Tribute to Harmer Parr

Harmer Parr was a member of the ALL North-East Branch committee in the 1990s when he worked as Languages Adviser in Sunderland. He moved later briefly to Stoke-on-Trent and then to Norfolk, and later still became an HMI and President of NALA.

Sue Balmer *is a member of the current ALLNE Branch committee. She recalls here Harmer's Sunderland years. Terms in red are glossed below.*

Memories came flooding back when I heard that Harmer had died on July 22nd 2024. It took me a while to digest the sad news and to formulate my feelings into a tribute worthy of the magnitude of the impact he had on my career, the careers of many other language teachers, and ultimately on the students we taught. I had been in touch with Harmer recently, sharing memories with him during warm, humorous exchanges. I cannot believe that there will be no more. I will always remember him with affection and gratitude, especially for his decision to become Languages Adviser for Sunderland LEA in 1987. What led him to move north to our region - still the butt of jokes and misconceptions -I will never know, but he made a significant difference.

Thinking back, I suppose that my earliest teaching experiences helped me to be receptive to Harmer's innovative strategies. He was someone who had an obvious passion for languages and who believed fervently in "Languages for All".
Having taught French in a Secondary Modern school, I did too, because the obvious enjoyment of those pupils was infectious. The provision for modern language learning though was patchy in the '80s, with some teachers continuing to deliver their subjects in a traditional way and others experimenting with new methods. There was little INSET (in-service training, now CPD) available until the welcome arrival of LEA Language Advisers, of whom Harmer was one. During the '80s and '90s he guided teachers through the plethora of reports, schemes and policy changes for language learning. The first version of the National Curriculum for MFL was published in 1991 but by then our group in Sunderland were well on the way to giving students the opportunity to prepare their language skills for real-life contexts. We honed their listening and speaking skills by using songs and games with maximum use of the target language. Harmer made sure that we were adept at finding resources that would motivate our students to enjoy their experiences and to want more. He gave us tips and simple tricks to aid progression and showed us how to encourage and value creativity. Without thinking about it, we were employing realia to make resources which brought culture into the classroom.

Many years later, Harmer contributed to ALL's request for an article. It was entitled: "Harmer Parr's Best Ten things to hang on to ..." It can be found on the ALL website at: https://www.all-languages.org.uk/research-practice/practitioner-focus/ in the Section 'Crossing Sectors')
Harmer encouraged his Sunderland teachers to use effective strategies like these, and many more. He bought us all OHPs so that we could keep a watchful eye on our streetwise pupils as we taught, and never had to turn our backs to the class. We thought that he might have had

shares in an OHP company! Any new technology available was seized upon. He gave us the ideas and we ran with them. They worked. For the first time, boys in our schools often out-performed girls in languages. Examination results were often higher than for other subjects in the curriculum. Our students responded to humour, song, age-appropriate language and support in the use of grammar so that they could manipulate language for their own purposes.

There is no question that our Sunderland pupils could often be demanding or even disruptive, but Harmer helped us to find ways to share our passion, to motivate them and to allow the teacher to be a facilitator, moving around the classroom, helping individuals and groups to practise new vocabulary and structures, assessing unobtrusively, praising and giving students the confidence to speak and perform in the target language in front of their peers.
We created materials for flexible learning: carousels and double horseshoes became the order of the day, so that students could develop their speaking skills. They could access listening materials to work on at their own pace, for enjoyment rather than testing.

Harmer's regular training sessions emphasised the changes needed to meet the requirements of the new National Curriculum., and when the CILT Comenius Centre was given a base in Sunderland, his network of teachers was keen to share good practice and resources across the region and beyond. Getting teachers together, showcasing successes and bouncing ideas around lightened the load for many. Harmer listened to us carefully, always ready to hear our concerns but finding a solution or adding a joke with that wonderful smile of his. We knew that he cared about us. He wanted us to succeed. He had high expectations of us and we in turn had high expectations of our students.

We had a challenge next to show that language skills acquired at school were useful in the workplace. Alongside Stella Marsh and other colleagues in the region, Harmer developed *Eurolinks,* a project bringing together business people, language teachers and learners. The following are Harmer's typically generous words from a message he sent me as we were reminiscing:

"Recruiting Stella was a huge plus. I heard there might be some TVEI money swilling about and knew that the teacher training for languages at New College, Durham, was being shut down. So I went and saw Stella, found she was willing, and immediately put in a bid, thinking I was being very cheeky. To my surprise, they swallowed it, I think because of the desperate report I'd written about the state of languages in Sunderland. The Councillors gave me FLAs as well. I think they felt guilty. Stella was so good they funded her for about eight years."

The emphasis on real language for real purposes increased participation and motivation. Students were keen to perform at the annual Festival of Languages in the North-East. This helped transform textbook learning and practice writing exercises by giving students an audience.
Learning a language in a more meaningful way and the confidence engendered seemed to have a transformational effect on our students. They signed up for activities and a variety of trips abroad with enthusiasm. Some of these young people were wary of travelling to the next town, but in the '80s and '90s they took part in exchanges lasting 2 weeks and welcomed partners into their homes. They would retain lasting memories.

Teachers benefiting from Harmer's first advisory post in Sunderland will thank him for his inspiring interventions, but it didn't stop there. Harmer moved back to East Anglia, supporting

teachers in another area with disadvantaged pupils. From there he continued to share his considerable expertise through NALA and as an HMI.

Our paths crossed again at several CILT conferences and later when I was working with Language Colleges for the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). I know that I would never have had the nerve to apply for that post without his stimulating advice in those early years.

He made you believe that anything was possible if you set your mind to it. Harmer never changed. He was unfailingly warm, humorous, gentle and determined. He battled illness with fortitude. He had an amazing intellect and found solutions in the most difficult of situations. He could easily have pursued a career in academia and used his considerable skills in the faculty of a prestigious university, but I am so pleased that he didn't.

NALA is the National Association of Language Advisers: https://nala.org.uk/

OHPs are Overhead Projector: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overhead_projector

FLAs are Foreign Language Assistants: https://www.britishcouncil.org/school-resources/employ-language-assistant

The Festival of Languages was a national movement in the 90s, run alongside ALL. The North-East Festival was resurrected in the pandemic, and continues its motivation and engagement activity with several partners : https://expressyourselfne.com/

HMI is Her / His Majesty's Inspectorate

CILT was the Centre for Information on Language Teaching (and Research) between the 1960s and 2012.

SSAT was the organisation that ran Specialist Colleges (including Language Colleges).