
USING THE TARGET LANGUAGE

a view from the classroom

Peter Dickson

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Published in November 1996
by the National Foundation for Educational Research,
The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ

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Registered Charity No. 313392
ISBN 0 7005 1436 8

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank those teachers who made this research project possible by giving their time to complete questionnaires. It is hoped that this report does justice to the views which they have expressed.

Thanks are due also to a number of other people who in different ways have assisted with the project, in particular Janet Hooper, at Southampton University, and the staff of Perins School and Bay House School in Hampshire who helped with the trialling of the questionnaire. Among staff at NFER, thanks are also due to Dougal Hutchison, who carried out the statistical analyses, to Barbara Lee, Robat Powell and David Upton who provided comments on the report, to Mary Hargreaves who prepared the manuscript for printing and Tim Wright who designed the cover. Effie de Souza gave invaluable secretarial support.

1. BACKGROUND

There has been little dispute, among language teachers and others concerned with foreign language education, over the principle that learners in school should be exposed as much as possible to the target language (TL) in use. Official statements by Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI) during the 1980s (for example GB.DES.HMI, 1988) and in statutory and non-statutory documents of the National Curriculum (GB.DES and Welsh Office, 1991) refer to the desirability of using the target language as the 'normal', 'natural' or 'principal' means of communication in the classroom. The National Curriculum Order for Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs) (GB.DFE and Welsh Office, 1995) states explicitly that 'when a spoken or written response is expected [by a pupil], it should be in the target language, except where a response in another language is necessary, e.g. when interpreting'. The thrust of the policy over recent years, and particularly the prescription of the National Curriculum, has been to create what some commentators (for example Atkinson, 1993) have dubbed an orthodoxy, by which the issue of target language is concerned less with the extent to which it can be maximised within plans for teaching and learning, than with the ability of teachers to maintain its use when communicating in the classroom.

The assumptions underlying this orthodoxy are that target language use promotes natural acquisition, and that use of mother tongue (L1) undermines this process by diverting attention from the object of pupils' learning. Although there is some theoretical and empirical justification for the first part of this proposition, there is none for the second. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that in classroom learning instruction plays as important a role as acquisition (Ellis, 1990), and that even in immersion teaching the use of L1 can positively affect performance and development (Lambert, 1984). Widdowson (1987) points out the fallacy of communicative language teaching which focuses exclusively on meaning, at the expense of form: 'it confuses ends and means and assumes that teaching language **for** communication is the same as teaching language **as** communication'. Claims for using target language for all purposes in the classroom bear the hallmark of this confusion.

Some recent reports of investigations into teachers' use of target language (see, for example, Franklin, 1990 and Chambers, 1991) take as their starting point the assumption that the medium of instruction in

the language classroom should, without qualification, be the target language. These investigations and others focus on the concern that teachers may not have sufficient language competence to meet the requirements of the newly formulated policy. Although this work has had the merit of analysing classroom communication and teachers' attitudes in ways which can help to increase target language use, it has not aimed to investigate critically the principle itself. Moreover, it has not taken into account the special features of language learning in UK schools and the particular characteristics of individual classrooms. As Macaro (1995) comments, there has been no major research project 'to investigate what teachers actually believe' about the issue of TL use. This survey was initiated by NFER to provide this perspective and to appraise the current position with reference to the practice and beliefs of classroom teachers.

2. THE SURVEY OF TEACHERS

Although pupils' perspectives are also likely to be a significant factor in judging the question of target language (TL) use, this project confined itself to a questionnaire survey of teachers and to the issue of spoken language. The questionnaire sought information from teachers of MFLs at key stages (KS) 3 and 4 of the National Curriculum about their current practice and their beliefs, and in particular:

- ◆ their professional background including opportunities for maintaining spoken language proficiency;
- ◆ estimates of the proportion of classroom communication carried out in the TL;
- ◆ estimates of the frequency with which pupils take part in particular activities, involving use of the spoken language;
- ◆ judgements about the difficulty of carrying out different aspects of teaching in the TL;
- ◆ views on the appropriate balance of TL and English to promote different features of foreign language development;
- ◆ views on the factors preventing TL use in the classroom.

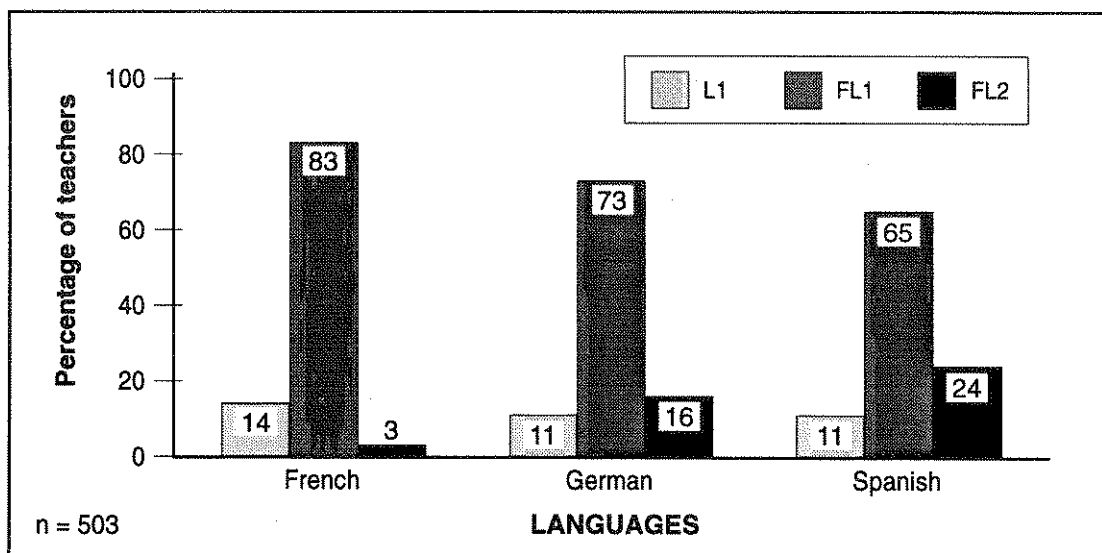
In January 1996, questionnaires were sent to 393 secondary schools in England and Wales, and assigned to two MFL teachers in each school, by a procedure designed to assure random selection. Seventy-one per cent of schools returned completed questionnaires; 508 questionnaires were returned – 65 per cent of those distributed.

3. PROFILE OF THE SURVEY TEACHERS

Languages taught at KS3 and KS4

It was recognised that many teachers may have been teaching more than one language at the time of the survey. Respondents were asked therefore to answer all questions with reference to one language only – their first foreign language or the language they taught most often at KS3 and KS4. The information provided showed that in 65 per cent of cases this language was French, in 27 per cent, German, and seven per cent, Spanish. There were also two cases of Urdu and one each of Italian and Russian. Figure 2.1 below illustrates for French, German and Spanish in how many cases this was the teacher’s native language (L1), first foreign language (FL1) or second foreign language (FL2).

Figure 2.1 L1, FL1 and FL2 teachers of French, German and Spanish



Taking all the languages referred to into account, in 13 per cent of cases teachers were native speakers, 79 per cent, FL1, and eight per cent, FL2 speakers. Teachers showed in addition that there was competence in many more languages than those specified in relation to the survey. In answer to a question about knowledge of other first and second foreign languages, 20 different languages were mentioned. Three-quarters of the respondents had one other foreign language in addition to their FL1, and a quarter had two or three (in one case four).

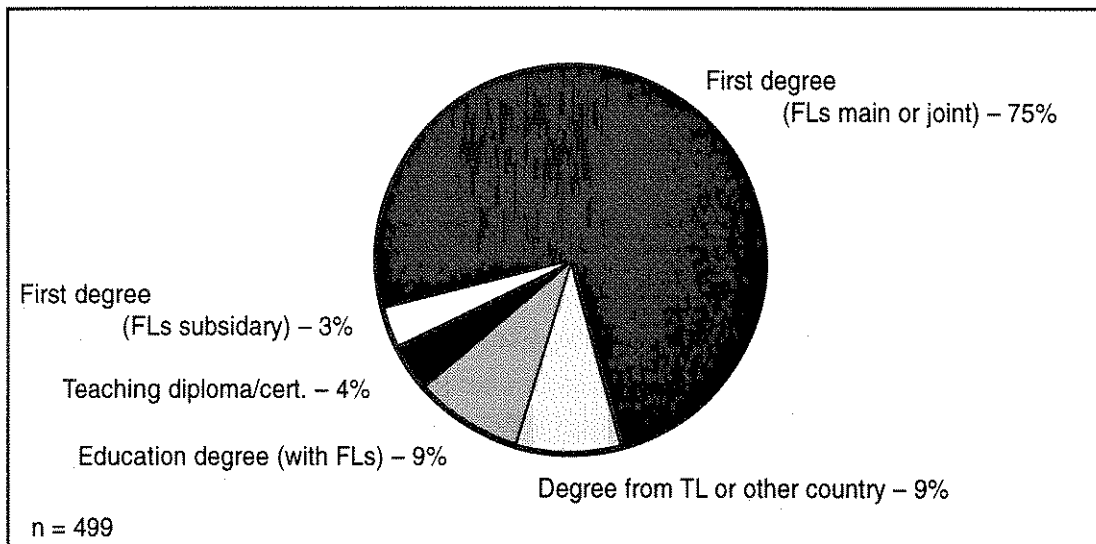
Qualifications

In order to establish details of the academic and professional background of the teachers, they were asked to indicate from a list which were their main qualifications, and to specify other degrees, diplomas and

certificates obtained. Figure 2.2 illustrates how the main qualifications for teaching foreign language were distributed.

The Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) was the professional qualification most often cited (by 70 per cent of teachers). Smaller numbers had other qualifications, both academic and professional, among which there featured advanced language certificates (six per cent), further degrees (five per cent), and diplomas for teaching English as a foreign language (five per cent). Between five and ten per cent of teachers mentioned qualifications unrelated to the field of language education.

Figure 2.2 Teacher's main qualifications



Opportunities for target language use

One of the factors which it is thought likely to affect TL use is the teacher's competence and confidence in the spoken language. Formal qualifications may provide some indication of this but opportunities for direct contact with the TL are likely to be more influential. The teachers were therefore asked to provide information about such experiences. The proportions of teachers spending time in the TL country were: visits for social/leisure purposes (71 per cent); year as assistant in school (51 per cent); visit for training/study purposes (30 per cent); year on teacher exchange (three per cent). Twenty-two per cent mentioned other opportunities: half of these (11 per cent of all teachers) regularly accompanied pupil visits or exchanges to the TL country, and over a quarter (six per cent of all teachers) had spent an extended period for work or study. Smaller numbers had worked abroad in industry or commerce, exchanged with other teachers for a short period of time, or enrolled on residential courses.

Teachers recognise that they need to keep their language competence up to date. A question asking them to indicate the most recent date on which these contacts with the TL applied showed that most (90 per cent) of those visiting the country for social or leisure purposes had done so since 1992. Much smaller numbers of those benefiting from other kinds of contact had done so recently: 20 per cent of assistantships had taken place over the last ten years; 50 per cent of training or study visits over the last 12 years; and there had been no more than one teacher exchange in any year, although most had taken place since 1976.

**Experience
and
responsibility**

There is a view that younger teachers, who have entered the profession recently, are more likely than older teachers to have had the training to help them adapt to current approaches to teaching, which place emphasis on TL use. Information was sought therefore on age, date of entry into teaching, and years of service.

The largest group (42 per cent) were aged 40 to 49; 28 per cent were aged 30 to 39; 16 per cent 20 to 29, and 13 per cent over 50. The distribution, which shows a small majority among the over 40s was not, however, reflected in the date teachers had entered the profession, nor in the number of years they had taught MFLs. This suggested that in recent years many mature entrants had been recruited. Fifty per cent had started teaching since 1980, and 20 per cent since 1992, a picture reinforced by the figures for years of service. Only a quarter of teachers had completed more than 20 years' service, and three per cent over 30 years.

Another feature of the sample of teachers was the relatively high proportion of those with posts of responsibility – higher than is, than one would have expected from a random sample. Heads of department accounted for 38 per cent, other coordinating posts, 25 per cent and main grade teachers, 37 per cent.

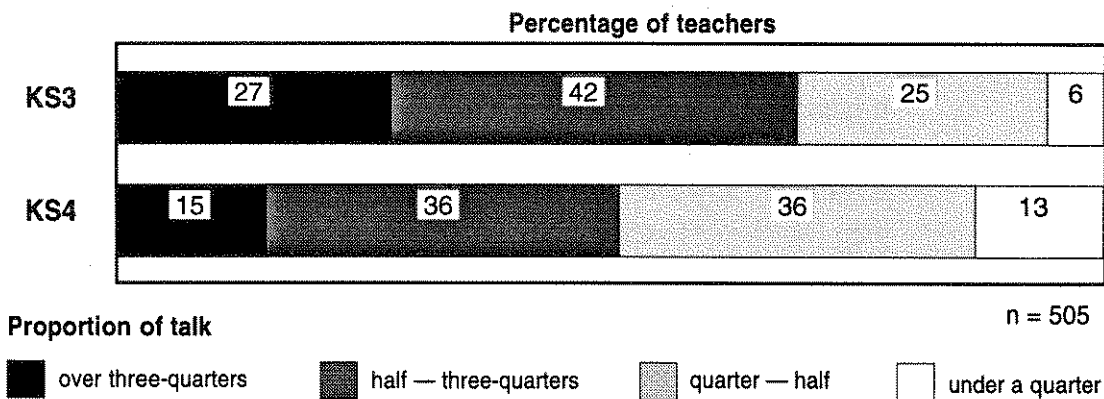
Some of the characteristics of the teachers described above provide a basis for comparison when the analyses of the results of the survey are reported in subsequent sections. Teachers were also invited to attach their comments to the questionnaire; 44 per cent did so and this provided further illustration of their responses.

4. QUANTITY OF TARGET LANGUAGE USED

Teachers' use of TL

The evidence which suggests that learners who are exposed to most TL input exhibit the greatest proficiency (see, for example, Larsen-Freeman, 1985) has led to the assumption that quantity of input is of prime importance. Consequently, there has been considerable interest in establishing the extent to which teachers use the TL in classroom settings. In the survey, teachers were asked to estimate, on average, what proportion of their talk, at both KS3 and KS4, was in the TL. Four categories were specified (*over three-quarters, between half and three-quarters, between a quarter and a half and under one quarter*), and although comments suggested that estimating was sometimes difficult, teachers were able to respond according to this categorisation. Figure 4.1 summarises the overall responses.

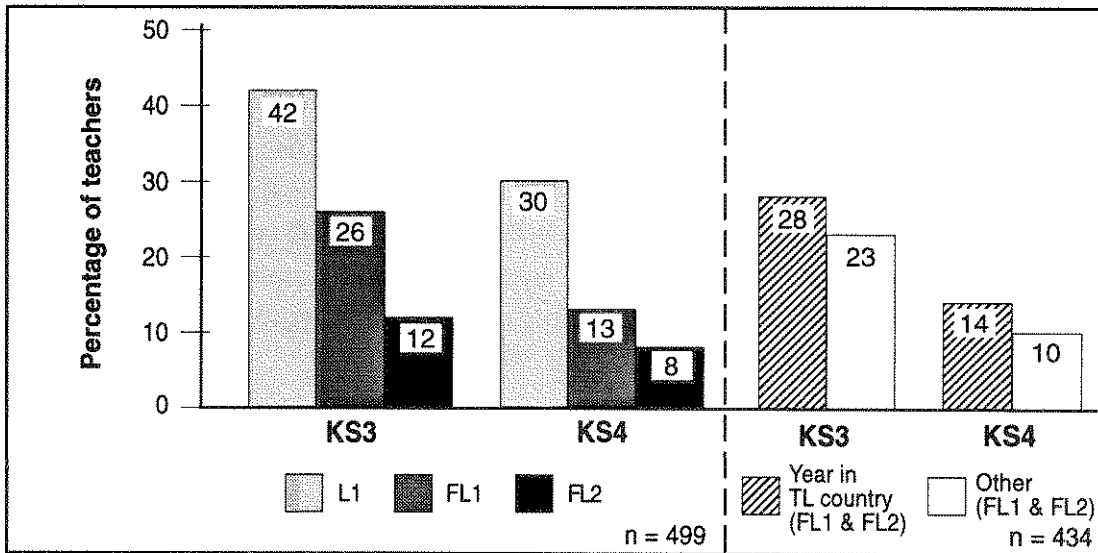
Figure 4.1 Teacher's talk in the target language at KS3 and KS4



The difference between teachers' practice at KS3 and KS4 is quite marked, with 68 per cent compared with 51 per cent using the TL for over half of their classroom talk. The decline in use of the TL for older pupils is discussed in Section 6 below. Although there was little difference between languages or between different groups of teachers when the figures for over and under a half were compared, there were marked differences in the proportions using the TL for over three-quarters of all communication, and this seemed to be related to language proficiency.

Figure 4.2 shows the differences between native speakers (L1), FL1 speakers and FL2 speakers, and, among FL1 and FL2 speakers, between those who had spent a year in the TL country and others, when the proportions using the TL for over three-quarters of their talk were compared.

Figure 4.2 Teachers using the target language for over three-quarters of their talk, by background



It is perhaps not surprising that higher proportions of talk in the TL should be a characteristic of the practice of native speakers; it is significant, however, that among those using the TL for over a half of their talk the difference between native speakers at KS3 and others is much smaller – three per cent. The difference at KS4 is about 12 per cent – probably a reflection of the much greater demands on language competence at that level.

What this picture shows in general is that, in spite of some differences reflected in teachers' language proficiency and fluency, not only does practice fall well short of 100 per cent use of TL, but that English plays a major part in classroom teaching of MFLs, even among native speakers. It has been demonstrated in other situations which might be thought to offer ideal conditions for 100 per cent TL use, for example in direct teaching or immersion, that approaches are less than successful without use of the L1 (Guthrie, 1983). Indeed, Guthrie claims that few teachers use the TL for as much as 80 per cent of their talk in class. There is also evidence to show that the quantity of TL input by the teacher is less critical than the quality, the nature of the classroom interactions in which it is used, and the degree to which learners are actively involved (Ellis, 1984). As part of a strategy to encourage communication, using English where necessary and allowing its use by pupils to sustain interaction and ensure involvement in tasks designed to be carried out in the TL, is likely therefore to be a practice

adopted instinctively by some teachers. These comments, both by native speakers, typify the views of most teachers with regard to the quantity of TL it is appropriate to use:

I think that I am highly skilled in my use of TL, but even so, I have some groups where use of TL rarely exceeds about 50 per cent of the lesson, and despite my efforts and best intentions, I don't see that this will ever change.

And, reinforcing the validity of 50 per cent:

I believe that half the time on TL use is good enough and serves its purpose. I don't think more can be of much use in certain contexts; I think it might even have negative consequences.

Pupils' use of TL

The extent to which teachers dominate classroom talk is well documented, as is their tendency to limit pupils' involvement by their interactional adjustments (Westgate *et al.*, 1985). The degree to which teachers succeed in eliciting talk from pupils is likely therefore to depend on their questioning behaviour, as well as on the activities designed for pupil participation.

It was not realistic to ask the survey teachers to estimate the proportion of all communication in the TL involving pupils; instead, they provided estimates of the proportions of pupils' own talk in the TL, and this showed quite a different pattern from that relating to the teachers. At KS3, only 30 per cent of teachers estimated that half or more of their pupils' talk was in the TL, and just over 20 per cent at KS4. The figures for three-quarters and over of pupils' talk in the TL were eight per cent at KS3 and about five per cent at KS4. Significantly, pupils appeared to use more TL where their teachers were native speakers — 14 per cent at KS4, for three-quarters and over of pupils' talk, was exactly twice that for pupils of other teachers.

While there is a danger in placing too great a reliance on the quantity of teachers' TL input, there is an equal danger in overlooking the relatively little TL used by pupils. Chaudron (1988) suggests that learners in classrooms have too few opportunities for practising TL use, particularly for message-oriented purposes, and Neil (1996) reports a small-scale study in which the pupils themselves state that they learn by speaking, but have only limited opportunities. The importance of acknowledging pupils' opinions was underlined by a number of comments about needs and the link to confidence. For example: '... it's best to ask the class how they learn best and adapt use of the TL accordingly, not assume the teacher knows it all' (native speaker).

5. CIRCUMSTANCES AFFECTING TL USE

Among the comments offered by the teachers, the one made most frequently (by 22 per cent) was that the TL should be used flexibly and that it was essential to adapt to individual pupils and classroom situations. The next most frequent comment (13 per cent of teachers) was that maximising use of the TL was a good principle. Given that fewer than half of the teachers made any comment, there was much evidence in these remarks to suggest that they did not always find it easy to reconcile their views: for example, many referred to a sense of guilt, fatigue and the burden of using the TL. This perhaps reflected a tension between the two principles they asserted, but it was also clear that the reality of their experience of the classroom was in conflict with expectations created by policy on MFLs and official statements.

Information was sought from teachers about the extent to which particular factors prevented TL being the normal means of communication in the classroom. Table 5.1. below lists these factors and gives the percentage of teachers affected by each *very much*, *quite a lot*, *a bit* or *not at all*.

Table 5.1 Factors affecting teachers' use of TL in the classroom

| | Very much | Quite a lot (percentage of teachers) | A bit | Not at all |
|------------------------|-----------|---|-------|------------|
| Disorderly behaviour | 51 | 23 | 21 | 5 |
| Lower achieving pupils | 30 | 34 | 32 | 4 |
| Large classes | 24 | 34 | 27 | 15 |
| Mixed ability classes | 21 | 32 | 35 | 12 |
| Your fatigue, stress | 18 | 29 | 43 | 10 |
| Your views on TL use | 11 | 18 | 32 | 39 |
| Your confidence (FL2) | 10 | 19 | 35 | 35 |
| Departmental policy | 6 | 10 | 11 | 73 |
| Your confidence (FL1) | 5 | 4 | 13 | 78 |
| n = 504 | | | | |

Factors relating to pupils, particularly disorderly behaviour and low achievement, all appeared to work more powerfully against TL use than teacher factors. The teacher's confidence in using the TL exerted

the smallest influence, though there was a marked difference between FL1 and FL2 speakers. A much greater obstacle for the teachers was their fatigue and stress, a consequence perhaps of their feeling that they should persist with the use of the TL even when it does not seem appropriate for many of their pupils. There were few differences in the responses of the teachers: native speakers were more affected by large classes and disorderly behaviour, but less by lower achieving pupils and fatigue or stress; and older teachers were more affected than younger teachers by mixed ability classes and lower achieving pupils.

A number of the teachers' comments provided reinforcement, and sometimes some explanation, of the picture created by these results. After the comments about the need for flexibility and for maximising TL use, the most frequent were that TL often alienated low achievers, making mixed ability teaching impractical (ten per cent of teachers) and that it led to poor understanding, anxiety and demotivation (11 per cent). The words of teachers showed clearly the relationship between these two views:

Use of the TL without taking pupil ability/behaviour into account is meaningless and counter-productive; it decreases pupil motivation and increases negative perceptions of the language as unfathomable.

Teachers who use lots of TL with low ability groups are both discouraging their pupils and exhausting themselves.

Another comment attempts to explain the potential for demotivation:

... with weaker pupils TL work can be kept simple but in the long term can become boring and over-repetitive.

The feeling that the potential for TL use is severely limited for lower achieving pupils was widespread. It is also consistent with a study of Swedish teachers of English which found that more English during lessons had positive effects for good pupils but negative effects for less able pupils (Giota, 1995).

The concern to maintain pupils' interest and sustain good working relationships in the classroom was seen by teachers as an important educational principle – one which was often undermined by excessive TL use.

Teachers expressed this in many different ways. For example:

Somehow, I often feel when I'm teaching in the TL that I miss a lot of opportunities (especially with beginners or low achievers) for a little aside, a joke, an encouraging remark (native speaker).

I find my pupils are well-motivated and keen to take part in all aspects of lessons; I feel they know me as a real person. We laugh in lessons and have fun – this is usually because we've used English to understand the subtle shades of meaning that humour demands.

There were many similar references to enjoyment and humour, which were recognised as essential for motivating pupils. Many of the teachers made comments about the potential of TL for impairing pupil-teacher relations, and some about the need to use L1 to exercise control – an equally valid, if more negative way of expressing the same opinion. A much looser group of comments (by 11 per cent of teachers) converged on the notion that it is necessary to build trust and confidence among pupils. All these ideas confirm the view of the classroom as a unique social context in which teachers should be left to exercise professional judgement about the best ways of managing interaction and learning. It is strong evidence too to challenge the notion that it is possible to generalise about appropriate use of the TL in the classroom, or that there are fixed patterns of combining TL and English which should be adopted.

Although classroom context was a major preoccupation of the teachers in the comments they offered, some also pointed out that the effectiveness of TL use was influenced equally by social and cultural factors. Lack of exposure to the target language in society was one of the factors mentioned. Its unfamiliarity makes it difficult to create opportunities for pupils to use it 'in an informal way (i.e. talking to each other)'. This is elaborated in another comment:

My main problem ... is the students' unwillingness/inability to use the TL in any meaningful way, i.e. in a way they would use it in everyday speech. In many German classrooms, I see this happening more because English is all around them and they pick up colloquialisms from adverts, TV, etc. which they incorporate into their classroom responses. The fact they can respond reasonably naturally motivates them to speak more. Students in England don't have this, unfortunately.

It was often teachers with working experience in the TL country, or native speakers, who commented on the contrast between the UK and other countries with respect to pupils' perceptions of the value of language learning and their appreciation of other cultures. For example:

The main difference I have found with this country is that, abroad, students expect to be taught in the TL, appreciate its value and culture and want to be taught in the TL. They appreciate difference and variety. No such cultural framework exists here. The media constantly reinforce the notion that English is best and what is foreign is to be regarded with a certain degree of suspicion (native speaker).

Another native speaker asked more directly whether the research had 'considered the effects of the xenophobic press and government attitudes [which] pervade everything, including the attitudes of some parents and consequently their children'. It would be wrong to suppose that such negative attitudes and experience were being invoked by teachers to argue against TL use in principle. The benefits of maximising TL use were constantly reasserted, but with the important qualification that it should always be subject to judgements about its usefulness in individual classrooms and for individual pupils.

6. TL USE AND EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching in the TL

The teachers were asked how easy or how difficult it was to carry out particular aspects of classroom teaching in the TL. These classroom functions are listed below in Table 6.1 along with the proportions of teachers responding – *very easy*, *quite easy*, *quite difficult* or *very difficult*.

Table 6.1 Teaching in the TL: difficulty of particular functions

| | Very easy | Quite easy | Quite difficult | Very difficult |
|---------------------|--------------------------|------------|-----------------|----------------|
| | (percentage of teachers) | | | |
| Ask questions | 42 | 46 | 10 | 1 |
| Comment on work | 21 | 42 | 26 | 10 |
| Direct pupils | 19 | 61 | 16 | 4 |
| Correct mistakes | 17 | 41 | 33 | 8 |
| Organise activities | 12 | 50 | 31 | 6 |
| Discipline pupils | 8 | 25 | 38 | 28 |
| Set homework | 7 | 33 | 39 | 21 |
| Explain meanings | 5 | 31 | 44 | 19 |
| Teach grammar | 3 | 8 | 34 | 55 |
| n = 505 | | | | |

From these results two figures stand out: 42 per cent of teachers found asking questions in the TL very easy and 55 per cent found teaching grammar very difficult. For the other aspects of teaching, about two-thirds or more of the teachers responded quite easy or quite difficult, reflecting the equivocal feelings frequently expressed in comments, which also alluded invariably to situational rather than linguistic difficulties in using the TL.

Nevertheless, linguistic difficulty appears to provide some explanation of the fact that the majority of teachers found the routine functions, involving largely predictable language, quite or very easy (the first five functions listed), while a similar majority found the other functions, which arguably make more demands on language competence, quite or very difficult. These results are not dissimilar to those from earlier studies (Mitchell, 1988 and Franklin, 1990).

However, the current survey provides evidence to suggest that teachers' language proficiency, which was the focus of discussion in reports on the earlier studies, may not be the most important factor in explaining teachers' reluctance to use the TL for certain purposes. If command of the language had been critical in the range of classroom functions for which teachers used the TL, one might have expected markedly different responses from native speakers of the TL and English speakers. In fact, native speakers differed conspicuously with respect to only one of the functions – disciplining pupils – which 52 per cent of native speakers, compared with 33 per cent overall, found quite or very easy to manage in the TL.

Although higher proportions of native speakers found most of the other functions quite or very easy, the differences ranged from only two to ten per cent. The pattern of responses was largely the same for all groups – native speakers, those with experience of an extended stay in the TL country, those with and without coordinating responsibility, older and younger teachers. The small differences that were found may indicate qualified scope for extending TL use in the classroom, but a more important conclusion to draw is that English is often used because it is seen as a more effective teaching strategy.

A question asking teachers whether the use of the TL or English, for each of the classroom functions, was more likely to be effective for pupils' learning reinforced this conclusion. The proportions indicating more effective in the TL ranged from ten per cent (teaching grammar) to 90 per cent (asking questions) and corresponded closely to teachers' views on the difficulty of using the TL for each of the functions. This suggests that the difficulty which is experienced may arise as much from the effort to accomplish something which teachers feel is better done in English, as from the demands on their own language competence.

Difficulties arise too as a result of the limited language competence of the pupils. Setting homework, disciplining, explaining meanings and teaching grammar are all likely to involve the use of language beyond the level which is accessible to many pupils. So, this may also explain why teachers find these more difficult in the TL. Pupils' lack of comprehension is an obstacle to both learning and teaching. Wing (1982) suggests that teachers' use of the TL is most often confined to functions that fall below rather than above the level of the learners' speaking ability, because these are least likely to interfere with the pace and direction of the lesson.

Teachers' comments about the use of English focused on three quite distinct but related issues: that it is practical and a realistic acknowledgement of time constraints to use L1; that for more complex explanations, particularly of grammar, L1 is more effective; and that pupils' deficiencies in L1 and grammatical understanding make it necessary in many contexts to use L1 rather than the TL. The question of grammar appeared to be central to teachers' concerns, and there were frequent expressions of regret that formal teaching of grammar had become marginalised in the teaching of English. The poor understanding of grammatical principles which is a characteristic of many pupils at the beginning of KS3 was seen as an obstacle to TL use in particular, as well as a disadvantage in second language learning in general.

It is interesting to note that in an investigation of the use of the TL among Italian teachers of English (Macaro, 1995) teachers were found – in contrast to the current survey – to favour use of the TL for teaching grammar, but this was because pupils had a good grasp of the structure of their own language and a shared understanding of the terminology. One teacher thought that the National Curriculum should have addressed more thoroughly 'the teaching of grammar ... both in connection with the question of target language, and with the current teaching of English'. A native speaker thought also that 'it is often inappropriate and time consuming to explain... grammar in the TL, particularly in view of the fact that so many English students have a poor understanding of their own grammar'.

English was generally seen as the better medium whenever the content of teaching was at a conceptual level not equalled by the pupils' proficiency in the TL. The very limited repertoire of many pupils at KS3 means that work in the TL is often at a level of triviality and, according to one teacher quoted above, boring and repetitive. Switching to English is thus, in one sense, a way of enriching the content of language lessons. This tension between lesson content and the level of pupils' language proficiency appears to account also for the decline in the use of the TL at KS4, referred to above in Section 3. The evidence that there was less TL use at KS4 was reinforced by comments. For example:

Organisation of activities by the teacher in the TL is much easier at KS3 as the tasks themselves are inherently less complex. As the nature of the task becomes more involved, the length of explanation/direction increases and is less well received by

students. If the task is easy to explain it will probably have very little intrinsic interest as an activity in its own right and becomes ... artificial language practice...

Judgements about TL use were influenced by organisational considerations as well as by the more fundamental question of pupils' knowledge about language and by the relative complexity of the activities they undertake at different stages of their progression. Teachers were acutely conscious of the relatively small proportion of curriculum time allocated to languages and the need to achieve particular targets within the time available. 'Is half an hour preparation worth avoiding a two-minute explanation in English?' asked one teacher. Another comment drew attention to the need to maximise time for pupils to use the TL: 'I prefer to give some instructions... in English so as to maximise the time for the [activity] itself. It is the activity which will allow intensive practice of the TL.' Similar judgements were made about the use of the TL for instructions in examinations: while there were no comments in support of the proposal, some said that it was unsuitable because, for example, it would fail to support lower achieving pupils, or place constraints on the performance of the most able.

Learning through use of the TL

While the great majority of comments made by teachers reflected a preoccupation with their own use of the TL, one described as a misunderstanding the pervasive belief among teachers in general that they should 'provide as much TL input as possible, failing to realise that it is primarily a means of promoting TL use among pupils'. The author of this comment would no doubt have agreed that teacher input is at least a major source of language data from which pupils recognise meanings and assimilate the different elements and structures of the TL, if he had not been underlining the danger of attributing to it too central a role in pupils' learning. When the teachers referred to stress and fatigue, did this bear witness to the feeling that there was relentless pressure to perform in the TL? And does this perception of their role reflect a feeling that with the passing of time they have merely replaced the tape-recorder?

There is certainly evidence to support the view (see, for example, Gass and Varonis, 1985) that opportunities for learners to interact through conversation in the classroom are essential for learning, and that,

therefore, as much attention should be paid to pupils' use of the TL as to the teachers'. The survey questionnaire asked teachers, therefore, to estimate how often pupils took part in particular activities, at both KS3 and KS4. Table 6.2 lists the activities and gives the percentage of teachers responding *often*, *sometimes* or *never*.

Table 6.2 Activities for pupils' use of TL: frequency at KS3 and KS4

| | KS3 | | | KS4 | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------|-------|--------------------------|-----------|-------|
| | Often | Sometimes | Never | Often | Sometimes | Never |
| | (percentage of teachers) | | | (percentage of teachers) | | |
| Answer questions | 92 | 8 | 0 | 86 | 13 | 1 |
| Role-play (pairs) | 81 | 19 | 0 | 72 | 27 | 1 |
| Conversation (pairs) | 66 | 32 | 2 | 60 | 37 | 2 |
| Role-play (groups) | 28 | 59 | 13 | 23 | 56 | 21 |
| Conversation (groups) | 20 | 53 | 27 | 19 | 53 | 28 |
| Projects (pairs/groups) | 7 | 54 | 39 | 4 | 46 | 50 |
| Extended stories/accounts | 3 | 34 | 63 | 12 | 51 | 37 |
| n = 503 | | | | | | |

From these results it is clear that the only activities frequently undertaken by pupils (by two-thirds or more who do them *often*) are answering questions or role-plays and conversation in pairs. Although it is hard to know how much of the conversation activity provides a genuine challenge to create language and express personal meaning, the impression from teachers' responses overall is that such opportunities are not a common feature of pupils' work; indeed, extended speaking appears to be a relatively infrequent activity at both KS3 and KS4 (about two-thirds of pupils at KS3 and over a third at KS4 never do it).

Teachers' responses to this question were consistent with their estimates of pupils' talk in the TL (see Section 4). Pupils of native speakers participated more frequently than others in all activities, except extended stories/accounts, and pupils at KS4 participated slightly less frequently than those at KS3 in all activities — again, with the exception of extended speaking. Role-plays or conversation in groups were not a feature of pupils' work in a significantly high proportion of cases, though they were reported more often by senior teachers than others. The information sought did not include teachers' views on the merits of the different activities, but it is reasonable to assume that the emphasis teachers placed on the more restricted and mechanical exchanges between pupils was a reflection of their judgement about constraints on TL use. There were comments in particular about the

reluctance of pupils to engage in meaningful conversation, and the problems of classroom management associated with open-ended conversations between pupils. One teacher remarked that it was 'extremely difficult to get pupils to use the TL in an informal way (i.e. talking to each other as they are working). They can only do it in structured/formal situations.'

Teachers' views on the pattern of spoken language use they thought most appropriate for pupils' development provide a different perspective. While there appeared to be relatively little emphasis placed on the kinds of activities which can stretch pupils' ability to express meaning and consolidate their knowledge of vocabulary and structure (for example in group conversation or extended speaking), fluency and vocabulary learning were among those aspects of competence which the majority of teachers felt were best promoted all or mostly in the TL. Table 6.3 summarises these views, giving the percentage of teachers who believed that each aspect of development should be *all in the TL, mostly TL, TL and English or mostly English*.

Table 6.3 Pattern of TL and English most likely to promote development

| | All TL | Mostly TL | TL and English (percentage of teachers) | Mostly English |
|-------------------------|--------|-----------|---|-------------------|
| Pronunciation | 63 | 32 | 4 | 0 |
| Spoken fluency | 53 | 42 | 4 | 0 |
| Listening comprehension | 36 | 43 | 20 | 1 |
| Knowledge of vocabulary | 17 | 50 | 32 | 1 |
| Accuracy | 13 | 43 | 43 | 1 |
| Confidence | 9 | 42 | 46 | 2 |
| Motivation | 8 | 40 | 49 | 3 |
| Cultural awareness | 2 | 17 | 68 | 13 |
| Knowledge of grammar | 1 | 6 | 54 | 39 |
| n = 501 | | | | |

The figures in Table 6.3 show that for all aspects of pupils' development, even for fluency and pronunciation, there was assumed to be a need for at least some use of English. Knowledge of grammar stood out as an aspect of competence which teachers thought should be developed very substantially through the use of English; this, along with their views on the difficulty of teaching grammar in the TL, may indicate the importance they attach to the explicit teaching of the rules of grammar and syntax. The other elements which teachers indicated

should be promoted predominantly or equally in English (cultural awareness, confidence and motivation) were, significantly, not aspects of linguistic competence. Comments illustrated how much importance teachers attach to sustaining motivation and building confidence and they clearly do not rely much on the TL for these purposes. Indeed, although native speakers, teachers under 40 and those with longer residence in the TL country were more likely to indicate *all TL* to promote development of many of these aspects of competence, the fundamental message conveyed by responses overall was that, for pupils' learning, use of English is often necessary and beneficial.

Teachers' views on the role of English in pupils' foreign language development has some support in second language (L2) acquisition research. Harley (1995), in her review of the lexicon in L2 research, suggests that L2 teaching approaches which avoid all reference to the L1 may need to be reconsidered: 'although studies of cross-linguistic influence have tended more often to focus on negative aspects, there is growing evidence of the facilitative effect of L1/L2 relationships on L2 learning'. A native speaker from among the survey teachers asserted the value of these relationships:

When I was being trained as a language teacher, I was frequently sceptical of the dogma 'use the TL at all times', resort to mime, drawing, cards, anything rather than translate. My German colleagues agree with me that we always compare foreign languages to our own ... and we need to acknowledge that translation into and from the mother tongue is useful.

What was clear to many teachers was that effective use of the TL was not necessarily the same as effective teaching. Several teachers commented that TL use was no yardstick to judge teachers, since it was not associated necessarily with high attainment of pupils. One teacher observed that she had 'yet to see any conclusive evidence that those pupils who experience much TL use all the time achieve more by the end of KS4 than those who experience less'.

Although teachers mounted a strong defence of the use of English, it should not be overlooked that, apart from the teaching of grammar, there was no aspect of L2 competence which it was thought should be developed mostly through the use of English. The apparent contradiction appears to lie in the teachers' perceptions of practice for fluency on the one hand and learning on the other. The learning of words, grammar and structure are critical for developing the competence needed to speak in the TL, and the use of English is seen by most as an indispensable part of that learning process.

Patterns of TL use Since about three-quarters of the teachers claimed that their use of the TL was not at all affected by departmental policy in school, that might indicate an absence of policy, or that policies tend not to concern themselves with prescriptions for use of the TL. In order to elicit teachers' views on the broad questions relevant to a strategy for TL use, the questionnaire asked them to indicate which of each of four pairs of statements best represented their view. The statements are reproduced below with the proportion of teachers choosing each.

| | Percentage of teachers |
|---|------------------------|
| A. You should use the TL as much as possible from the outset. | 89 |
| B. You should use only a little of the TL with beginners and gradually increase it. | 11 |
| A. The TL and English should always be used according to a fixed pattern. | 6 |
| B. The pattern of TL use and English should be constantly adjusted to take account of classes and pupils. | 94 |
| A. You should always simplify use of the TL in an attempt to ensure pupils understand everything. | 46 |
| B. Your use of the TL should aim to stretch pupils' understanding. | 51 |
| A. In paired TL activities, you should expect pupils to participate only if they use the TL. | 63 |
| B. In paired TL activities, pupils should be allowed to contribute in English to encourage their participation. | 37 |

The results here are totally uncomplicated with respect to two of the issues: they show a very clear majority in favour of maximising TL use from the outset, as opposed to gradually increasing it, and for constantly adjusting between the TL and English, rather than using them according to a fixed pattern. These views are entirely consistent with those expressed elsewhere which, while asserting the value of maximising TL use, argue against the notion that it is possible to generalise about patterns of use across different contexts.

The picture presented by the teachers' choice between the remaining statements is less clear. The proportions agreeing with the statements about simplifying and stretching understanding were roughly similar. This may suggest that they were not seen as contradictory and, indeed, comments indicated that each approach was thought to have a value in the appropriate context. Nevertheless, it is significant that nearly half

of the teachers agreed with the words 'always simplify'. Similarly, about half supported the notion of stretching pupils' understanding, even if evidence provided elsewhere suggested that few used activities which stretch pupils' ability to use the spoken language.

That teachers should have thought, by a majority of about two to one, that pupils participating in tasks designed for developing spoken language should use only the TL is perhaps even more surprising. Although consistent with the aim of maximising TL use, and often with the authenticity of the roles being played, discounting the use of English was at odds with the teachers' views on their own practice, which they continually stressed needs to be flexible enough to take account of pupils' involvement, their interest and enjoyment. It was also at odds with the aim of developing pupils' communicative ability in a progressive fashion which allows for the use of English as one of the strategies which can compensate for deficiencies in the second language.

7. SUMMARY OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS

Quantity of TL use in the classroom

Teachers frequently claimed that it was difficult to generalise about the proportions of talk in the classroom which were in the TL because the circumstances in which they taught were so variable. Their estimates, nevertheless, provide a broad picture:

- ◆ At KS4, teachers use as much English as TL; at KS3, the balance appears to be firmly in favour of the TL.
- ◆ The TL and English both appear to have a part to play in teaching and classroom management. The only language activity which is carried out mostly in English is the teaching of grammar. This applies to native speakers of the TL as much as to English-speaking teachers.
- ◆ Native speakers use the TL more than other teachers in nearly all circumstances; FL1 speakers, compared with FL2 speakers, and those with a background of extended residence abroad, compared with others, are also more likely to use the TL. Seniority and age appear to have little effect on the quantity of TL used.
- ◆ Most teachers said that their pupils use more English than the TL, with the predominance of English more marked at KS4 than at KS3. Pupils with teachers who are native speakers use the TL more than other pupils.
- ◆ Pupils' opportunities to use the TL in the classroom appear often to be limited to routine answering of questions and structured role-plays or conversation.
- ◆ More TL is used with higher achieving pupils than with lower achievers.

Factors influencing TL use

Teachers' proficiency in spoken language

Although a small number of teachers claimed that competence in the TL was important for maximising TL use, there was stronger evidence to suggest that it was just one of the many factors which affected their judgements about the appropriate balance of TL and English. The relatively modest difference between native speakers and others in the quantity of TL used overall was clearly a function of the native speakers' superior language competence; the greater differences,

however, were related to the purposes of TL use, and these are more easily explained in terms of effective teaching and classroom management.

Educational considerations

Most teachers were not prepared to sacrifice what they regarded as educational principles – establishing a rapport with pupils and putting their interest and enjoyment first – in order to maximise TL use. Teachers' comments repeatedly asserted the link between classroom relations, pupils' motivation and effective learning.

Classroom conditions

The pupils' limited proficiency, their behaviour and the size of the language classes were among the factors most strongly influencing teachers' judgements about use of the TL. In such circumstances, persistent use of the TL was thought to alienate pupils and to limit opportunities for learning. English was therefore used to restore good behaviour and maintain pupils' interest.

The conceptual level of classroom communication

There was evidence to show that the conceptual level of the teaching and learning sometimes imposed a need to use English and that this was particularly characteristic of work done at KS4. Conversely, a strict adherence to the principle of using the TL for all purposes could result in a trivialisation of the content, as often appeared to be the case at KS3. The level of pupils' understanding, and their reluctance to stretch their spoken language ability, appeared to provide a better explanation of the pattern of TL use than limited proficiency on the part of the teacher.

Organisational factors

The allocation of time to MFLs, and its distribution, both appeared to have a bearing on TL use. Realising some teaching objectives through the use of English seemed to many teachers a more efficient use of time, while shorter and more frequent lessons were sometimes thought to provide better conditions for maintaining TL use.

Effective teaching and learning

Teachers claimed that some use of English was more effective for teaching and learning, sometimes because it was an expedient, for example because it saved time, but also because comparing English with TL facilitated learning. The learning of grammar and vocabulary in particular were thought to benefit from exploiting these relationships between the first and second languages.

Knowledge about language

Teachers referred frequently to poor grammatical knowledge as an obstacle to TL use. Their experience was that when pupils entered KS3, they had neither the appropriate knowledge, nor a shared understanding of grammatical terminology. Some knowledge about language was seen as essential for pupils to develop independence in their use of the TL, for understanding or personal expression.

Social and cultural factors

Britain's linguistic and cultural isolation, as well as the negative attitudes to foreign languages and culture which persist in society, were reasons frequently given by teachers to explain pupils' reluctance to communicate in the TL. Teachers tended to regard such attitudes as an obstacle to TL use rather than a challenge for language learning.

8. CONCLUSIONS

As with any other principle, the use of TL in MFL classrooms should be evaluated in context and with reference to the purposes it is expected to serve. Is nearly exclusive use of the TL, in the context of MFL learning at KS3 and KS4, in UK schools, appropriate? Clearly, on the evidence of this survey, very few teachers think so. Does almost exclusive use of the TL serve the purpose of more effective language learning? Although some teachers are optimistic about the future of the policy, expressions of belief in exclusive TL use tend to be more idealistic than realistic. The balance of opinion is that TL use is just one factor in a strategy for effective teaching and learning, which may also take into account opportunities for using the TL in contexts outside the classroom.

In spite of teachers' reservations, there was little or no dissent from the view that TL use should be developed, and that it should increasingly be the natural means of communication in the classroom, provided it is consistent with educational purposes. However, efforts to extend TL use appear often to have foundered on the low levels of proficiency of the pupils. Increasing the teacher's TL input has perhaps led to an over-dependence on it, and greater passivity on the part of the pupils. At the same time, promoting opportunities for pupils to use the TL appears sometimes to have resulted in an emphasis on mechanistic tasks which allow little opportunity for the expression of personal meaning — a challenge which is critical for developing second language proficiency. The teachers' comments express an awareness of these negative consequences. There was also some recognition of the measures needed to counter them: switching between the TL and English to take account of learning needs, raising awareness of the linguistic differences between English and the TL, and ensuring that activities provide an appropriate challenge and are motivating and interesting for pupils.

What the survey shows also is that there is a gap between the principle of maximum TL use, avowed by most teachers, and the reality of classroom practice, and that there is much uncertainty as to how policy objectives should be adapted to beliefs. Teachers' comments reveal that advances in the use of the TL come about through training and mastery of certain routines, for example the teaching of grammar in the

TL, so that these become goals with their own justification, rather than goals formulated from conviction and consensus about their efficacy. The preoccupation with teachers' own spoken language proficiency, and their ability to perform all the functions of classroom teaching and management in the TL, has perhaps masked the more important question: what kinds of classroom activity and communication in the TL are most likely to help pupils to learn and to practice what they learn? The teachers' competence to present a fluent and accurate model of spoken language is, of course, an important condition for learning, but their ability to provide opportunities for pupils to engage in genuinely communicative activities may be more critical. The evidence of this survey confirms earlier observations (for example Mitchell, 1988) that, in comparison with practice and rehearsal of the TL, communicative activities, which are generally thought to promote development because they challenge pupils to express personal meaning, are relatively rare in the classroom.

A conclusion to draw from the survey therefore is that a more critical approach to TL use is needed to place it in the context of effective teaching and learning. Teachers' comments, for example, point to the need to develop listening skills more systematically and to the fact that pupils may be reluctant to use the TL until they are ready. They also stress the importance of an explicit, grammatical knowledge, without which they feel pupils will be unable to acquire any independence in their use of the TL. Observations such as these imply that a strategy may be needed to enable pupils to acquire from the outset some fundamental skills and knowledge, so that they reach more rapidly the stage where TL use can be developed more profitably. Policies on TL use in the early stages of MFL learning may need to take account of this key condition. In many respects, the beliefs of practitioners are not out of step with the rationale of the policy on TL use, but they do not seem to have been much taken into account in the way it has been represented in official statements and publications providing support and guidance. The evidence of teachers in this survey provides an opportunity to assess more systematically their beliefs about TL use in the classroom and its role in relation to theories of language learning and acquisition.

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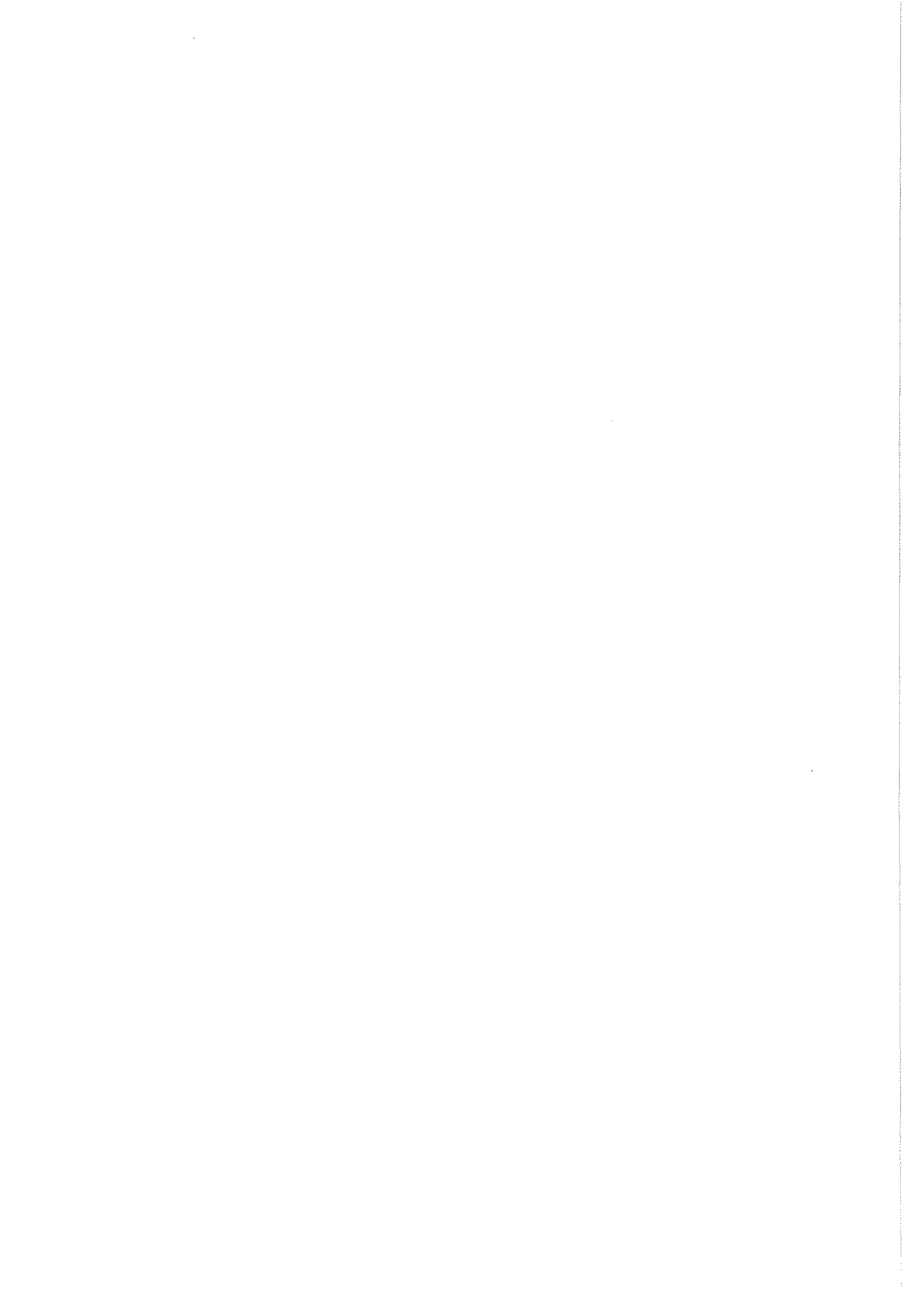
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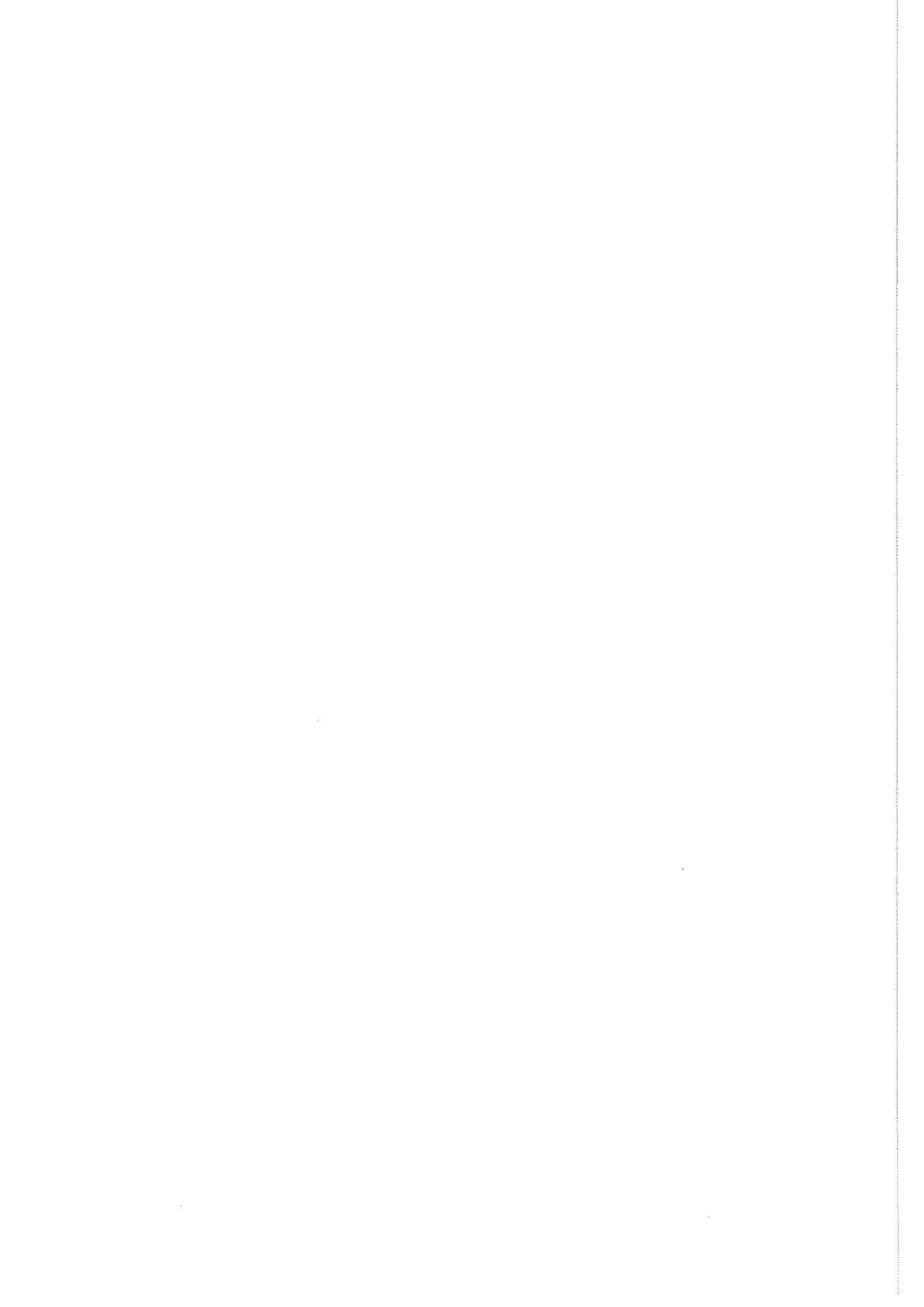
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USING THE TARGET LANGUAGE

A view from the classroom

There has been very little argument among teachers of modern foreign languages (MFLs) about the merit of using the target language as much as possible when teaching. However, there has been an uneasy acceptance of the principle, proposed by the National Curriculum Order for MFLs, that the target language should be the normal means of all communication in the language classroom. Much discussion of the policy and its implementation has focused on teachers' proficiency and fluency in the target language, but there has been little consideration given to the validity of the principle itself.

The survey described in this report set out to establish the extent to which teachers use the target language, and to investigate their beliefs about its role in effective teaching and learning. It provides information, in particular, about the quantity of target language used by both teachers and pupils at key stages 3 and 4 of the National Curriculum, about difficulties encountered in promoting target language use, and about the balance of target language and English thought to be most appropriate for developing foreign language competence.

The perspectives of teachers whose mother tongue is the target language are considered alongside those of English speakers, and together these show a considerable degree of consensus about the need to adapt target language use to circumstances, and to recognise that it is only one aspect of a broader strategy for teaching and learning MFLs.

ISBN 0 7005 1436 8

£6.00