

Learning French in British schools

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Often have I heard the complaint - the self criticism - that the British are the world's worst language learners. Apparently it is not true.

But supposing it is true. What can be done about it?

Research into the reasons for success or failure in students has shown that those students who really want to learn, and who take responsibility for their own failure, frequently succeed in the end. Research like this merely confirms what most people instinctively know but often devilishly deny, that if you want something badly enough, and you are willing to make the needed sacrifices and endure the inevitable pain, then you are likely to succeed. In my own field of linguistics it is a hotly argued debate about whether adults can achieve near native performance in pronunciation. The consensus is the unsurprising but counter intuitive conclusion that most adults can achieve near native performance, if they really want to, and take appropriate learning steps over a long period of time. In short, adults rarely achieve near native standard because they give up too soon. This conclusion is counterintuitive perhaps because there are so few examples of those who have succeeded, and even these examples are dismissed as being because they are naturally gifted for languages instead of gifted for hard work at learning languages.

Students fail because they do not want to succeed - they do not want to with sufficient strength that they will pay the price needed for success.

Why then do so few British students learn well a foreign language? There are many possible reasons. The first one is probably that there is an unrealistic expectation that in the short time allowed for language study then students can learn a language. It is quite obvious that British children largely fail to learn a foreign language because the education system does not permit or want the students to learn. If the education planners really wanted children to learn a language then they would allocate the needed time.

It is a widely known estimate that to go from zero to fluency, defined as B2 level in a language in all five skills requires about 1200 hours of instruction. At level B2 students can write letters and reports, can understand most books, magazines, news and documentary programs, and can converse pleasantly with reasonable accuracy on any subject they want.

The can also consider studying another subject through the medium of that foreign language.

The current situation is that at best students get 2-3 hours a week for five years, then nothing. A maximum of 600 hours of tuition (each year counts as 40 weeks). It is quite obvious that the hours allocation needs to be doubled. At least one hour per day of French, for at least five years. Can this be done? Easily.

British schools are famous world wide for their short hours of study. Twenty periods of 70 minutes is the norm, and this includes sport and other activities. French schools commonly teach 30-35 hours per week.

English schools rarely start before 9am and rarely go on after 4pm except for clubs and detention - practically the only punishment left to teachers, and I hear this is highly restricted in many schools. Of course, to give the full picture, these study hours in school ignore the homework timetable, which can easily amount to an extra 2-3 hours per night, and the needed human extra curricular activities such as clubs and sport. French schools routinely start at 8am and go on to 6pm. In Tunisia, I know of primary schools that have given extra lessons starting at 630am, and the official school day finishes at 530pm and some children then went to extra private tuition until 7pm.

I am not advocating such long hours. On the contrary, I have repeatedly said that a good teacher does not need a lot of hours, and in many subjects, two intensive hours are better than three boring hours.

But with languages 'compressed time' is not always efficient. A good teacher is one who actually takes the time to practice and drill. It is completely different in science teaching where a good teacher has mastered the art of conveying a massive amount of content combined with explaining inherently difficult ideas in the shortest time possible. Languages have a high element of skill and subconscious manipulation of phrases. This can only come with extended exposure and training over a long period of time.

So what will it realistically take to teach French in British secondary schools?

Quite clearly, an extra hour needs to be added to the school day. Students need to do at least an hour of French per day. I already hear people shouting 'you can't do that'. Why not? Will children have to come to school or go home in the dark? In large parts of Britain in the winter they already do that. I can remember in 1970 leaving home at dawn at 745am to catch the country bus to school, and when I stayed on for a club after school I did not get home before 7pm, twice a week. I left in the dark and came home in the dark and thought nothing of it.

Yes, the school buses will have to be rescheduled. But the biggest single factor will have to be the hiring of French teachers. That means money. If you want to do it cheaply, and if French teachers become in short supply, there are plenty of highly qualified Africans and North Africans who speak perfect and clear French who would willingly come to Britain to teach. It would not be difficult to test their French to make sure it is as good as is needed, and many such people would love to come to Britain. They could be hired, if there is a fear that once here they will overstay their welcome, with the promise of a bonus paid in their own country on their return.

If Britain is ever to take languages seriously, then students will need 5-10 hours per week - just for one foreign language. Can't be done? Of course it can. If the desire for foreign languages is strong enough then students could easily spend ten hours a week learning another language - plus homework.

The French GCSE and A level syllabi and examinations also need overhauling. Far too many of them are dominated by French literature, and a very English way of viewing foreign languages. For instance, I have seen that students read a book in French then write about it in

English. How absurd. Better a simplified but correct French than advanced English about French.

I know that immersion research in Canada and elsewhere has shown that weak students in L2 need the content of L2 material assessed in L1. But this research is interested in how well the students learn another subject through ('vehiculed' by) French. I am saying that when you teach a foreign language and ask students to read for content in that foreign language, then at Advanced level it is absurd to allow students to use English to express the content of material they have read in French. If you allow students to do this then the whole problematic subject of translation is opened up. You also miss the opportunity to encourage learners to struggle to

express themselves correctly. I totally agree - if your goal is to test only understanding of material in L2, then testing in L1 might be helpful for weaker students. But if your goal is a high level of all round performance, then students need to learn to write simply but accurately in L2. Better a simplified but correct French than advanced English about French.

Literature, and maybe history and geography also seems to dominate the information content of French A levels. But why this bias towards the arts? Why should French be so strongly associated with philosophy and literature? Surely, by the time students study A level French they should be exposed to examples of French in all the major subject areas, and of most of the genres, both written, spoken, and multimedia, and including science and business.

Another interesting course would be world affairs viewed through French eyes. Given the narrow focus of British and American Media, it would be good to expose students to another perspective, and World Affairs in French lends itself to that.

It is very interesting that the French - who seem to have a passion for their literature, philosophy, and mathematics, have in their French courses for foreigners gone the route of top priority for language - not literature. Thus the DELF and the DALF are purely language based, unlike A level French.

The British educators have reaped the harvest they have sown. They are clearly not really motivated enough to plan for effective foreign language learning in British schools. The price is obvious, and the path to success reasonably clear. If Britain wants people to learn languages then they will provide 5-10 hours a week of tuition for five years. The obstacles to implementing this are mere trivial excuses of a type beloved of children to excuse bad behaviour. Much better to honestly admit - languages are possible, and for some inexplicable reason, the price is too high. But given this reluctance to pay the price, do not complain about the lack of success in learning languages. **If you want it badly enough, you will pay the price. People in Britain do not want to pay the price. Therefore clearly the British do not really want to learn languages.**