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German as a foreign language

Learners need grammar: but which grammar?

The challenge of word order in German

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This paper approaches the topic ‘which grammar’ from a number of perspectives. After a short look back at grammar in the curriculum and beliefs about the role of grammar in a historical context, the nature of German word order is discussed from a language-typological point of view. Following this, the issue of the learner’s ‘need for grammar’ will be addressed by a look at some typical learner errors in spoken production and through the perception of advanced German learners about their grammar ‘needs’ in a specialist degree in modern languages. This is followed by a consideration of the issue of grammatical sequencing in textbooks. The article concludes with a proposal for an evidence-based approach in the area of MFL policy.

Introduction

In the last couple of years, grammar has returned to the national agenda of what in UK primary and secondary sectors are called Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs).¹ In Higher Education, university departments of modern languages have generally maintained a more conservative stance and so grammar was never off the agenda. But what does it mean to say that grammar is back? Which ‘grammar’?

Do we mean the grammar which we use when speaking or the grammar we use when writing? One obvious example of a **spoken/written** difference in German is the word order in some adverbial subordinate clauses such as those beginning with *weil*. One German examinations board chairman, in full denial of any such differences, once told me that we still wanted ‘our’ candidates to get it ‘right’ in oral examinations, by which he meant, observe the written rule. Other conventions such as turn-taking and ellipsis, including not using whole sentences, also distinguish spoken from written language.

Or do we mean different **linguistic models** of grammar? How many pedagogical grammars or textbooks of German written in English use the *Satzklammer* model found in German DaF publications? Or *Satzbaupläne*? If they do, what terms do they use in English to convey the German model? Or do they try to fit German grammar to the more English

Subject-Predicate model, with resulting reconceptualisations of phenomena such as verb-second in declarative clauses as ‘inversion’ of subject and finite verb, or non-finite verb-final order in main clauses as ‘moving’ the relevant verb part to the end of the clause?

In the classroom itself, we encounter two participants in the activity of language learning: the teacher and the student, both with their own ideas of grammar. For the **teacher**, it is probably some kind of near-native or native speaker grammar; for the **learner**, it is *in practice* some kind of interim grammar, an approximation to the target which in most cases and in most respects will remain ‘interim’, in this sense then, a misnomer. But we know that learners do not progress by learning neatly-encapsulated bits of the target language perfectly before moving on to the next bit, the final outcome being an accumulation of ‘bits’: their grammar interacts and evolves. So what kind of grammar is pedagogically optimal and how do we identify it?

We may, for instance, look to the **textbook**, which attempts to carve up the language into digestible chunks and to guide the learners along a path, interpreted and elaborated by the teacher. But how does the textbook author decide on the chosen path? Is the decision based on evidence of how some learners learn? Or on some linguistic notion of progressive complexity? Or simply on received wisdom?

Finally, which **level of grammar** is in focus: word, clause/sentence, or text? Grammar for German in particular has often meant a focus on inflectional morphology, i.e. grammar at the word level, to the extent that one nameless teacher of German once told me that ‘German has more grammar than English’. What has often received little attention in the past in pedagogical and other grammars, as well as in textbooks, is grammar above the sentence level: how do sentences combine to make texts? What distinguishes a series of sentences from a cohesive text, a question which is particularly relevant to German, where nominal inflections facilitate a flexibility in the order of information unfamiliar from the perspective of a rigid Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) language such as English.

¹ Cf. Turner 2001 for a useful evaluation of developments with respect to the National Literacy Strategy.

In this paper, I would like to approach my topic of ‘which grammar’ from a number of perspectives, starting with a quick look back at grammar in the curriculum, and beliefs about the role of grammar in a historical context, leading us back to the present day. Following a brief discussion of the nature of German word order from a language-typological point of view (what is there to learn?), the issue of ‘need’ (in what sense or senses do learners ‘need’ grammar?) will be addressed on the one hand by a consideration of some learner errors in spoken production, and on the other hand through the perceptions of advanced German learners *about* their needs in their first year of a specialist degree in modern languages. We then move on to consider the issue of grammar in textbooks from the point of view of grammatical sequencing, before concluding with a proposal for moving forward in the area of MFL policy making related to an evidence-based approach.

A quick look back

In matters of fashion, it is sometimes helpful to see what we have stored away in the back of our wardrobes: sartorial re-invention at no extra cost. In matters of language teaching, grammar has featured in UK foreign language (FL) classrooms since the teaching of modern (*sic*) languages was first institutionalised in the nineteenth century. Hence, I would like to spend a few minutes tracing back some of the themes which have become very topical today.

In contemporary society, ‘grammar’ has connotations which we can trace back to beliefs which have survived for millennia, starting with the teaching of the classics: training the mind, logical thought, discipline. We are doubtless all aware of hidden ideologies – as opposed to evidence – which often lurk behind official policy decisions: in languages, today’s rhetoric of standards in languages has been commonly interpreted as grammar. In earlier times, such ideologies may have been more explicit and professionally acceptable:

German has [...] in a less degree than French the claim of practical utility; but in another respect it must be ranked higher, for its numerous inflections peculiarly adapt it for teaching grammar; and for that purpose, it would stand next to Latin. (Report of the Schools Enquiry Commission, 1868, reported in Perren 1976:120)

So, by inference, as a kind of poor man’s Latin, German could be thought to inherit the transferable benefits of a highly-inflected language, reflecting the classical status of (Latin)

grammar as the foundation of learning. In the same vein, in the mid-20th century, one august body, The Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools, pointed out the putative benefits of acquiring grammatical skills in modern languages in general:

[The individual student's] struggles for accuracy in grammar and idiom will help him to form habits of careful thought [...] (The Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools 1949:18)

While such views gradually receded through the 1970s and 1980s as 'communicative competence' became the main criterion of assessment, they did not disappear. They just went underground. In the 1990s, the official rhetoric of documents from bodies such as the then School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, GCSE and A-level GCE syllabuses, and Chief Examiners' Reports were, superficially at least, steeped in the language of communicative language teaching. But closer analysis reveals in many cases highly traditional attitudes to grammar and its learning (Rogers 1996) which are little different from those of their historical predecessors. Consider the following extract from a Chief Examiner's Report on A-level German:

In many cases it was clear that the grammar had not been thoroughly learnt or understood, which is regrettable. In others, however, there seemed to be a total disregard for grammatical structure. This lack of discipline was often, but by no means always, compounded by careless presentation of work [...] (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate. *German. Report on the June 1993 Examination*)

Clearly, the communicative paradigm had not entered a happy marriage with its grammatical spouse, at least not in the eyes of this A-level Chief Examiner.

For recent policy developments in the UK, however, more interesting than 'careful thought' – or underlying associations of good grammar with good discipline – is the additional belief that grammatical knowledge gained in foreign language learning will have a positive influence on mother-tongue skills:

His improved grasp of the structure of language will continually find expression, even in his mother tongue [...] (The Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters in Secondary Schools 1949:18)

Indeed, such thoughts are now official policy in the UK, where a cross-curricular approach to the teaching of languages, embracing both 'Literacy' and MFL syllabuses (see, for

instance, CILT/QCA *Modern Foreign Languages and Literacy at key stages 2 and 3*) has been proposed, according to which:

Pupils should be taught to use their knowledge of English or another language when learning the target language (DfEE, 3c,1999)

The new National Curriculum for Modern Foreign Languages places greater emphasis on formal aspects of language, including both grammar and grammatical terminology:

Pupils should be taught the grammar of the target language and how to apply it (DfEE, 1b, 1999)

In the majority of grammar books for foreign learners, grammar is usually associated with word grammar (particularly for a nominally highly-inflected language such as German) and sentence grammar. In English mother-tongue teaching, however, text grammar has become a priority.

Pupils should be taught the principles of sentence grammar and whole-text cohesion and use this knowledge in their writing. (quoted in CILT/QCA *Modern Foreign Languages and Literacy at key stages 2 and 3*)

Particularly for aspects of German word order, text, in the sense of what influences the order in which information is presented in sentences as connected items in a cohesive whole, is an essential part of applying the structural rules.

We discuss a practical example in the next section, showing how older concerns about structural accuracy need to be rethought in the overall context of the pragmatic tailoring of information.

German word order: a typological view

What is it that students have to learn when they tackle word order in German? Starting from the traditional viewpoint of English structure, German word order looks distinctly odd:

- the finite verb does not always follow the subject in declarative main clauses ('inversion' is a minority rule in English: *only then did she ...*)
- parts of the verbal group are split between second position (finite) and final position (non-finite) in main clauses

- the verbal group appears in final position in both finite and non-finite subordinate clauses
- main clauses have different rules from subordinate clauses

But it is English which is the odd one out here among the Germanic languages. Two particular features are notable: all Germanic languages except English exhibit what is from an English perspective called ‘inversion’, namely the verb-second constraint; and other Germanic languages such as Afrikaans, Dutch and Swedish have a different word order in main and subordinate clauses.

So how can we characterise German word order? During the 1960s and 1970s there was an extensive theoretical debate about which type of language German is. If we classify languages according to word order type in terms of Subject, Verb and Object, there are six logical combinations, but the majority of the world’s languages can be accounted for by the SVO and SOV types. And German, as a mixed-type, is indeed highly unusual (cf. Hawkins 1979). But this analysis may also be said, through its close association of (S)VO order with main clauses, and (S)OV order with subordinate clauses, to mask certain trends which may influence our perception of word order rules, and hence our treatment of them in the classroom. In fact, statistical studies show that a large percentage of declarative main clauses in German, particularly in written texts, do *not* start with a nominal or pronominal subject. Estimates vary according to the genre of the text, e.g. drama, *Ich-Erzählung* novel, newspaper or academic text. One estimate of newspaper German (Sommerfeldt 1988) claims that 42.7% of text-opening sentences do not start with the subject; neither do 49.5% of all other sentences. Another study (Winter 1961) cites 41.1% of non-subject initial sentences for academic texts, but 23.5% for dramatic texts, simulating, we can speculate, spoken dialogue in which it is more usual to start with the grammatical subject.

If we move to the other end of the clause, describing German main clauses as SVO begs the question of what might be happening after the ‘O’. And it is here that we come to the ‘bracket’. Differing definitions of this very German phenomenon notwithstanding, there is still considerable evidence that the end of the bracket is often filled in German main clauses; one study (Lambert 1976) claims that 60% of sentences in her sample are ‘bracketed’, although her study includes subordinate as well as main clauses. Common

bracketed structures in main clauses include separable verbs, auxiliary (*haben* or *sein*) with past participle, and modals with infinitive.

In a small study which I conducted (300 sentences from newspaper German; 300 sentences from transcribed telephone conversations), I found that 48% of declarative main clauses in the written corpus did *not* start with the grammatical subject and 47% of the declarative main clauses in the written corpus contained a completed verbal bracket. This compares with 37% (non-subject initial) and 44% (includes completed verbal bracket) respectively for the spoken corpus.

So, while SVO order in declarative main clauses is grammatically correct, it may not, however, reflect the more complex picture of language *use*, where ‘inversion’ and ‘verb-splitting’ are common, trends which we need to bear in mind, particularly if we want our students to operate more consciously at the level of text. Let us consider the following example of first-year undergraduate writing, a story sharing some characteristics with a *Märchen*, the aim of which was to practise the use of past tenses.² The main characters are: Max, the dog; Elisa, the aunt; Oskar, Dad; Eva, niece/daughter.

The story, which was written jointly by two post-A level native speakers of English, is full of action, but still sounds rather flat. An analysis of the word order indicates one reason for this. Of the 19 sentences in the text, only two start with an element which is not the subject (*plötzlich* and *dann*). Of the 42 clauses in the whole piece, 34 are main clauses, of which 11 are co-ordinated clauses, all introduced by *und*: only one of these includes an adverbial in first position (*und dann tröste sie*). While there are 6 finite subordinate clauses, there is also repetition here with 3 adverbial clauses introduced by *während*. The absence of tonal variation achieved in the story arises not only from a lack of variety in the choice of conjunctions, but also from the regularity of the (S)V order at the beginning of main clauses.

² I am grateful to my colleague Mag. Barbara Rassi for providing me with samples of students’ work.

Es war an einem klaren Herbsttag zur Mittagszeit: Elisa lud den Wagen während ihrem Rottweiler (Max) jagte die Katze des Nachbars. Es war ein besonder Anlass – die Geburtstag ihrer Nichte und Elisa musste zum Park gehen, um ihren Bruder und ihre Nichte zu treffen. Elisa pffiff ihrem Hund, und er kam angelaufen. Ise tritten im Auto ein und sie fuhren zum Park. Oskar (Elisas Bruder) und Eva (Oskars Tochter) warteten in Parkplatz. Eva war sehr froh den Hund zu sehen und sie begann kleine Stöcke zu werfen. Eva und Max spielten zusammen während Elisa sprach mit Oskar. Plötzlich etwas geschah – Elisa und Oskar hörten ein Plätschern. Eva schrie und Max bellte. Die zwei Erwachsenen liefen und sahen Eva in den See. Max ergriff die Initiative und spracng im Wasser. Er schwamm auf Eva und sie schnappte ihn. Sie kamen zum Ufer zuruuck. Oskar zog seine Tochter heraus und tröste sie, während Elisa lobte Max. Elisa entschied, dass es eine gute Zeit wäre, Eva sein Geschenk zu geben. Die 3 Persone und der Hund spazierten zum Auto und dann erinnerte Elisa sich an, dass sie das Geschenk vergessen hatte, also sie fuhren nach ihrem Haus. Sie saßen am Kamin und Eva bekam ihr Geschenk. Dann einschlieff Eva, weil das Haus so warm war. Max was sehr hungrig nach seinem Abenteuer, deshalb stahl er Schwarzbrot vom Speiseschrank.

Figure 1: A story written by two post-A level students with English as L1 as a guided exercise to practise past tense forms.

Choosing to start a main clause with an element which is not the grammatical subject, particularly a non-adverbial element such as an object or a past participle, has to do with the distribution of information in the clause in relation to previous sentences. If students start from a rigid ‘grammatical word order language’ such as English as opposed to a ‘pragmatic word order language’ such as German (after Thompson 1978), then the task of ordering sentences in German is sensitive to grammar above the sentence level in a way which differs from English. In English, you have to learn to manipulate the SVO-structure to accommodate the information order; in German you have to learn to change the word order itself.

Perspectives on ‘needing’ grammar

As teachers, if we assume a target of native-speaker type competence, we quickly develop our own perceptions of what we think the grammatical shortcomings of our students are. But teachers’ perceptions, largely based on their students’ language production, may be different from those of the students themselves. We will therefore look at the question of ‘need’ from these two perspectives: that of production and that of student perceptions.

A learner's production of language: a case study in spoken German

In Figure 2, a transcribed excerpt from an AS (Advanced Supplementary) level³ oral conducted on behalf of an English examining board⁴ in April/May 1989, an English native speaker is being asked to discuss – in German – a magazine article about two penfriends from East and West Germany meeting for the first time (E: Examiner; S: Student).

E	Also Rita. Was denkst du von diesem Artikel hier?
S	Ich denke, daß es sehr traurig ist, weil <i>uhm</i> zwei Freundinnen <i>uhm</i> sind trennen we... wegen der Mauer. In Berlin. <i>uhm</i> ...
E	Ja. Das stimmt.
S	Es sehr traurig ist, weil <i>uhm uhm</i> es sehr schlimm, wenn sie von deiner Familie und Freundin <i>uhm</i> trennen sind.
E	Ja. Das stimmt. Was weißt du über die DDR oder die Mauer?
S	<i>uhm</i> Es war <i>uhm</i> nach <i>uhm</i> der Krise gebauen, <i>uhm</i>
E	Ja.
S	zu Kommunismus und Kapitalismus
E	Ja.
S	<i>uhm</i> trennen.
E	Ja
S	<i>uhm</i> Aber die Leu... meisten Leute in Deutschland <i>uhm</i> nicht <i>uhm</i> nicht die Mauer magen.
E	Ja.
S	And <i>uhm</i> die sie <i>uhm</i> ein... die Wiedervereinigung Deutschland möchten.
E	Ja. <i>uhm</i> Wie siehst du die Zukunft von Deutschland?
S	Ich denke, daß die einzige Lösung ist für <i>uhm</i> die Wiedervereinigung Deutschland, aber es <i>uhm</i> einwahrscheinlich ist.
E	Ja. Was denkst du über das Leben in der DDR? Weißt du etwas darüber?
S	<i>uhm</i> In der DDR ist es der Kommunismus.

Figure 2: Extract transcribed from an AS (Advanced Supplementary) oral examination, 1989 in which a magazine article is the topic.

The young student's spoken production shows that she can use a number of verb placement rules in accordance with the target language:

- verb-final in a daß-complementiser clause (daß es sehr traurig ist)

³ 'Advanced Supplementary' level was normally taken one year after GCSE and was intended to be linguistically of the same level as Advanced level GCE.

⁴ The data were released on the condition of anonymity. The name of the Board has therefore been withheld and the name of the student has been changed.

- verb-final in a conditional clause (wenn sie von deiner Familie und Freundin *uhm* trennen sind)
- split verb construction in a main clause (Es war *uhm* nach *uhm* der Krise gebauten)
- verb-second in a main clause with a fronted adverbial (In der DDR ist es der Kommunismus)

In addition to these target-like structures, the student has also produced the following structures:

- verb-second in an adverbial subordinate clause (weil *uhm* zwei Freundinnen *uhm* sind trennen we... wegen der Mauer)
- verb-final in a main clause – possibly mirroring the earlier *daß*-clause with identical content (Es sehr traurig ist)
- verb-final in a co-ordinated main clause: 2 examples (Aber die Leu... meisten Leute in Deutschland *uhm* nicht *uhm* nicht die Mauer magen. aber es *uhm* einwahrscheinlich ist.)
- verb-second in a *daß* complementiser clause (daß die einzige Lösung ist für *uhm* die Wiedervereinigung Deutschland)

This short extract shows us that the learner's application of the complex rules of word order in German main and subordinate clauses is variable: she incorrectly uses verb-second order in subordinate clauses and verb-final order in main clauses – co-ordinated and un-co-ordinated – as well as applying these rules in the correct structural context. But what her errors show are not a random ordering of verbs and objects, verbs and adverbials, and verbs and subjects, but rather, an application of the rules in an apparently context-free way. This type of systematic variation – a kind of interim grammar – has long been recognised as a phenomenon and is most famously and broadly termed 'interlanguage' (Selinker 1972). It can be viewed as systematic because the learner is applying a set of rules. It is variable because the context of application is sometimes correct, sometimes incorrect. Anecdotally, in my own experience, similar patterns of variability continue for many learners well into post-A level work at university.

This then is another type of grammar: the learner's interim grammar, which can be regarded as an observable sign of the learner's attempt to learn, since it is highly unlikely that she was ever taught the non-target-like structures which she has produced or that she was ever exposed to them, except perhaps through her fellow students' work. What is

interesting about this student's performance – and in my experience not untypical – is that she overgeneralises a rule which is perceived as difficult for English learners, namely verb-final. What seems to be difficult for her is the restriction of the rule to subordinate clauses and its consistent application there. Its widespread use does not support the claim that verb-final order is intrinsically difficult for English native speakers.

In the brave new world of talking *about* grammar, the door would be open to analysing this type of language production in an explicit way, using the mother tongue. But what we do not know is how – or even if – learning could be affected by such an approach. What would be needed are evidence-based studies of whether progress towards more target-like use of the rules can be accelerated in this way, and if so, what kind of analysis is the most helpful for our students.

Learners' perceptions of their own needs

In 1998, amid a growing interest in 'autonomous learning' (cf. also 'independent learning', or 'open learning') (e.g. Holec 1981), I devised a questionnaire for new first-year students of German⁵ (post A-level or equivalent) at the University of Surrey. The questionnaire had at least three purposes:

- i. to raise the students' awareness of certain possibilities which could help them with their language learning e.g. knowledge of other languages, style of learning, availability of resources;
- ii. to give students the opportunity to reflect on their own language-learning experience and to consider ways of improving it, including self-monitoring;
- iii. to give language-teaching staff a basis on which to discuss individual goals privately with students and to propose ways in which these goals might be reached, given preferences for stated learning styles.

I would like here to discuss just one aspect of these questionnaires, namely, students' own perceptions of their needs. The following table (Table 1) shows the overall degree of

⁵ I would like to acknowledge the help of my colleagues at the University of Surrey in collecting the data discussed here and for their efforts to act on them as part of our Open Learning programme: Stefan Hauser and Barbara Rassi (co-funded by the Austrian Cultural Institute and the University of Surrey) and Jutta Zinsmeister and Dr Corinne Heipcke (co-funded by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst and the University of Surrey).

confidence students have in their own proficiency for selected areas of linguistic knowledge. A confidence score for each named aspect of linguistic knowledge was calculated on the basis of the students' own estimation of their proficiency measured in the questionnaire on a 5-point scale: 1=poor; 2=below average; 3=average; 4=good; 5=very good. The score was calculated for each area of linguistic knowledge by multiplying the relevant point on the scale by the number of students choosing that point, e.g. if 4 students rate their proficiency in word endings as below average, the score is $4 \times 2 = 8$. These scores were then converted to a rank order.

Table 1: Rank order of specialist students' perceptions of their proficiency according to questionnaire responses (1 = most confident; 5 = least confident) over three years

	2000 (N=30)	2001 (N=29)	2002 (N=22)	average from most to least confident
spelling & punctuation	1	1	1	1
pronunciation/intonation	2	3	2	2.3
grammar (e.g. sentence structure)	4	1	3	2.67
vocabulary	3	4	4	3.67
grammar (e.g. word endings)	5	5	5	5

It emerges that overall the students surveyed are more confident of their proficiency in sentence structure than in inflectional morphology, the category about which they were least confident overall. Looking at students individually, the two most typical patterns were to rank their proficiency in sentence structure the same as that in word endings, or one point above. There were only 4 cases (4/81, i.e. 5%) where a student rated their proficiency in sentence structure below that in word endings.

Table 2: Individual patterns of response showing relative confidence in proficiency in word endings and sentence structure over three cohorts of first-year specialist students (self-assessment)

	2000 (N=30)	2001 (N=29)	2002 (N=22)
proficiency ranked as equal =			
proficiency ranked one rank higher >			
proficiency ranked two ranks higher >>			
proficiency ranked three ranks higher >>>			
sentence structure = word endings	63%	41%	45%
sentence structure > word endings	27%	45%	45%
sentence structure >> word endings	3%	7%	5%
sentence structure >>> word endings			5%
word endings < or << sentence structure	7%	8%	

What could be the reason for this pattern of response? The students' perceptions could, of course, be right: perhaps they are indeed "better" at sentence structure than word endings.

For teenage *second* language learners of German, for instance, it has been claimed that errors of inflectional morphology are among the most persistent (Wichter 1982). Another reason, already alluded to in the 19th century by the Schools Enquiry Commission, reflected still over one hundred years later in Chief Examiners' Reports at A-level (Rogers 1996:59), also suggests itself: inflectional morphology is a particularly salient aspect of German grammar, especially if the starting point is a largely analytical language such as English, as is still the case here for the majority of students. But its interaction with word order is mostly neglected and seems to play no obvious role in the structural sequencing of textbooks.

The textbook's grammar: sequencing word order rules

In all textbooks, decisions are taken to order and filter what is presented to students: the question then arises, on what basis the syllabus is to be sequenced. Judgements of various kinds have to be made concerning ordering related to the balance between (assumed) ease of learning, key structural importance, and communicative centrality or utility. Priorities change: many German textbooks of the early to mid 20th century had grammar as their organisational principle, often starting their first chapter with an exposition of the definite article, reflecting the frequency of nouns in discourse and the many different forms of the definite article according to gender, number and case. While textbooks of the later 20th century were often functionally motivated, structural choices were still made for organisational reasons.

Since verbs are a part of any clause, and because they constrain the structure of that clause and possibly others in complex sentences, they are structurally central to any text. Furthermore, since German word verb placement rules are context dependent, as we have seen, textbook authors have to make decisions about (i) the order in which these syntactic contexts are explicitly dealt with, and (ii) the order in which they start to appear in texts as part of each chapter. We can refer to case (i) as 'foregrounding' (e.g. highlighted in grammar boxes; targeted in production exercises) and case (ii) as 'backgrounding' (e.g. no explicit attention drawn; excluded from production exercises).

As an example of a sequencing issue, let us look briefly at the verb separation rule in German, which can operate in three contexts (X represents any non-verbal element).

- a. Die Studentin kam spät an (SVXVparticle)
- b. Ich muss morgen nach Berlin fahren (SModXV)
- c. Wir haben einen neuen Wagen gekauft (SAuxXV)

In a survey of six textbooks, ranging from 1907 to 1979 (Rogers 1994), it was established that the order in which the different realisations of this rule were introduced as foregrounded material varied considerably. These are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Order of introduction for verb separation in main clauses in six textbooks of German as a foreign language from 1907 to 1979

	1907	1955	1968	1972	1974	1979
SVXVparticle	3	2	1	1	2	1
SModXV	2	1	2	2	1	2
SAuxXV	1	3	3	3	3	3

The clearest degree of consensus emerges with respect to the later introduction of past tense forms – *sie hat das Buch gelesen* – in five out of the six textbooks surveyed. This suggests that this particular context for the verb-final rule, in the sense of the lexical verb appearing clause-finally, is generally perceived to be more difficult, assuming some kind of progression. Opinion is split on the ordering (relative ease or difficulty?) of the other two contexts, namely separable verbs (*sie kommt immer spät an*) and modals plus infinitives (*sie will nicht heiraten*). But what is the sense from a communicative point of view in assuming that learners need a past tense after they need modals or separable verbs?

In the research literature, many differing views have been discussed with respect to the ordering of syllabuses. These include: contrastive linguistic arguments, acquisitional or developmental arguments, processing complexity arguments as well as communicative need. But it is unclear to what extent the decisions on how to sequence elements of the syllabus are based on any coherent evidence-based view of learning or to what extent they are simply based on assumptions.

MFL Policy: a way forward?

The example of German word order is just a part of a much larger question: on what basis is modern foreign language policy decided? As curricula, syllabuses (or schemes of work) and examining bodies become more centralised at secondary level – the current trend in the UK – there is also a need to review the basis for policy decisions, such as the return to grammar as a part of the *languages* curriculum, from a more evidence-based perspective. One way forward here is classroom-based research, not a new idea (cf. Seliger & Long 1983; Chaudron 1988; Allwright & Bailey 1991), but one which has received a new impetus from the current UK situation. The recent CILT/QCA report (*Modern Foreign Languages and Literacy Project, 1999-2001*), which has been concerned with investigating views about language learning is an example of how classroom teachers are undertaking their own research into familiar beliefs such as: ‘A successful early start should improve standards’, ‘Intensive courses work better than long drawn out ones’, ‘Metacognitive understanding aids language learning’, and so on. In other words, teachers are seeking evidence for practice, a trend which is reassuringly more advanced in the medical field and is reflected in the phrase ‘evidence-based medicine’. ‘Whatever else?’, we anxiously ask. Foreign-language teaching and learning is not usually seen as a safety-critical process: the consequences of operating on the basis of assumption and belief are not life-threatening. But for over two millennia, practice has in a somewhat cyclical way (cf. Kelly 1969) been based on ‘common sense’, ideology, economic, political and social factors, as well as linguistic and psychological models.

The *Modern Foreign Languages and Literacy Project* is a step in the direction of evidence-based MFL teaching and learning, and a potentially useful input to MFL policy. How can this trend be supported? In other disciplines such as clinical psychology, business studies and education management, universities have introduced so-called ‘practitioner doctorates’, higher degrees which train professionals to conduct research in a practice-based environment. A practitioner doctorate in the teaching and learning of MFLs would train classroom teachers to formulate their own research questions and hypotheses based on their professional experience, to begin to consider not only what counts as evidence, but also how to interpret it with respect to practice, how to evaluate this practice, and ultimately, how to connect teaching and learning. Grammar – of whatever kind – may well be an

important part of this connection, but it remains to be seen which grammar or grammars, and how.

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