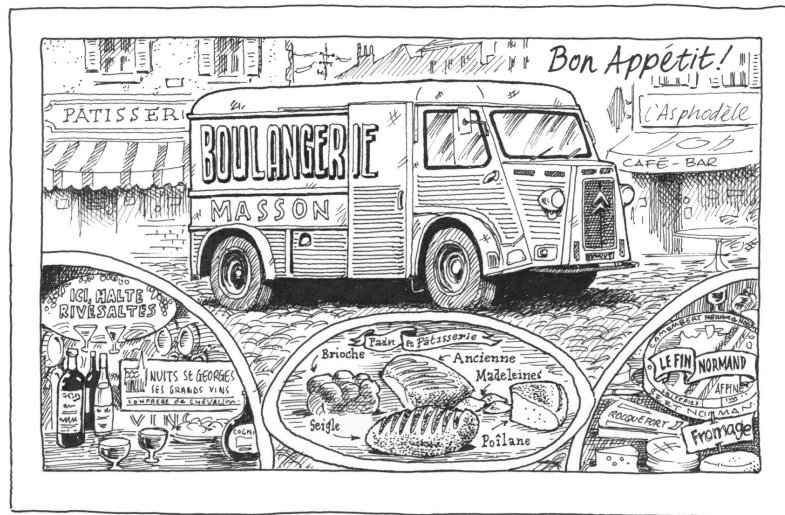


# Chapter 1

## Introduction and Philosophy



My childhood summers meant staying in a *gîte* in Brittany. It wasn't just the *crêpes* I looked forward to, but entering another culture, visiting local *restaurants* and vast *hypermarchés* and experiencing the joy of conducting simple transactional exchanges using words in a 'foreign language'. Here were opportunities for bringing out my Collins French phrasebook and dictionary, not just for decoding the *panneaux de signalisation* and the *plats du jour*, but to sit quietly learning lists of vocabulary and phrases which I could then try out in real life scenarios. I could say things and make people react. I'd discovered this secret code! And the beginnings of a life-long passion.

In my first French lesson at secondary school my teacher gave me a present: a textbook to use in class and for homework. I was thrilled! Two weeks into Year 7, the teacher conducted

a listening activity in class where we had to listen to the French football results from *Ligue 1* and write down the score: '*Paris Saint-Germain trois, Marseilles deux.*' It was just as well there were no 10-0 victories as we had only learned the numbers up to five. Such memories stick; I remember thinking, 'Wow, two of my favourite things in one class, football and languages!'

In Year 11, with exams looming, I had to revise for my German GCSE reading and listening papers. We had been told to 'learn your topic vocab!' With my Letts GCSE German Study Guide I locked myself away in my room and learned all of the vocabulary on all of the topic lists! When I heard *Holzhaus* I felt smug because this was a word I knew, perhaps picking up a mark that few other students would have got. I realised that language exams were basically about vocabulary.

As a trainee teacher, Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) and Recently Qualified Teacher (RQT), I began to explore the transactional nature of teaching languages in general and of teaching vocabulary in particular. I had started my teaching career full of enthusiasm, armed with a textbook, a scheme of work and a stack of PowerPoint slides. My work in the classroom was driven by this familiar, well-trodden path; I needed to cover the course. It was a struggle keeping to the schedule, but I completed the textbook by April.

It was in my fourth year of teaching that I had to rethink my approach. I had hoped that this roadmap was serving my students well, but when their reading and listening exams came along many of the students found parts of the foundation reading paper difficult. One student said, 'I didn't know *gare routière.*' I said, 'Oh, it's only one mark. It's bus station, don't you remember? We did that in Year 10 when we did travel and holidays.' Well, had they remembered, they would have got the mark.

A colleague who had been teaching the top set told me that she never thought to teach the word *grève*, which the students needed to know in order to get a mark on the higher paper. I spent that summer holiday worrying about how I could ensure that every student knew words like *gare routière* and *grève*, which are part of everyday French life, not just words appearing on exam papers!

So, what to do? I was aware of the exam board's prescribed list of vocabulary, but I had never thought deeply about how to teach a word in Year 10 and be certain that the students would remember it for their exams in Year 11. Just because I could confidently say, 'I taught that word in Year 10, so if it comes up in an exam next year then great, I've done my job', it did not necessarily mean that the students would remember that word or recognise it when they saw or heard it.

I had been teaching vocabulary in the modern foreign languages classroom by writing the words on the Interactive Whiteboard, modelling the pronunciation, getting the students to

repeat it, and checking their pronunciation. Towards the end of the lesson I measured their progress by asking the students to recall what they had learned. But even so, the students were not retaining the vocabulary. More was needed.

My personal way of learning vocabulary – which had been to simply stare at a list of words and repeat them to myself over and over again – was never going to inspire students. Nor did I think the best course of action would be to write to parents and recommend they buy their child a Collins French phrasebook and dictionary to read in their quiet moments. Instead, I asked myself:

- In my experience, how do students learn vocabulary?
- Can I identify which knowledge is more important for students to learn in order to improve their chances of success?
- Can I introduce activities in the classroom so that when I impart this knowledge the students remain engaged and motivated when practising it?
- Is there a more effective way of getting students to remember more content (vocabulary) over a longer period of time?

During my time as a trainee teacher on my PGCE and as an NQT, the best teachers I had seen had always struck me as ‘entertaining content deliverers’ (particularly with Year 7 classes). They imparted knowledge and practised the language in a variety of ways, all of which focused on learning through repetition. I had experienced some of this as a student in Year 7. My teacher used flashcards to present a picture, would say the word and get the class to repeat it. Once all the flashcards had been seen, we were presented with random cards and asked to identify them. Were we being exposed to as much language as possible during the lesson? Given that the teacher only showed one flashcard at a time, clearly not. Students could be shown far more words on a PowerPoint slide.

First, I had to let go of the old pattern. I had been creating PowerPoints with just one word or phrase on a slide. It dawned on me that I could expose students to far more vocabulary simply by putting more of it on the slide. The slide would still draw their attention, but now there was much more to see and learn. I would take advantage of the natural tendency to scan everything in sight. It was my own hunch, not based on any teaching and learning evidence.

This was a start. However, simply showing more words and relying on more repetition would not guarantee improving students’ recall of the all-important vocabulary and grammar points. In the foreword to Lemov’s *Practice Perfect*, Dan Heath stresses that it is not just repetition that improves performance but correct practice. You need the right kind of practice with the right mindset: it’s not about being weak or bad. ‘To practice is to declare, *I can be better.*’<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. Lemov et al., (2012) *Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. p. xiii.

Improving students' performance in the classroom involves conducting a combination of activities that keep students motivated and engaged over a period of time. They are repeating and practising the vocabulary with the teacher, and then deliberately practising retrieval. And when the students look back at what they were doing, they realise they were having fun! It's this strategy *over time* that has the greatest impact on their ability and attitude to learning a foreign language.

There were setbacks along the way. Students in the exam were still failing to recall vocabulary which they had covered the year before. I had taught this vocabulary, so why hadn't they known it? I remembered the second key question I had asked myself: can I identify which knowledge is more important for students to learn in order to improve their chances of success? Here was an opportunity to revise what I was doing. I analysed dozens of reading and listening papers, looking for recurring vocabulary which was essential for getting the marks on any reading or listening paper. For example, for my Spanish group the essentials were *los deportes acuáticos* (on the 2010 WJEC Reading paper) and *compartir*, which would greatly aid understanding to answering a question (on the 2010 AQA Higher Reading paper).

I compiled a list of words and the odd short phrase based on this frequency analysis; this became the Key Vocab List. You might say that some vocab is more important than other knowledge; although the exam board prescribes a set list of words, it is not ranked. Having prioritised this list of words and phrases, I put them on a PowerPoint, but I still needed to ensure that the students knew this vocabulary. I needed answers to my other questions: what kind of activities would engage and motivate the students? What was the most effective way of getting students to remember more content (vocabulary) for longer? Or to put it another way: how could I make it stick in a fun and engaging way so that I was almost tricking students into learning?

The words on the Key Vocab List came from different topics and in no particular order. Textbooks impose some arbitrary order based on topics, but there was no real reason for teaching vocabulary in that order just because that was how it appeared in a textbook or scheme of work. Learning had to be more flexible and allow for practice at getting key vocabulary into students' long-term memories. So whenever I taught a topic, I always included additional practice of key vocabulary unrelated to the topic.

With this philosophy in mind, I devised as many ways as I could think of to get the students to practise this key knowledge in class. I didn't think they would respond positively to vocab test after vocab test; however, being reasonably sporty, I realised that if the practice was competitive it would be more engaging. This, then, was the basis of the Vocab Fun Learning Activities (VFLAs) which focused on students practising the language in a fun way. All of the VFLAs involve the teacher standing at the front of the class showing a PowerPoint slide of key vocabulary on the board. To test retrieval, I constructed PowerPoint slides on which I could

cover up the English meanings. For the competitive element, I divided the class in half with students on one side competing against the other.

Several VFLAs can be used in the same lesson to practise the knowledge and to test recall. Varied and spaced practice has proven successful in ensuring that students acquire core knowledge. In *Make It Stick*, the authors suggest the following:

*To be most effective, retrieval must be repeated again and again, in spaced out sessions so that the recall, rather than becoming a mindless recitation, requires some cognitive effort. Repeated recall appears to help memory consolidate into a cohesive representation in the brain and to strengthen and multiply the neural routes by which the knowledge can later be retrieved.*<sup>2</sup>

I had been employing this practice-retrieval effect using the VFLAs with groups of students from Year 10 onwards (though when I started I wasn't aware of the theory behind it). The term 'retrieval' is now frequently used instead of 'test', not only because of the negative associations of that word, but because it more accurately describes what happens during recall.<sup>3</sup>

After some VFLAs using key vocabulary items, I would test retrieval by covering up the English meaning on the PowerPoint slide. The logic was that in order to do well on a reading and listening paper students do not necessarily need to be able to spell the Target Language word because the source material on these papers is always in the Target Language. Therefore, I was practising recognition-retrieval. Having covered up the English meaning I would then give the students some time in pairs or individually to write down the English meaning or I would conduct a different type of quiz to practise retrieval.

The VFLAs create competition between individual students, or teams, or each half of the class. Something as simple as telling the students that the pair who could write the greatest correct number of words from the slide would receive one of the language trophies (which I would give out, and at the end of the lesson take back in again) can act as a powerful motivator.

These class activities are not frivolous games. For me, the idea of a language *game* implies superficiality. In the past the well-known language game Splat (see FLA #23) always worked well *as a game*. However, did it allow all of the students to practise as much vocabulary as possible? Were all of the students involved all of the time? What were the other students doing while the splatters were doing their splatting? Was there an objective behind the practice that the students were aware of or was it just a way to wind down at the end of the lesson?

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<sup>2</sup> P. C. Brown et al., (2014) *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press. pp. 28–29.

<sup>3</sup> B. Carey, (2014) *How We Learn: The Surprising Truth about When, Where and Why it Happens*, London, Macmillan. p. 93.

Just showing a list of what would be, in the students' eyes, a list of arbitrary words would not be motivating. However, explaining how what they are doing in class is directed towards achieving exam success can be very powerful. This is why I talk about *selling* the idea, which means linking the activity with the long-term objective and encouraging the students to adopt a positive attitude towards learning.

To maximise learning, the students need to practise this key vocabulary at some time during every lesson or at least every other lesson. This provides *spaced practice*. By running VFLAs with the Year 10 class for the practice and retrieval of key vocabulary in every lesson, their exam results showed phenomenal improvements. This vindicated what I was doing in the eyes of the students. They could see the purpose of it and that it was working. This gave them more confidence and built trust in the classroom, increasing their thirst for more knowledge. The attitudes to learning changed and a climate of competition developed: a team of students and the teacher were now competing against the exam.

After the reading and listening exams, the students came to tell me just how easy they had found both exams. They rattled off words they recalled as answers to questions and said these were the easiest exams they had taken so far – a stark contrast to my first GCSE group. Come results day in August the Spanish results were incredible: the students had achieved 100% A\*–C and 81% A\*–A. The local media became interested with *The Sentinel* and *Crewe Chronicle* referring to them.<sup>4</sup> With the reading and listening results an overwhelming majority of students had exceeded their target grades.

I had proven to myself that with learning, engagement and progress I could help to achieve excellent outcomes for students. Furthermore, this approach led to fifteen students choosing to study Spanish beyond GCSE at AS level. Clearly these students did not perceive languages as too difficult.

The following year I adopted the VFLA practice with my Year 9 group but met some resistance when I suggested to a colleague that they could adopt part of this strategy in their own teaching. This belief that 'my students don't learn like that' is revealed as a fallacy when you examine what actually works for transferring as much knowledge as possible from a student's short-term memory to their long-term memory by revisiting it and practising it at spaced intervals. The way to convince colleagues is through results and students' performance – you must lead by example. But part of that example is demonstrating continuous improvement; there is still a long way to go. As language teachers, one of the ultimate goals is to create an environment where students are speaking the language independently. But this independence can only come once the students have a core body of knowledge with which to work.

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/marks-students-lead-way-making-grade-host/story-13230386-detail/story.html> and <http://www.crewechronicle.co.uk/news/local-news/alsager-school-gcse-results-5607224>.

## The role of the teacher

The teacher's role is to inspire, engage, support and promote students' learning. Teachers also act as a role model for the students: just as the students practise vocabulary and other language features, the teacher is likewise practising teaching. Teaching is an art that has to be learned. The more you practise, the better you become, or as Parker Palmer puts it: 'Technique is what teachers use until the real teacher arrives.'<sup>5</sup>

Both teacher and students need to know that they are engaged in purposeful activity which will lead towards mastery. It's not about the teacher showing off their own knowledge but rather ensuring that the students are given enough opportunities to acquire their own body of knowledge.

Students must first acquire sufficient language knowledge and reach a basic level of automaticity with it. Year 7 students are initially dependent upon their teacher imparting all of the basic language knowledge that they need. You could think of the class as a *learning organism*, which collectively takes in the new information, and in which the individuals learn from each other, and from each other's mistakes. The more they hear, see and practise, the more likely they will achieve the broader goal of automaticity with the language.

The Ofsted framework grade descriptor for outstanding quality of teaching includes the following: 'Teachers and other adults authoritatively impart knowledge to ensure that pupils are engaged in learning, and generate high levels of commitment to learning across the school.'<sup>6</sup>

My experience of using the VFLAs is that students engage in learning and this has the knock-on effect of creating better behaviour for learning, which in turn allows the teacher to impart knowledge more authoritatively.

In my NQT year, there was an aversion to teacher-led lessons and teacher instruction. One observer commented that my lesson was 'very heavy on teacher talk', and that I needed to 'find ways of encouraging students to learn more independently'. I'm not sure how this Year 7 group could have worked independently, as this was a new topic and the class had not encountered any of the words before. Recent work by John Hattie, who has carried out a vast meta-analysis evaluating the success rates of different teaching approaches, has shown that direct instruction is one of the most powerful teaching factors. What this means in practice is that students are taught the knowledge first. They see the words in the Target Language, and the teacher models the pronunciation. Then they are free to practise this independently.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Parker Palmer, (2007) *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass. p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Ofsted, (2015) *School Inspection Handbook*. Ref: 120101. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook>.

The VFLAs present the language content first; the students then practise this in an engaging way. Consistent engagement with the lessons is a huge factor in students opting whether to continue with further study of a language.

## **Fun Learning Activities**

The FLAs are about sentence structure and ways to practise paragraph-building, and thus have a different function from the VFLAs, which focus on making vocabulary and short phrases stick and on moving as much language into students' long-term memories as possible.

The Fun Learning Activities (FLAs) came next. Most of the FLAs have the students working in groups, practising the language independently from the teacher. To a greater or lesser extent all of the FLAs rely on the students having already acquired the relevant background knowledge, such as basic sound-spelling links and the International Phonetic Alphabet in Pronunciation Funology (FLA #34). Fast-Forwarded Learning (FLA #26) has the teacher record a clip of themselves teaching a grammatical point not yet covered with the class. During the showing of the clip the students are asked to note down how they think they could manipulate the grammar point themselves. However, in order that the students may complete the activity, this clip must refer to knowledge they have already acquired. That is why in the very first lesson with a Year 7 group it would be difficult to conduct a FLA without having first imparted and practised some vocabulary and grammatical knowledge using the VFLAs.

The aim, therefore, is first to impart the vocabulary knowledge that the students need and then to have the students demonstrate that they can use and adapt this knowledge in other contexts. The key message is that students' learning 'requires the guidance of teachers, the diligence of repeated practice and sustained effort in order to be achieved'.<sup>7</sup>

During a recent Ofsted inspection the Lead Inspector observed my lesson with a Year 7 Spanish group and included the following passage in the school's Ofsted report:

*In the very best lessons, teachers use creative approaches to teaching which help students enjoy their learning and make considerable progress. For example, in two Year 7 Spanish lessons where the teaching was outstanding, teachers used imaginative and fast-paced activities to help students become confident in the new phrases. As a result, students proudly showed how fluent they had become in talking about likes and dislikes, showing excellent attitudes to learning.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Peal, (2014) *Progressively Worse: The Burden of Bad Ideas in British Schools*, London, Civitas. p. 194.

<sup>8</sup> Ofsted, (2013) *Inspection Report: Heart of England School*, 13–14 November. p. 5. See <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report/provider/ELS/136909>.



In that lesson I used several VFLAs to practise knowledge of school subjects and opinion phrases.

Then the students went To The Walls (FLA #14) to build their own sentences on the Magic Whiteboards around the room (see Chapter 2). This is a technique I frequently use in order to get students to prove to me, other students, and most importantly to themselves that they are able to write well-formed sentences. Once I have checked what has been written, the students sign their names under their work as evidence that they can do this.

With changes afoot, where lessons will no longer be graded by Ofsted, it would seem that rather than just 'turning on the Ofsted lesson' and getting a one-off snapshot grading, you need to be able to explain and justify what you do in the classroom to help students progress in the long term. After all, this gives a fairer reflection of the quality of teaching and learning over time.

## Reflection

One of the greatest effects on student learning, according to Hattie, comes when teachers reflect on and learn from their own teaching. I feel that the following points define outstanding teachers.

Outstanding teachers:

- Ensure that students engage fully with what is being taught;
- Develop strategies for teaching new content;
- Impart new knowledge, and then monitor students' learning by frequently testing retrieval of this new knowledge;
- Put themselves in the students position to understand better how they are learning.<sup>9</sup>

The journey and reflection on my own practice has involved all of these bullet points. What I find so exciting is that these characteristics, not only are officially referred to in Hattie's research but, could apply to any teacher in any subject who is flexible in wanting to learn and adapt their own practice to improve outcomes for students. This book's activities and philosophy is my way of encouraging other teachers to do this.

In addition, teachers should be objective in their grading, and not use it to reward or punish students, and they should encourage students to think creatively, rather than using worksheets which can reduce engagement and limit thought.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> J. Hattie, (2012) *Visible Learning For Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*, Abingdon, Routledge. p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Hattie, (2012) p. 36.

I hope that the idea of the VFLAs and FLAs supported by the attitudes to teaching described here with reference to Hattie will lead to success for both students and teachers in their own journey of language-learning and teaching.