

"How can teachers help pupils to learn?"

Since the late 1980s, raising the standards of learning has been high on the government’s agenda. According to Black and William (1998) ‘national curriculum testing, the development of the GCSE, league tables of school performance, initiatives to improve school planning and management, target setting and more frequent and thorough inspection’ have all figured highly in the endeavour to raise learning standards. However, it seems despite its efforts, the government has failed to query how teachers can raise the standards and help pupils to learn. Furthermore, Black and William (1998) have pointed out the challenges that teachers face within the classroom, where it is the responsibility of teachers to channel ‘the personal, emotional and social pressure amongst a group of 30 or so youngsters in order to help them learn now, and to become better learners in the future.’ According to the Teaching Standards (2012), ‘a teacher must set high expectations which inspire, motivate and challenge pupils, promote good progress and outcomes by pupils, demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge, plan and teach well-structured lessons, adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils, make accurate and productive use of assessment, manage behaviour effectively to ensure a good and safe learning environment,’ as well as fulfilling ‘wider professional responsibilities.’

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‘A teacher opens up unknown or only half-suspected areas of skill or knowledge; he makes things clear; he makes things as simple as possible. He enables pupils to do more things and to understand them better.’ (Marland, 1975) The following essay aims to establish how teachers can achieve this ideal described by Marland. The essay will analyse how teachers can help pupils to learn, focussing particularly on areas such as lesson planning, management of the learning environment and the use of ICT in the classroom. It will also discuss the importance of neuroscience, learning theorists, teachers’ subject knowledge and understanding as well as teacher-pupil relationships in the endeavours of teachers to help pupils to learn. In addition to referencing relevant literature, I have reflected upon my own observations and experiences as a trainee teacher of modern foreign languages in the secondary school, in order to examine the range of factors which can influence pupils’ learning.

An integral part of teaching is lesson planning, which tends to be a major concern for the trainee-teacher. In order to create an effective lesson plan, which helps pupils learn, teachers must consider; school policy, learning objectives – setting them as well as achieving them and make effective use of their time resources.

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According to Wallace and Kirkman (2007), when preparing a lesson plan it is helpful to consider school policy and to 'take into account school initiatives' for example raising boys' achievement. At my placement school, there is a policy of promoting numeracy and literacy across the curriculum, so I must take this into account when planning my lesson. For example, when giving the class a worked example, I made the mistake of writing a sentence on the board that began with the word *aussi* which means *also* in French. This is not grammatically correct either in English or in French. My mentor made me aware of this error and ever since, I have made an effort to include my worked examples on my lesson plans, so errors such as this, which may be detrimental to the pupils' literacy and indeed their learning, do not occur.

It has been suggested that a good lesson plan will 'set clear objectives that are understood' easily by pupils as well as other teachers (Wallace and Kirkman, 2007). According to Elliot (2007) when setting learning objectives, teachers should 'think in terms of what the pupils need to know, understand, or be able to do at the end of the lesson or a series of lessons rather than what you are going to *teach* them.' It is important to draw on the scheme of work and pupils' previous knowledge when establishing learning objectives as there may be prior learning that pupils can adapt with help in order to better their understanding and therefore further their learning. My mentor has suggested that the most effective lesson objectives are simple and succinct so that the pupils can easily understand them and know what to expect from the lesson as well as what is expected of them. Moreover she has advised that the learning objective should be apparent to the pupils throughout the lesson so that each task they complete can be recognised as purposeful to their learning. Some teachers may struggle to break down their subject into neat chunks, as their subject knowledge is so vast, but must recognise the benefits of this, namely by giving pupils a clear direction, a teacher can help pupils to learn.

It is the responsibility of the teacher to ensure that 'pupils achieve productive outcomes' (Wallace and Kirkman, 2007); the teacher may plan how they are going to sequence the learning of their pupils so that it is as effective as possible. Bruner's theory that pupils learn through structured interventions can be applied here, an effective lesson plan might include the questions that the teacher is going to ask the pupils in order to 'focus the child's thinking' (Fleming, 2004) or how they are going to use activities and materials 'to develop pupils' understanding.' Taking the sequence of the teaching into account in a lesson plan can help teachers' build the *scaffolding* advocated by Bruner (1983) which therefore allows the teacher to promote the pupils' learning. I have witnessed *scaffolding* take place in single lessons, across a series of lessons and when crossing the bridge between KS3 and KS4.

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Lesson planning should take into account different learning styles, and the teaching methods used should 'enable all pupils to learn effectively' (Wallace and Kirkman, 2007). In other words, the teacher must adapt their teaching in order to adhere to different learning styles. However, appealing to the different learning styles is no easy task, especially when considering class size and individual needs. Many educators prescribe to the idea of visual, auditory and kinaesthetic learning styles (VAK) (Fleming, 2004). Although one could argue that a person cannot be exclusively sorted into just one group, but rather may be on a spectrum of learning styles and that this may differ depending on many factors, such as the subject they are learning. From what I have witnessed within the foreign languages classroom, I would argue that a variety of different activities might be employed in one lesson, this range of techniques help pupils to learn whilst developing the different learning styles and also helps the teacher to *scaffold* pupils' learning. For example, I have witnessed the use of objects and flashcards to present new vocabulary in a visual way, over-exaggeration when pronouncing words also helps pupils to see how they need to move their mouths in order to say the vocabulary correctly. Secondly, the new vocabulary is repeated by the teacher and the pupils numerous times, helping auditory learners in particular. Usually, a subsequent listening exercise enables the pupils to listen to the vocabulary in a different context. Next, the pupils will be required to complete a reading exercise, so that they can see the new vocabulary spelt correctly and see how it can be used in a sentence before they are eventually given the task of writing notes or produce a piece of their own written work, which appeals to those with a tendency towards kinaesthetic learning. By differentiating and appealing to a range of learning styles, teachers can help pupils to learn whilst developing learning styles that may not come as naturally.

Assessment is an important characteristic of lesson plans. The teacher should plan when they are going to collect exercise books and homework. Assessment can aid learning in a number of ways depending on the type of assessment used. Haydn (2003) states that diagnostic assessment is 'designed specifically to probe misunderstandings or barriers to learning and so provide suggestions for ways forward' whilst formative assessment 'can give pupils an awareness of their comparative strengths and weaknesses and priorities for future learning.' Thus, the purpose of assessment should be to aid pupils' learning in the future more than to test what they already know. In addition, keeping a record of attainment levels either digitally or in a mark book may prompt the teacher into reminding students how they need to improve their work in order to achieve higher attainment levels. One could argue that a teacher that regularly and thoroughly assesses their pupils' work is more likely to help their pupils to learn.

Wallace and Kirkman (2007) also advise that the lesson plan should ensure that the teacher can make effective use of time and resources. In order to combat the risk of undermining the development of

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pupils' understandings, a teacher should allocate enough time for each task so that they do not end up in a situation where they are simply telling pupils the answers. Effective use of time means that the pupils have time to problem solve themselves, supported by the teacher in their learning. Foreign language lessons at my placement school are typically 50 minutes in length; therefore good classroom management is a prerequisite if the teacher is to ensure that all of the learning outcomes are to be achieved. The teacher must carefully plan how long is to be spent on each activity, and carefully select resources that will be the most beneficial to their pupils. That being said, the teacher must also be flexible in terms of time and resources, for example if an essential activity is taking longer than anticipated or certain resources are unavailable or not working.

In any classroom that is to be conducive to learning, it is essential that the teacher is capable of managing the pupils' behaviour. In the modern languages classroom, behaviour management can at first be tricky, especially when teaching predominantly in the target language. It is therefore important to develop routines early on, so that pupils know from the outset what is expected of them. Pupils need rules and firm and consistent teachers. Research by Wragg (1984) concluded that pupils prefer teachers that are 'understanding, friendly and firm.' Furthermore Marland (1975) indicates that strict teachers create more effective learning environments, their expectations are evident from the outset and therefore 'the strict teacher creates the peace which is necessary for any positive relationship' and as this essay will discuss, positive relationships are key to pupils' learning.

In order to prevent misbehaviour, Marland suggests that the teacher should be prepared to receive the class in order to manage behaviour from the outset. 'Be in the room first if at all possible. Unpack and lay out your personal papers and books rapidly and neatly... Check quickly that the room is in order... This preliminary early settling in is very helpful.' Davison (2003) recommends taking advantage of the norms that pupils have become accustomed to with all of their teachers, for example 'going in [to the classroom] and sitting down quietly when they arrive, collecting and returning books, getting equipment out...' Secondly, he advises that teacher's 'lay the ground rules' and adhere to the school's policies on reward and discipline. Teachers at my placement school utilise the consequences system and praise system, but they also agree on classroom rules with their classes, getting the pupils involved in a sort of contract, which effectively avoids confrontation because pupils' defence that they 'didn't know' they were doing something wrong or that it's simply 'not fair' that they are being punished. Nonetheless, if confrontation were to arise, Marland (1975) states that the teacher is essentially the leader of the classroom and must therefore be prepared to dominate the learning environment in order to control it.

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In order to be able to manage the learning environment, the teacher must be able to communicate effectively with their pupils. The teacher's 'response, both verbally and non-verbally in any classroom situation influences the immediate and, possibly, long term relationship with the class. (Capel, Strangwick and Whitehead, 2003) Research suggests that more than 70% of what we communicate is through non-verbal expression. The use of facial expression, eye contact, gesture, mime and how the voice is used may be key in helping pupils to learn through the building of positive teacher-pupil relationships. Grey (2009) states that 'The institute of Child Health in London found that, at puberty the ability to recognize the expressions on people's faces significantly declines, with boys finding it particularly difficult.' This relates in particular to negative emotions such as anger and sadness which can be difficult for those going through puberty to identify due to hormonal changes in the brain. It may therefore be necessary for teachers to use other forms of non-verbal expression such as eye contact, body language or even their position in the classroom, alongside facial expression in order to communicate effectively with their pupils.

In addition, it is important that teachers are respectful and understanding when communicating with their pupils. According to most of my colleagues, shouting is off limits. The voice should be manipulated to gain attention and convey mood, without shrieking or shouting because this can 'be damaging for both your voice and your relationships with the children' (Grey, 2009)

Management of the learning environment depends largely on good teacher-pupil relationships. It is imperative that teachers establish positive relationships with their pupils. According to Rimm-Kauffman (2012), 'improving students' relationships with teachers has important positive and long-lasting implications for students' academic and social development.' Rimm-Kauffman acknowledges that improving relationships alone will not necessarily lead to higher academic achievement but indicates that students who benefit from more positive, supportive teacher-pupil relationships are more likely to gain higher levels of achievement than their contemporaries who do not foster such ties with their teachers. This theory corresponds with the significance of social learning theorised by Vygotsky and the concept of the zone of proximal development (1962) 'what a child can do today in co-operation, tomorrow he will be able to do on his own.' However, without the confidence to be able to learn through talk, brought about by a positive teacher-pupil relationship, such learning may not take place.

In addition, the pupils need to feel that their contributions matter, and have the confidence to *fail*. The teacher can govern this through their use of praise and encouragement to all pupils when they show capability in any area. According to Fleming (2004) 'This will help to build pupils' self-esteem, which in turn will help their performance in all areas' including motivation and learning.

With a view to fostering relationships with pupils and ensure good classroom management, Marland

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recommends learning pupils' names as quickly as possible and asking colleagues for background information about them, and talking to the pupils, taking an interest in them and their hobbies and pastimes. He also recommends exploiting duties such as corridor monitoring and bus supervision as this provides the opportunity to see pupils in different contexts.

The impact teacher-pupil relationships have on pupil-pupil relationships can have a considerable effect on pupils' learning. According to Keenan (2002) Vygotsky's theory of social interaction and the more knowledgeable other has led to educational devices such as reciprocal teaching which relates to the idea that *docendo discimus* (we learn by teaching). 'Reciprocal teaching is a method of using peers to foster dialogues about a subject matter such that they provide a level which is beyond the individual child's capability but within their zone of proximal development.' (Brown and Palinscar, 1982). Encouraging pupils to discuss subject matter in the classroom can help their learning, as 'pupil-pupil exchanges are unusual occurrences and yet seem to yield most in terms of pupil engagement and exploratory talk giving rise to real thinking.' (Cazden, 1998)

Management of the learning environment also concerns the environment itself. The learning environment should stimulate interest and engagement. According to Grey (2009) the classroom displays should be appropriate to current learning and learning resources in their own right, this can assist the teacher in supporting the pupils' independent learning. In addition, Cowley (2005) asserts that classroom and corridor displays should incorporate the pupils' work and be inclusive of all the children who attend the school because this helps their self-esteem and their creativity, which therefore aids their learning. The foreign languages classrooms at my placement schools are adorned with useful phrases that encourage the pupils' to communicate in the target language for purposes that are not always necessarily subject related, providing them with the opportunity for 'real' communication for example a pupil may ask another pupil if they can borrow a piece of equipment. Furthermore, the colourful displays also help pupils' to become independent learners. At the school, there is currently a strong campaign for independent learning; a policy called *SEE 3B4ME* has been put in place which means that a pupil must consult three resources and or people, before asking the teacher for help. Informative and interactive displays are advantageous for this reason, and each teacher's classroom is therefore suitably decorated with this policy in mind. The teachers are of the opinion that the pupils' learning benefits from a stimulating learning environment that the pupils can use as a resource.

The use of information and communication technology (ICT) in schools is of ever increasing importance. Leask (2003) has pointed out that 'the rapid pace of development in ICT software and hardware is forcing everyone who uses the technology to undergo a process of continual learning.' Gone are the days when *computing science* was just another optional KS4 curriculum subject, (Russell,

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2001) the information age has brought about a new era for education; an era in which educational institutions are reliant upon computers, for administration as well as education. ICT is now a compulsory subject at KS3 and is used to teach other subjects, such as mathematics, sciences and foreign languages.

According to the Office for National Statistics (2012) 21 million households in Great Britain (80 per cent) had Internet access in 2012, compared with 19 million (77 per cent) in 2011. It may be therefore safe to assume that all secondary school pupils have access to a computer and the internet, be it at school or at home. This fact, coupled with the fact that many schools now have 'useful websites and intranets' (Leask, 2003) means that pupils are able to continue and extend the learning they have done at school, with online access to the textbooks and software that were previously only available in the school environment. Teachers can take advantage of the wealth of technology that is now at our fingertips in order to help pupils learn. Studies have shown that in schools where ICT is embraced pupils tend to learn more within a given amount of time, demonstrate an increased enjoyment, as well as holding more positive attitudes towards computers and technologies (Kulik, 1994).

ICT is an extremely useful tool in helping pupils to learn. Some schools employ ICT as the main method of teaching and learning, with a view to promote independent learning and increase computer literacy. This policy has been employed at a local school in North Lincolnshire, the policy is that pupils are autonomous in their learning, traditional customs such as timetables and fixed period lessons have been replaced with independent learning in an open plan environment, with pupils working at computer stations and receiving small group tutorials at various times during the day. It could be argued that the dependence on technology, has resulted in the fact that according to Ofsted 'Too much teaching is pedestrian or lacks spark' and that there is not enough opportunity for pupils to be 'actively involved in their own learning through discussions, debates and problem solving in teams.' (Ofsted Inspection Report, 2012)

The pupils currently attending secondary school have grown up in the information age, many are adept at using modern technologies before they reach secondary education and are interested in what they have to offer. Teachers can engage pupils' interest in their subject by adapting, adopting and amending materials on-line, creating dynamic resources and presentations, encouraging communication and input through 'non-standard' mediums such as e-mail or post-box, using specialised software, and using the internet to access authentic materials. Furthermore, according to the National Council for Educational Technology (NCET) (1994) research shows that ICT can help teachers help pupils to learn.

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Due to the fact that 'IT can provide a safe and non-threatening environment for learning' (NCET, 1994), pupils are able to research, work and assess themselves individually; they can submit their work electronically to the teacher using software such as Post-box without intimidation. At my placement school, pupils enjoy the process of submitting their work electronically and can have their work corrected in real time without the trepidation of criticism from their peers. Moreover, it could be argued that the electronic marking of work is less menacing than its manual counterpart, because errors can be easily highlighted using colour coding for example, and the pupil can then correct these errors without necessarily having to rewrite entire paragraphs. Furthermore, this could mean that pupils may be more motivated to correct and redraft their work, and thus enhance their own learning.

In addition, 'IT has the flexibility to meet the individual needs and abilities of each student.' (NCET, 1994) which means that employing technology is a useful way of promoting inclusive learning and differentiating between pupils of different abilities and learning styles without marginalising pupils by making their differences obvious, for example by distributing different coloured worksheets for different abilities. I have witnessed French lessons in the ICT suite where teachers have assigned pupils different tasks depending on which area of the subject or topic they are struggling with, which helps their learning.

'Computers give students the chance to achieve where they have previously failed.' (NCET, 1994) For example, in my placement school, when GCSE classes receive feedback for their end of unit tests, they spend a lesson in the ICT suite, correcting and redrafting their work using Microsoft Word. This allows for analysis of their work whilst adhering to the key process from the MFL Programme of Study (2012) which states that 'pupils should be able to redraft their writing to improve accuracy and quality' (key process 2.2h). Dependent on different learning styles, teachers may be able to adapt their teaching resources to help pupils to learn, 'Difficult ideas are made more understandable when information technology makes them visible.' (NCET, 1994) This may be particularly true for pupils with a tendency towards visual learning, or those who struggle with reading. Teachers may help pupils to learn by taking their needs into account and utilising technology to explain difficult concepts. For example, I was teaching the *passé composé* to a low ability year eight class and decided to use an adapted version of the game *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* on the interactive whiteboard, this worked more successfully than writing a set of grammar rules on the board and expecting pupils to learn them. This way, pupils were able to see a range of possible answers and choose the correct one, applying their own set of rules.

According to NCET (1994) 'IT is particularly successful in holding the attention of pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties.' I have witnessed evidence of this in a high ability year 7 class;

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their teacher occasionally takes the class into the ICT suite to use foreign languages software. A pupil who suffers from behavioural, emotional and social difficulties thrives in an environment where he is able to work individually and at his own pace. The pupil in question is also gifted and talented and has stated that he enjoys using computers for language learning, especially when there are listening exercises involved as he is not so easily distracted.

One must take into account the fact that 'students make more effective use of computers if teachers know how and when to intervene.' (NCET, 1994) Therefore, behaviour management should be carefully considered when thinking about letting pupils use computers during a lesson. Firstly, according to Leask (2003) one should not 'let pupils sit at computers while you are talking to them at the introduction of a lesson.' This was a mistake I made whilst teaching my first lesson in an ICT suite. The pupils were distracted and eager to log on to the machines and therefore could not concentrate on the instructions I was giving them. Secondly Leask outlines that teachers should not 'leave pupils for the whole lesson just working on their task with no intervention to remind them of the educational purpose.' It is essential that the teacher keeps the pupils on task in order to help their learning; software that allows a teacher to view the screens of their students is helpful for behaviour management as well as assessment for learning.

In the modern foreign languages classroom, I have seen ICT used effectively. New technologies play a strong, although not dominant role, with personal computers, interactive whiteboards readily available in every classroom and laptops and e-readers available for reservation. The internet has made foreign language dictionaries accessible to everyone. There are also a number of websites that can help pupils learn more about foreign cultures as well as the language, for example foreign newspapers that are published online as well as websites offering digital radio channels. Communication with native speakers of foreign languages has never been so readily available, through the use of email and voice over internet protocols such as Skype; teachers can help pupils learn foreign languages through the 'real communication' they crave (Macdonald 1993) by putting them in touch with their contemporaries at partner schools abroad.

Furthermore, devices such as YouTube can be used to give pupils an insight into the culture of native speakers, and software like Audacity can be employed to record pupils' conversations in the target language and then edited by the teacher in order to point out areas where improvement may be needed. Software which accompanies school textbooks has eliminated the need for audio cassettes, therefore saving time. Furthermore this software can be put onto the school intranet and accessed by pupils from home, at any time of their choosing. On the other hand, Kulik (1994) notes that despite the successes of ICT in the classroom, research found that computer use did not necessarily benefit all pupils, all of

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the time. Principally, there are considerations that must be made involving teaching and learning styles.

To conclude, the answer to the question '*how can teachers help pupils to learn?*' is not a simple one. Primarily, teachers must take their surroundings into account, considering how they can use the layout and decoration to their advantage, whilst also communicating with their pupils in a firm but friendly manner using the behaviour and rewards systems to discipline and motivate pupils, at the same time forming positive relationships with their pupils that encourage pupil participation. Secondly, teachers need to plan their lessons effectively taking into account; school policy, learning objectives that will lead to productive outcomes by appealing to different learning styles so that all pupils can learn effectively in a limited period of time. Finally teachers can use ICT to engage the children of the information age in a safe and non-threatening way that gives the opportunity for achievement to pupils with various learning styles; however it must be noted that it is the teacher that instructs the lesson and not the technology. If a teacher can take the factors mentioned in this essay into account, when planning and executing their lessons and organising their classrooms, they are more likely to succeed at helping pupils to learn.

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