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Language Teaching: Learning from the Past

4. Target language and (m)other tongue use



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HOLLT.net
History of Language Learning and Teaching

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Cover image

R. T. Hammond: *Fortbildung in der deutschen Sprache. Student's book*, 1969

About these materials

This project addresses the need for a historical perspective in language teacher training, using research in the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HoLLT) to inform language teaching practice and policy. Taking five key themes of immediate relevance to teaching practice today, the project responds to evidence that teachers benefit from the framework that HoLLT gives them to reflect on and critique their own and others' practice and policy. Our materials translate research into packages tailored to the needs of practising teachers, making explicit links to their current and future roles. They are designed to be used without expert input, so that they can be widely used and embedded in training.

These materials incorporate an understanding of the history of language teachers' specialist discipline, equipping teachers to be more critically reflective in the classroom and thus more effective as teachers, as well as to be advocates for language learning and multilingualism.

Our project partners are the main language teacher associations and CPD centres in the UK. The training packages give teachers the toolkit they need to use an understanding of the past to make decisions about their current and future practice. The five themes all tackle topical concerns in language pedagogy, providing a historical perspective on each of the key themes:

1. Differentiation and diversity
2. What does it mean to teach culture?
3. Grammar: 'The art of speaking well'?
4. Target language and (m)other tongue use
5. Making the case for languages – Policy and advocacy

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1. How to use this handbook

These materials form part of a series of material for languages teachers about the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HoLLT). The series aims to encourage teachers and trainees to consider current topics in MFL through a historical perspective. Each of the five packs comprises the following:

- A two-minute introductory video
- A five-minute video
- A participant booklet which includes historical examples and discussion topics
- A facilitator booklet which includes contextual information and guidance for discussions

Use this handbook along with each of the modules in our pack. When used as part of a teacher training programme, this module is intended to supplement your existing training materials on differentiation. We assume that trainees and teachers will have a basic knowledge of standard models of differentiation such as ‘differentiation by task / by outcome’ (e.g. see Coffey, 2018a) or ‘differentiation by content / process / product’ (see Tomlinson, 2003). We hope that our module offers a way to extend models of adapting material toward a deeper understanding of how decisions around curriculum content and learning environment shape pupils’ engagement with language learning.

2. Aims

The theme of this pack is Grammar. The objectives are:

1. To consider the relation between ‘target language’ (L2) and students’ first language (L1), and how we use them in our teaching
2. To consider approaches to the teaching of pronunciation in the past to inform decisions about practice today
3. To encourage a shift from the binary question of L1 or L2 toward more creative thinking about ‘language use’ in general
4. To understand how translation has been used for pedagogical purposes historically and up to the present, and why practices have changed

3. Historical background

The earliest language learning books used in England were usually written by the clergy and used for teaching Latin, from the end of the Roman Empire in the 5th century to the Renaissance in the 15th century. It is difficult to tell from the surviving materials how language teaching took place, but we know (for example from Ælfric of Eynsham's writing about teaching Latin in the 11th century) that teachers already carefully considered the extent to which they used students' first language and the target language.

Prestige, register and correctness in the target language have concerned teachers for centuries. The first French teaching materials used in England were aimed at the children of Normans who lived in England after the Norman conquest. These materials did not reflect the variety of French spoken by Normans in England, but instead modelled the variety of French spoken in France, as it was more prestigious. In the 18th century, Lewis Chambaud, author of several textbooks, was clear in his view that there was a 'right' type of native speaker and that some regional accents of French were unsuitable for teaching English learners. Later still, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, language teachers debated whether native speakers or English speakers were better placed to teach languages.

Whether students should translate into or out of the target language has been debated over the course of centuries. The translation tasks published by scholars like Holyband in the 16th century focused on memorisation and rote learning. The Grammar-Translation method, in contrast, aimed to develop grammar and syntactical knowledge, encouraging a deeper understanding through analysing the language. The Reform Movement in the late 19th century advocated for more speaking in language lessons, and advances in printing meant that pictures could be more easily used to initiate and support classroom conversations.

When, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the aims of teaching foreign languages moved from purely practical purposes toward studying culture and literature, the gap between literary language and day-to-day conversation was laid bare. Teachers today might recognise this difference when teaching the French past historic tense and other forms reserved for written or literary registers.

New technology in the 20th century meant that students could be exposed to more than solely their teacher's use of the target language. The first school 'language laboratory' was set up at Salford Grammar School, Lancashire, in 1962. Within five years there were five hundred language laboratories in English schools. Since then, technology has clearly advanced beyond what could have been imagined. Target language source material is now limitless, although foreign language input tends to remain tightly structured ('curricularised') and teacher-led at least until the age of about 16 (GCSEs in England). At the same time the communicative approach to language teaching which prevailed from the 1970s to the 2000s emphasised the transmission of meaning within defined performative functions (asking directions etc.), with a more recent return to focusing on grammatical form and accuracy.

4. Introductory Task

**Target language and
(m)other tongue use**

1. How do you use the L1 and L2 in your lessons?
2. What assumptions does the use of the term 'target language' imply?
3. How do you acknowledge students' different first languages?

4.1. Introductory task

A note on terminology:

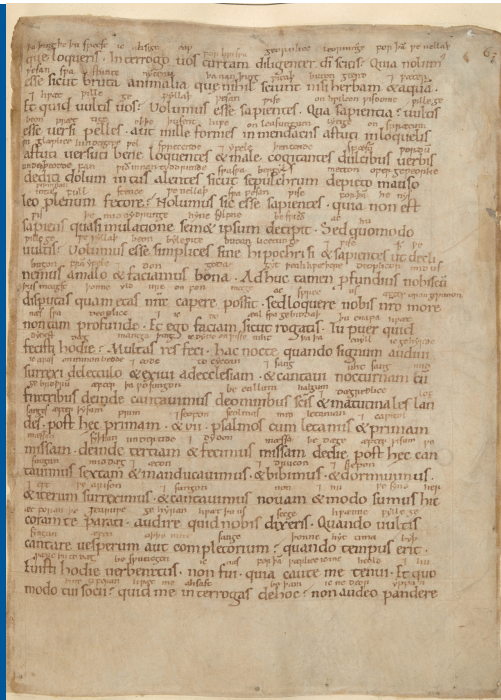
We avoid the term 'mother tongue' and have opted instead to use 'L1' to refer to the language spoken at school (e.g. English in schools in England). We recognize, though, that not all students share this language as their first language.

Question 3:

One could argue that the term 'target language' privileges language acquisition as the main goal of teaching (ahead of say, understanding grammar, or encountering literature).

5. How to teach vocabulary

Ælfric of Eynsham



Ælfric of Eynsham's
Colloquy
British Library:
Cotton MS Tiberius A iii

Ælfric's glossary featured almost 1300 entries, mostly nouns and adjectives with some chunk phrases included

The topics covered were chosen according to how meaningful they would be to young boys and men living and working in a monastery.

For example:

- crux/rod ('cross'),
- panis/hlaf ('bread'),
- mel/hunig ('honey').

The wordlists were arranged thematically e.g. under vegetables

Latin	Old English
cariota	waldmora (literally 'wood / field root', carrot)
Pastinaca	wealmora [literally 'wild root', parsnip]

1. Think of vocabulary you teach. Is it typically presented by topic? In your opinion, how useful are the topics covered? (Do they describe the reality of the learner, or do they serve another purpose such as preparing them for a future communicative function or for teaching some aspects of culture?)

2. Are the vocabulary strings you teach also (like Ælfric's glossary) mostly nouns and adjectives?

5.1 How to teach vocabulary



Pause the video after “It was the first real English dictionary ... alphabetical order.”

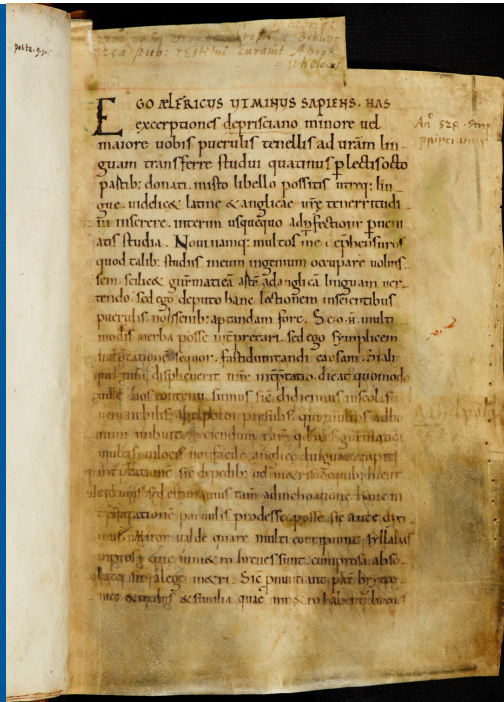
Ælfric based his work on an earlier textbook (Priscian’s grammar of Latin, in Latin, produced in ca. 500 CE).

Some pupils in lower secondary school seem to know a lot about foggy weather and guinea pigs but not always how to say the word ‘put’ or ‘take’. How do we judge the *relevance* of vocabulary for our pupils?

6. How much to use the target language?

Ælfric of Eynsham

Preface to Ælfric of Eynsham's *Grammar*;
11th century
Cambridge University
Library



Noui namque multos me reprehensuros ...

[I know that many will criticize me ...]



1. This is the cover of a 2012 publication about the use of the target language in the classroom. What are your views on an 'ideal' use of the target language?
2. Work on teachers' views of their target language use often reveals some guilt around reverting to the first language. What does this tell us about these teachers' 'ideal' of their language lesson?

6.1. How much to use the target language?



Pause the video after "... without the help of their own language."

Question 2:

Suggestions:

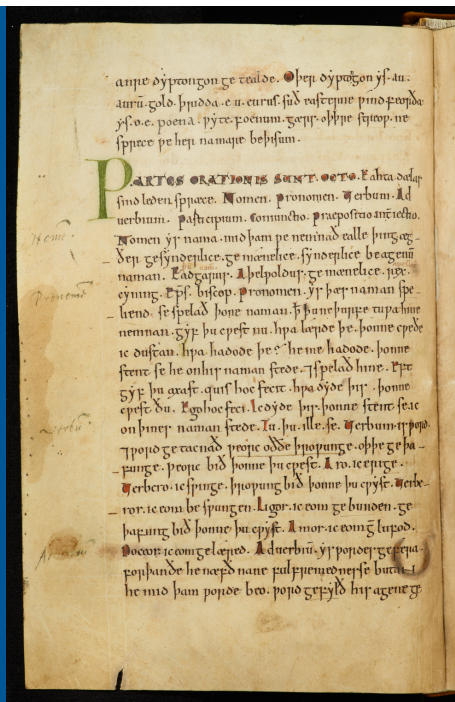
- Teaching should take place in the target language.
- Language teaching should be an immersive experience.

Encourage participants to discuss honestly their preconceptions about an 'ideal' of using target language. The story of Ælfric's use of English to explain Latin grammar is interesting because of the way he defended his use of pupils' first language as if it fell short of an ideal.

7. Ælfric of Eynsham: Grammar rules in Latin and English

Ælfric of Eynsham: Grammar rules in Latin and English

11th century copy of
Ælfric of Eynsham's
*Grammar and
Glossary*
Cambridge University
Library (MS Hh.1.10)



Partes orationis sunt
octo. Ahta delar sind
leden spræce [...]
Nomen yr nama mid
tham the neminath ealle
thing

[The parts of speech are
eight ... Noun. Name,
with which people name
all things]

1. Why did Ælfric decide to break with tradition by translating words?
2. What disadvantage would an English learner of Latin have had in the 10th century compared with a student of Latin in France or Italy?
3. How familiar is the foreign language to your students? Does it have the same alphabet?
4. The linguist and teacher Otto Siepmann expected pupils using his *Primary German Course* (1912) to spend their first month focussing on pronunciation. They would then be faced with “carefully constructed reading passages”, where, Siepmann said, the large number of cognates meant that they “will be pleasantly surprised to find that they can read and understand a connected piece of German without having first to learn any words or grammar”.
5. Do you make deliberate use of cognates in your teaching? Maybe we over-use words like ‘prefer’ in teaching French, where ‘like ...more’ might be more natural. Does this matter?

“The politeness of a language (...) consists in manners of expression different from those of the common people, without any affectation: and a language is more or less polite, according as it has more or less of those manners of expression and ways of speaking, which are neither affected, nor vulgar. In France we avoid nothing so much as to speak as the common people do. There are really, as it were, two languages in the French-tongue; the one spoke by well bred people, the other by the vulgar; and people’s education is presently known by their speaking. The common manners of expression must be known to foreigners, to understand the people speak; and the polite to express themselves by.”

(L. Chambaud: *A Grammar of the French Tongue*, 1750)

6. Think about how we teach written standard language vs spoken varieties. For instance, which examples of non-standard target language should we include?

7.1. Ælfric of Eynsham: Grammar rules in Latin and English



Pause the video after “Ælfric’s decision ... well enough to understand them directly.”

Question 2: The Latinate languages were much closer to Latin.

This might lead to a reflection on transparency and inter-comprehension, i.e. how ‘transparent’ is the language(s) we teach to our learners?

Question 5:

Encourage discussion of international terms like ‘cola’, as well as of older cognates like prefer/ préférer, and how these can provide access. Maybe we spend too long teaching cognates?

Question 6:

For example:

- Omission of ‘ne’ in French negative
- Regional variations
- Should we stick to a written standard norm even in speaking?

8. Teaching pronunciation

Teaching pronunciation

It would make the French split their sides with laughing, if they were to hear that French is taught in any part of the world by Swisses.

L. Chambaud: *The Treasure of the French and English Language*, 1750

Statements on the teaching of German show that pronunciation had to be balanced with other perceived risks:

“When I have tried foreign masters, their ignorance of our code of trust (...) has been a greater evil than their pronunciation was good.”

(Survey respondent in E.P. Arnold and F. Waren: ‘The Teaching of modern languages in Preparatory Schools’, 1900)

“There was a risk (...) in allowing Germans to teach in our schools of bringing English boys into contact with German morality and ideals.”

(Mr Somerville, Modern Language Association General Meeting, 1918)

1. Is it important for learners to learn how to pronounce all the sounds of the language – and their relationship to the letters of the alphabet – before starting to speak, or to read and write?
2. How do you teach pronunciation? Do you teach the pronunciation of single words? Chunks?

8.1 Teaching pronunciation



Pause the video after “For example, in 18th- century London ... various French regions.”

Although we are left with the textual traces of past materials only, it is important to remember that oral practice was an important part of language learning, at least until the grammar-translation method came to dominate school curricula, especially in boys' grammar schools, in the 19th century.

Chambaud had strong views about the poor French of many native speakers. His strongest ridicule is reserved for the Swiss: in one of his dialogues, the slow progress made by one speaker over six years is ascribed to the fault of their Swiss master.

In his 1750 Grammar, Chambaud also warns against Normans, Gascons, Picards, and Provençals as teachers. The fear of speaking 'bad' French was already centuries-old in England, dating back to the anxieties of Anglo-Normans measuring themselves against the French of France.

9. Audiolingual approaches

Audiolingual approaches

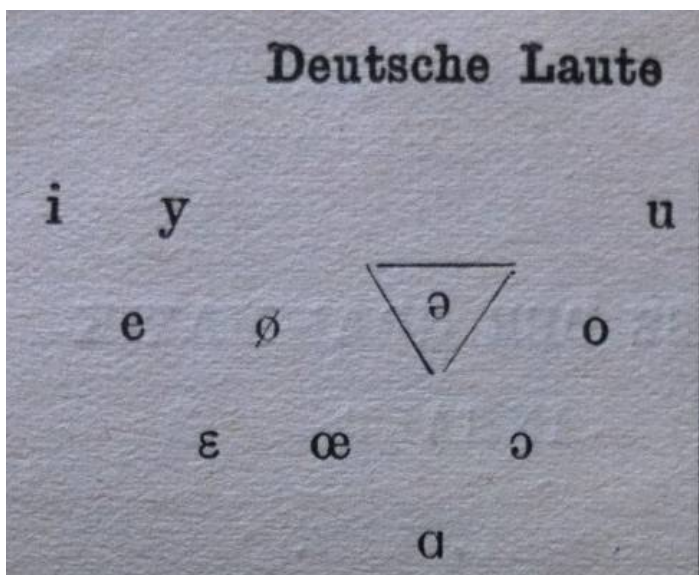
R. T. Hammond:
*Fortbildung in der
deutschen Sprache.*
Student's book, 1969



The examples below show 20th-century attempts to represent sounds in writing. *French for the Front* taught basic French to soldiers in World War I. Rippmann's *New First German Book* was a book for teaching German by an advocate for the reform movement using the new scientific phonetic notation.

Fired on by the French

<i>French</i>	<i>How to say it</i>	<i>English</i>
Amis! Anglais!	am-ee! Ahn-gla!	Friends! English!
Nous sommes Anglais!	Noo som-zahn-gla!	We are English!
Ne tirez pas!	Ner teereh pah!	Don't fire!
Nous sommes alliés!	Noo som-zal-yeh!	We are allies!



Above: E. F. Harris: *French for the Front*; 1915

Left: 'German sounds' in W. Rippmann; 1917

The diagram tells us where the tongue is positioned to make the sound: i = high and front; u = high and back.

1. Would you use an approach similar to Harris's in your teaching? When is this a useful approach?
2. Who would find a diagram like Rippmann's useful?

9.1. Audiolingual approaches



Pause the video after "... for example in radio language learning broadcasts, or from records or tapes in language labs."

The first school 'language laboratory' was set up at Salford Grammar School, Lancashire, in 1962. Within five years there were five hundred language laboratories in schools.

10. Pronunciation practice

“

Rules for pronunciation are totally omitted. From all the attempts that have hitherto been made it does not appear, that any adequate idea of it can be conveyed in writing. The ear cannot be properly formed without the assistance of a good speaker.

”

N. Wanostrucht:
*A Practical Grammar
of the French
Language*; 1780

1. How would you describe the type of oral work done in your lessons for different year groups? What is the place of highly structured practice of the target language (e.g. in drills/repetition)?
2. ‘Conversation’ was a popular form of informal learning in the 18th century. This didn’t just mean making small talk but engaging in discussion around a theme. What type of purposeful conversation can we encourage in language lessons (e.g. structured debates, discussion of a topic)?

10.1 Pronunciation practice



Pause the video after “It’s hard to know ... information about past methods.”

11. Plurilingualism in the classroom

Latin and plurilingualism in the classroom



Today we teach a particular ‘curricularised’ model of the target language. But to what extent do we include references to other languages (including pupils’ home languages, or other languages that they encounter in school)?

11.1 Plurilingualism in the classroom



Pause the video after “Even then, what we now call ‘plurilingualism’ was part of the classroom.”

Language teaching in the Roman Empire

Servius was a teacher and grammarian of the late Roman period. His goal was both to teach classical Latin and to reinforce spoken, everyday Latin, which was quite different. His pupils would have a variety of different home languages, so in many ways he was teaching “Latin as an additional language”, both in its written, literary form and in its vernacular.

Present-day language teaching in Europe

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) understands learners to be “plurilingual, pluricultural beings”. Translation was reintroduced to the CEFR in the form of ‘mediation’ in 2018. It can be argued that translation can support learners’ development of a plurilingual identity as they relate the new language to their first language.

12. Translation in language teaching and learning I

Translation in language teaching and learning

Different functions of translation and the target language in language learning				
As a lexical gloss	To give instructions and explanations	To draw attention to differences through cross-language comparisons	To support literacy development in both languages	To assess knowledge and understanding

What is the role of translation in language teaching and learning?

- **A reference for understanding the target language (for instance, ‘*chien* means dog’)?**
- **To stimulate linguistic awareness more broadly through comparison (for instance, comparing verbal and nominal preference? (E.g. ‘he swam across the river’ = ‘Il a traversé la rivière à la nage’ [‘la nage’ means swimming, but is a noun whereas ‘swimming’ is a verb; the meaning of both sentences is the same])**
- **A convenient all-round test of language knowledge?**

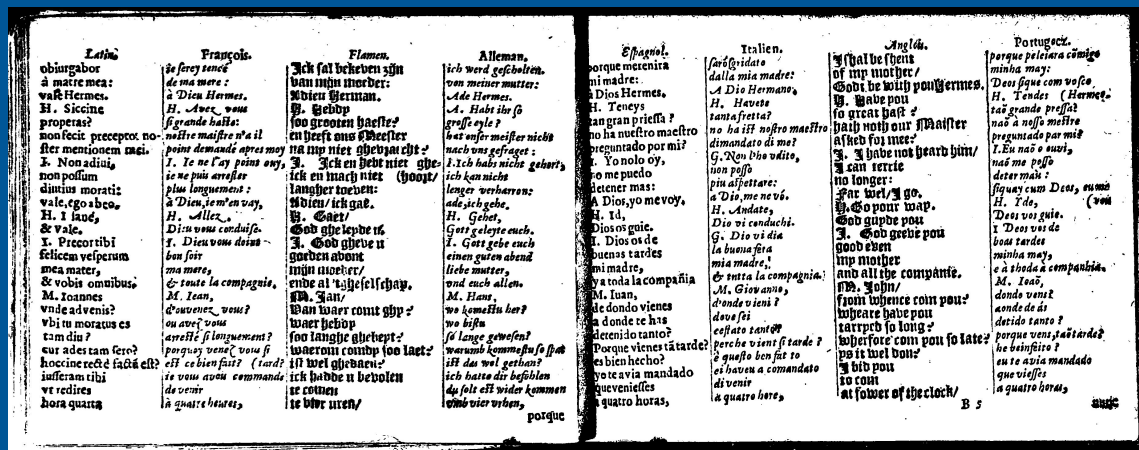
12.1 Translation in language teaching and learning I



Pause the video after “Students’ first language ... teachers still have today.”

By ‘verbal and nominal preference’ we mean the way in which different languages have a preference for noun or verb constructions. For example, German and French use more noun constructions whereas English uses verb constructions to express the same idea.

13. Translation in language teaching and learning II



Early English Books Online, Copyright © 2019 ProQuest LLC
 Images reproduced by courtesy of The Huntington Library

Noel de Berlemont: *Colloquy and dictionary in eight languages*, 1631
 The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

1. What were some advantages of the parallel text format?
2. The video describes ‘double translation’ exercises (translation of the text from the target language to English, then covering, and translating back to the target language) as a way of learning dialogues by heart. Do you encourage the sort of exercise? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

13.1 Translation in language teaching and learning II



Pause the video after “In the 16th century ... the ‘double translation’ method.”

Points that might emerge here include the balance between rote-learning of precise chunks vs. more freely reconstructing a phrase as in speed dictation.

14. Translation and repetition

Double translation

“Children, turn your lessons out of French into English, and then out of English into French.”

C. Holyband:
French Littleton, 1609



How do you encourage repetition? Which parts of language (words, chunks) do you ask students to repeat?
Do you find that it helps move language into long term memory for later recall?

14.1 Translation and repetition



Pause the video after “This ‘double translation’ ... the Tudor period’s bestsellers.”

Rote-learning has been a longstanding feature of language learning, especially in the early stages.

The main learning strategy for languages in the early modern era was memorisation by repetition of both vocabulary and whole dialogues. For example, in 1576, the French-English language tutor Claudius Holyband stated in his language learning book *The French Littleton* that “If the Reader meaneth to learn our tongue within a short space, he must not entangle himself at the first brunt with the rules of the pronunciation; but after he hath read them over, let him take in hand these dialogues.”

This can be linked to a discussion of cognitive load theory and retrieval practice.

15. The Grammar-Translation method

The Grammar-Translation method

EXERCISES UPON THE FOREGOING RULES.

Where is the master of the house?—Virtue
Où, adv. est, v. maître, m. maison, f. Vertu, f.
 is estimable. — The prince spoke to the king.
est, v. estimable, adj. prince, m. parla, v. roi, m.
 Do you² prefer¹ England³ to⁴ France²? —
vous, pro. préférez, v. Angleterre, f. France, f.
 To the third page of the book.—Prefer virtue
Troisième, adj. page, f. livre, m.—Préférez, v.
 to riches, friendship to money, and utility to pleasure.
richesses, pl. f. amitié, f. argent, m. et, c. utilité, f. plaisir, m.
 The father, mother, and children, are dead.
Père, m. mère, f. enfant, m. font, v. mort, p. p.
 The¹ lazy² do³ not³ love⁴ work⁵. —
 paresseux, adj. ne-pas, adv. aiment, v. ouvrage, m.
 Corn grows for men and grass for
Bled, m. croit, v. pour, p. homme, m. herbe, f.
 cattle.—Justice is the mistress and queen of
bétail, m. Justice, f. est, v. maîtresse, f. reine, f.
 virtue.—Walk in the garden.—
Promenez-vous, v. dans, p. jardin, m.
 Send the child to school.—Give that
Envoyez, v. enfant, m. école, f. Donnez, v. cela, pro.
 to the poor. — Children¹ generally² like²
pauvre, m. ordinairement, adv. aiment, v.
 apples⁴ and⁵ pears⁶. — Education is to the mind
pomme, f. poire, f. éducation, f. est, v. esprit, m.
 what cleanliness is to the body. — I like

N. Wanostrocht:
*A Grammar of the
 French Language
 with Practical
 Exercises, 1789*

The page from Wanostrocht's 1789 French grammar shows a sort of gap-fill translation exercise: to translate the English, learners are expected to copy out the French words supplied in order, filling in the missing articles (with or without prepositions), e.g. *le, de la, au*. For example:

There is the master of the house.
Voilà ___ maître (m) ___ maison (f)

becomes: *Voilà le maître de la maison.*

1. How do you use gapped translations or other types of writing frames? Are the parts of language you focus on (nouns, verbs etc.) sequenced in order of difficulty?
2. Do you ask students to include new vocabulary when writing (e.g. 'guessing' or looking up unknown words) or do you restrict the language they are practising to a finite bank of words from a set vocabulary list?

15.1 The Grammar-Translation method



Pause the video after “They were not just for memorising chunks.”

Teachers who used the Grammar-Translation method still used language that referred to the world of the classroom:

“Ich bin ein Junge; Sie sind ein Junge; Was tue ich? Sie heben die rechte Hand. [...] Elisabeth, nehmen Sie den Bleistift!”

“I am a boy; You are a boy; What am I doing? You are raising your right hand [...] Elisabeth, take the pencil!” (Macpherson 1931).

Many teachers today express disapproval of the Grammar-Translation Method, and it’s probably fair to say that it came to be used in overly mechanical and uninspiring instructional methods.

It is important to remember, though, that the Grammar-Translation Method developed as a reaction against the wearisome rote-learning of extended texts in the target language, whether literary passages or conversational dialogues, that had characterized earlier methods.

In fact, many language classrooms today feature a lot of grammar teaching and a lot of translation, even though teachers may feel they’re teaching communicatively.

Question 2:

This can encourage a broader discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of teaching exclusively a basic list of high frequency items (who decides what counts as high frequency for who etc.)

16. Reform approaches to teaching languages



“

Begin with the spoken language.

Each text should form a connected whole, so as to establish as many associations as possible in the mind of the learner between each word and context.

H. Sweet, 1899

”

Henry Sweet (1845-1912) was the leader advocate of language teaching Reform in England.

Which ‘text types’ do you use the most in your teaching (e.g. narratives/stories, descriptions, dialogues) and what are the advantages of each?

16.1 Reform approaches to teaching languages



Pause the video after “This means longer stretches of text ... relevant to the lives of learners.”

Encourage participants to consider the different kinds of language likely to occur in different kinds of texts – e.g. descriptions will usually contain many third-person present verbs, whereas narratives are often in the past tense etc. – as well as a discussion of how thematic content can be meaningful for their students.

17. Reflection

The English National Curriculum for 11- to 13-year-olds

Aims

The national curriculum for languages aims to ensure that all pupils:

- understand and respond to spoken and written language from a variety of authentic sources
- speak with increasing confidence, fluency and spontaneity, finding ways of communicating what they want to say, including through discussion and asking questions, and continually improving the accuracy of their pronunciation and intonation
- can write at varying length, for different purposes and audiences, using the variety of grammatical structures that they have learnt
- discover and develop an appreciation of a range of writing in the language studied

- 1. List 4-5 skills or pieces of knowledge about the target language that you are keen for your students to carry with them when they leave your classroom.**
- 2. Is there an ideal balance between the target language and first language use?
What factors affect how that balance might vary?**

17.1 Reflection

The key language competences enshrined in the English National Curriculum (and the curricula of many other countries) are reading and listening comprehension, speaking and writing. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) also includes 'mediation' which encompasses different types of interpreting and translation as well as summarising and paraphrasing.

18. Key timeline

5th – 15th century	Language learning books were usually authored by the clergy
11th century	Ælfric of Eynsham publishes his glossary, bilingual grammar and book of dialogues for teaching Latin to English boys. His is the first bilingual grammar in a modern European language.
13th century	French language learning materials for Normans in England model a prestige variety of the language
1580	Claudius Holyband publishes <i>The French Littleton</i> ; his language learning books focus on memorisation and rote learning
17th – 18th century	The aims of language teaching move from practical purposes to culture and literature
1750	Lewis Chambaud expresses strong views on who was the ‘right’ kind of native speaker to teach French
19th century	Methods used in the teaching of modern languages follow those of Latin and Greek: the Grammar-translation method. Grammar rules are learned deductively and practised through translation.
19th century	The international phonetic alphabet is formulated
1882	The Reform Movement begins with Wilhelm Viëtor’s pamphlet ‘Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!’ (Language teaching must change direction)
1895	Teaching of at least one modern language required in higher grade and science schools receiving government grants (as part of commercial classes or as literary subjects)
1962	The first school ‘language laboratory’ is set up at Salford Grammar School, Lancashire
1988	National Curriculum introduced in England and Wales; General Certificate of Secondary Education introduced in the UK
2004	Languages become optional after age 14

19. References and bibliography for further reading

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Appendix: Video transcripts

Introductory video

The question of target language use touches at the emotional core of what it means to learn a foreign language. Teachers sometimes feel that they need to defend their use of learners' first language in lessons, in particular teachers who are allied to *communicative* approaches which, at least in their strong version, aim to use the target language almost exclusively and seek to exclude the mother tongue in case it hinders the learning of the new language.

The target language is always learnt in a relationship with other languages, most obviously – though not exclusively – the student's first language. In this unit we consider some of the factors that have shaped the use of the target language for classroom talk and oral practice, as well as the functions of explicit translation between target languages and mother or other tongues.

At times, translation of new words or complex phrases are used as a gloss to help students understand the flow of a larger stretch of target language. At other times the task of translating is itself the aim of activity. There has also been much heated debate about the relative benefits of translating *from* and *into* the target language. The recent reintroduction of translation in English schools and the renewed encouragement for meta-talk to discuss grammar and to share learning strategies has reinvigorated the perennial discussion about how to balance the use of the target language and students' first language. We hope that the pedagogical rationales presented in this unit will help to inform choices about language use in the classroom.

Main video

The status of a language and the reasons for learning it have always shaped attitudes to the way the target language is modelled, as well as the balance between using the target language and students' first language.

Between the end of the Roman Empire around the 5th century and the Renaissance in the 15th century, most classroom learning in the British Isles was the business of the clergy.

Ælfric, an English monk, scholar and teacher living at the end of the 10th century, broke new ground when he wrote a bilingual Latin-English grammar book...

... for his pupils learning Latin at a monastery near Oxford.

Ælfric's teaching materials included three elements: a grammar book, a glossary, or vocabulary list, and a book of dialogues.

His popular textbook is the first bilingual grammar written in any modern European language.

Ælfric's glossary featured mainly lists of nouns listed by topic, for example plants, animals, and occupations. It was the first real English dictionary (Latin to Old English), although it was ordered by themes rather than in alphabetical order.

But Ælfric expected his decision to use his pupils' first language to help explain Latin grammar to be criticised. He defended his decision on the grounds that his pupils were young and did not yet have the ability to understand Latin, the target language, without the help of their own language.

Ælfric's decision to translate grammar rules tells us that his pupils did not speak Latin well enough to understand them directly.

As for learning to pronounce the target language, conversation manuals published in the 15th and 16th centuries often had a pronunciation guide at the beginning and so could be used, in theory at least, by an independent learner, but many manuals were designed as textbooks for use with a tutor. The dialogues could be read aloud in lessons and the pronunciation corrected by the teacher.

Some authors of manuals warned learners against certain native speakers' pronunciations as poor or incorrect.

For example, in 18th- century London, Lewis Chambaud warned against learning French from Swiss speakers of French, as well as from French speakers from various French regions.

Before technology allowed voices to be recorded, teachers came up with ingenious ways of describing pronunciation through sometimes lengthy explanations of sounds.

In the 19th century, the international phonetic alphabet was formulated using symbols to represent sounds. It sparked a scientific approach to teaching pronunciation that was particularly helpful to teachers who were non-native speakers.

From the middle of the 20th century onwards, new technologies enabled approaches to teaching with more focus on spoken communication, as they allowed learners to hear authentic language spoken by someone other than their classroom teacher ...

... for example in radio language learning broadcasts, or from records or tapes in language labs.

It's hard to know how much the target language was spoken in classrooms when we have to rely on textual material for information about past methods.

Raising awareness of different registers has always been the task of teachers. Even when ancient Roman teachers of Latin taught pupils 'classical, literary Latin', the pupils communicated with each other in a quite different spoken, vernacular Latin ...

... and many pupils also had different home languages. Even then, what we now call 'plurilingualism' was part of the classroom.

Students' first language has been used in different ways, and looking at the past, we can see the precursors to debates about the use and function of translation in language teaching that teachers still have today.

After the Norman conquest, French became a second language rather than first for the Normans who lived in England. The first French teaching materials in the 13th century were designed to model a prestige variety of French.

Most conversation manuals at this time featured bilingual dialogues, first in interlinear form with alternating lines of French and English ...

... but then giving both languages in parallel became the norm.

There was also a fashion in the later medieval period for multilingual, or "polyglot", manuals with columns of phrases or dialogues in up to eight languages.

In the 16th century, dialogues were intended to be learnt by heart using the 'double translation' method.

Roger Ascham, who had been tutor to Elizabeth I, advocated the 'double translation' method in his famous teaching treatise 'The Schoolemaster' published in 1570.

The method involved translation of the text from the target language to English, covering it, and translating back to the target language. This 'double translation'

was also adopted by Holyband in his French textbooks, which were the Tudor period's bestsellers.

By the 19th century the dominant method for teaching languages in schoolrooms was the so-called Grammar-Translation Method

Unlike the earlier translation of rote-learnt whole sentences, translation exercises within the grammar-translation method demanded grammatical and syntactic competence. They were not just for memorising chunks.

The Reform Movement of the late 19th century proposed exciting new approaches that sought to by-pass pupils' first language and encourage direct absorption of the target language. The monolingual principle of this so-called 'direct method' was novel for the teaching of foreign languages, even though it represents in many ways a reconfiguration of older oral-based methods that had been applied in classical times.

The Reform approaches therefore encouraged focus on speaking the target language and teaching current, spoken forms of language. Rather than invent artificial or isolated sentences to practise new vocabulary and grammatical points, teachers were asked to build the learning around 'connected texts'. This means longer stretches of text that make sense, such as dialogues, narratives and descriptions, and that also felt relevant to the lives of learners.

Many school subjects have seen debates on the right balance between skills and knowledge. Languages are no exception. Today the skills of using and understanding the target language in speech and in writing form the basis of assessment. After all, languages have a social dimension, and learners take part in interactions from the first day, even if new technologies will keep expanding what it means to be a competent communicator.