Contents

A. Teaching First Year Grammar: Reflections

My main experience of teaching this year has been providing extra grammar classes for first year French students, under the Heath Harrison Teaching Fellowship scheme. Sometimes referred to as 'remedial', these weekly classes are intended to provide extra support for students whose grammar is particularly weak. Some students are recommended by their college tutors, whilst others attend of their own volition. Many of the latter are in fact very strong at grammar,[1] and this structure can therefore lead to some challenging ability ranges in what are generally very small-group classes.

The basic brief for the class is to prepare students for the grammar section of their Preliminary Examinations, which involves the translation of twenty sentences from English into French. At the same time, however, the classes should also aim to provide a strong foundation for all the language (and indeed literature) work that the students undertake both in their first and subsequent years. This more general aim informed my planning, and it is also a concept that I tried to instil in the students from the very start, aware from my own undergraduate experience how language work can sometimes be approached in a purely mechanical fashion. Too often it is viewed as a set of exercises to solve and be forgotten, when in fact a deep understanding of the workings of the foreign language being studied should underpin and inform everything from literary analysis to cultural studies.[2]

My planning of the grammar classes was influenced by a variety of factors. I identified the topics I wanted to cover over the twenty-week course by referring to past papers, examiners reports, and discussions with colleagues about areas they or their students felt were particularly problematic. I also used part of the first session to ask the students themselves about areas they wanted to address, and I encouraged an ongoing process of suggestion throughout the year. I was keen to foster a sense of collaboration: the students could contribute to their own learning by bringing along problems they had come across in other classes, and we could solve them together.[3] This atmosphere also extended to the conduct of the classes themselves.

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[1] See Appendix C1, example a, in which a student (actually very strong) gives one of their reasons for attending the classes as 'I love grammar', p.17.

[2] For more on the balance between language and literature in the Oxford course, see part B of this portfolio.

[3] Cf. Brookfield's demand that educators should encourage adult learners to develop their own learning programmes in Stephen D. Brookfield, *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), pp. 36-37.

Having established a provisional scheme of work, [4] I turned to planning the individual classes. This was informed both by my own experience of learning grammar (from unhelpfully vague grammar instruction in school, to rigorous *ab initio* Italian in my first year at Oxford) and by the advice of the teacher I was replacing. I decided classes would be divided into two sections: one focusing on the theory, rules and structures behind a particular grammatical point,[5] and one putting these rules into practice through exercises.[6] Despite wanting to avoid the impression of 'teaching to an exam', I decided that the exercises should take a similar form to the grammar section of Prelims, since the translation of sentences is an effective way to practice rules at the same time as noting exceptions and, more generally, increasing vocabulary.

Whilst each week focused on a specific field, I also tried to reinforce the idea of grammar as an underlying skeletal structure by connecting topics used from week to week (e.g. a general session on pronouns followed by a more focused class on relative pronouns), and by including examples of previously-studied topics in subsequent weeks' exercises (a subjunctive phrase when we were discussing prepositions, for example). Furthermore, I regularly returned to more general exercises, more akin to the exam, in which students were given no indication of the grammatical point being tested. This tactic served the dual purpose of keeping topics fresh in the student's mind, and reassuring them (and me!) that they were making progress. I asked students to attempt one such general exercise in the very first class, both as a diagnostic process, and to give them an indication of the level for which they were aiming. The difference between their level at this point and their ability and confidence by the end of the course was pleasingly noticeable.

The final few sessions, however became considerably more exam-focused. They were devoted entirely to past exam papers: through a combination of working methodically through questions, and asking students to identify sentences they found particularly problematic, I reinforced what they had learned over the year and made them aware of the patterns of topics that were tested. My aim throughout was to provide transparent learning

[4] See Appendix C2 for my overall year plan.
[5] Phillip Race, *The Lecturer's Toolkit: a resource for developing assessment, learning and teaching*, 3rd ed. (London: Routledge, 2007) esp. Chapter 1, 'Learning, a natural human process', which describes the importance of this sort of 'deep learning'.
[6] John Klapper gives a useful evolutionary summary of the different approaches to teaching grammar in 'Teaching grammar' in *Effective Learning and Teaching in Modern Languages*, James A Coleman & John Klapper (eds) (Oxford: Routledge, 2005) pp.67-74. In particular he cites the modern movement back towards a more structural, grammar-focused method of language teaching, discussed in E Hinkel & S Fotos (eds), *New Perspectives on Grammar Teaching in Second Language Classrooms* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002).

goals, with both short-term (exams) and long-term (solid grammatical foundations) outcomes.

I was keen that the theory section of my classes should be as interactive as possible. In practice this entailed a move away from pre-prepared handouts, and towards a more collaborative model. I had originally prepared handouts for each topic based on a simplified version of the students' recommended grammar book,[7] with the intention of building up a mini grammar reference for them throughout the year. However, teaching my first class convinced me that an alternative method would be more effective. Not wanting simply to read through a sheet with the students (in my experience the worse possible way to check real understanding), I had decided to discuss the topic with them before handing it out. In the process, I realised that students were taking their own notes of our discussion, all in quite different ways. Some worked more visually, creating diagrams, others wrote paragraphs of prose, and others used annotated examples. It became clear that whilst my role was to ensure they received and understood the necessary knowledge and information, in fact the recording and retaining of this understanding was a more personal matter, which would be most effective if students performed it themselves.[8] Given that many of these students were attending because they had found traditional grammar explanations in grammar books or native-speaker led classes to be confusing, I decided that the best tactic was to keep the handouts for my own use, to recall rules and examples, but to encourage students to notate the information in the way that would best allow them, individually, to understand and recall it at a later date.

This is not to say that I provided no structure: discussion of a given topic would begin with eliciting what the students already knew in a 'brainstorm' format, but I would then try to rationalise their contributions into a comprehensible structure or set of rules, often providing visual schema (lists or tables) on the whiteboard. Furthermore, I accompanied every explanation with an example. Asking students to discuss grammar in their own words was a very effective way to move beyond the formal terminology of grammar books towards a real understanding of what these terms mean.[9] Whilst it is of course necessary to be comfortable with technical language, in the context of a remedial grammar course, the

[7] Roger Hawkins & Richard Towell, *French Grammar and Usage* (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing Group, 1997).
[8] See John Klapper, 'Teaching Grammar' (*op. cit.*) p.74: 'The building of grammatical competence is […] a developmental process, which teaching can only indirectly influence.'
[9] See C J Alderson, C Clapham & D Steel, 'Metalinguistic knowledge, language aptitude and language proficiency' in *Language Teaching Research* 1 (1997) pp.93-121 on the lack of a link between formal knowledge of grammatical technology and linguistic proficiency. Cf. also John Klapper's assertion in 'Teaching Grammar' (*op. cit.*) that 'discovery learning', or noticing grammar in what we know of language, most accords with the natural method of language acquisition (p.72).

alternative explanations provided by different students often served to help their peers see something in a new and more comprehensible way.[10]

The collaborative approach to which I have briefly referred above was part of a deliberate attempt to create an atmosphere in which students felt supported and accepted, and in which contribution was actively encouraged as a way of furthering individual and group learning.[11] This approach was informed by the advice of the previous year's grammar teacher, who had emphasised how these students – not only timid first years, but those who found the topic particularly difficult – often felt inferior, and were unwilling to advance suggestions for fear of being labelled as stupid.[12] Observing one of her last classes, I was very impressed by the group spirit that she had fostered over the year: students not only participated when called upon by the teacher, but also made suggestions and corrections about each other's work, all in a spirit of advancing the common good rather than displaying their own knowledge or ridiculing their peers.

To this end, not only was the initial theoretical discussion guided by student suggestions, but the second, exercise-based part of the class was also very interactive. Given the range in ability created by the two types of participating students (very weak and very interested in grammar) I decided the best approach was a fairly non-negotiable level of participation. Each student in turn would be asked to come and write their version of a translated sentence on the whiteboard, whilst the others completed the same translation on paper. We would then discuss other possible options, first focusing on actual errors, then moving on to nuances or equivalent alternatives. I would often take the opportunity for vocabulary building by questioning them on related word groups, nouns derived from verbs, opposites, superlative versions of adjectives etc. Even at the discussion stage I would often ask individual students directly for their suggestions, since both classes I taught had at least one very strong student who would jump in with answers if open questions were asked to the whole group. Whilst this approach initially seemed to faze the weaker students, within a couple of weeks they were comfortable with making suggestions even if they were very unsure of the answer. By reinforcing both how useful mistakes are in helping everyone to

[10] Stephen D. Brookfield & Stephen Preskill's 'Fifteen benefits of discussion' include the following: 'It helps students become connected to a topic, […] It develops the capacity for the clear communication of ideas and meaning, […] It develops habits of collaborative learning, […] It helps students develop skills of synthesis and integration.' in *Discussion as a way of teaching* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1999) p.17.
[11] On the productive nature of a collaborative approach, see Alison Phipps & Mike Gonzalez, *Modern Languages: Learning and Teaching in an Intercultural Field* (London: Sage Publications, 2004) p.85.
[12] See Stephen D. Brookfield & Stephen Preskill, *op. cit.* p.146, which suggests giving students 'the reminder that in your class there are no stupid questions.'

learn, and how everyone (including myself) has doubts and makes errors, the atmosphere became a friendly, collaborative one, in which I, as the teacher but not the future exam marker, tried to present myself as more of a coach than an authority.[13]

Indeed, the last point had been one of my biggest concerns about grammar teaching: well-aware that my own grammar is far from perfect, I was worried that students would ask questions to which I did not know the answer, and which would undermine my credibility. However, in the event I found that these situations were incredibility helpful, since my response – looking up examples in a grammar book, or researching problems for the next class – helped to demonstrate to students how language learning is a continual process, and how a relative degree of fluency can be achieved even without an exhaustive knowledge of every single exception; an idea that seemed to paralyse some of them at the start. My status as a recent graduate from exactly the same system, and the fact that I did not provide homework or marks, helped to foster the environment of group learning, of which I was a part.

At the end of the first two terms I asked the students to fill in brief feedback forms, designed with the dual aim of improving my own teaching and providing the students with as much individually-tailored help as possible in subsequent weeks.[14] I have concentrated here on the responses from the first term of teaching, as comments were largely duplicated in the second term. I was pleasantly surprised at the positive comparisons students made with other grammar classes they were attending, with most aspects of the lessons rated consistently at 4 or 5 out of 5, and one student describing them as 'much clearer than most grammar teaching in college'.[15] The students almost unanimously mentioned how useful they found the group discussion of sentences, and one remarked positively upon the effort they perceived I had made in preparing the classes.[16] Aside from giving me assurance that my methods were working, however, the feedback forms were also useful in allowing the students to make suggestions about topics and techniques they would like to cover in subsequent classes; something which, despite my best efforts, they appeared less keen to do in person. Requests were largely for topics that I had already planned for the following term,[17] but I did also pick up some extra ideas.

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[13] See Stephen D. Brookfield & Stephen Preskill, 'Keeping students' voices in balance' in *op. cit.* pp.134-151.
[14] See Appendix C1 for a blank version of the form, p.16.
[15] Example b, p.18.
[16] Example c, p.19.
[17] Cf. example d, p.20.

The overwhelmingly positive responses were highly encouraging, however they also made me suspicious that my feedback form had been too 'leading'. If I were to repeat the exercise, I might explicitly ask, for example, for the 'least useful' as well as the 'most useful' aspect – whilst question 9, on possible changes, was intended to elicit this response, in practice many students simply wrote 'no changes', since criticism was not explicitly invited.

My first experience of teaching French language at university level has been a highly positive one. It was a pleasure to see the students grow in confidence and ability, and through constant self-reflection and self-assessment, I too was able to develop my teaching skills over the course of the year. The opportunity to experience shaping and delivering a year long course is an invaluable one in the first year of a DPhil: it is an unthreatening, relaxed environment in which to begin teaching, but still acts as rigorous training for delivering more complex courses later on in an academic teaching career.

B. Language and Literature: the Great Debate

> *'In a competitive world we cannot afford to be without strong and complete skills: no skills – no jobs. The need to strengthen our children's literacy, numeracy and technology skills is clear and we support it. Side by side with these should go the ability to communicate across cultures. It too is a key skill.'*[18]

At the heart of the 2000 Nuffield Languages Enquiry was the notion of language study as a key skill, vital for a future UK workforce. The enquiry expressed concern at the decline in languages in schools,[19] and noted the increasing pressure on students to take only 'relevant' A-levels for vocational degrees such as Medicine and Engineering, a pressure that is squeezing languages out of the curriculum.[20] On the assumption that 'successful professionals of the future are unlikely to be monolingual English speakers',[21] a key recommendation was the inclusion of compulsory language modules in all degree courses, a pattern that is already surprisingly common, with more higher education students studying languages outside language degrees than within them.[22]

Yet whilst these changes and recommendations are laudable, their main focus is a pragmatic knowledge of the language itself: a communicative tool acquired alongside the 'meat' of another degree, to be employed in later working life. Where does this leave straightforward modern languages degrees, also in severe decline?[23] If language is a key skill to apply to a separate knowledge base, does this mean linguists are actually under-qualified: highly technically expert in their chosen language(s), but with nothing to which they can apply it? This is, of course, a gross simplification. Whilst the scope of the description 'languages degree' is vast, every course bearing this name contains both practical language elements, and other components: translation theory, linguistics, cultural studies, literature, or more vocational elements such as business.

This breadth of content is a relatively recent development. Modern Languages degrees initially followed the Classics model, focusing on translation and literary study.[24] It was

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[18] *Languages, the Next Generation* (Nuffield Foundation, 2000) p.4. http://nuffieldfoundation.org/fileLibrary/pdf/languages_finalreport.pdf
[19] Cf. a recent article by Alda Edemariam in The Guardian, 'Who still wants to learn languages?', 24 Aug 2010. http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/aug/24/who-still-wants-learn-languages
[20] *Ibid.* p.51.
[21] *Ibid.* p.52.
[22] *Ibid.* p.54.
[23] *Ibid.* p.56.
[24] James A. Coleman, 'Modern Languages as a university discipline' in *Effective Learning and Teaching in Modern Languages*, *op. cit.* pp.3-9.

only in the early 1980s that student dissatisfaction with this structure began to show. Some students began to resent the requirement for literary study, and demand more practically useful language degrees, often with a vocational content.[25] This trend has continued, particularly in the wake of declining language study, as institutions have tried to create more universally attractive courses. Even the most traditional institutions now offer a wider base of study: Bristol University's French course, for example, now boasts of a balance of language and 'culture' elements, with the latter including a high proportion of literature, but also covering historical periods and contemporary debates. Only a handful of institutions resolutely retain the literature-heavy tag, among them Oxford and Cambridge. Whilst even these courses now offer film options, the main component of their non-language content is still traditional literary study.

In the context of declining language study and funding, and a push for practical language skills, these courses are sometimes viewed as outmoded. Their defenders, on the other hand, stress the value of literary study as a gateway into the history, culture, and psyche of another country. They denounce the purely practical approach as underestimating both the capabilities and the interests of today's students. Whilst the debate is ongoing and vast, however, this wider context will not be my main focus here. Rather, I will examine the logistics of delivering such complex courses: how an institution (specifically Oxford), in the modern context of language-as-key-skill, approaches teaching a language course that is perceived as mostly literature, but in which, ultimately, the final exams are balanced almost exactly 50-50 between literary content and practical language use. It is this question of balance – in teaching, exams, and perceived value – that will be my main object of study.

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My initial interest in this question was sparked by a discussion with a French college fellow, who was explaining her choice to take on some French language teaching normally delegated to a more junior colleague. 'I always try and make sure I do some language teaching too, so the students don't get the impression that the 'real' work is the literature, taught by college fellows, whilst language is just passed onto postgrads and language assistants,' she told me. This comment made me consider my own experience of language learning at Oxford, and it struck me that the majority of my language classes (in both French and Italian) had been taught by language-only teachers; whether language assistants, language centre staff (often doctoral students in their own countries), or postgraduate

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[25] The anti-literature backlash among students is charted in the surveys recorded in Colin Evans, *Language People: The experience of teaching and learning Modern Languages in British Universities* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1988).

students. Only very rarely had I been taught language by the same people that taught me literature. Furthermore, despite the 50-50 weighting of the final exams, and the relatively high number of language classes, I had routinely spent over 85% of my individual study time on literature, rather than language work. This imbalance appeared worthy of study.

Some background reading revealed that the teaching split is a common trend in language degrees, and is not only a feature of the especially literary Oxford course. John Klapper describes language teachers as 'often effectively second-class citizens on temporary or part-time contracts, with limited career prospects despite holding professional qualifications,' whilst James Coleman evokes a division of tasks which 'also tends to perpetuate the inferior status of language centres, whose applied language work is perceived as subordinate to research into literary and cultural topics.'[26] The experience and working conditions of language teaching staff would provide material for a whole piece of research in their own right, but what interested me in this realisation was less the point of view of the teacher, and more that of the student: the impression that this arrangement gives to students of the place and importance of language in what is largely regarded as a 'literature' degree.

If my own experience of both language teaching and individual study was a common one, there was a strange imbalance in the message students were being given about the relative value of language and literature study, and it was not surprising that the literary nature of Oxford's course was viewed as a given. I decided to create a short survey for current and former Oxford Modern Languages students in order to gain a wider view of how language and literature were perceived. The online survey I devised (Appendix C3, p.22) was distributed to friends, students and other contacts via email and Facebook, with the request that it should be forwarded to other linguists. Whilst this method had severe limitations (notably a 'bunching' effect in certain year groups and language combinations, and the impractical nature of trying to give results by language – see Appendix C5, p.26), the 37 complete and 10 partial replies were enough to give a general impression of student opinion in an admittedly anecdotal, rather than rigorously scientific, context.[27]

The results of my survey confirmed parts of my initial hypotheses, but were nowhere near as dramatic as I had anticipated.[28] The questions directed at my main interest – that is, the type of teachers delivering language teaching – revealed surprising results. Whilst grammar

[26] John Klapper, 'Who teaches our students? University teachers and their professional development' p.23 and James A. Coleman, 'Modern Languages as a university discipline' p.8 both in James A Coleman & John Klapper, *op. cit.* See also Alison Phipps & Mike Gonzalez, *op. cit.* p.63.
[27] My poor phrasing in question 5 unfortunately rendered responses to this question useless, as some students appeared to use 1 as their highest rank, whilst others used 5.
[28] See results summary, Appendix C4, p.24.

and prose translation (into the target language) are largely delivered by native speaker, language-only teachers (likely to be language assistants), this is often in combination with teaching from another, predominantly Anglophone source, most likely to be a literature tutor. Furthermore, translation into English is largely taught by these Anglophone literature fellows. It would appear that many college fellows adopt the same approach as the anonymous tutor cited above, taking on at least some language teaching, and delegating far less to postgraduates than I had anticipated. It should be noted, however, that the proportion of students reporting college fellows teaching prose or grammar in their second language is considerably lower. Given that most respondents listed French or German as their first language, with subjects like Italian and Portuguese in the second column, this disparity is not surprising, since the smaller languages are routinely delivered by departments rather than colleges (cf. responses to question 4), and thus the reliance on external, language-only staff is higher.

Elsewhere in the responses, however, patterns conform far more to my own experience and expectations. The average weightings for revision time spent on Literature, Grammar and Vocabulary are 74.3%, 12.41 % and 8.49% respectively – one student even claims to have spent 100% of their revision time on literature (question 7, respondent 46). This tallies with anecdotal evidence of students stating that 'you don't need to' or even 'you just can't' revise for language exams. The range of responses given to question 6 verges on the comic: whilst the average time per week spent reading literature is 11.55 hours, responses range from 1 hour to 32 hours. Similarly, the time devoted to essay writing (average: 9.28 hours) ranges from 4 to 30 hours, although in reality the majority of responses are in a much smaller range, from 7 to 10 hours. The higher responses in these brackets generally come from students who claim to spend considerably more time working overall (the same student notes 30 hours for reading and 30 for writing), but within individual responses, the proportion of time spent on language and literature respectively is largely similar. The notable trend is that language is always given considerably less attention, as the average results for grammar (2.03 hours), prose translation (3.25 hours) and translation into English (2.80 hours) demonstrate. These results seem to bear out the traditional perception of Oxford as a literature course, which gives little emphasis to practical language skills: students clearly feel they should be focusing the bulk of their efforts on the 'content' modules.

There are a number of very understandable reasons for this, not least the fact that contact hours for language are often slightly higher, and significant progress (particularly in oral language) can therefore be made in the classes themselves, as well as in the year abroad,

traditionally the period during which real linguistic competency is acquired. Furthermore, the volume of material that must be covered for the literary components of the course requires a higher time commitment, which could be matched in terms of productivity by short, intensive bursts of language work. Nonetheless, it appears the students are given an imbalanced impression of value, an impression that, if one student is to be believed, is carried over into the attitude of teaching staff: 'Even though they are supposed to be equal, much more importance is placed on literature by college tutors (e.g. handing in an essay late is worse than not doing a translation)'.[29]

The open comments section provides a very interesting snapshot of students' own interpretations of the debate (see Appendix C6, p.27). There is an emphatic split between those who feel there is nowhere near enough emphasis on language in the course as a whole,[30] and those who take the more traditional line of seeing Oxford as a primarily literary course, which relies on bright students to pick up language on their own initiative.[31] These reactions display a familiarity with the ongoing debate about language and literature emphasis in Modern Languages degrees, with the second group of students clearly at pains to defend their own choice of a (self-avowed) literature degree. This in itself is interesting: linguists in general are increasingly having to justify themselves to the wider world, but those teaching and following 'traditional' courses find themselves more than most in a defensive position.

However, since the wider context of Oxford/literature versus new universities/vocational language was not my main object of study, I was pleased to note that some respondents picked up on the subtler question I was aiming to analyse: not that of the emphasis on language in general, but rather that of the emphasis (or lack of it) on language teaching and study. Several respondents noted the imbalance between time and effort spent on language throughout the course, and its weighting in the final exams.[32] One particularly perceptive student, who supported the literary weighting of the course, did acknowledge that, for weaker students, too little focus on language could be damaging.[33] And indeed, in the context of declining modern languages uptake in schools, a less rigorous approach to English grammar all ages, and a GCSE and A-level exam system that focuses on limited topical knowledge rather than a broad linguistic base, it is this very point that I find the most concerning.

[29] Respondent 3.
[30] Respondents 15, 35, 36.
[31] Respondents 39, 47.
[32] Respondents 26, 18.
[33] Respondent 46.

The imbalance in focus identified by this student may not be immediately evident. The Modern Languages Faculty undergraduate handbook defines the objectives of Modern Languages in broad terms, apparently placing relatively even emphasis on language and literature.[34] My survey revealed that language teaching is taken seriously by departments, and many students are happy with this. Yet the outside perception is of a heavily literary degree course, and students themselves often find this reinforced by the emphasis put on 'putting in the time' for literary study. Even if the weighting of the final exams says otherwise, the impression given is that language is either less important, or (perhaps even more worryingly) simply taken as a 'given'. Weaker students, influenced by this perception, are likely to continue to struggle, not giving the time to language that they should, and loathe to ask for extra help in what should be the core section of their degree.

Oxford's Modern Languages course presents itself as a degree that encourages study for study's sake. Not in the business of simply providing key skills, or enhancing employability, it wants its students to use their language abilities to experience the joy of discovering another culture through its literature and culture, rather than mechanically learning the vocabulary for a particular job. A country's literature is vital to the development of its language: modern Italian has been shaped by Dante's *Divina Commedia* and Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*, Molière's characters have become stock reference in French, whilst English relies on Shakespeare for hundreds of its commonplace phrases. These are not points that I wish to dispute; indeed, I am in vehement support of literary study. However, it does seem that somewhere in the drive to protect literature, we have lost sight of that fact that the opposite is also true.[35] Language is vital to the study of literature: if we wish to avoid becoming simply comparatists, we must understand grammatical nuances, loaded vocabulary, and the cultural import of specific linguistic structures. Today's university entrants may not immediately have the linguistic ability, or even the basic knowledge of grammatical structures, to allow them to appreciate and access literature to anywhere near this extent. Even the most traditional languages courses must consider this, and adapt in order to avoid the mortal fate of so many language departments countrywide.

In recent years, Oxford appears to have taken this requirement on board to some extent: pre-term grammar courses are offered to the weakest candidates, and extra courses are often provided in the first year. What is perhaps missing, though, is a link between the two aspects of the languages degree, which could benefit both language and literature, and

[34] http://www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/files/docs/handbooks/faculty_student_handbook_0910.pdf p.5.
[35] See N McBride, 'Studying culture in language degrees in the UK' in N McBride & K Seago (eds) *Target culture – target language?* (London: AFLS/CILT, 2000).

inspire students to see how their studies as a whole fit together.[36] At least three respondents to my survey made comments along these lines: one suggested that language and literature were not integrated enough, whilst two others suggested that occasional tutorials, or one literature essay a term, could be in the target language.[37] This is an encouraging sign, and reflects my own experience: required to write an essay in French for Paper I of Finals, I focused purely on the literary topics, jumping at the chance to write about something that I found so stimulating, rather than a random current affairs debate unrelated to my own experience.

Theoretical writing on language learning backs up the value of such an approach. Alison Phipps and Mike Gonzalez write convincingly about the motivation provided for language learners by using and acquiring content that inspires and interests them.[38] If students choose Oxford because they want to study literature, it follows that literature both inspires and interests them: what better content, then, to use for language teaching? Studies cited by Phipps and Gonzalez prove how such an integrated approach would cause language to 'stick' much more easily, by being used in a meaningful context. Furthermore, it would also be beneficial to the literature side of the course, since discussion of a text in its own language can often be highly illuminating, not least because certain terms or critical concepts are very difficult to translate, and therefore subtly change meaning when discussed in English.

This is not an argument in favour of writing purely in the target language; far from it. I understand why we write predominantly in English, I know the value of being able to express oneself clearly in literary criticism, and the frustration of tangled thoughts often brought about by communication in a second or third language. I understand, too, that the weaker students that I cited as cause for concern might be the very students to find such an approach terrifying. But with regular exposure to literary discussion in the language; the requirement to think, write and argue, and oral discussions with direct relevance to the rest of their studies, I am convinced these students would benefit. I described other language courses as more vocational, with their linguistic content determined by the 'meat' of the other subject (business, finance, law) with which they are paired. But perhaps the Oxford course could benefit from seeing itself as training students for a vocation too: that of a literary critic. It is of little import if only a handful of students follow this route. The

[36] On integrating content see G Parkes, 'Intégration horizontale ou profession: enseignant. Comment être généraliste' in J A Coleman & Alan Rouxeville (eds) *Integrating New Approaches. The teaching of French in Higher Education* (London: AIFS/CILT, 1992).
[37] Respondents 11, 19 and 27.
[38] Alison Phipps & Mike Gonzalez, *op. cit.* esp. pp.79, 100.

experience of carrying out one's everyday tasks (in this case, literary analysis) in another language, of coming to terms with an unfamiliar vocabulary, and learning to apply it, is one that can be replicated whenever language use is called for in later life. Rather than pigeon-holing language as translation and grammar, it should be the tool students use every day; perhaps then their 9 (or 4, or 30) hours of literature writing would be seen as language work too.

Sadly, it appears this view is not yet widely shared. The same literature tutor that sparked my initial interest in this topic described setting an essay in French for a student from another college, only to be telephoned by a colleague and asked not to put so much pressure on the apparently traumatised student. Perhaps the decline in language study means these are futile suggestions: the move in literary study is towards comparative courses, with texts all read in translation, whilst language courses may increasingly be tacked onto other subjects. But I would like to think that there is hope. That language study in the future will not be divided into the pragmatic, 'key skills' brigade, and a tiny elite who still aim to appreciate literature in its original form. If it is important for British people to learn languages to avoid becoming insular and isolated, it is equally important for them to read Proust, Dante, Goethe and Cervantes, so that when they use those languages, they can interpret more than the surface meaning of exchanges. Only by continuing to combine these two skills in Modern Languages degree programmes can this ideal be achieved, and this sort of adaptation is just as important to the survival of Modern Languages as any move towards selling language as purely practical skill, an added extra to the meat of a 'real' degree.

C. Appendix

Appendix C1: Feedback forms

FIRST YEAR GRAMMAR – MT09 – EVALUATION

All responses are anonymous so please be honest!

1. How many grammar classes have you attended this term?
_____

2. Why did you come to the classes?
_____

3. Did they meet your expectations in (2)?
_____

4. Do you go to any other grammar classes in Oxford?
_____

5. Which class did you find the most useful?
_____

6. Which section of the classes do you find the most useful?
_____

7. Please rate the following aspects of the class (1, poor – 5, excellent)
Atmosphere ___
Class size ___
Class structure ___
Clarity of explanations ___
Appropriateness of content covered ___
Sentence section ___
Usefulness as preparation for exam ___
Usefulness for general grammar ___
Overall ___

8. What grammatical points would you like to cover next term?

_____

9. What changes would you make to the structure of the class?

_____

10. Any other comments?

_____

Example a

FIRST YEAR GRAMMAR – MT09
EVALUATION

All responses are anonymous so please be honest!

1. How many grammar classes have you attended this term? 7

2. Why did you come to the classes? I love grammar / mine is rather weak.

3. Did they meet your expectations in (2)? Yes

4. Do you go to any other grammar classes in Oxford? College classes

5. Which class did you find the most useful? Past historic, anterior etc.

6. Which section of the classes do you find the most useful? Going through sentences on the board.

7. Please rate the following aspects of the class (1, poor – 5, excellent)
Atmosphere 4
Class size 5
Class structure 5
Clarity of explanations 5
Appropriateness of content covered 5
Sentence section 5
Usefulness as preparation for exam 5
Usefulness for general grammar 4
Overall 4.5

8. What grammatical points would you like to cover next term?

The French Language. Anything!

9. What changes would you make to the structure of the class?

/

10. Any other comments?

N.A

Example b

FIRST YEAR GRAMMAR – MT09
EVALUATION

All responses are anonymous so please be honest!

1. How many grammar classes have you attended this term? 5

2. Why did you come to the classes? to improve my French grammar.

3. Did they meet your expectations in (2)? yes.

4. Do you go to any other grammar classes in Oxford? ~~[illegible] but for Fr~~ We have college translation classes with a bit of grammar but not much

5. Which class did you find the most useful? all of them.

6. Which section of the classes do you find the most useful? the explanations

7. Please rate the following aspects of the class (1, poor – 5, excellent)
Atmosphere 5
Class size 5
Class structure 5
Clarity of explanations 5
Appropriateness of content covered 5
Sentence section 5
Usefulness as preparation for exam 5
Usefulness for general grammar 5
Overall 5

8. What grammatical points would you like to cover next term?

c'est / il est , prepositions

9. What changes would you make to the structure of the class?

Can't think of anything.

10. Any other comments?

They are really helpful classes and I enjoy them. Much clearer than most grammar teaching in college.

Example c

FIRST YEAR GRAMMAR – MT09
EVALUATION

All responses are anonymous so please be honest!

1. How many grammar classes have you attended this term? 5

2. Why did you come to the classes? own choice, need to improve grammar

3. Did they meet your expectations in (2)? yes.

4. Do you go to any other grammar classes in Oxford? no

5. Which class did you find the most useful? past history.

6. Which section of the classes do you find the most useful? analysing mistakes.

7. Please rate the following aspects of the class (1, poor – 5, excellent)
Atmosphere 4
Class size 4
Class structure ___
Clarity of explanations 4
Appropriateness of content covered 5
Sentence section ___
Usefulness as preparation for exam 5
Usefulness for general grammar 4
Overall 4

8. What grammatical points would you like to cover next term?

passive, but really anything!

9. What changes would you make to the structure of the class?

N/A

10. Any other comments?

The only lecturer so far to give us the sheets, rather than just ask us to do them – a lot of effort go into these lessons, and I feel like I'm learning. Thankyou!

Example d

FIRST YEAR GRAMMAR – MT09
EVALUATION

All responses are anonymous so please be honest!

1. How many grammar classes have you attended this term? 4

2. Why did you come to the classes? To improve my grammar

3. Did they meet your expectations in (2)? Yes.

4. Do you go to any other grammar classes in Oxford? Yes (but German)

5. Which class did you find the most useful? This one.

6. Which section of the classes do you find the most useful? going through sentences

7. Please rate the following aspects of the class (1, poor – 5, excellent)
Atmosphere 4
Class size 5
Class structure 4
Clarity of explanations 4
Appropriateness of content covered 4
Sentence section 5
Usefulness as preparation for exam 5
Usefulness for general grammar 5
Overall 5

8. What grammatical points would you like to cover next term?

Passive, endings + agreements

9. What changes would you make to the structure of the class?

We should get some homework..

10. Any other comments?

Nope!

Appendix C2: Year Plan – First Year Grammar

Michaelmas Term

Week 3: Intro – what is class for?, 10 sentences to try ✓, identification of problem areas, brief topic if time?

Week 4: Past historic ✓& exercises ✓

Week 5: Past tenses ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 6: Subjunctive ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 7: Sequence of tenses ✓ & exercises ✓ 'If' clauses ✓

Week 8: Sentences ✓

Hilary Term

Week 1: Object pronouns ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 2: Agreement of past participles ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 3: Relative pronouns ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 4: Il est / c'est ✓, impersonal pronouns ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 5: Passives ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 6: Imperatives ✓ & exercises ✓ & Comparatives/superlatives ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 7: Reported speech ✓ & exercises ✓

Week 8: Sentences

Trinity Term

Week 1: Revision (based largely on student requests)

Week 2: Revision (based largely on student requests)

Week 3: Past papers

Week 4: Past papers

Week 5: Past papers

Week 6: Past papers

Other topics to cover:
Numerals, prepositions with common verbs, infinitives, questions, après avoir; past participle as linker etc etc

Generally emphasise (from examiners reports): silly mistakes to avoid (allez voir tes parents), grammar not just as a set of rules to apply blindly

Appendix C3: Blank Survey

Language and literature in the Oxford system

College:
Matriculation year:
Language(s) studied: 1) 2)

1) Are / were you taught grammar by:

	Language 1	Language 2
Anglophone language-only teachers		
Native speaker language-only teachers		
Anglophone college fellows (lit tutors)		
Native speaker college fellows (lit tutors)		
Oxford post-grads		
Other		

2) Are/were you taught translation into the language by:

	Language 1	Language 2
Anglophone language-only teachers		
Native speaker language-only teachers		
Anglophone college fellows (lit tutors)		
Native speaker college fellows (lit tutors)		
Oxford post-grads		
Other		

3) Are/were you taught translation into English by:

	Language 1	Language 2
Anglophone language-only teachers		
Native speaker language-only teachers		
Anglophone college fellows (lit tutors)		
Native speaker college fellows (lit tutors)		
Oxford post-grads		
Other		

4) Where do / did the majority of your language classes take place?

	Language 1	Language 2
College		
Faculty		
Language centre		
Other		

5) Please rank the following activities in terms of their importance in your opinion:

	Rank
Literature – reading	
Literature – writing essays	
Grammar exercises / learning	
Translation into target language (prose)	
Translation into English	

6) In a normal week, how many hours individual study time do/did you spend on:

	Hours
Literature – reading	
Literature – writing essays	
Grammar exercises / learning	
Translation into target language (prose)	
Translation into English	
Other language work	

7) Thinking about the last set of exams you sat, what percentage of your revision time was spent on:

	Percentage
Literature	
Grammar	
Vocabulary	
Other	

8) Thinking about the last set of exams you sat, did you achieve your best results in:

	Language 1	Language 2
Literature		
Language (prelims only)		
Translation into English (finals only)		
Translation into target language (finals only)		

9) Any further comments on the balance of language and literature in the Oxford course?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix C4: Survey Results

Language and literature in the Oxford system

College:
Matriculation year:
Language(s) studied: 1) 2)

1) Are / were you taught grammar by:

	Language 1	Language 2
Anglophone language-only teachers	6	3
Native speaker language-only teachers	37	22
Anglophone college fellows (lit tutors)	16	8
Native speaker college fellows (lit tutors)	4	6
Oxford post-grads	10	6
Other	2	-

2) Are/were you taught translation into the language by:

	Language 1	Language 2
Anglophone language-only teachers	2	2
Native speaker language-only teachers	34	20
Anglophone college fellows (lit tutors)	12	2
Native speaker college fellows (lit tutors)	4	7
Oxford post-grads	4	3
Other	3	-

3) Are/were you taught translation into English by:

	Language 1	Language 2
Anglophone language-only teachers	6	7
Native speaker language-only teachers	6	3
Anglophone college fellows (lit tutors)	35	17
Native speaker college fellows (lit tutors)	1	3
Oxford post-grads	8	7
Other	-	-

4) Where do / did the majority of your language classes take place?

	Language 1	Language 2
College	35	4
Faculty	6	17
Language centre	4	5
Other	-	-

5) Please rank the following activities in terms of their importance in your opinion:

	Rank
Literature – reading	
Literature – writing essays	
Grammar exercises / learning	
Translation into target language (prose)	
Translation into English	

NB Results for this question are not included due to the ambiguity of phrasing which led to confusion.

6) In a normal week, how many hours individual study time do/did you spend on:

	Hours
Literature – reading	11.55
Literature – writing essays	9.28
Grammar exercises / learning	2.03
Translation into target language (prose)	3.25
Translation into English	2.80
Other language work	1.82

7) Thinking about the last set of exams you sat, what percentage of your revision time was spent on:

	Percentage
Literature	74.3
Grammar	12.41
Vocabulary	8.49
Other	8.48

8) Thinking about the last set of exams you sat, did you achieve your best results in:

	Language 1	Language 2
Literature	22	14
Language (prelims only)	9	6
Translation into English (finals only)	8	4
Translation into target language (finals only)	5	3

9) Any further comments on the balance of language and literature in the Oxford course?

** *See Appendix 6, below***

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix C5: Respondent Details

Number	Matric Year	College	Language 1	Language 2
1	2004	Worcester	French	Italian
2	2009	Queen's	French	-
3	2009	Christ Church	French	Italian
4	2002	Worcester	French	-
5	2008	Brasenose	French	-
6	2005	St Anne's	Arabic	-
7	2004	St Hugh's	French	Italian
8	2008	Christ Church	French	Italian
9	2004	New	French	Italian
10	2009	Christ Church	French	Czech
11	2004	Worcester	French	Russian
12	2004	St Hugh's	French	-
13	2009	Wadham	French	-
14	2006	Worcester	French	-
15	2004	St John's	French	Spanish
16	2009	Queen's	French	-
17	2009	Christ Church	French	-
18	2001	Christ Church	French	Italian
19	2007	Worcester	French	-
20	2004	Jesus	Italian	French
21	2006	Worcester	French	Portuguese
22	2006	Worcester	German	-
23	2006	Worcester	French	German
24	2007	Worcester	French	-
25	2006	St Peter's	Spanish	Portuguese
26	2006	Wadham	Spanish	Portuguese
27	2004	Lincoln	French	-
28	2009	Queen's	(English)	French
29	2008	Worcester	German	French
30	2007	Worcester	French	Spanish
31	2007	Lincoln	German	-
32	2004	New	French	Italian
33	2005	Worcester	German	Czech
34	2004	St John's	French	Italian
35	2006	Christ Church	Spanish	Portuguese
36	2006	St Peter's	Spanish	Portuguese
37	2009	Exeter	French	-
38	2005	St John's	French	-
39	2005	St Hugh's	French	-
40	2006	Christ Church	Italian	Portuguese
41	2006	St Peter's	French	Portuguese
42	2004	Christ Church	French	Italian
43	2009	Christ Church	French	Italian
44	2008	Magdalen	French	German
45	2002	Somerville	French	-
46	2004	New	French	Latin
47	2003	Keble	French	Spanish

Appendix C6: Reponses to Question 9

3: Even though they are supposed to be equal, much more importance is placed on literature by college tutors (eg handing in an essay late is worse than not doing a translation)

5: Literature seems to be the emphasis. Especially in French, the standard of language of most is already fairly high at matriculation and it seems that the year abroad is for gaining real confidence in language use, especially oral.

6: Hmm, I've just filled out this survey but I suspect it's not really relevant for what you're doing. The Arabic course isn't really like other modern languages - it's a mixture of language, literature, history and Islamic studies that makes it more like an area studies MA. The core papers only comprise one literature module (a mixture of classical and modern texts) although there is the option to do further literature modules. I personally think this is a great mix - you can focus on the literature side if you want to but, for those who prefer to also cover other aspects of the Islamic world, the core paper provides a good level of basic knowledge.

7: Very literature heavy. Course very demanding on the literature side, particularly at finals, leaving little time for any independent grammer and vocab. However this is also why I chose the Oxford course and would have gone to another university if it was not the case!

11: I think that it is clear that there is not enough focus on language -- or rather that the two are not integrated enough.

13: There is definitely not enough focus on language, such as broadening vocabulary. Oral is not taken seriously enough. I feel as though my language fluency is worse than it was at the end of A Level, though I am much better at reading the language.

15: More emphasis should be placed on actually being able to speak the foreign languages, with more conversation time (in second year there was no provision made on the French side for this in my college until Trinity term). I think the weighting for translation is about right, and there is plenty of opportunity for getting a solid grounding in grammar. Literature probably is disproportionately weighted, but then again this is the accepted norm upon applying to the course, the opportunity should be there for students who wish to study it to do so.

18: There is a rather large imbalance in the number of hours you spend on language work in private study time vs. how important it is for the exams. Even though language counted for roughly half my grades, I would regularly spend 80 % of my working week on literature work.

19: I very much appreciate the emphasis on literature, as that is the area I enjoy the most, and find the most interesting. However, having been in France this year on my year abroad, I do think I would have benefitted from more hours of language practice (not necessarily grammar exercises, but just oral practise) with a native speaker/s. I slightly worry that next year I will lose some of the fluency that I have, I hope, gained this year, because of the emphasis on teaching in English all the time in Oxford. Occasionally conducting tutorials/writing essays in French would be very beneficial too, I think.

23: I was happy with it.

24: I think we should do more language work in second year. It's as if, because there are no exams and the year abroad is coming up, it doesn't matter, but I wish we could have kept learning and improving at the same rate as we did in first year.

26: The teaching is weighted too unevenly towards literature given that the degree is actually 50% lit, 50% lang.

27: I think perhaps there is something to be said for having more time to write in the target language i.e. perhaps one literature essay per term should be written in the target language.

29: Not enough time is devoted to developing spoken fluency in the first two years.

30: Not enough language. Also literature is not studied in enough depth and there is too much of it!

35: Literature without a doubt consumes the majority of time - lectures/ tutes as well as personal study time - which I think leads to occasionally poor writing in the target languages even after the year abroad.

36: in terms of time spent per week, there is a ridiculous amount of reading to do for literature essays and i neglected my language work in favour of this. although my translation into english was excellent for my finals, i got a low 2:2 in translation into spanish, which i think partly reflects the fact that i was more preoccupied with revising for content papers, and also the fact that we only had an hour's contact time for this per week.

38: Prospective students often aren't aware of the weighting towards literature!

39: It's more weighted towards literature, which I think is a good thing; you have to learn the language as you go along, for yourself. A course like this stretches you intellectually, and takes linguistic competency for granted. It gets the best out of you.

41: I think the literature sway is a really positive thing. Going into the Oxford system, applicants are aware that the language course is heavily slanted towards literature - it's not the right place to be if literature is not a priority.

43: Generally I had a lot more contact time for language than literature.

44: Literature is clearly the core of the course: I tend to tell people that I am doing a degree in French and German literature.

45: You did not mention language in Finals which is where I had my best results, in the oral/aural and the essay in French. In general I thought the balance was just fine - I still think language learning should be a tool only.

46: On the assumption that it is principally a literature course, I think that the balance between language and literature is about right for students who are starting with a good level in the language. However, this may not be the case for all students, and for some the amount of language teaching is probably insufficient.

47: What makes studying Modern Languages such a joy is that they are literary courses, and is up to the student, with guidance and the help of a year abroad, to make sure the grammar is up to scratch.

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