The L2 classroom: Pupil Perspectives on Pedagogy in England, Germany and the Netherlands

Brendan Bartram

(B.Bartram@wlv.ac.uk)
University of Wolverhampton, England

Abstract

Engaging L2 learners more effectively in the classroom is a subject which attracts a great deal of interest among teachers, researchers and policy makers, particularly in the current educational climate in England where concerns about the 'state' and uptake of languages, particularly in upper secondary and in Higher Education, are widespread. Against this background, it is interesting to consider pupils' own views on the impact of the pedagogical diet they receive in the L2 classroom. To this end, the following article examines the results of a tri-national survey of learner attitudes, and focuses on pupils' perceptions and evaluations of their French and German lessons. Key Stage 4 pupils (aged 15/16) were chosen in view of current concerns to re-animate this stage of learning in England. The article also examines the views of Dutch and German pupils of the same age in an attempt to identify what, if anything, might be learned from practice in countries often thought to produce 'better' language learners, though it should of course be acknowledged that wider social and educational influences must be borne in mind in this respect.

1 Introduction

This article focuses on the nature of pupils' attitudes to the activities they engage in during L2 lessons in three European countries. Particular attention is paid to pupils' evaluations of lesson organisation and variety, the resources used, and the management of oral activities. The extent to which these factors influence pupils' attitudes to language learning is also considered. Several other studies have previously examined pupil views on the language classroom, and it is useful to begin by exploring what these have revealed about L2 pedagogy and its impact on pupil attitudes. Some have argued that pedagogy plays a very small part in influencing pupils' attitudes to modern foreign language learning (MFLL), particularly when pupil attitudes are already negative, and that attempts to improve teaching practices in a bid to improve attitudes are bound to fail since pedagogy in itself is not enough to override negative attitudes:

… de tels efforts ne pourront réellement porter leur fruits que si, parallèlement aux améliorations didactiques, les attitudes des élèves envers la langue à apprendre sont favorables[1]. (De Pietro, 1994, p. 90)

Such views, however, stand in sharp contrast to the wealth of literature which suggests that what happens in the classroom is extremely influential (e.g. Nikolov, 1998; Clark & Trafford, 1995; Dörnyei, 1998). Stipek (1996) also strongly asserts the important connection between classroom reality and pupil motivation:

Study after study demonstrates that although students bring some motivational baggage – beliefs, expectations and habits – to class, the immediate instructional context strongly affects their motivation. Decisions about the nature of the tasks, how performance is evaluated, how rewards

are used, how much autonomy students have, and myriad other variables under a teacher's control largely determine student motivation. (p. 85)

2 Literature review

As is indicated by the above quotation, a huge variety of pedagogical issues will variously influence attitudes. In their research into pupil motivation in England, Lee, Buckland and Shaw (1998) randomly listed twenty-five different lesson activities commonly used in the L2 classroom, before asking pupils to tick which activities took place in their own L2 classes, and which ones they liked or disliked. The results showed that lessons were "characterised by a fairly standard range of processes" (Lee et al., 1998, p. 24), including such activities as copying from the board/book, working with partners, groups and textbooks, answering questions, listening to explanations and tapes, repeating, doing language exercises etc.

When examining how pupils rated the different activities, Lee et al. (1998) were struck by the fact that "pupils have no strong sense of either liking or disliking the great majority of things they do in the modern language classroom" (p. 27). Activities which generally proved more popular included pair and group work, while the most unpopular activities included reading out loud, vocabulary tests and copying from the board/book. These findings can be compared to Chambers' (1999), who found that playing games and watching films were additional favourites among pupils, whilst learning vocabulary and verbs were generally disliked. Though Lee et al. do not attempt to link their findings with pupil attitudes directly, the image that emerges is of pupils who seem generally uninspired by the teaching and learning activities they are engaged in. This image is confirmed later in Lee et al.'s research, where pupils ranked languages among the most unpopular school subjects, a result borne out by Stables and Wikeley (1999), and also by Aplin (1991), who found that pupils generally opted out of languages because they liked them less than other subjects.

When exploring the reasons for the particular subject rankings, Lee et al. (1998) observe that "in all subjects, pupil preference was based on classroom experience" (p. 50), suggesting once again that the pedagogical diet received by most pupils is doing little to improve their attitudes towards MFLL. Aplin's (1991) research would again seem to support this. He examined the attitudes of pupils who had decided to abandon their language studies at sixteen and identified a dislike of language learning activities as a key factor in their decision-making. Pupils felt that many of the activities in their L2 lessons were not enjoyable and lacked practical value. Although it could be argued that Aplin's findings are merely reflective of the fact that most of the pupils that took part in the research would not have experienced the more communicative/transactional (and thus more practically oriented) approach that was introduced via the National Curriculum in 1988 and are therefore unsurprising, it is still interesting to observe the largely similar results revealed by the ATLAS project (2002). The views that other subjects are more interesting, more useful, more enjoyable and less difficult emerged as important themes in this large-scale national research project.

Another issue revealed by the ATLAS project was the largely negative experiences that pupils had with oral activities in particular. Pupils partaking in the study made particular mention of the panic and embarrassment experienced as a result of oral work, and anxieties created by the demands of pronunciation, accuracy and fluency which were all made worse by "being put on the spot when the teacher asks you to speak in class" (p. 3). This same phenomenon was noted by Court (2001) in her research on boys learning French. Court suggests that boys are especially prone to a fear of embarrassment, explaining that they might be "embarrassed at having to produce strange noises in the presence of girls" and also of "sounding foolish in front of male peer groups" (pp. 28–29). The increased risk of embarrassment for boys has to do with the fact that language learning is at variance with dominant constructions of masculinity among adolescent males, she argues. This construction is particularly undermined in the L2 classroom which offers more potential for embarrassment "because there are so many more opportunities to get things wrong" (Court, 2001, p. 29), especially when having to engage spontaneously in unprepared speaking activities. This is partly why some boys prefer writing activities, Court argues, as "writing does not

involve an element of spontaneity" (2001, p. 32). The extent to which girls associate speaking activities with embarrassment was not explored in Court's study, given her focus on boys, but it seems logical that some girls may have similar experiences. Whether gender is significant here or not, the inevitable role of some oral activity in MFLL means that the effect on attitudes of such anxieties are unlikely to be encouraging, and the skill of the teacher to defuse these feelings is highlighted once again.

Lee et al. (1998) come back to the possibility that the communicative approach working often within a fragmented topic-based framework, which has characterised much L2 teaching in English secondary schools since 1988, may be equally to blame for negative attitudes, as it may lead to pupils becoming frustrated in their language classes:

> Some of them imply that they are aware of things going on behind their work which they cannot grasp. They may unwittingly be describing the effect on them of representative current approaches to modern language teaching with its emphasis on chunks of language met in the context of a topic. (p. 59)

Grenfell (2000) discusses how this fragmented approach is often exacerbated by "results-driven game-playing" (p. 26) which sees many schools, sensitive to their league-table positions, adopting modular L2 curricula, often noted for their compartmentalised approach to learning, but seen by many as offering schools an easier route to higher exam grades. Grenfell argues that such "political" concerns conflict with setting in place solid linguistic foundations, and the lack of such foundations may only further exasperate pupil learning and attitudes to learning.

Though sometimes criticised by such authors as Grenfell and Lee, this approach to teaching aims to break language down into palatable learning experiences which will eventually culminate in revealing the "big linguistic picture". Before they reach this stage, however, pupils may indeed struggle with frustration at the elusiveness of language concepts and mastery, which relies on very carefully structured approaches whatever the teaching methods used. Most of these methods involve a fair degree of rehearsal and repetition, given the nature of the language acquisition process, and Clark and Trafford (1995) found that this indispensable and fundamental aspect of language learning is something which may add to pupils' frustration. Pupils of both sexes "expressed frustration about the repetitive nature of their language learning experience" (Clark & Trafford, 1995, p. 320) and felt that "languages placed a greater demand on them in terms of concentration" (p. 321) as a result.

Vasseur and Grandcolas (1998), who looked at the way French is taught in the UK, are particularly critical of the National Curriculum's "reinterpreted Behaviourism" (p. 221) and of the over-emphasis on repetition which they observed and feel does little to promote positive orientations to learning French:

> La langue, c'est des automatismes: on n'analyse pas, on répète, on s'ennuie. Les conséquences pour l'élève sont multiples: il lui est difficile d'exercer activement ses capacités de compréhension, de transférer ses connaissances d'une unité d'enseignement à l'autre …[2] (pp. 222–3)

It seems reasonable to assume that these factors may contribute to the formation of negative language attitudes among some pupils. Using a range of activities and approaches may thus be one way to minimise the potentially damaging effects of (excessive) repetition, and Clark and Trafford's (1995) findings certainly suggest that variety in language teaching and learning "seemed to have a profound effect on pupil attitudes" (p. 322).

Other authors have similarly continued to identify classroom factors as major influences on pupil attitudes in L2 contexts. Kent (1996) found, for example, that teaching arrangements were often responsible for de-motivating language learners, and cites such factors as an over-reliance on worksheets in particular and the amount of teacher time taken up with maintaining discipline as key culprits. Discipline problems in L2 lessons may be a potential consequence of pupils' struggle with concentration, as acknowledged by Clark and Trafford (1995) above. This phenomenon was also noted by Henry (2001:15), who discusses the "undertow of reluctance" among language

learners in Britain. She not only acknowledges that L2 lessons are often prone to discipline problems, but that the consequences of these problems are particularly counter-productive in language learning:

> Disruptive behaviour has a disproportionate effect on language lessons, where attentive listening and working in pairs are essential ingredients.

McPake *et al* (1999) similarly highlight pupil dissatisfaction with individualised approaches to teaching, whereby pupils are often left in pairs to study worksheets as the teacher moves around the class monitoring individuals, with limited whole-group supervision. Pupils felt that worksheets were problematic with regard to revision, suggesting perhaps that they had difficulty in ordering their notes and thus reviewing their learning, while those in Kent's (1996) study were particularly critical of the excessive use of worksheets and provided detailed insights into their reasons, not least among which was the fact that they felt worksheets did little to promote their deep learning, given their focus on task completion which was often "at the expense of encouraging long-term learning" (p. 11).

An additional problem may be the delay between completing one worksheet and moving on to the next, which may be responsible for pupil frustration or loss of interest. Kenny (2002:29) refers to this problem:

> One of the issues with worksheets is getting round to mark them so that pupils go on to the next thing because they have shown that they have understood. (p. 29)

Again, it seems reasonable to assume that learners' attitudes to the nature of the activities they engage in during L2 lessons will influence their attitudes to MFLL. Indeed, Mahjoub (1995), who investigated language attitudes in Belgium, found that there was a direct correlation between university students' experience of learning German at school and their attitude towards German, though this raises the conundrum of causality – does a negative attitude towards the language unfavourably predispose learners towards the learning situation or vice versa? This situation leads Mahjoub (1995) to conclude that "die Möglichkeit einer gegenseitigen Beeinflussung darf nicht ausgeschlossen werden"[3] (p. 79). Again, however, it seems difficult to deny that the nature of learning and teaching will not have an effect on learner attitude.

3 Methodology

3.1 Purpose and sample selection

Reflecting on these issues, I was interested in discovering what pupils thought about the nature of their L2 lessons, and their perceptions of how lessons affected their attitudes. This article focuses thus on selected data which specifically relate to this topic, collected as part of a more extensive qualitative PhD survey involving pupils aged 15 and 16 from across the ability range at mixed comprehensive schools (see Bartram, 2006, for an extensive discussion of the methodology). This age group was chosen for several reasons. Firstly, learners in all three countries would have experienced at least four years of compulsory language education at this age, by which time it seemed reasonable to expect pupils to have developed attitudes to MFLL. Secondly, given that much of the research was to focus on the students' self-interpretation of their language learning experience, younger pupils may have been more likely to lack the maturity of reflection required and the ability to articulate their perceptions. Thirdly, and significantly from an English perspective, it is at this age that rising numbers of students in England decide to end their language studies.

The pupils were drawn from six schools (two in each country) located in the English Midlands, Central Holland and Central Germany. Proximity to other language groups could therefore be ruled out as a potential distorting factor. All the schools (comprehensives, thus allowing sampling

in roughly equal numbers from across the complete ability range) were located in semi-urban regions, close to the conurbations of Birmingham, Frankfurt and Amsterdam, and were as similar as possible with regard to size, social intake and levels of educational attainment. It was felt that identifying and selecting schools in line with the above geographical, social and educational criteria were thus important considerations in producing comparisons that offered a degree of validity. Attempts were additionally made to ensure as close a gender balance as possible in order to eliminate bias in this important respect. The decision to opt for two schools in each country was an attempt to widen the sample of pupils included from each country and allowed findings in each national context to be compared and questioned internally prior to cross-national analysis.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The first stage of the study was based on a word association task involving the 295 learners of French and German volunteering short written responses to 21 prompts identified in the literature as important in terms of language attitudes and influences (e.g. the teacher, the lessons and lesson activities, speaking activities, their parents' view of the language, friends' attitudes, their attitudes to the target-language speakers, the curriculum content, the number of lessons etc). This method was chosen in an attempt to begin the research in a more exploratory fashion than would have been possible by operating within the pre-determined categories of a questionnaire. It was also an effort to avoid issues of cultural bias in design, a concern given the diverse national contexts involved. Pupils were given thirty minutes to complete this task, and were reminded that they could write as little or as much as they wished. Stage one findings in the current article relate chiefly to the two prompts on "my French/German lessons" and "speaking French/German" (this last item was selected in view of Court's research above). Though this focus on two items may appear questionable, it did provide an overall impression of patterns and emphases that could be explored further later by using two other techniques. Once collected, pupil responses from each national sample were transcribed onto single sheets to facilitate analysis. This was done through a process of inductive categorisation with the support of critical friends to lend a degree of analytical plausibility.

Smaller sub-sets (roughly half the pupils) participated in the second stage which invited learners to comment more fully on their attitudes in writing in an attempt to triangulate and develop stage one findings. Pupils were again given thirty minutes to describe their attitudes to MFLL and to discuss which factors they felt were influential. Asking pupils to produce such reports allowed them the luxury of reflection and detailed articulation – something not always possible under the instant response pressure of an interview. A system of open coding was then applied to reduce the data to category sets. 45-minute group interviews were used as a final instrument (one interview per language per school, with 5/6 pupils present for each interview, making a total of 10 interviews for French and German involving 60 pupils) in an attempt to secure a degree of methodological triangulation by re-visiting and corroborating ideas using a non-written method. The interactive potential offered by group interviews was also useful in helping pupils to develop and articulate their thinking. As Kruger (1994) suggests:

> The focus group interview works because it taps into human tendencies. Attitudes and perceptions [….] are developed in part by interaction with other people. We are a product of our environment and are influenced by the people around us. (pp. 10–11)

The interviews were subsequently transcribed and subjected to the same process of open coding used during stage two, with appropriate amendments for new themes and nuances. Comments by the German and Dutch pupils appear below in English translation, and the names of the pupils and schools have all been changed to ensure their anonymity.

4 Findings and discussion

4.1 German lessons

The stage one responses to the prompt "German lessons" were transcribed onto single sheets to facilitate analysis. An attempt was made to group the responses by engaging in a process of category building. Having considered the pupils' comments, their responses were thus allocated to the following thematic groupings, given that their remarks appeared to centre around enjoyment/or the lack thereof:

Category	Examples of English responses	Examples of Dutch responses
Unenjoyable	43 - It's mostly writing- rubbish; don't learn enough vocab; I don't see a point in them; some students mess about because they don't like languages; too early in the morning; boring (22)	29 - No good explanations; don't do much; chaotic; we generally don't achieve our objective; we don't do anything in the lesson – she's never there; our class is very noisy; boring (13)
Enjoyable	16 - Fast paced+; can be rewarding; are really good but I'd never say! Gives me a better understanding of English; sometimes fun	25 - Fun; nice; lot of variety; useful; nice with videos; peaceful lessons; always follows the same pattern+
Neutral	10 – ok, so so	15 – all right, ok
Total responses	69	69

Note: Students were asked to annotate their own responses to avoid erroneous interpretations in the subsequent analysis – "+" to indicate a positive connotation, "-" for a negative, "=" for a neutral response.

Table 1: Stage 1 responses to "German lessons"

An inductive analysis of the responses offers a number of insights. Though many English pupils simply opted for "boring" to define their experience of lessons, it is interesting to note the very varied and specific criticisms offered by other pupils, some of whom indicate that a positive attitude to learning the language is thwarted to some extent by the focus of the lessons or classroom behaviour (cf. Henry, 2001). The comment by one English pupil that German lessons "are really good but I'd never say!" is particularly intriguing, in that it hints that openly admitting a positive attitude may be at variance with the prevailing peer culture. Looking at the data as a whole here, variety, relevance and the pitch, pace and challenge of lesson activities seem to be important issues for the pupils, given that the presence or absence of these features seems responsible for their positive/negative evaluations.

In their accounts, lessons were the most mentioned educational aspect after the teacher, and pupils highlighted the importance of these same key themes. A Dutch girl underlines the importance of variety, a key theme from stage one, also highlighted by Clark and Trafford's research (1995):

The German lessons are always really nice because of the variety of things we do in the lessons. Sometimes we watch German films, at other times we practise listening or reading or writing.

This theme was particularly stressed in the interviews with the English pupils, some of whom felt that their diet of similarly structured lessons ("we pretty much know what we're going to do every lesson"; "it's boring, there's no variety") did little to support positive attitudes. Greater use of ICT could potentially help deliver the lesson variety many pupils desire, and it is worth noting that stage one data from both countries showed almost unanimous interest in increased ICT

integration in German classes. Out of a total 58 responses received from the English pupils, 35 expressed satisfaction with ICT use while 23 felt it was underused; the figures for the Dutch pupils (total 59 responses) were 25 and 22 respectively. The Dutch pupils also appeared generally satisfied with their other learning resources, though the English pupils were more critical, often questioning their relevance and referring to the age and the poor condition of the materials used ("awful – most info and books are written before 1990"; "so old it's unbelievable"). During the interviews, some English pupils were additionally critical of an over-reliance on worksheets (as also found by Kent, 1996). Lisa's comments suggest that this has contributed to her increasingly negative attitude towards the subject:

> Like in year 9, I really liked German, because the teacher we had, she really interacted with you, she didn't give out sheets much to be honest, she got you one-on-one…working together really ... I'd rather do that, I'd rather work as a class as well. Sometimes it's all right doing sheets, but like these sheets, they don't teach you nothing...

In their accounts, several Dutch and English pupils referred to the negative impact of lessons on their attitudes. Though one Dutch pupil is particularly critical of the lessons, she still maintains a positive attitude towards the language:

> We're not making any progress and his lessons are completely hopeless. I think his lessons are useless, but I do like the language.

One of the English pupils attributes his (and others') negative attitude precisely to the way lessons are conducted, however:

> Perhaps my view would change a little if it was approached by teachers in a different way, as from my experience German lessons are really quite boring and dull. This is probably because it's a difficult subject to teach interestingly, and this is the main reason why a large percentage of children don't enjoy it. (English boy)

Another with similar sentiments accounts for the apparent discrepancy between positive attitudes towards the teacher and a more negative attitude toward lessons:

> My attitudes towards learning German are influenced by the lessons and how boring they are, the teachers are quite good but they don't really do enough fun activities.

One pupil goes as far as saying that "school lessons are the things that influence me most" and explains how a concentration on written work makes her lose interest and enjoyment, yet this does not detract from her positive attitude towards learning, as she describes how "it is nice to be able to speak a language other than English" and that she "would like to be able to speak the language fluently". It would appear that, for some pupils, a very positive attitude towards language learning in general may override more negative classroom-based experiences.

4.2 French lessons

Category	Example German responses	Example Dutch responses	Example English responses
Unenjoyable	16 – don't learn enough so it's no fun; the head-teacher doesn't provide enough resources; could be more interesting and varied	18 – never any aim; too much reading and writing; takes a long time before we do anything; not enough grammar; we don't do anything	40 – disrupted by idiots; when we have substitute teachers they don't know what they're doing; useless; could go on more important subjects
Enjoyable	27 – well organised; lot of fun; good and effective; useful	13 – we can work independently; nice atmosphere; productive	13 – cool; get involved+; challenging+; fun; not enough!!
Neutral	11 – ok=; all right	11 – ok=	5 – alrite= (sic)
Mixed	2 – interesting but not always	7 – sometimes nice, sometimes very dull	7 – sometimes fun, sometimes boring
Total responses	56	49	65

Table 2: Stage 1 responses to "French lessons"

The stage one responses for French echo the importance of the same issues (variety, balance, organisation and challenge) seen for German lessons and once again suggest that lessons are enjoyed by fewer English pupils. These impressions re-emerge in the accounts, where several indicate that the sessions fail to engage them:

> I feel that if we are going to learn French then the lessons need more fun activities and subjects. (Green Bank girl)

During the interview with Red Lane pupils, however, some learners talked with great enthusiasm of interesting lessons where they attempted to engage in debates and discussions. The Dutch pupils find themselves in an attitudinal mid-way position, and their accounts reflect the divided picture which emerged at stage one, with some pupils rather critical of their lessons and others much more positive. Boredom appears to be a chief criticism:

> The lessons are hardly interesting and don't motivate you, which results in negative reactions from the pupils. (Boy at Rembrandt College)
> The French lessons always make me drowsy. (Girl at Vermeer College)

The more positive pupils also reflect familiar themes, as one girl comments:

> The lessons are really very varied and original. For example, we watch French videos and sing French songs – this makes the lessons nice and not boring.

As already highlighted, the importance of variety in lessons was stressed by pupils in all countries during the interviews. The German pupils talked positively about lessons which were not always based on 'the book', and talked of enjoying songs and games, so that lessons were not just "stress where you have to learn but give you a bit of a break as well" (Anna, Donau Schule). When asked if they would change anything about their lessons, many of the Dutch and English pupils were quick to mention the need for more varied activities, something that might partially account for their apparently more negative attitudes.

The English pupils were additionally critical of their learning resources (60/75 comments received were negative), partly as a result of the age and quality of the textbooks, and because many felt they were underused. Other pupils raised issues of relevance and interest during the interviews (as also noted by Stroinska, 1998):

> You have a woman saying things like… everyone is constantly going to the cinema or swimming pool. No-one does anything apart from shopping, swimming pools and ice-skating and things like that, so it's… it gets a bit tedious really.

In the Dutch interviews, some pupils pointed to an over-reliance on their French textbook (cf. Clark & Trafford, 1995), which limited the amount of variety included in the lessons again because "every chapter is the same, always following exactly the same format" (Janne, Rembrandt College). This reinforced the impression of lessons being boring for several pupils, and was perceived by several as a negative influence on their attitudes.

4.3 Speaking activities

Given the importance attached to communicative teaching in currently endorsed methodology in all three countries, the prompt "speaking the language in class" was included to gain some idea of pupil attitudes to activities involving them in oral work. The responses from the English pupils with regard to German reveal a rather fragmented picture, with comments focussing on the difficulty involved and the extent to which this was (not) enjoyed. Perhaps the most interesting finding to emerge was the fact that several pupils disliked oral activities because they found them embarrassing, as noted by several other commentators:

> Not good for shy people.
> I don't like it because I think I'll get laughed at.

Another pupil who professed to enjoy oral work is perhaps also hinting at the "discomfort" experienced by classmates, when commenting that it leads to "a lot of distractions from other members of the group". These comments were made by both girls and boys, suggesting that oral inhibitions are not necessarily the preserve of boys, as claimed by Court (2001) and Taylor (2000). The Dutch pupils' responses for German showed some similarities with regard to difficulty though many pupils referred to this aspect being "fun", explaining that "you learn a lot from it," and that more use should be made of oral activities, a view also expressed by some of the English pupils during the interviews, who speculated that few opportunities for oral practice may be a reason why some make less progress:

> I don't know if it's the same in your group, but like in our group, we don't get spoken it, we just get sheets with it on, and it's like, put it this way, you don't know it unless somebody speaks it to you. It's like in one of the other groups, their teacher just does their lesson in German, and they respond to it, that's probably why they're in the top group …(Jane, Red Lane)

As for French, though many pupils at all six schools seem to enjoy speaking activities (see below), the German pupils appear the keenest about more oral work:

Category	Example German responses	Example Dutch responses	Example English responses
Difficult	10 – it's hard as often nobody's listening; we try nearly every lesson – it's not so easy; haven't always got the confidence	21 – difficult but you learn a lot from it; really hard; hard, slow and with a lot of "eh…s"; very difficult	10 – zut-a-lors – difficult; never understand; hard; difficult
Unenjoyable	11 – nobody really likes to; don't like it	11 – not good; boring; not nice	19 – embarrassing; worrying; hate it
Enjoyable	19 – great; exactly right; not too much and not too little; it's important so you learn to speak; very effective	13 – otherwise you'll never learn to speak good French; do it all the time+; fun	20 – we do a lot of oral work+; enjoy it; quite good; good – answer questions! gives us a chance to use our learning; helps my confidence
Want more	21 – not enough-; we speak more German!-; too little	12 – hardly-; we don't do it enough; we should but we don't	8 – hardly do it-; not enough
Neutral	0	6 – ok=; all right=	7 – ok=
Total responses	61	63	64

Table 3: Stage 1 responses to "speaking French in class"

Greater reluctance is again evident among some of the English pupils, and, as with the responses to German, only English pupils admit that they find speaking the language "embarrassing" and "worrying", an issue which again preoccupied only English pupils during the interviews. Pupils talked about feeling nervous and lacking confidence, as Liz' explanation reveals:

It's sort of worrying 'cos you can make a fool of yourself, you know, with your accent and stuff 'cos you have put on a French accent.

The level of difficulty experienced does not appear to detract from a positive attitude for the German and Dutch pupils, whose stage one responses suggest that speaking and listening are no easier for them than for the English pupils. When questioned during the interviews, several Dutch and German pupils felt that oral practice was in fact the best thing about their French lessons, as Kees' and Karin's comments demonstrate:

Just talking together, and in front of the class, because you learn from the others then, if they're speaking as well, so you do learn … (Kees)
The fact that we speak a lot, we don't write a huge amount, so we talk a lot, read a lot, and so on. (Karin)

5 Conclusions

Though the sample size precludes any firm conclusions, a number of tentative points arise from the study. Firstly, it would appear that what happens in the classroom has a not inconsiderable effect on pupils' orientation towards MFLL. Pupils from all six schools are able to articulate very clearly their likes and dislikes about classroom activities and their various effects on them. Interestingly, the data from the three countries also reveal a fairly broad consensus on pupil perceptions of good and bad practice, and the commonalities identified here lend some weight to supporting the particular importance of these features. Furthermore, it would appear difficult to

argue on the basis of the findings here that the English L2 classroom differs greatly from that in Germany and Holland, or that magical pedagogical formulae can be adopted from these countries.

With regard to what appears important irrespective of context, lesson variety is repeatedly referred to by the pupils, who often suggest that this will be associated with positive learning attitudes. There are many examples where an over-concentration on any particular skill (e.g. writing) is singled out for criticism, often because it creates an impression of boredom among the pupils. "Boring" is certainly a much chosen word when it comes to describing aspects of their learning experience, as the tables above show, and though this may partly be nothing more than an expression of the teenage condition, the clear emphasis on variety that emerges from the pupils is worth pondering. Using a range of resources would also appear much valued by the pupils in this respect, and once again there are many examples of pupils critical of an over-reliance on either textbooks or worksheets. This last issue in particular seems to be of special concern to many of the English pupils, who bemoan the age and poor quality of their learning resources much more than the German and Dutch pupils.

Though unsurprising in itself, the majority of pupils appear convinced of the potential of ICT to deliver learning variety and add greater enjoyment to their lessons. Restating that the pupils stress the importance of being able to enjoy their lessons might also seem rather obvious, but it is perhaps worth noting that the findings here offer some indication of what elements the pupils interpret as key in this regard. Variety of lesson structure, focus and resources must of course be mentioned again, whilst a positive classroom atmosphere, supported by sound teacher-pupil relationships and opportunities for active participation and contribution seem equally valued by the pupils. Though all teachers will no doubt strive for such conditions, the reality of translating these aims into positive classroom dynamics may be a more complex challenge. This may be particularly so in the English situation for a number of reasons. Firstly, the value attached to MFLL may not be quite what it is in Germany and Holland (see Bartram, 2005), and this may in itself burden the English L2 teacher with a particular classroom challenge, as Stables and Wikeley observe:

> English pupils need really to be aware of a need to succeed with languages. This continues to present a significant challenge to modern language teachers in the British context. (1999, p. 31)

This potential lack of conviction regarding the utility of MFLL and the concomitant "undertow of reluctance", as referred to Henry above, may be part of the reason why more English pupils refer to discipline problems during their lessons, and to the fact that classroom disruption offsets their enjoyment. Behaviour management may thus be a particular but important issue in the L2 classroom in England, all the more so when L2 lessons inevitably involve oral activities, noted again as a potential source of embarrassment and disruption by only the English pupils. The extent to which it would be legitimate to argue that the reticent attitude towards speaking shown by some of these pupils can be explained in cultural terms, and the extent to which such reluctance influences a more negative learning attitude are additional questions worthy of further research. Whatever the case may be, careful and sensitive organisation of speaking activities would seem to be important final considerations arising from the study.

Notes

[1] Translation by author: "… such efforts will only really bear fruit if improvements in teaching are accompanied by favourable pupil attitudes towards the language being learned."

[2] Translation by author: "Language is a set of automatic responses: they don't analyse, they repeat, they get bored. The consequences for the pupils are many: it is difficult for them to actively develop their comprehension skills and to transfer their knowledge from one session to another."

[3] Translation by author: "the possibility of mutual influence cannot be excluded"

References

Aplin, R. (1991). Why do pupils opt out of foreign language courses? A pilot study. *Educational Studies, 17*(1), 3–13.

ATLAS. (2002). *Selected results from a survey of school students' attitudes towards learning languages, Nov-Dec 2002.* Retrieved December 15, 2003, from http://www.ucl.ac.uk/epd/atlas/-questionnaire-report.doc

Bartram, B. (2005). The lessons don't influence me: societal influences on pupils' attitudes to language learning. Retrieved January 10, 2005, from http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/143083.htm

Bartram, B. (2006). Comparing language learning attitudes in England, Germany and The Netherlands: some methodological considerations. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, *1*(1), 56–72.

Chambers, G. (1999). *Motivating language learners.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Clark, A., & Trafford, J. (1995). Boys into modern languages: an investigation of the discrepancy in attitudes and performance between boys and girls in modern languages. *Gender and Education, 7*(3), 315–325.

Court, K. (2001). *Why are boys opting out?: a study of situated masculinities and foreign language learning.* Retrieved December 15, 2003, from http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/crile/crile57/court.pdf

De Pietro, J. (1994). Une variable négligée: les attitudes. *Education et Recherche, 1*, 89–111.

Dörnyei, Z. (1998). Motivation in second and foreign language learning. *Language Teaching, 31*(3), 117–135.

Grenfell, M. (2000). Modern languages – beyond Nuffield into the 21st Century. *Language Learning Journal, 22*, 23-29.

Henry, J. (2001, Nov 2). Speaking in different tongues. *Times Educational Supplement*, p. 15.

Kenny, J. (2002, Nov 29). Quicker clicking with the lingo. *TES Teacher*, p. 29.

Kent, D.M. (1996). *An investigation into the factors influencing the learning of foreign languages in S5 and S6 in Scottish schools.* Retrieved 9 April, 2003, from http://www.scre.ac.uk/scotresearch/kentinves/index.html

Krueger, R.A. (1994). Focus groups: a practical guide for applied research. London: Sage.

Lee, J., Buckland, D., & Shaw, G. (1998). *The invisible child.* London: CILT.

Mahjoub, N. (1995). Der hässliche Deutsche und die deutsche Sprache. Beeinflusst das Deutschlandbild die Einstellung zum Deutschen als Fremdsprache? *Germanistische Mitteilungen, 42*, 65–82.

McPake, J., Johnstone, R., Low, L., & Lyall, L. (1999). *Foreign languages in the upper secondary school.* Edinburgh: SCRE.

Nikolov, M. (1998). Hungarian children's motivation to learn EFL. *Novelty: a journal of ELT and Cultural Studies in Hungary*, *5*(1), 41–51.

Stables, A., & Wikeley, F. (1999). From bad to worse? Pupils' attitudes to modern foreign languages at ages 14 and 15. *Language Learning Journal, 20*, 27–31.

Stipek, D.J. (1996*).* Motivation and instruction*.* In D.C. Berliner and R.C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 85–113). New York: MacMillan.

Stroinska, M. (1998). Them and us: on cognitive and pedagogical aspects of language-based stereotyping. In M. Löschmann & M. Stroinska (Eds.), *Stereotype im Fremdsprachenunterricht* (pp. 35–58). Frankfurt am Main: Lang.

Taylor, A. (2000). Boy-free zone? *Language Learning Journal, 21*, 3–7.

Vasseur, M.T., & Grandcolas, B. (1998). *Regards croisés.* In M. Matthey (Ed.), Les langues et leurs images (pp. 220–228). Neuchâtel: IRDP.