

# Language Futures and the future of language learning: lessons for the mainstream languages classroom and beyond

Dr Rachel Hawkes

LANGUAGE WORLD FRIDAY 23 MARCH 2018: MARY GLASGOW PLENARY LECTURE

---

Language Futures (<https://www.all-languages.org.uk/research-practice/language-futures/>) is a highly personalised, innovative and creative approach to language teaching and learning suitable for both primary and secondary schools. It has been designed to foster deep learner engagement and to enable students to take responsibility for their own learning which they are encouraged to extend beyond the classroom.

Successful language learning requires positive motivation, sustained effort and, above all, time. It needs enthusiastic, resourceful teachers and resilient, independent learners who embrace challenge. There is no perfect recipe and one size will never fit all because the process is dynamic, in constant flux and relies on interpersonal relationships.

This talk explores the findings of a two-year research study looking at Language Futures, an innovative approach to language learning. The findings have implications for the mainstream languages classroom, for all of us as language teachers. In particular, we examine crucial messages about choice and motivation, student autonomy, project-based learning, and the all-important learning beyond the classroom.

*Dr Rachel Hawkes is the Education Researcher for Language Futures. Rachel has a PhD from Cambridge University, focusing on teacher and learner interaction in secondary languages.*

The approach was originally developed by Linton Village College, Cambridgeshire and is funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Management of the initiative passed to the Association for Language Learning in summer 2015. A research study exploring and evaluating the impact of the Language Futures approach on learners, teachers, and the wider school community was carried out over 2015-2017 with an official launch of the study's findings at Language World 2018 as part of the Mary Glasgow Plenary Lecture on Friday 23 March delivered by Dr Rachel Hawkes.

## **Implications for the mainstream languages classroom:**

The findings of this study resonate with previous findings that motivation for language learning is, for secondary learners in England, largely dependent on classroom learning experiences. The motivational aspects of the Language Futures (LF) approach have implications for mainstream classroom practice, in particular with respect to development of student autonomy and project-based learning. However, the purpose of research inquiry is, first and foremost, an in-depth understanding of the object of study, and must avoid the temptation to leap to prescription. There is always a tension here in educational research, as the frenetic nature of teaching in schools gives teachers an appetite for practical recommendations for change that address their immediate priorities. On the other hand, it is hard to claim a *raison d'être* for research that has nothing to say to practitioners! Mindful of this pedagogical imperative, therefore, this section of the report suggests potential applications to classroom language teaching, aware that it runs the risk of failing to reflect the full complexities of language teaching, teacher and learner differences, which are better reflected in the full research report.



# Language Futures and the future of language learning: lessons for the mainstream languages classroom and beyond

Dr Rachel Hawkes

LANGUAGE WORLD FRIDAY 23 MARCH 2018: MARY GLASGOW PLENARY LECTURE

---

## 1. The motivational power of choice

When learners make choices they tend to take more responsibility for their learning. Increasing the range and variety of ways in which we offer choice to students in their language learning may improve motivation. This might include a choice of words to learn for vocabulary tests, using 'Surprise Me!' homework tasks more often, or considering how to make classroom tasks more open-ended.

## 2. Language mentors

The support of additional adults or older learners in the classroom, as role models, conduits of culture, one-to-one explainers of structures or vocabulary, is invaluable. All teachers know students whose understanding is suddenly accelerated when they spend a few minutes after-school with them individually. This is often done as an intervention in response to an identified lack of progress. We might usefully consider the benefits of recruiting community volunteer mentors or sixth-form mentors to support classes from the start of Year 7. Providing additional learning support in the classroom earlier for learners may promote less anxiety for lower attaining learners and more stretch for higher attaining learners.

Many schools no longer employ foreign language assistants (FLAs). Evidence from the vast majority of schools in the study suggest that there are, more often than not, adults and sixth-formers (within school and the local community) who can provide in-class support. There are models of this sort of support already in some schools. Examples include:

- Sixth form enrichment, in which students support lower school classes.
- Sixth form afterschool lesson programme, in which students take responsibility for planning and delivering additional support lessons to Year 7 students.
- Adult community volunteers, who come into lessons once a week to classes of Year 7 and Year 8 students.
- Adult learners in lessons, a project in which adults join a GCSE class and learn alongside students, indirectly modelling mature learning behaviours and linguistic thinking.

## 3. Autonomy

Most students in the programme articulated their enthusiasm for LF because it allows them to work at their own pace. For some students, this undoubtedly means a slower pace than the mainstream classroom, and we return to this in the section on mastery, but other students are seemingly held back in the mainstream classroom because they are ready to make links for themselves and work more independently. They relish the opportunity that LF gives them to do this in their language learning. There was also evidence that students transfer greater levels of agency to other subjects, including their first foreign language, but also other curriculum subjects. Students refer to not relying on the teacher, taking responsibility for what they learn, asking more questions, and wanting to find out more.

In discussion with these students, they envisage an 'ideal scenario' in which there is a mix of direct teacher-led instruction and more independent work. Interestingly, they suggest that the independent work would not always follow instruction, but that they would sometimes have the chance to discover for themselves and then have a teacher-led lesson to take the learning on further or confirm their hypotheses. These were higher attaining students, typically boys. This could be part of an answer to how we might engage certain higher ability boys in language learning.



## Language Futures and the future of language learning: lessons for the mainstream languages classroom and beyond

Dr Rachel Hawkes

LANGUAGE WORLD FRIDAY 23 MARCH 2018: MARY GLASGOW PLENARY LECTURE

---

### 4. Mastery

Lower attaining students overwhelmingly appreciated LF because they had more time to master content, vocabulary and grammar. Their levels of anxiety and frustration in the mainstream classroom, where things moved on too quickly, and they didn't feel able to ask questions, were clearly in evidence from the interviews. The relief of being able to elaborate their new learning over several lessons, the constant repetition, and the learner satisfaction afforded by having the time to work on small project-type tasks involving making and doing, were a key component of learner enjoyment of the LF programme. At KS4, as schools move towards greater inclusion, teachers will inevitably begin to focus on the mastery of key structures and vocabulary that students absolutely need for success at foundation tier. It would seem useful for this to start in Year 7 with a 'pruning' of overall content to allow time and space for mastery of this core language.

### 5. Project-based learning

Students in all the different LF models where projects were a key feature reported high levels of enjoyment. One of the reasons that projects worked so well in some LF models was that it allowed students to work with the same key language for longer, allowing better mastery of it. However, this is not the only significant feature of PBL – it was clear from the research that the dual features of working towards a practical outcome and purpose, as well as having an audience, were also important for motivation.

### 6. Culture

Students who might not be intrinsically motivated by language can be motivated by culture. In addition, students who are interested in the language can also be further motivated by engagement with the culture. So, for all students, a culture-rich curriculum is likely to be more motivating.

### 7. Developing the ecology of the mainstream classroom

It is clear that students within the LF classroom are less anxious and exhibit higher levels of student agency than many (not all!) mainstream languages classrooms. One measure of this is the number of questions students typically ask. In the LF classroom, students tend to ask quite a lot of questions, often not of the LF teacher, but rather of their mentor or their peers. There are many possible reasons why this could be the case, but two reasons suggested by this research are:

- Asking questions in small groups is much more face-saving than in front of a class of 30 learners.
- They have more questions to ask because far less is explained to them. The onus is on them to find things out for themselves and they know this.

The following are tentative suggestions for ways we as teachers could adapt conditions in the classroom to reduce anxiety and reticence, and to promote active enquiry and risk-taking amongst our students:

- Re-programme ourselves as teachers to bounce questions from students on to other students.
- Actively promote and solicit question-asking from students by rewarding them explicitly for it.
- Explicitly teach and revisit often target language question-forming in our curricula.
- Use pair and group configurations to generate more questions, getting them to try out their spoken questions on each other first in a face-saving situation before expecting them to use them in whole-class discourse.

# Language Futures and the future of language learning: lessons for the mainstream languages classroom and beyond

Dr Rachel Hawkes



LanguageFutures

LANGUAGE WORLD FRIDAY 23 MARCH 2018: MARY GLASGOW PLENARY LECTURE

---

## 8. Paradigm for an LF sequence in whole-class teaching

Recurring themes throughout the study associated with higher levels of engagement are: choice, controlling the pace and scope of one's learning, open-ended tasks and projects, and collaborative working in pairs or small groups. Here is one suggestion for an LF-style learning sequence, as it might look in the mainstream languages classroom:

Lesson objective: To make a phone reservation for a hotel stay in a TL country

1. Introduction of the project task (in the target language).
2. Whole class brainstorm of language needed (depends on the stage in the scheme of work where the lesson occurs, but this brainstorm may include some TL and some English).
3. Scaffolded whole-class 'harvesting' of known TL structures (i.e. language and structures that students have previously mastered that would also work in this context – e.g. I would like / Do you have?)
4. Group work to generate all the language needed for the dialogue (teacher is a facilitator during this phase – students use own resources, dictionaries, textbooks, iPads, etc...)
5. Language rehearsal in pairs / groups.
6. Recording (or live performance) so that there is an outcome / audience for the work.
7. Peer and/or teacher evaluation, as appropriate.

Useful additions to this sequence of teaching would be some engagement with real examples – e.g. a previous lesson researching real hotels in a given destination and reading some reviews of the hotel, which would generate ideas for actual facilities that are / are not available in a particular hotel. This example is not too different from a lesson that teachers might already have taught. One key difference, potentially, is the amount of time given over to the practice, recording and performance phases. In my experience, this phase is often curtailed by pressure of time.

These implications for practice from the LF research project are suggestions to add to the ongoing conversation about motivation for language learning. Researchers, politicians, educationalists and teachers are unwise to offer easy solutions to the challenges of learning languages in the classroom. It is important to be mindful of both the complexity of L2 motivation, and the importance of individual learner differences. On the other hand, practitioners are consistently rewarded when they engage seriously and openly with research findings, seeking to apply the 'nuggets of gold' to their own practice, and reflecting on the evidence from their own classrooms.

## For further information on the Language Futures approach:

Visit the website <https://www.all-languages.org.uk/research-practice/language-futures/>

Visit the Language Futures Stand during Language World 2018

Contact the Language Futures Project Manager Clodagh Cooney at [ccooney@all-languages.org.uk](mailto:ccooney@all-languages.org.uk)