



# Pupils' Questioning in MFL

## Louise Harty

### The enquiry network focus

The overarching theme of the enquiry was progression in language learning. From this the following enquiry questions emerged:

- Does the quality of children's questions change as they get older?
- What is the gap between children's capability in asking meaningful questions in English and in French?

### Dimensions of the enquiry network

The network was facilitated by Louise Harty and included six teachers from diverse backgrounds across Northumberland. 200 pupils participated in the enquiry, including year groups 3, 4, 7, 8, 10 and 13.

### Summary of findings

- Tasks that engage pupils' natural curiosity will motivate them to engage in spontaneous and meaningful talk.
- Communication is often sacrificed to accuracy in MFL classroom.
- Emergent language leads to confidence and is empowering.

### The Enquiry Network

The network is facilitated by Louise Harty who has been supporting language innovation and development in Northumberland for 6 years. Louise is currently enrolled in the MEd Practitioner Enquiry programme at Newcastle University.

Six teachers from diverse backgrounds participated in the enquiry, bringing a wide range of experiences and talents to the network:

**Sally-Anne Herriott**, EYFS specialist with a background in Linguistics and Phonetics, is currently teaching in nursery and KS1 in schools in Berwick she is also delivering French at St Mary's First School in Berwick.

**Gavin Johnston**, assistant head at St Michael's First School in Alnwick, currently teaching a mixed year 3 /4 class. Gavin has been instrumental in promoting Spanish in local primary schools and has recently completed a Practitioner Enquiry MEd at Newcastle University with a focus on A4L strategies in primary MFL.

**Di Ellison** has responsibility for Special Needs and French at Ovingham Middle school and is currently working towards a National Senco Award.

**Catherine Newton**, AST, is head of French and KS3 Literacy at St Paul's Middle school in Alnwick. She has trialled, evaluated and revised a vast range of resources produced by Northumberland

MFL networks.

**Jane Lawson** is head of Languages at Bedlingtonshire High School. She has a responsibility for Parental Involvement throughout the Bedlingtonshire Federation and is a passionate promoter of open-minded enquiry based learning.

**Muriel Regnier**, AST and Head of Languages at St Benet Biscop High School, is a native French speaker and a firm advocate for a thinking approach to language learning.

Approximately 200 pupils participated in the enquiry, including the following year groups – years 3, 4, 7, 8, 10 and 13. Head teachers were informed of the scope of the project and funding was provided to cover 3 x 1/2 days of supply to enable the group to meet.

### The enquiry network focus

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### The Enquiry Process

#### Facilitator's Task

Progression in language learning is a complex concept which has been the focus of considerable research over the last few decades. The facilitator was concerned that the enquiry should address a specific issue that has been highlighted as problematic in recent research. Consequently during the first network meeting, an article by Rosamond Mitchell (2003) "Rethinking the concept of progression in the National Curriculum for MFL: a research perspective" was used as a stimulus for shared reading and group reflection. The group chose to use the enquiry to address the observation reported in the article by Dobson (2002) that there are very limited opportunities in many MFL classrooms for learners to take the initiative, ask questions and offer comments. The nature of pupils' questions was of particular interest to Gavin Johnston who had raised it an issue in his Practitioner Enquiry MEd dissertation. Rooting the enquiry in research allows practitioners to reflect on their own experiences and expertise in the light of knowledge embedded in theory and research. This would ensure that our enquiry would lead to the creation of new knowledge both individually and collectively.

#### Students' learning needs

Using the Timperley model for enquiry (Timperley *et al.* 2007) as a framework, the group discussed their pupils' learning needs in relation to asking questions. Their shared concerns which were common to all year groups are listed below:

- Pupils are ill equipped to ask meaningful questions in another language.
- Pupils need opportunities to ask meaningful questions in language lessons.
- Pupils need to be able to draw on their natural curiosity as a motivating factor to form their own questions spontaneously.
- The quality of their questions does not appear to progress.
- Pupils need to develop independence in questioning skills in another language.
- Pupils need to be able to form their own questions spontaneously.

Considering these learning needs in relation to the main theme of progression, the following enquiry questions emerged

- Does the quality of children's questions change as they get older?
- What is the gap between children's capability in asking meaningful questions in English and in French?

**Teachers' learning needs**

In order to address the identified student needs, the teachers considered that they would have to:

- research whether or not exploratory questioning is successful in other curriculum areas and if so, how;
- find ways of motivating students to ask questions spontaneously;
- explore activities that would stimulate children's natural curiosity and provoke a variety of questions;
- consider how to scaffold questioning as it becomes more complex;
- understand why pupils have difficulties in structuring questions;
- develop ideas for providing regular opportunities;
- find out what sort of questions children would like to ask;
- understand how to categorise questions.

**Facilitator's Task**

In preparation for the second network meeting the facilitator needed to consider what research knowledge around questioning skills in general could support the construction of an intervention. Gillies and Khan (2009) observed that teaching children to ask and answer questions is critically important if they are to engage in reasoned argumentation, problem-solving and learning. Their article 'Promoting reasoned argumentation, problem-solving and learning during small-group work' discusses many of the issues that teachers had highlighted in the first network meeting. The facilitator summarised the article and introduced it as a shared

reading at the beginning of session 2.

**Design of Tasks**

In response to the article mentioned above, the teachers felt confident in asking questions such as: "can exploratory questioning in English help us to establish what meaningful questioning looks like and inform our shaping of the languages curriculum?" They discussed a range of interventions that would stimulate children's natural curiosity, be adaptable to all phases and elicit a range of questions. This was surprisingly difficult and it was the EYFS specialist who eventually suggested an initial task that was accepted by all. The task *What's in the Box* involved hiding something related to the context of the children's learning in a box and asking the children to guess what it was. It was agreed that pupils would attempt to ask questions in French or Spanish but move to English if unable to do so in the other language. This would enable the group to address the second enquiry question - how to measure the gap in children's capability in asking questions in another language.

**Classroom experience**

Each teacher carried out the task in a slightly different manner. Both first school teachers showed the children a limited range of objects, one of which was then hidden in the box. Middle and high school teachers opted for little or no preparation. All teachers began to scaffold pupils' learning during the task or else used the outcome of the activity to provide future scaffolding. Some teachers spent 10 minutes on the activity; others extended

it over the whole lesson. All pupils were informed about the purpose of the enquiry and entered into the activity with enthusiasm and inquisitiveness. Some older students were asked to record their questions using a voice recorder which they initially found disconcerting but came to enjoy as the process got underway.

#### **Facilitator's Task**

The facilitator researched methods for collecting and analysing both quantitative and qualitative data that would produce answers to the enquiry questions. Simple recording sheets were designed to record the questions pupils asked in both French and English (appendix 1). An adaptation of a Philosophy for Children tool by Philip Cam (2006) would provide a means of categorising the questions (appendix 2). Pupil views templates (Wall et al., 2007) (appendix 3) would capture pupils' cognitive conflict when attempting to construct the questions in French enabling analysis of linguistic barriers. Teachers' views would be recorded using the Timperley template (appendix 4).

#### **Modifications**

All teachers reported that the activity had been a success in terms of stimulating curiosity; however the types of questions it generated was very limited. It was necessary to find a new task that would produce a wider range of questions. The original task was therefore adapted in order to generate a wider range of questions. In the new task the teacher informs the class that objects have been found which cause concern to the person who

discovered them. The discovery is set within an appropriate narrative context and the class is asked to suggest questions that could help initiate a dialogue or else solve a mystery. The narrative context for the year 10 class was a mother finding 3 items under her 14 year old son's bed. For one of the year 3/4 classes Mummy Bear finds some objects in Daddy Bear's apron pocket. Each school was to create its own narrative context. The objects are removed from the box one by one and examined. The teachers attempts to arouse children's natural curiosity by making comments like: *"C'est bizarre, n'est-ce pas, une clef dans la poche du tablier de papa ours?"* This ensures that children have the noun vocabulary around which to construct their questions. The class is invited, as a whole class activity, to comment on the objects and ask questions firstly in French and then in English. Pupils then work in groups of 3 or 4 to record questions around the stimuli. They try and ask questions in French but may also ask questions in English where they are unable to do so in French. When they encounter a struggle in producing the question in French a group member completes the pupil views template, recording the resulting question in the speech bubble and the cognitive struggle in the thought bubble.

#### **Impact of modification**

All teachers reported a much wider range of questions. In the first schools, a greater use of English was noticed when asking the questions. Children had shifted from starting with a French or Spanish adjective and putting some English around it, "is it roja?" to using an English construction with the odd French or Spanish

word inserted, "is Papa Ours a pickpocket?"

### Evidence collected

#### Data

140 questions in total were recorded and categorised from a range of year groups from year 3 to year 13. 32 pupil view templates were completed by a range of classes. Teachers' observations and personal accounts were captured on the Timperley templates (appendix 4).

#### Analysis - questions

The questions were categorised in the following manner:

- **Stony** – closed questions that were closely welded to the stimulus usually requiring a yes/no or single word answer. e.g. c'est petit? / how much money was in the apron pocket?
- **Stumpy** – closed questions that moved beyond the stimulus usually requiring a single word answer. e.g. qui portait le collier? / is the money in euros or pounds?
- **Leafy** – open questions welded to the stimulus requiring an explanation  
e.g. pourquoi est-ce que tu as une copie de Heat magazine et du mascara sous le lit? / why were the jewels stolen?
- **Starry** – open questions that move beyond the stimulus into the realms of speculation or generalisation. e.g. pourquoi tu copies tes copains? How come bears and trolls are friendly?

The categorisation of questions is designed to capture breadth of questions and quality of thinking behind the questions. Pupils were not aware of how their questions would be analysed and in terms of a process, many stony and stumpy questions are necessary before leafy and starry questions can begin to emerge. The facilitator was hoping that the task would elicit a range of questions rather than significant numbers of one type of question. The results can be seen in the following graphs:

Figure 1: Classification of questions asked in French, Spanish and English for each year group

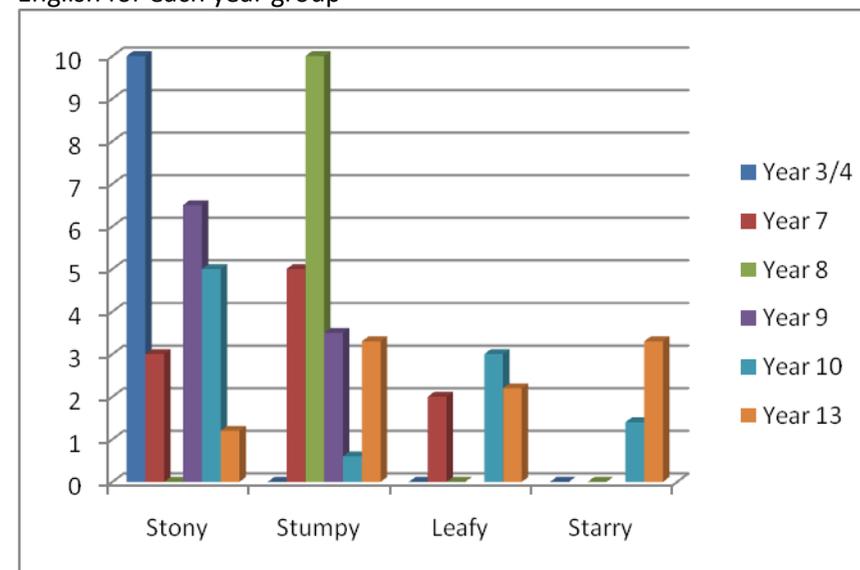
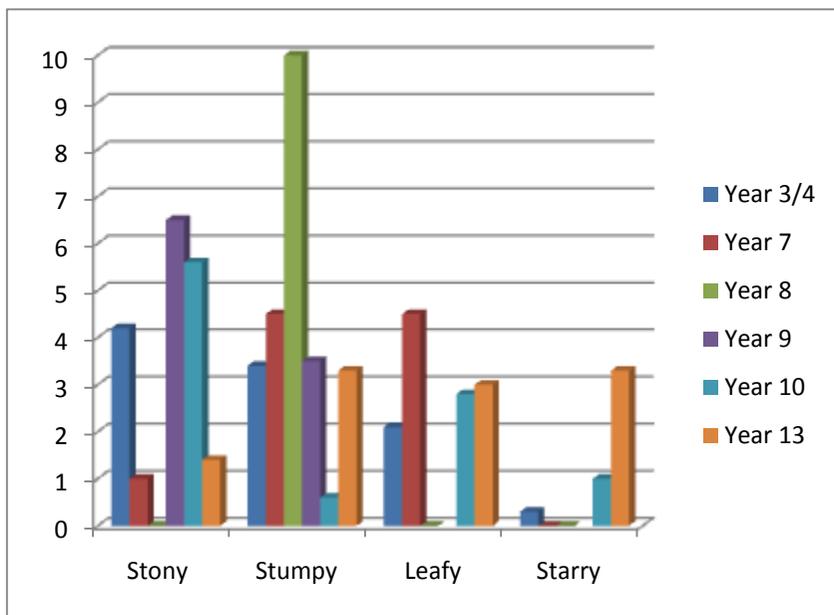


Figure 2: Classification of questions asked in French and Spanish only (no English questions) for each year group



**Analysis - student comments**

32 pupil view templates were completed, an example of which can be seen in Figure 3 below. These templates were then analysed to determine the linguistic nature of the cognitive conflict. Table 1 on the following page lists as percentages the number of times a specific linguistic issue occurred as a barrier to producing a question in French. Interestingly the year 3/4 children used the templates to record the emotional rather than linguistic conflict involved in formulating a question.

Figure 3: example of a completed pupil views template

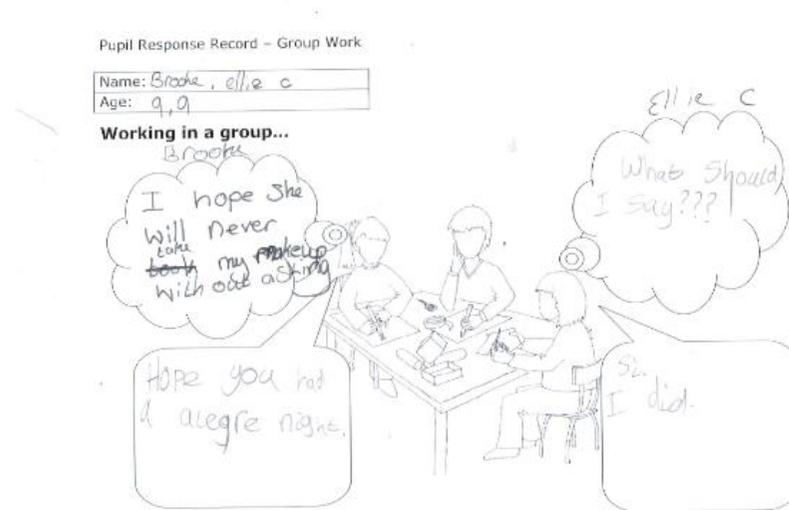


Table 1: categorised pupil comments from the pupil views templates where a linguistic issue was recorded as a barrier to producing a question in French.

Gender	4%
Pronoun	16%
Preposition	4%
Question formation	10%
Sentence construction	6%
Verb construction	16%
Verb tense	40%
Vocabulary	4%

#### Analysis – Teachers' comments

The Timperley models were scrutinised by the facilitator for expressions that described how the process have been received by both pupils and teachers.

#### For pupils:

Enjoyable; motivating; empowering; developing understanding of grammatical concepts; drawing on prior knowledge; connects learning

#### For teachers:

Enjoyable; diagnostic; connects learning; give a sense of purpose;

#### Discussion of Results

##### Findings

##### ***Does the quality of children's questions change as they get older?***

The enquiry has demonstrated that pupils generally ask a wider range of questions as they get older although there are a number of variables which should be taken into consideration. These include factors such as nature of the task, level of scaffolding, focus of task. In the year 8 enquiry lesson for example, pupils were so focused on the grammatical aspect of what they were doing that the breadth of their questions was limited.

##### ***What is the gap between children's capability in asking meaningful questions in English and in French?***

Only the year 3/4 and year 7 classes chose to ask questions in English. The way in which the year 3/4 children use emergent language would suggest that they are less self-conscious of the language they are using, possibly perceiving French and Spanish as an extension of their generally developing language skills. As children get older they are possibly more conscious of which language they are using and therefore less inclined to mix them. What is interesting is that the types of leafy questions that the year 3/4 children were asking in English are similar in nature to the French questions asked by the year 10 students. Teachers

were unexpectedly surprised at the skills which the task demanded and the benefits these brought to the language learning process. For example pupils became more and more adept at drawing on their prior learning both in terms of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Pupils were actively aware of this, giving a sense of purpose and relevance to what they were trying to do. Teachers commented that the experience of categorising their pupils' questions according to criteria that was not focused on accuracy was intensely liberating. It allowed them to measure what they valued, which was genuine attempts at spontaneous and meaningful language. The resulting questions provided a valuable diagnostic tool in terms of linguistic issues.

Despite the cognitive conflicts that emerged during the task, the activity was very well received by all classes:

**Year 3 and 4** children enjoyed the task immensely. "It was fun trying to find out what was in the box". They appeared to move effortlessly between languages: "What a naughty niña Infanta is!" "Is it animalito?"

**Year 7** loved the investigative nature of their task as they had to work out questions that would help solve a crime. "We had to think about other ways of saying things in English, more simple ways". "Once you've worked out how to ask one question, you can ask loads."

**Year 8** pupils were extremely motivated to ask questions and were very keen to structure their questions correctly. As their

confidence increased they began to realise the wealth of prior knowledge that they had to draw upon. One year 8 pupil wanted to ask "Who took the photo?" He recorded on the pupil view template "took wasn't in the dictionary so I figured I would have to look at to take". Another wanted to ask "Are there any links between the objects?" She commented "It was hard to find the right kind of link in the dictionary but I searched and did find it." One year 8 girl found it difficult to engage with the task because it was so different to what she would normally expect to do in a French lesson.

**Year 9** students really enjoyed the lesson. "It was hard because we really had to think, but I loved it." "I didn't realise how much French I knew."

**Year 10** showed evidence of emotional engagement in the activity; students proposed a variety of questions, ranging from "tu fumes?" to "es-tu confus sur ton sexualité?" "It made you really think about how some questions are just accusations while others sort of open up a chance to talk about things." "It made me think about how bits of language work together."

**Year 13** students commented "we managed to work out the rules for how to ask questions". "It felt like a real life situation".

## Conclusions

### Learning about MFL

Providing opportunities that engage pupils' natural curiosity creates motivation to generate spontaneous and meaningful language. It builds pupils' confidence, enables them to draw on their prior learning and values communication above accuracy.

**Learning through enquiry**

The discipline of an enquiry has helped the participants involved in this network to develop an objective attitude to classroom practice, enabling a proactive rather than reactive approach to issues around behaviour and learning. The Timperley enquiry template provided a very clear framework which is rooted in pupils' learning needs. The cyclical nature of the framework encouraged continual refinement and probing.

**Learning through enquiry networks**

The diversity of experience and talent of individual participants brought a breadth and wealth to the network that was appreciated by all. Reflecting on research articles and sharing insights clarified issues and generated ideas in a mutually supportive environment. This enabled the group to build on the learning of others in the past and to create new learning which will hopefully be of benefit to others.

**Summary****Three most important findings**

- Tasks that engage pupils' natural curiosity will motivate them to engage in spontaneous and meaningful talk.
- Communication is often sacrificed to accuracy in MFL classroom.
- Emergent language leads to confidence and is empowering.

**References**

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**Appendix 1**

French / Spanish Questions	English Questions

Appendix 2

# Stony, Stumpy, Leafy, Starry



Welded to stimulus

Open Questions



Beyond stimulus



Closed Questions



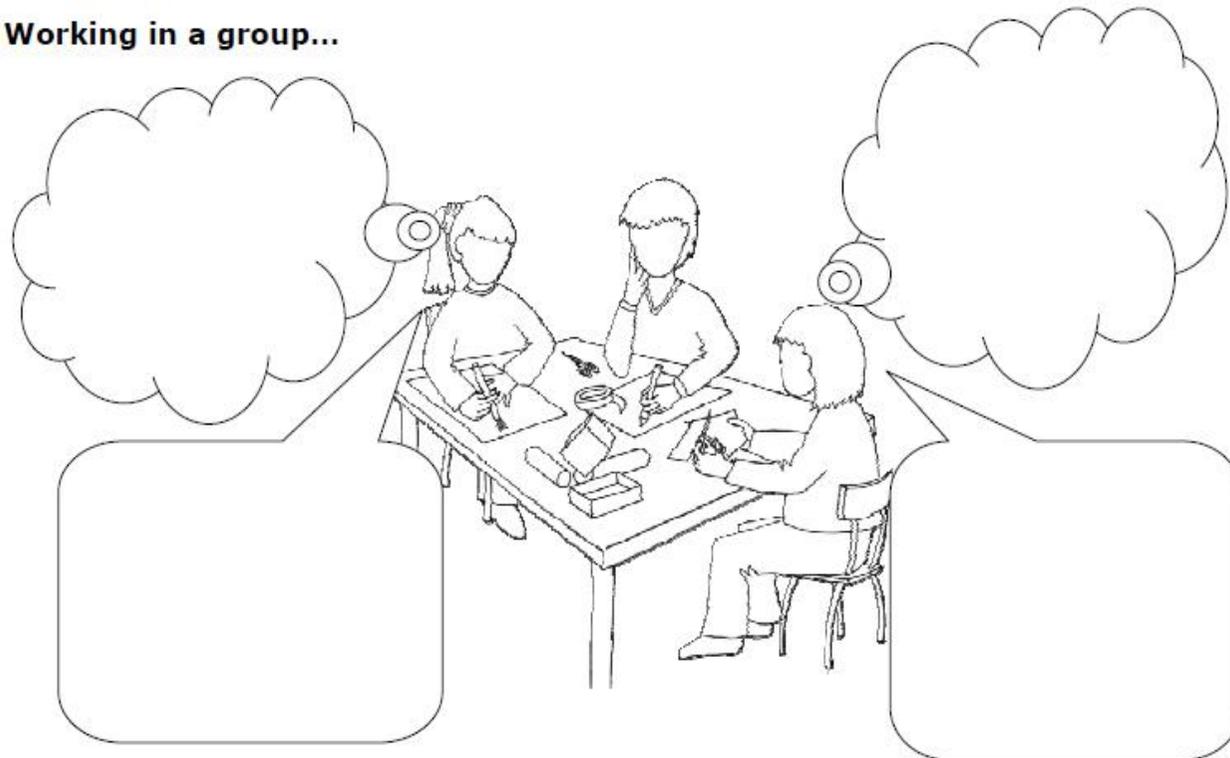
Quadrant

Appendix 3

Pupil Response Record – Group Work

Name:
Age:

**Working in a group...**



Appendix 4

