

Modern languages for all, or for the few?

National policy development

2001 was always going to be a memorable year for modern language teachers. Not only was it the European Year of Languages, with all that that entailed; but the year also, in Scotland, marked the end of a long period of waiting. At last we had the Minister's response to the Action Group Report on Languages; at last the new 5-14 Guidelines were out; at last we could get to grips with the new, improved national qualifications framework – the intention behind all these being to “secure the place of modern languages in the curriculum”. Even as these long-awaited events unfurled, however, the climate for language learning in Scotland was changing in other ways.

The National Priorities in School Education, as approved by the Scottish Parliament in December 2000, aim to give “strategic direction” to the statutory framework for schools education, set out in the Standards in Scotland's Schools etc. Act 2000, that “requires local authorities and schools to plan, monitor and report on improvement in education”. The first of the five priorities is *Achievement and Attainment*, defined as “to raise standards of educational attainment for all in schools... to achieve better levels in national measures of achievement including examination results.” If emphasis on the end product deters students from opting for a subject in which they expect to do less well, schools are unlikely to want to persuade them to change their minds.

Curriculum guidance issued by the then Education Minister Jack McConnell in August 2001 urged schools to use more flexibility to ensure that pupils are being taught what is seen to be relevant to them, allowing some subjects to be dropped in S3/S4 in order for new combinations of subjects to be created to suit individual needs. Dropping modern languages was actually cited as an example in Ministerial Circular 3/01 (*Flexibility in the Curriculum*).

The more rigorous application of equal opportunities legislation to all statutory services which is a hallmark of recent legislation in Scotland is likely to have implications for schools. It may lead to questions about the range of modern languages offered, and to whom. For example, education was originally excluded from the provisions of the UK Disability Discrimination Act 1995, but this was amended in 2001 by the provisions of the UK Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 which was intended *to prevent discrimination against disabled people in their access to education*. The Education (Disability Strategies and Pupils' Records) Bill which improves access arrangements for school pupils with disabilities in Scotland was introduced in the Scottish Parliament last December. This means that, from September this year, schools and colleges may be acting unlawfully if they adopt measures which deny access *to any area of the curriculum* on the grounds of their disability to any pupil or student. The new duties will apply not only to pupils and students already on the school's role, but also to any potential pupil or student who may fall within the definition set by the Act. 'Disability' is defined as *... a physical or mental disability that is substantial, adverse and long-term*. Examples include sensory impairments, mental illness, learning difficulties, dyslexia, diabetes, epilepsy and disfigurement.

In August 2001 the Education Committee of the Scottish Parliament launched an inquiry into the role of educational and cultural policy in supporting Gaelic, Scots and minority languages in Scotland. The Education Committee report will be published later this year. Its conclusions are, of course, not yet known, but it seems likely that, in a Scotland increasingly aware of its

multiculturalism, Scots, British Sign Language, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Cantonese and Arabic are, like Gaelic, set to enjoy a higher status in the curriculum than heretofore.

All of these developments, taken together, mean that in the years to come, modern languages as a subject will have to argue its case even more vigorously and compete harder than ever before to maintain its place in the curriculum. At the same time, we need to be prepared to take all comers. As we develop arguments about the value and benefits of foreign language learning, we need to be able to show how study of a foreign language not only benefits the individual pupil by preparing him/her for life and work in an enlarged European Community; we will also need to be able to explain *and to demonstrate* what modern languages can contribute to all of our national aspirations. In other words, we need not only to develop the arguments, but also, and perhaps more importantly, to develop our curriculum so that it reflects the claims we make. We need to be able to show, for example, *which aspects of our curriculum* contribute to, for example, personal development, communication skills, working with others, social inclusion, citizenship, international understanding, etc. And, of course, as we do this, we need to show that all these benefits are available to all pupils.

School policy development

A lot of work is already being done to 'get the message across' to the community at large that languages are important and that all children are entitled to study at least one foreign language during their time at school. Course content is being reviewed to ensure that it is interesting and relevant to our young people. Great efforts are being made, in North Ayrshire and elsewhere, to hitch modern languages securely to the ICT wagon. Much of the 'new' money recently made available for modern languages by the Scottish Executive seems likely to be spent on improving access to technology.

All these are important, but I believe there is one other area which we ignore at our peril: we somehow have to convince young people that they *are capable* of learning a foreign language – that it is no more difficult than any other subject – that they have just as much chance of succeeding at French, say, as at maths, or social subjects, or science.

This may be difficult, for it is not only young people that we have to convince. We have only to look at one of the unintended effects of the Action Group Report and the Minister's response to understand the serious consequences of a failure to deal with this. Both HMIE Robert McKinstry, in his memorable address last November to those attending the Annual Conference of Scottish Association for Language Teaching, and Professor Richard Johnstone, in his dissertation on this website, have already taken firm action to mitigate the damaging effects of the confusion surrounding the use of the word 'entitlement'; but we have to ask ourselves why it was that some schools moved so quickly to remove modern languages from the core curriculum. What justifications were offered? Was there an underlying assumption that modern languages, as a subject, is too difficult, and therefore not appropriate, for some pupils? That certainly seems to have been the case in some schools. We need the justifications to be explicit if we are to challenge them – or accept them!

Departmental development

First of all, however, we have to convince ourselves. Do we, as modern language specialists, believe that learning a foreign language is more difficult than learning maths, geography or any other subject? Do we go along with the view that learning a modern language may be *too* difficult for some pupils? If so, we are implying that our subject *is* harder than those other subjects, and so it is not surprising if our pupils believe it too. The danger for modern

language departments is that, if we allow to go unchallenged a perception that modern languages is *not* 'for all', that it is indeed more difficult, then why should *any* pupils choose to do it? If this view prevails, then what was to have been an opportunity for all may, in the end, be chosen by only a few.

But, if we say that modern languages is *not* more difficult than other subjects, will pupils believe us? After all, if pupils *experience* modern languages as more difficult than other subjects – which some of them undoubtedly do – then for them, it *is* more difficult.

Now, as never before, we need to look at the courses we offer, not just from the point of view of content, assessment, and access to technology but also in terms of methodology. Not just *what* we teach, and *why* we teach it, but *how* we teach it.

Approaches to learning and teaching

From the moment pupils walk through the door until they leave the classroom, everything we do as teachers has a positive or negative effect on pupils' learning. We can help or hinder their learning in so many ways: by the way we greet them; by the way we deal with their mistakes; by the expectations we have of them; by the targets we set; by the strategies we employ... We have given less thought to this aspect of curriculum development in recent years, but we can delay no longer. We must find ways of changing pupils' perceptions of language learning, so that learning a language seems, if not exactly 'easy', then 'challenging' in a way which convinces pupils that they *will* be able to meet the challenge and *will* experience success. If we look only at content without considering methodology, motivation will not improve. Those pupils who are experiencing failure in the modern languages classroom will continue to do so, and the alternatives which will be on offer will seem increasingly attractive.

This is not an easy agenda for modern languages teachers. It suggests that success lies primarily, not in the hands of policy developers, local authorities or senior management, but in the way we manage our pupils and in the range of strategies we employ to help them to learn. Shifting the spotlight away from content and onto ways of helping pupils to learn better may be difficult to do without help. Where is this help to come from? I believe it must come not from one source, but from several.

Discriminating carefully between what is achievable and what is not

We must take time to discriminate clearly between the different types of barriers which affect learning, so that we can adopt appropriate strategies for dealing with different types of barriers instead of wasting time, energy and emotion on issues we have little control over. What happens to children outside of school I can do little about, at least not today, and not alone. What happens to those same children in my classroom, I do have some control over, so that is what I must focus on. How do I help socially disadvantaged children to learn and to reap the benefits of what I have to offer? What I have to offer can change the lives of these children, just as much as – and perhaps more than – any other subject.

Does this child have learning difficulties, physical or sensory impairment? I can't do anything about that, either. Nor can the child. All I can do is to accept the child as he/she is and consider how I can help this child to learn and to reap the benefits of what I have to offer. What I have to offer can be life-enhancing for these children. Ask those who teach modern languages in special schools.

Does school management make it difficult to teach ‘these’ children? What exactly are the barriers the system puts in their way? Classes too large? Poor discipline? No support? We have to challenge systemic barriers too, but not today, and not in the classroom, and, preferably, not alone. Changing the system requires a different sort of approach.

Does our determinedly monolingual society make it difficult? No use complaining about that now. What about society’s children whose task ours is to ensure that they do *not* remain determinedly monolingual?

In the end, the only barriers I *am* empowered to tackle, and as soon as I like, are curricular ones. Since HMI tells us¹ that the majority of barriers preventing children learning *are* curricular ones, there are grounds for hope. It means that I can concentrate on my job of developing the curriculum, knowing *that* will make the biggest difference, and leave other people to worry about the rest.

It’s still a tall order, though, if I don’t know how all those children who are struggling can be persuaded that it’s not so difficult after all. But there are people who *do* know what it is that makes modern language learning seem so difficult, and who have ideas about how we might make it seem easier.

Finding out what makes modern languages seem so difficult

Most modern languages teachers put a great deal of time, effort and dedication into their teaching. The high numbers attending modern languages seminars on Saturdays is ample testimony of that. So why do some pupils still find it so difficult? My work with Modern Languages teachers and their Support for Learning colleagues over the last eight years leads me to believe that one of the reasons is that, when we are planning our work, we start with the wrong question. We tend to ask ourselves what we can do to help the pupils to learn better; but we really need to ask ourselves, first of all, why they are not *already* learning better than they do. Modern language teachers work just as hard as their colleagues in other departments, so why is it that the same pupils find *our* subject harder? The answer to that question seems to be, not that language learning is inherently harder, but that some of the things modern language teachers ask pupils to do makes it *seem* harder. We need – we *really need* – to know what those things are. These are the barriers which prevent our pupils from learning as easily as they might. If we don’t know what they are, then we will keep erecting them; any improvements we try to make are likely to incorporate the same barriers, and so be less effective than they might otherwise have been. So we need to ask first, “Why aren’t they already learning better? What’s *stopping* them learning?” Only when we have the answer to those questions will measures to help our pupils to learn even better be truly effective.

Adopting ‘inclusive’ strategies

Individual modern language teachers don’t need to start from scratch. Some colleagues have been there before them and have left signposts. They can tell you that although the same chunk of language work can be taught in many ways, some of those ways can be described as ‘inclusive’, others ‘exclusive’. It is important that we know whether the learning strategies which we commonly use with our pupils are ‘inclusive’ or ‘exclusive’ and take steps, if necessary, to make them more inclusive. Some examples:

¹ *Effective Provision for Special Educational Needs* (SOEID 1994, p 8.)

a) If a target of fifteen words and phrases has been set in preparation for a role, play, say; and if the fifteen words and phrases are introduced in one block, not all of the class will be able to learn and remember them, because some people have very small working memories and cannot process so much material in one go – the system crashes. The same material, introduced in sets of five, especially if the five are linked in some way, will be accessible to more of the students; two more blocks of five will allow all (or at least more) of the students to reach the target of fifteen. Not a big change for the teacher, but a world of difference for the student ‘at risk of failing’.

b) We know that different children learn in different ways, therefore that some ways will seem easier than others. One child learns easily from text. Another finds reading difficult but finds it easy to learn things he has heard; another has a strong visual memory but what goes in one ear seems to fall out of the other. This means that if the teacher can supplement a standard task by adding other sensory dimensions, the task becomes accessible to a wider range of students. If not all tasks can be enhanced in this way, then ensuring that some tasks are visually rich, that others provide good sound input; that some will appeal to learners who learn best through movement, etc. then more students have a chance of encountering at least some tasks which play to his/her strengths. Without such an inclusive approach, there is a danger that the teacher’s standard approach will ‘exclude’ those who learn best in other ways. A different way of accommodating a wider range of learning styles is to set a goal and then to offer a choice of ways of achieving it. This allows students to ‘play to their strengths’, making the task seem easier. If we can identify the learning styles we already cater for, we can incorporate additional or alternative approaches.

c) A teacher who presents new vocabulary can offer the student several ‘hooks’ on which to hang the new material. The word or phrase exists as written text and sound. Most pupils will learn better if they have both. Visual representation can be added, bring in a few more students. Vocal repetition, rhyme, rhythm colour, movement, song, humour can all be added, any of which will add to the number of students who can engage more easily with the task of learning that word. A teacher who presents new language in a ‘enriched’ context will reach more students than one whose presentation is impoverished and matches the learning styles of only a small section of the class. The ‘hooks’ have a further purpose: when, later, stored language is required for use, it has to be located and retrieved from long-term storage – the more hooks have been used to aids storage, the more hooks can be used to aid recall. The pupil who has seen a picture of a horse when learning the foreign word for it, may later retrieve the word more easily from memory if shown the same picture again.

d) In order for new learning to be absorbed and retained, it has to be transferred from ‘working memory’ to ‘long-term memory’ (rather like a computer needs to ‘save’ new work if it is not to be quickly lost). In order for this to happen, most students have to engage with the new material, have a chance to ‘play’ with it, manipulate it, do *something* with it. If students are denied the chance to consolidate new learning in some way, the process of storing cannot happen. Very few students are capable of memorising instantly what they are told for the first time. A teacher who moves quickly from the ‘presentation of new language’ phase to ‘using the language’ (reading, writing, listening, speaking) without providing a ‘consolidation’ phase will fail to carry forward a significant portion of the class, who will then be struggling to cope with tasks which involve language they have only partially absorbed and may not remember at all.

Identifying barriers to learning

Another way of making language learning seem easier is to identify the barriers to learning we inadvertently erect when we ask pupils to do something which is actually too difficult for them. If we can identify the barriers we can devise suitable strategies for removing or

reducing them, or we can provide additional help for the student faced with the barrier. If we are successful in this, we will be able to teach the same content, to the same or higher standard, to a wider range of pupils. To put it another way, more pupils will experience success and fewer will perceive the subject to be beyond them.

The difficulty is that modern language teachers are not routinely trained to identify barriers or learning styles, or to evaluate strategies in this way. Help may be needed. Where is that help to come from?

Getting help

In 1994 HMI published a document called *Effective Provision for Special Educational Needs*, familiarly known as EPSEN. It deals in detail with procedures for opening a Record of Needs, constructing individualised educational programmes, and so on, but it also provides guidance to school management on effective learning and teaching and the importance of facilitating collaborative practice.

*...class and subject teachers...have the responsibility for teaching all pupils in their classes, including those with special educational needs. **In effective schools they receive support from other members of staff...*** (The highlight is mine.)

...the most effective teachers... value teamwork with colleagues and other professionals and have sufficient confidence to seek and give advice and be guided by others.

One of the roles of Support for Learning specialists is to provide consultancy support, to...

"...advise the management team and colleagues on ways of improving the quality and effectiveness of learning and teaching throughout the school and on particular areas or subjects in the curriculum; they also give advice and guidance on the learning needs and programmes of individual pupils."

If the modern language teacher is unable to access this help, then we're back to systemic problems again. EPSEN is quite clear about where responsibilities lie: *"These roles are most effectively fulfilled when management create the necessary working conditions."*

'Management', of course, extends beyond the school. If we are to take our statutory duties seriously, if we are to make curricular opportunities available for and accessible to all students, teachers must be equipped with the skills to do just that. That help may already be available within the school. The teacher training institutions are another potential source of help, via pre-service and in-service training.

Adopting a problem-solving approach to differentiation

It may help if we look at the vexed question of differentiation from a different angle. Instead of trying to get our heads round the 'twelve considerations', or 'the fifteen dimensions', and trying to apply them on a global scale, we might think, rather, of the outcome we want to achieve. Put simply, **effective differentiation is anything which allows an individual pupil at risk of failing to be successful**. Thinking of this at the level of a single task, we might observe a pupil struggling (therefore 'at risk of failing'), decide how to help (devise a strategy), and provide that help (implement the strategy). If the strategy is a good one, the pupil will succeed. If he/she is still experiencing difficulty, perhaps we need to try a different strategy. If I can't think of a solution, perhaps someone else can?

Offering appropriate courses

There seems no doubt now that, for some of our pupils, modern language courses culminating in Standard Grade Assessment have been part of the problem. As departments have been striving to accommodate students with an ever-widening range of abilities, the numbers of students dropping out, or being dropped, in their fourth year of language learning has assumed alarming proportions. To have tolerated for years a situation in which more than ten per cent of the S4 cohort (and sometimes more) dropped out, received 'no award' or Grade 7, especially when other core subjects were showing only three or four per cent in the same categories, (ref. SEB & SQA statistics) seems little short of folly. Fortunately, a more flexible alternative is now coming on stream, with many schools now looking to Higher Still Access provision rather than to Foundation level to provide a suitable programme for their lower-ability students. It should be noted that the level of performance expected of students achieving Access 3 is the same as (or slightly higher than) that expected of Foundation level candidates. However, the programme leading to those levels of performance can be geared more closely to students' learning needs, relies less on long-term memory, and so is experienced as 'easier' by students.

Evaluating practice

The challenge modern language teachers face is now urgent. If modern languages is not a subject which is accessible to all, then its 'core' status is at risk. It will become marginalised. That would be a tragedy of national proportions, denying life-enhancing opportunities to this and future generations of pupils. We must evaluate our practice now, and do whatever is necessary to make our subject more accessible. To keep us on track we need look no further than the pupils themselves. We will know we are succeeding when pupils begin to ask themselves, not "Why should I learn a language?" but "Why not?"

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