Linguistics & Modern Foreign Language (MFL) Teaching

Moving through Languages: Schools & Universities Working Together

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LINGUISTICS IN MFL TEACHING

× What is Linguistics?
× What can Linguistics do for MFL decline?

× Our project: how can teachers in schools and universities work together to do something about it?
1. What is linguistics?
What is linguistics?

- Language awareness
- Scientific study of language
- How (human) language works as a system
WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

OWNER SAID MEOW

HE UNDERSTANDS MY LANGUAGE
What is Linguistics?

Keep calm and espeak espanish.

This is a WUG.

Now there is another one.
There are two of them.
There are two _____.

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WHAT IS LINGUISTICS?
2. What can linguistics do for MFL decline?

- What are the benefits?
- Who benefits?
- Where's the evidence?
DIFFERENT WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT AND ENGAGING WITH LANGUAGES

EMPOWERING STUDENTS

CROSS-CURRICULAR LEARNING

RECRUITING NEW LINGUISTS

SCIENTIFIC/OBJECTIVE APPROACH

IMPROVE LANGUAGE LEARNING ITSELF!
**LINGUISTICS: THE BENEFITS**

**New ways of thinking about languages**
- **Scientific**, objective approach
- **Descriptive** rather than prescriptive or evaluative approach

**Empowering students**
- **Combat linguistic misconceptions** and prejudices
- **Ownership** of their unique way of speaking ("idiolect")
- Taking away pressure that they’re not “native” speakers
- ‘instill an appreciation of the universality of human cognition and also of human diversity’ (Tortora 2017:4)

**Recruitment**
- Attract different/new kinds of students to the study of languages

**Cross-curricular learning**
- Empirical investigation and scientific theory formation (‘STEM’ skills)
- **Accessibility**: ‘hands-on’ research (for free!)
- Intersects with sciences, maths, history, geography, sociology, PSHE...

**Language learning!**
- raising metalinguistic and sociolinguistic awareness
The student perspective

‘I appreciate my ability to speak a second language fluently much more than I did before, too, and I find myself picking up little differences in how people say things in French’
- Danielle

‘Linguistics has made me more interested in learning new languages and has also made it easier than before’
- Valentin

‘I found it fascinating that there are so many different sounds in other languages that aren’t in English or Spanish. Now I am also very interested in studying another language’
- Eric

Loosen (2014:270–271)
‘Linguistics allows you to explore languages in a whole different dimension. I have learned more about word formation/morphology and observed the structure of words in different languages’
- Kenedy

‘Not only have the things I learned expanded my knowledge of the study of languages, but they’ve opened my eyes to ways the world works’
- Kylie

Linguistics gives us an appreciation of the complexity that language is. I [was] fascinated by trying to discover patterns in how and why we do what was observed. That’s one of my favorite parts of linguistics—being able to apply it to real life
- Gianna

Loosen (2014:270–271)
‘Linguistics touches everything and is involved in any and every possible topic [...] This makes this one the class where really the questions or points of interest are limitless as to what people can do... That kind of connection to humanity was what I learned from linguistics, all things people have ever learned depended on language’ – James

Loosen (2014:270–271)
3. Benefits in the UK (MFL) context
Our Project

AIM: get Linguistics into the MFL curriculum

× Address decline in MFL study in schools and universities
  × Drop in GCSE entries from early 1990s, not helped by languages becoming optional after age 14 (only 49% in 2014)
  × Drop in A-level entries (and knock-on effect at university level)
  × Growing divide (state vs. independent sector; gender; socio-economic groups)
× Long-held views that MFL study is inherently difficult and that marking criteria for A-levels are tougher than in other subjects

(cf. Tinsley & Doležal 2018; Corr et al. 2019)
WHY?
**WHY NOT?**

× Current A-level spec: distinction between language **skills** vs. **content** (= literature, film, history, culture)
  × Language as a ‘skill’ – but it can be much more than that!
× Linguistics is already written into the A-level!
× English Language A-level engages with English itself in a nuanced and insightful way:
  × sociolinguistic variation, linguistic analysis, phonetics, semantics, pragmatics, language acquisition, stylistics, language change, language attitudes
WHY NOT?

× We can do the same for MFL!
  × Attract new kinds of students to the study of languages at A-level and beyond;
  × Bridge the content/skills gap in MFL A-level spec
    × In line with the university context
  × Enhance the linguistic skills of A-level linguists by raising their metalinguistic and sociolinguistic awareness
WHAT’S OUR PROJECT DOING ABOUT IT?

The ‘Linguistics in MFL Project’:

- Introductory mini-courses for French, German and Spanish linguistics
- 4x 50-minute interactive lessons
- delivered by teachers with some background in linguistics

http://www.linguisticsinmfl.co.uk / @inmfl
Linguistics has the potential to help students with their language skills in interesting and nuanced ways.

Grammar is not really a list of constructions to be employed; it is an ever-changing system with rules and intricate interactions, used in different ways by different speakers.

Understanding this, and how linguistic differences can encode social differences, is an essential skill for anyone wanting to use language authentically.
Language or dialect?

- What is a dialect?
- Are there any dialects of English?
- Are there any dialects of French?
- Why is Occitan (France) a language and Neapolitan (Italy) a dialect?

“A language is a dialect with an army and navy” (Max Weinreich)
Introducing the IPA
(International Phonetic Alphabet)

- The IPA allows us to represent the sounds of a language, regardless of its spelling system.

- Can you guess what these English words are?
  - [rəʊn]
  - [kæt]
  - [mæt]
  - [lɪt(ə)rtʃ] (cat)
  - [θaʊ.ˈæt] (thought)
  - [ˈɡɒdʒəs] (glasses)

German in the IPA

- Can you work out what these German words are?
  - [ˈblʊma] = Blume
  - [ˈʃvaɪna] = Schweine
  - [ˈbuːx] = Buch
  - [ˈʃvaɪl] = Schule
  - [ˈtrvɔlf] = zwölf
  - [ˈbʁʏka] = Brücke
  - [pfeːsə] = Pfeiffer
  - [ˈpiːɡəlt] = Spiegelbild

- Is this easier in German or in English? Why?

'THE SOUNDS OF GERMAN'
Spoken vs. written grammar

- **Suffixal and prefixal grammar in verbs**
  - The written language carries grammatical information in the suffix of the verb.
  - The spoken language tends to carry this information in prefixes: the subject pronouns do most of this work:
    - je donnais [ʒe.ðɔ̃]  
    - tu donnais [tu.ðɔ̃]  
    - il donnait [il.ðɔ̃]  
    - nous donnions [nu.dɔ̃jɔ̃]  
    - on donnait [ɔ̃.dɔ̃]  
    - vous donnez [vu.ðɔ̃ʒ]  
    - ils donnaient [il.dɔ̃]  

Verb morphology

- **Suffixal and prefixal grammar in verbs**
  - Similarly, in spoken French, gender and number are marked via the article before the noun, whereas written French marks gender and number at the end of the noun in the suffix:
    - Le chat [le.ʃat]  
    - Les chats [le.ʃa]  
    - La table [la.tabl]  
    - Des tables [de.tabl]
  - Written verb morphology likely approximates 12th century French!
The history of word order

- They all share the order Phrase – Verb – subject (e.g. Object – Verb – Subject), i.e. the verb is always placed in second position, unlike Modern Spanish, where the most common word order in unmarked contexts is Subject – Verb – Object.
- This is a rule known as Verb Second (V2), which used to be active in Old Spanish (and is still active in modern languages like German).
- But has V2 disappeared at all from Modern Spanish? Can you think of any contexts in the modern language where the Object – Verb – Subject order is required?

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Feedback: Evidence of the Benefits (So Far...)

Did Students Learn New Things About the Study of Language/Language Awareness?

👍 YES:
by the end of the course, everyone could define linguistics (or made a good stab at it)*

* In answer to the question ‘How would you describe linguistics to a friend?’.

Beforehand, around 20% ‘didn’t know’ or gave inaccurate responses.
**FEEDBACK: EVIDENCE OF THE BENEFITS (SO FAR...)**

**DID STUDENTS BECOME MORE INTERESTED IN THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE/LINGUISTICS?**

👍 **YES:**

25% students had read something about linguistics before the course

60% said that they intended to read more about linguistics afterwards*

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*on a scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), 59.2% ‘agreed’ or ‘strongly agreed’ with the statement ‘having the taken the course, I intend to read some more about linguistics’.
FEEDBACK: EVIDENCE OF THE BENEFITS (SO FAR...)

**DID STUDENTS FEEL THEIR LANGUAGE SKILLS HAD BENEFITED?**

👍 YES:
students agreed that ‘learning a bit about linguistics has helped me with my language skills’*

*on a scale of 1-5 (strongly disagree to strongly agree), with a median result of 4.
FEEDBACK: EVIDENCE OF THE BENEFITS (SO FAR...)

 DID TEACHERS OBSERVE ANY BENEFITS?

👍 YES:

 × The lesson was helpful for my students (92.3%)
 × Students seem interested and engaged (91.8%)
 × Lessons triggered discussion on further topics, debates, language comparisons, independent research
× Popularity of UKLO
× GROC initiative (successful in Spain at introducing Linguistics into university entrance exams)
× LSA: introduce Linguistics as (A-level equivalent) subject in American high schools
× LISTEN! Initiative (linking up with educators around the world)
WHAT NEXT?

× Join our MFL A-level pilot for 2019/20!
× Adopt a linguist!
× Try out the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to pronounce words from any language
× Have a go at some linguistics puzzles from UKLO
× Visit our Linguistics in MFL website to find out more...

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THANK YOU!

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