructional talk when the teacher was explaining lesson objectives, setting tasks or homework or explaining rules, and the pupils were passive listeners. Table 2 also shows that there is a preponderance of activities that require no more than reactive behaviour, repetition and reproduction, such as chorusing words or phrases, reading aloud, or writing down rules. The activities in which pupils were actually producing rather than repeating language, such as 'Fill the gap' or 'Construct sentences', were controlled and restricted to a narrow range of prescribed vocabulary and structures.

In the next sections, I discuss the qualitative analysis of four types of activities in Table 2 that would have the potential for meaning-focused interaction and provide examples to show that this potential was not realised. These types are 'Question/answer' and 'Listening comprehension' in the category 'Teacher-led/whole class', 'Discussion' in the category 'Group/pair work', and 'Games'.

Missed opportunities for meaning-focused interaction in different activity types

Question/answer would be a suitable format for creating communicative interaction, if the questions invited the learners to respond with genuine information, for instance their opinions, suggestions or personal experience. As explained in COLT Part B, for learners' responses to be classed as communicative, they should not be linguistically controlled, and should present some kind of extended discourse. However, the 'Question/answer' activities observed in the fifteen lessons had none of these communicative features, but consisted of (1) the teacher asking pupils for English translations of words, phrases, instructions, or learning objectives (55 minutes), (2) the teacher eliciting, usually in English, a linguistic rule previously taught (39.5 minutes); (3) the teacher eliciting L2 words or short phrases by showing pictures or giving other cues (35.5 minutes). Pupils' answers typically consisted of one word in the L2 or the naming of a grammar rule in English.

Listening comprehension, although it involves a receptive skill rather than language production, is nevertheless a communicative activity, if learners have to gather the overall meaning from the spoken text, or identify specific information, in order to carry out further communicative action (such as giving spoken or written responses or by filling information gaps). These requirements were not made in in the five instances of listening comprehension in the dataset; in contrast, the pupils had to listen for prescribed linguistic items (names or individual words), which were known to them beforehand. The follow-up activities involved no use of the target language apart from the naming of the linguistic item. The example from German Y7 in Table 3 illustrates the restricted nature of the listening activities.

Table 3. Description of listening comprehension exercise in German lesson Y7

Topic: Food and drink
Pupils' worksheet (also presented on Interactive Whiteboard (IWB)):
1.   7.
2.   8.
3.   9.
4.   10.
5.   11.
6.   12.
a. die Schokolade, b. das Brötchen, c. Orangensaft, d. Cola, e. die Banane, f. Bonbons, g. Wasser, h. Käse, i. der Apfel,   j. Chips, k. Kuchen, l. die Orange
Teacher instruction: (given first in German, then repeated in English): 'You will hear these words (pointing at list on IWB) in twelve sentences. Match the letter for the word with the sentence number. If you want to challenge yourself, write down the word'.
Recording: Different speakers say short individual sentences of exactly the same structure, e.g. 'Ich esse eine Banane' (I eat a banana), 'Ich trinke Cola' (I drink Coke). Each sentence is followed by a non-verbal expression of enjoyment, such as 'mhm'.
Procedure: Teacher plays the whole recording (12 sentences) twice. Pupils write the letter of the food/drink item next to the sentence number. Teacher then checks the answers, sentence by sentence. Several pupils give the letter, not the vocabulary item, as answer. When the word is given as answer, no articles are used.
Time: 9 minutes

The teaching approach in this example, which resembles the nature of the other four listening comprehension exercises in the dataset, is in sharp contrast to the communicative features explained above. There was nothing personally interesting and nothing new to find out in the recording, in which twelve people said in disjointed sentences what they eat or drink. The activity

was a form-focused exercise which did not present any challenge to the pupils. The vocabulary items were already familiar; the pupils had to listen for just one word, which was easy to identify in the simple and identical structure of the sentences, and then had to write down only the letter by which the word was listed. Writing down the whole word was announced as a challenge, even though the pupils could just copy it from their work sheet. When the teacher checked the answers, pupils just named the letter associated to the word; in other words, they did not even have to use the target language in a reproductive one-word answer. The grammatical point in this exercise, i.e. that some of the words appeared in the listening comprehension in a form that was different from the written list, with the indefinite article and in the accusative case (e.g. der Apfel – Ich esse einen Apfel) might have offered some intellectual challenge; however, it was not addressed.

Discussions have been strongly recommended as an activity in CLT (e.g. Brumfit 1984), because they enable learners to express personal meanings and facilitate language learning through the negotiation of meaning and production of output. Discussion in groups was invited in three of the observed lessons. In one German lesson in Year 8, pupils were asked to discuss the learning objectives; in another German lesson, also in Year 8, pupils had to discuss, on the basis of a prescribed list of vocabulary, first which food and drink they would bring to a party, and next, which party game should be chosen. In a Spanish lesson in Year 8, the pupils were asked to discuss what subjects they would study next year; however, at that stage in the curriculum, the pupils did not have a choice over their subjects. The instructions were mostly given in English, and most of the discussions were held in English. Both the discussions about learning objectives or study plans for the next year were clearly unsuitable for creating meaningful interaction, as there was simply nothing to say on these topics. In both cases, the 'discussion', lasting four and five minutes, was used to fill time, during which the teacher attended to organisational business. Although the group conversations could not be accurately transcribed from the video recordings, it seemed that the pupils did not even attempt to address the given topics, but used the time for a chat, resulting in increasing noise levels. By contrast, the other German teacher in Year 8 had related the topic 'Planning a party' to pupils' personal life, as she planned to organise an end-of-year party in the German classroom. However, the pupils were not given a chance to express personal meanings, as the discussion of what to bring to the party and what games to play was restricted by a limited and rather inauthentic vocabulary list, including items such as 'Dekor' (decoration), 'Häppchen' (snacks) and 'Brettspiele' (board games). Apart from the fact these rather antiquated words would hardly be used by German teenagers, it is unlikely that such items would be considered for a teenage party. At the same time, the pupils were not encouraged to look up or ask for additional words. Also, they were not equipped with the linguistic means needed for a discussion, such as giving and justifying opinions or conceding to other opinions. In this one instance when the discussion was situated in a potentially meaningful communicative context, it was just used to practise a list of vocabulary items.

Games can offer ideal contexts for generating communicative interaction and have therefore been promoted in the CLT literature (e.g. Nunan, 1989), and more recently in the form of virtual leaning and second life (e.g. Hislope 2008). The main benefits of games can be summarised as engaging learners in a role, be it in a roleplay or in a different identity in a virtual environment, or creating information gaps and competition, which might be particularly attractive to pupils in the age group of KS3. As games were a dominant activity in the lessons we observed, they are discussed separately in the next section. The discussion includes all activities that were called 'game' by the teachers.

The use of games

Ten of the fifteen lessons included one or two games, but in one German Y8 lesson, there was a rapid succession of three games. Only three lessons, two by the same teacher, contained no games. Altogether there were 15 games ranging considerably in the time and preparation invested in them. In five cases, activities were called 'games' because they had a competitive element; however, they were in fact teacher-led vocabulary exercises. Typically, the class was divided into two or more competing groups, and the teacher or a pupil wrote points down; occasionally, an incentive (sweet) was promised to the winners. The coding revealed that the 'games' shared the following characteristics: (1) the instructions tended to be confusing; (2) they had no clear outcome and therefore disintegrated after a while; (3) they elicited one-word answers, or just word recognition, and (4) most seemed ad-hoc, i.e. unprepared. In most of these games, competition between groups was eroded, because the teacher called up individual pupils for answers and therefore the competing groups had no chance of winning points. The following example from a Spanish Y 9 illustrates these characteristics.

Table 4. Description of Game in Spanish lesson Y9

Topic: Prepositions **Teacher instruction:** (given first in Spanish, then repeated in English): 'Now I show a preposition and say the word in English. If I say the right translation, you have to remain standing, if it's wrong, you need to sit down. The group where everybody is sitting first is the winner '. **Procedure:** Teacher divides class into two groups. He points to the prepositions listed on IWB in quick succession and says English words. There is some chaos, as several pupils get the answers wrong, sit down and get up again. T abandons game without winner. **Time:** 3 minutes

Eight games involved pair work. Some of them were called 'battleship' and 'noughts and crosses', but unlike the original games, pupils were only required to read out words from a list and tick them off. Whilst these games involved at least some vocabulary recognition, there were two pair games in a German Y8 class that seemed to be even more limited in their linguistic challenge . In the first, a text consisting of three sentences, each written in a different colour, was shown on the IWB. In turns, one pupil had to read a sentence, while the other one had to name the colour. In the second game, another text was presented; this time, the pupils had to read between two and five words in turns, and the one who landed on a certain word had lost. There was only one game in our dataset in which more than the recognition of individual words was involved. In French Y7, the pupils had to assemble a long sentence. Three options were given for each of the components of the sentence, and the pairs had to guess each other's options. None of the pair games was followed up by the teacher, even when there was a linguistic outcome.

There were three 'treasure hunts'. As they required some preparation and took more time than the other games (between 9 and 16 minutes), their limited outcome in terms of language use and communicative interaction was even more noticeable. This is shown in the following example.

Table 5. Description of 'Treasure Hunt' in French lesson Y7

Topic: Professions **Pupils' worksheet** (also presented on Interactive Whiteboard (IWB)): Who is a mechanic? _____

This treasure hunt required reading comprehension of 30 short sentences with more or less identical structures and already familiar vocabulary. The pupils then had to provide the answer to the English questions on their work sheet; this required not even the correct spelling of a French word, but the writing down of the name of a classmate. As more than a third of the lesson was spent on this game, it is difficult to see why the activity was not designed in a way that challenged pupils more and made them use the target language actively. This could for instance have been achieved in a different format, by giving two groups different partial information about a person and asking them to complete the description of this person by asking each other relevant questions.

Considering the frequency of games in the observed lessons, and the negative correlation between time investment and learning outcomes, an obvious explanation is that teachers use games to keep pupils entertained and to make language learning more attractive. This intention was in fact mentioned by a number of teachers in the interviews. However, the use of games in the way described earlier might have the opposite effect on pupils. Clearly, the futility of some of the games cannot be lost on pupils, and this might create a general feeling that MFL lessons are not to be taken too seriously. The recordings showed several instances of pupils being bored, or abandoning the game quickly and chatting with each other.

Target language use

The preceding discussion has already disclosed that none of the activities in the 15 lessons created communicative interaction, which, according to COLT Part B, would have features such as active or creative language use, sustained speech, or learner-initiated discourse. Overall, the quantitative and qualitative analyses showed that there was no meaning-focused interaction in any of the 15 lessons but that the focus was entirely on form and linguistic correctness. At no point did the pupils use the target language productively, initiate discourse or produce sustained speech. As all activities in the dataset served the revision and practice of vocabulary and grammar, pupils' use of the target language was restricted to the reproduction of linguistic forms. These forms were most often elicited through teacher questions. The longest stretches of language produced by pupils were whole sentences in French Y7, Y9 and German Y9; however, this production was controlled by prescribed vocabulary and grammatical structures. Across the 15 lessons, there was little opportunity for pupils to say more than individual words in the target language, and there was not one chance to say something that was of interest or relevance to them. Some teachers might argue that a focus on form and controlled activities are needed in the early stages of language learning, while in fact CLT

has many suggestions for communicative tasks for beginners. In our dataset, however, it was obvious that the dominance of form-focused activities did not diminish in Year 9.

Conclusion

The limited sample of 15 lessons clearly provides only a snapshot of MFL teaching at KS3, and critiques might rightly question the representativeness of this study. Nevertheless, the findings confirm those of Mitchell and Martin's (1997) research as well as the concerns expressed over the application of CLT in the NCMFL (e.g. Block 2002, Pachler 2000). While these earlier concerns were concerned with a 'partial' understanding of CLT principles, our classroom data, collected more than a decade later, suggest that there is by now hardly any understanding of these principles. The analysis showed a predominance of teacher-led and tightly controlled activities, entirely focused on linguistic form, which required minimal –if any- target language production by the pupils. At the same time, traces of CLT were still evident in teachers' use of pair/group work and activities such as discussions or games which have been promoted in CLT for their communicative potential. However, these activities were used purely for the practice of grammar and vocabulary, or, as was the case with some of the games, for no clear purpose at all. The controlled and extremely limited use of the target language throughout KS3 can be seen as a serious underestimation of pupils' cognitive and intellectual capability; at the same time it undermines their confidence in using the target language.

If the 15 lessons discussed in this study are representative, it is fair to speak of an MFL classroom culture of low expectations, lack of challenge, and light entertainment. It is possible that this culture has gradually developed as a result of the negative perceptions of MFL in England and of dwindling student numbers and that it reflects teachers' desire to make language learning look easy and fun. Clear signs for this desire were that several teachers in our data used various gimmicks (e.g. promising sweets, throwing stuffed toys at pupils to invite their response), and the high use of games is another example. However, these efforts may be counter-productive, as pupils may feel underrated and increasingly demotivated as they proceed through KS3, realising that they can do no more than reproducing individual words and phrases. The teaching practices observed in this study suggest that the earlier CLT-orientation has by now completely disappeared, and that current MFL teaching is dictated by the attainment targets that demand grammatical accuracy. It may be the tension between the demands from the attainment targets and the desire to make language learning attractive that has led to the teaching methodology observed in this study, which could be called 'grammar-translation in communicative disguise'.

It is important to stress again that this study was neither intended to identify deficiencies in teachers' practices, nor to promote CLT as the best approach to teaching languages. As stated earlier, the intention was to examine how the original NCMFL policy still influences contemporary teaching methodology. The demands of teaching MFL in face of negative public perceptions, the low status of this subject in secondary education, and particularly the difficulties of classroom management in schools with high numbers of less privileged and often demotivated students, are fully acknowledged. As mentioned earlier, the teachers in our sample were deeply committed, the atmosphere in their classrooms was friendly and constructive, and they all had good rapport with their pupils. At the same time, the teachers were working very hard in their lessons, while the pupils appeared to have a rather relaxed time. It is possible that these teachers have been socialised into

this undemanding entertainment culture without being aware of language learning theories or the CLT principles that originally influenced the teaching methodology in English secondary schools.

Certainly more research is needed to find out whether the teaching practices identified in this study are indeed widespread in KS3. This research should be accompanied by an investigation of teacher beliefs in order to establish what underpins their teaching practices. It would also be interesting to investigate to what extent MFL teacher training equips teachers with knowledge about language learning processes and teaching approaches that facilitate these processes. Lastly, more research needs to be done into pupils' perceptions of the activities they encounter in the MFL classroom. However, even without this research, it is fairly obvious that the current situation, particularly the continuing disengagement of pupils with language learning, requires urgent attention to curriculum planning and methodology. The guiding question must be what would make language learning more attractive to pupils.

It is likely that activities that pose real challenge would engage pupils more than 'fun' activities that require neither linguistic nor intellectual ability. If the emphasis has to remain on linguistic accuracy, then the language classroom should be accepted as the authentic context of language learning (van Lier 1996), and classroom communication should address the difficulties involved in learning words and grammatical structures in a foreign language. This would offer genuine challenges and chances for achievement. If, however, the goal of MFL teaching is to enable pupils to *use* the target language, communicative challenge must be brought into the MFL classroom. This could be achieved through activities that have 'interactional authenticity' (Andon and Eckerth 2009). Such activities do not necessarily reflect situations of future language use (e.g. tourist), but require pupils to interact over an information or opinion gap, solve a problem or share some personal information. These meaning-focused activities would allow a tolerance of errors, and their challenge would lie in the need to achieve clear outcomes. This challenge can be enhanced when an element of true competition is added to an activity. It is not difficult to see how some of the activities we observed could be re-designed as communicative, challenging and more engaging; however, in view of our research findings, it seems that a change in the current MFL classroom culture is needed, and that this change needs to be initiated by policy makers and curriculum designers. It remains to be seen whether the new National Curriculum for MFL (DfE 2013), with its explicit focus on linguistic competence, will enhance at least the linguistic challenge in MFL classrooms.

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[i] The textbook topics are in turn influenced by the topics for the GCSE examinations in England (e.g. My world, Myself and others, At home and abroad, Everyday activities).

[ii] The project was conducted by my colleague Nick Andon and me.