



LANGUAGE FUTURES: LESSONS FOR THE MAINSTREAM LANGUAGES CLASSROOM

Dr Rachel Hawkes explores how letting students take control can promote their autonomy and engagement

All types of students thrive in the Language Futures classroom



“Students who might not be motivated by language can be motivated by culture”

“Learners in the LF classroom are less anxious and exhibit higher levels of student agency”



PROFILE

Dr Rachel Hawkes

Rachel works across the eight secondary schools in The CAM Academy Trust. Director of International Education and Research, and SLE for languages, she is also a former President of ALL. She has a PhD from Cambridge University focusing on teacher and learner interaction in the secondary languages classroom.

The purpose of the Language Futures (LF) approach is to generate deep engagement with learning, such that learners are motivated not solely by outcomes but also by the learning process, and that they take responsibility for their learning both within and beyond the classroom, voluntarily extending it outside school.

In the LF classroom, students choose the language they wish to learn. The teacher facilitates the learning of several languages within one classroom, and students are additionally supported at times by community language mentors, who are native or near-native speakers of the language.

Autonomy is key, as learners also exercise control over other significant aspects of their learning such as topic choice, selection of language within a topic, methods of learning, resources, classroom activities and follow-up work outside the classroom.

“When learners make choices they take more responsibility for their learning”

A recently published longitudinal study of LF explored four different models of the approach in eight secondary schools. While the different models involved students of varying levels of interest and ability, the findings have implications for language teachers working in mainstream language classrooms.

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 learning might include: a choice of words to learn for vocabulary tests; using ‘surprise me!’ homework tasks; or making 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, or one-to-one explainer of structures or vocabulary, is invaluable. Many schools no longer employ foreign language assistants. However, evidence from the vast majority of schools in the study suggests that there are often adults and sixth-formers within the local school community, who can provide in-class support.

3 AUTONOMY
Most students value LF because it allows them to work at their own pace. These students, typically higher-

attaining boys, envisage an ‘ideal scenario’ in which there is a mix of direct, teacher-led instruction and more independent work.

4 MASTERY
Lower attaining students overwhelmingly appreciate LF because they have more time to master content, vocabulary and grammar. Their levels of anxiety and frustration in the mainstream classroom, where things move on too quickly, are clearly in evidence from the interviews.

5 PROJECT-BASED LEARNING
Students in all the different LF models where projects were a key feature reported high levels of enjoyment. Working towards a practical outcome and purpose, as well as having an audience, appear important for motivation.

6 CULTURE
Students who might not be intrinsically motivated by language can be motivated by culture, and for all students, a culture-rich curriculum is likely to be more motivating.

7 DEVELOPING THE ECOLOGY OF THE MAINSTREAM CLASSROOM
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.

As teachers, we could reduce anxiety and reticence, and promote active enquiry and risk-taking by:

- teaching and revisiting frequently question-forming in our curricula
- bouncing questions routinely from students on to other students
- actively soliciting question-asking from students by rewarding them explicitly for it
- using pair and group configurations to generate more questions, allowing students 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.

These suggestions for practice from the LF research project contribute to the ongoing conversation about motivation. Whilst it remains unwise to offer easy solutions to the challenges of learning languages in the classroom, 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.

LISTENING TIPS

- Allowing students to select their own audio passage is likely to improve motivation to engage in listening tasks.
- Students experience less anxiety when listening at their own pace.
- Controlling the playback themselves, students are able to self-differentiate during listening tasks.
- When students generate more target language questions spontaneously, they provide a valuable source of listening for other students to respond to.

