

Institution: University of Reading		
Unit of Assessment: 23, Education		
Title of case study: Transforming Foreign Language Teaching: Motivation and Language Comprehension		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000 - 20		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:2000-2020
Suzanne Graham	Senior Lecturer; Professor	2000 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014–20		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Learning a foreign language has recognised benefits for cognitive, social and economic development. However, learners can be demotivated by poorly developed listening and reading skills that teachers often lack the skills and confidence to improve. Addressing those issues, Suzanne Graham's research has changed the teaching and assessment of foreign languages from primary through to tertiary education, reaching over 1,500,000 learners and their teachers in over 140 countries. Her findings have brought about improvements to and changes in teachers' subject knowledge and classroom practice for developing learners' comprehension skills, as well as for developing their motivation and confidence for language study. Her research has thus made a wide-reaching and very significant contribution to addressing the challenges of low motivation for and competence in foreign language learning.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Long-term research by Graham has led to internationally significant findings on the relationship between three key factors for students' success, enjoyment and motivation in learning a modern foreign language (MFL). These are metacognition (understanding their own learning), self-regulation (knowing how to improve their learning); and self-efficacy (believing in their ability to complete tasks successfully). Graham's work has demonstrated that these factors are also important in enabling students to understand authentic listening and reading materials, which, in turn, motivate through the cultural insights and interest they stimulate. It has also shown that these factors act in synergy and influence student decisions about whether to continue with MFL study [Section 3, ref 1]. Furthermore, the research has demonstrated through funded classroom interventions the teaching approaches that lead to improved self-regulation, self-efficacy and comprehension [Section 3, refs 2 and 5].</p>		
<i>Teachers lack confidence and skill in developing comprehension and motivation</i>		
<p>Following Graham's insights into how to improve students' confidence and comprehension skills, more recent work since 2014 has focused on how to change language teaching strategies and classroom practices accordingly. She conducted the only existing large-scale study of classroom practice for teaching listening comprehension, gathering questionnaire, interview and observational data from language teachers in six regions in England. Funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation (GBP70,004), the research showed that teachers lacked confidence and skill in how to develop students' listening proficiency and confidence [ref 3], findings that echo concerns voiced in countries such as Japan and China. Next, an ESRC follow-on study (GBP99,985) demonstrated that engagement with research about how to improve listening skills had a statistically significant, positive impact on teachers' pedagogical understanding. It also provided a framework for future Nuffield Foundation funded teacher development initiatives and grassroots collaborations.</p>		
<i>Importance of sense of progress at the primary–secondary school transition</i>		
<p>Subsequent Nuffield Foundation funded research (GBP139,585) investigated changes in attainment and motivation when students move from primary to secondary school in 10 schools in England, in the only externally funded longitudinal study of primary MFL in England</p>		

since 2010. Findings highlighted that primary school teaching approaches which made learners aware that they were making progress and growing in competence were crucial for motivation across transition [ref 4].

Developing comprehension, confidence and intrinsic motivation through authentic texts

The research funded by the Nuffield Foundation also showed that learners lacked confidence in understanding French and using it for authentic communication; for example, being able to read the kind of text that might interest a French teenager. These issues were thus explored in a second Nuffield-funded study (led by Oxford University's Department of Education, with 878 learners in 36 schools). The largest funded England-based study of secondary school MFL for around 20 years, it confirmed the value of using authentic texts to boost confidence and interest when learners move from primary to secondary school, and clarified the teaching approaches that can facilitate that [ref 5]. Graham led the strand of the research (in 13 schools) that showed that teaching strategies focusing on self-regulation and comprehension were vital for improving learners' self-efficacy in reading about aspects of French-speaking culture, such as music. The value of using authentic texts such as these was further tested with 586 learners in 15 secondary schools, as part of a GBP3,230,977 AHRC grant (led by Oxford). For the first time, Graham showed that MFL learners' creativity and vocabulary were enhanced when they studied texts such as poems and when the teaching focused on personal and emotional engagement [ref 6].

Overall, Graham's research has established the importance of nurturing learners' motivation for language learning by enhancing their self-efficacy, metacognition, self-regulation and sense of progress in comprehending authentic and culturally rich materials. These are areas in which teachers often lack confidence and skill themselves. The findings are important because they provide clear guidelines on how to develop teachers' pedagogy and practice, as well as the examination and assessment frameworks needed to facilitate them. As a result, they have led to wide-reaching and significant changes in those areas in England and around 140 other countries.

3. References to the research

2* threshold: The research constitutes a body of work unique in its focus on self-efficacy for language comprehension among learners and teachers across all phases of education, demonstrating for the first time how it can be improved through research-informed instruction and a focus on personal engagement and progression. The work includes the only externally funded longitudinal study of primary MFL in England since 2010, and the two largest funded investigations for 20 years of reading comprehension for secondary MFL learners, across approximately 1,500 learners in total. These studies have applied appropriate longitudinal and mixed-method research designs, and rigorous data collection and analysis, including multi-level modelling. They have thus contributed significantly to the advancement of knowledge and in turn to changes in policy and practice. All of the above is reflected in the work's funding through competitive, peer-reviewed grants, and publication in peer-reviewed international outlets.

1. Graham, S.J. (2004) '[Giving up on modern foreign languages? Students' perceptions of learning French](#)'. *Modern Language Journal*, 88 (2). pp. 171–191. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0026-7902.2004.00224.x>
2. Graham, S.J. and Macaro, E. (2008) '[Strategy instruction in listening for lower-intermediate learners of French](#)'. *Language Learning*, 58 (4). pp. 747–783. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2008.00478.x>
3. Graham, S. and Santos, D. (2015) [Strategies for Second Language Listening: Current Scenarios and Improved Pedagogy](#). Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
4. Graham, S., Courtney, L., Tonkyn, A. and Marinis, T. (2016) '[Motivational trajectories for early language learning across the primary-secondary school transition](#)'. *British Educational Research Journal*, 42 (4). pp. 682–702. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3230>
5. Woore, R., Graham, S., Porter, A., Courtney, L. and Savory, C. (2018) [Foreign Language](#)

[Education: Unlocking Reading \(FLEUR\) – A Study into the Teaching of Reading to Beginner Learners of French in Secondary School.](#) Project Report. Oxford University, Oxford.

6. Graham, S., Fisher, L., Hofweber, J. and Krüsemann, H. (2020) '[Getting creative in the languages classroom](#)'. In: Kohl, K., Dudrah, R., Gosler, A., Graham, S., Maiden, M., Ouyang, W.-c. and Reynolds, M. (eds) *Creative Multilingualism: A Manifesto*. Open Book Publishers

4. Details of the impact

Languages play an important role in enriching education and advancing learners' cognitive and social development. Learners can, however, be demotivated by poorly developed comprehension skills that teachers often lack the skills to improve. Bringing about changes in teacher classroom practice and confidence is thus a fundamental element in achieving improvements in learner motivation and competence, across all stages of education and in all countries. Graham's research has led to significant changes in language education. Her findings on student confidence, motivation and outcomes for language comprehension have been used to make changes to England's frameworks for A-level and GCSE exams in MFL, in turn prompting changes in classroom practice. Additionally, her research on teacher confidence, understanding and classroom practice has influenced both teacher training and the development of materials used in primary, secondary and tertiary education in 140 countries. As a result, teachers are more confident and skilful, and are better placed to improve student motivation and learning outcomes.

Changing national exam and subject content frameworks

Acknowledging the importance of Graham's research on listening and self-regulation as an "invaluable contribution to curriculum and assessment reform", in 2014/15 a Department for Education (DfE) advisor rewrote the exam and subject content for MFL GCSE and A-Level. The exams now place greater emphasis on requiring students to understand more authentic spoken language. These changes affect the majority of state secondary schools in England, impacting around 300,000 students for GCSE and 18,000 for A level annually. Changes were made in the knowledge that assessment frameworks shape classroom practice. The DfE advisor comments that "Higher expectations of the competences required in the new specification should act as drivers of such change" [Section 5, source 1].

For A-level, Graham provided "authoritative" evidence-based advice to the MFL A-level Content Advisory Board (ALCAB) in 2014. As a result, her 2004 article [Section 3, ref 1] was cited as supporting evidence in ALCAB's final recommendations, emphasising the need for motivating and authentic content [source 1]. As a result, the subsequent "new assessment requirements have been influenced by the body of research evidence from Professor Graham" [source 1].

Resulting changes to teacher training and practice

(i) Listening comprehension

The revised exam requirements made greater demands, however, on the classroom skills of MFL teachers in England, whose confidence and subject knowledge for teaching listening is often under-developed [ref 3]. That is also true in other countries. To address this and support teachers, Graham's work has provided research-informed materials and training for listening comprehension which have shaped initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and continued professional development (CPD) in England and beyond.

Web-based materials (pdcinmfl.com/) were developed to show classroom applications of the listening research [refs 2 and 3]. By mid-2020, there had been over 70,000 hits from 140+ countries across five continents [source 2]. The site has been described by a lead practitioner as "a highly positive development for language teachers" and by ITE tutors as "influential" [source 2]. Using the site and its underpinning research, ITE courses in England have moved away from training teachers to simply test comprehension; they now follow a principled pedagogy for developing listening and learner confidence. The site underpins the ITE MFL course at Reading (led by Graham, educating around 175 teachers since 2013) and ITE in

other universities, ranging from Portsmouth and Sussex in the south, to the Midlands and Yorkshire [source 2]. Trainee teachers have reported an “improved understanding of ... the difficulties learners face”, resulting in changes in teaching so that “students' level of anxiety around listening has decreased, their motivation has increased and now both instructor and students are more confident when carrying out listening activities”.

Beyond the UK, Graham’s research on effective listening pedagogy has underpinned textbooks for teaching English in Brazil, used by over c.1,000,000 schoolteachers and learners, and one of the few textbooks available for Portuguese [source 4].

Graham’s research on self-efficacy when applied to listening tasks also underpins training given by a leading teacher CPD provider, influencing the work of 8,000+ language teachers in five continents [source 3]. The research has also influenced teacher development in 12 schools in Hong Kong through another CPD provider, affecting 1200+ learners [source 3].

The impact of the research also extends to tertiary education, leading to improved practice and learning outcomes around the world. For example, in Japan the work has led to improvements in the instruction of hundreds of university English language teachers on listening skills, the listening proficiency of their learners, and the development of listening materials in that country [source 5].

(ii) Improving motivation by changing teaching approaches to include authentic material

Graham’s early research [refs 1 and 2] established the importance of enabling learners to understand more authentic, and hence more interesting materials in the foreign language, for encouraging them to continue language study. Subsequently, in 2016–18, a further study [ref 5], in collaboration with 13 schools in England, investigated changes in teaching practice for the adoption of authentic texts. This combined empirical research with a positive impact through changed teaching practices across year groups and languages. It resulted in a positive learning experience and increased learner confidence [source 6]. The value of using authentic texts was next shown in the Creative Multilingualism project, where the approaches implemented led to significant gains in vocabulary and general creativity for 586 learners in 15 schools in England. They also gave teachers “the courage to try out more ambitious things” in the classroom [ref 6; source 6].

As a result, the teaching approaches in these two successful school collaborations were then rolled out on a national basis, forming part of the National Centre of Excellence for Language Pedagogy (NCELP), funded by the DfE. NCELP’s work has drawn heavily on Graham’s research on self-efficacy, in order to improve MFL uptake at GCSE [source 7]. Graham developed and delivered training, materials and toolkits for NCELP based on the projects funded by the Nuffield Foundation and the AHRC, reaching approximately 22,000 learners in all 45 NCELP schools across England, and influencing NCELP’s Schemes of Work [source 7]. The materials were then used at further national practitioner events, where students and tutors from 11 teacher training and higher education institutions from across England improved their understanding of how to use authentic texts, leading to changed practice [source 7]. As a result of all these activities, teachers are better equipped to provide intrinsically motivating classroom experiences.

Changing national and international pedagogy for primary–secondary school transition

Graham’s research on the transition from primary to secondary school established the importance of giving learners a sense of continuing progress in MFL. Recognising the value of that research for the classroom, the DfE awarded her GBP107,000 in 2015/16 to provide teachers in the Thames Valley with training that was based on it [ref 4]. The aim was to ensure that teachers were equipped with the necessary skills and tools for developing learners’ communication and comprehension, across the two school phases. Working with 80+ schools (affecting over 8,000 learners), Graham trained teachers in classroom practices developed from the research cited in refs 3 and 4. Reports to the DfE show statistically significant impact on teachers, who commented that the training not only improved their own confidence and pedagogical understanding, but also “vastly increased the practice and motivation of the pupils” [source 8]. In 2020, Graham’s findings on sense of progress and motivation similarly improved the pedagogical understanding of 3,333 teachers, from over 100 countries, through a

MOOC developed with the Universities of Southampton and Essex. An end of MOOC survey showed increased understanding of motivation (76.6%) and the intention to adapt practice as a result (83.4%) [source 8].

Changes to classroom resources for use across primary and secondary education have also arisen from the research. After sharing findings on the importance of students having a sense of progress, and the motivation that resulted from that [ref 4], Graham was named as a “leading primary language research expert” by the Goethe Institute. It invited her to join *The Language Magician*, an EU project to develop an online game underpinned by her research. The game has been used to provide diagnostic assessment for 20,258 learners in 838 schools across 94+ countries in seven continents since 2018, including 25 of 28 EU countries [source 9]. The game’s website shows a reach of more than 2,000,000 hits. Primary teachers from 400 schools in England have been trained to assess learners with the game, and it is used in around 400 towns and cities across the UK. It is embedded as a core curriculum resource (in Spain, Italy and Germany) and teacher training module (used by the Spanish Ministry of Education, and the Tenerife Grand Canaria Regional Educational Authority). In Tenerife the game is used to assess all European languages, including among migrant learners. Around 90% of 3,437 learners in England, Italy, Spain and Germany who used the game said it gave them useful information about their progress and that they found it motivating. Its high educational value was recognised through the award of “Erasmus+ Innovation Project 2018”. Then, in 2020, the European Commission awarded it the title of “success story”, a term reserved for “projects that have distinguished themselves by their impact, contribution to policy-making, innovative results and/or creative approach, and can be a source of inspiration for others” [all source 9].

Without appropriate instruction, it is easy for language learners to become demotivated. Graham’s research has led to global changes in teachers’ subject knowledge and classroom practice for developing learners’ comprehension skills, critical factors for improving confidence and motivation for language study. It has also influenced policy for assessment. Reaching over 140 countries, from primary to higher education, this work addresses the challenges of low confidence, competence and motivation in MFL meaning that learners can gain significant benefit from the associated cognitive and social development gained from learning an additional language.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- [S1] Influence on GCSE and A-level: testimonial (DfE Advisor & ALCAB Chair); ALCAB report.
- [S2] User data and email feedback showing the global reach of <http://pdcinmfl.com> and its influence on teacher education and in-service teachers.
- [S3] Influence on international CPD provision and teacher practice/confidence – social media feedback, acknowledgements and emails.
- [S4] Impact on English and Portuguese textbooks by Santos – testimonial and sales figures.
- [S5] Impact on Higher Education: correspondence from universities
- [S6] Impact on teacher and learner confidence in using authentic texts – teacher emails and interview summaries.
- [S7] NCELP and practitioner training events – practitioner feedback.
- [S8] Impact on practice for primary–secondary transition: Reports to the DfE and MOOC user data.
- [S9] User data (global), teacher/learner/EU feedback on the impact of *The Language Magician* and “success story” award letter from the European Commission.