

Modern Languages For All: The Challenge for Schools and Education Managers

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Since the inception of the idea that we, the people of Europe, could and should develop and celebrate our common European identity, there has been the wish to nurture in our citizens an appreciation not only of our shared interests but also of our rich cultural and linguistic diversity. In schools this has expressed itself chiefly through the development of a 'European Dimension' in education which has embraced both the need to offer better opportunities for young people to learn each other's languages and also the need to foster an increasing awareness in young people of the impact a common European future would have on all aspects of their lives.

It was inevitable, perhaps, that the focus initially would be on language learning, since modern language learning had long been an important element in the schooling of our most able pupils. The new challenge, however, was to extend the opportunities to all young people, regardless of their abilities and disabilities.

In many countries this new aspect of language learning was not seen as a priority and was slow to develop. Even where it became official policy quite early on, few resources were devoted to developing suitable courses and even fewer to re-training modern language teachers in the new teaching approaches, which would be required. Only relatively recently has attention turned to the notion of 'entitlement' to language learning, and with that the realisation that something needs to be done if all young people are to be offered equal opportunities to experience themselves as successful foreign language learners and equal members of the community of Europe.

The following account attempts to trace the path that has been taken in Scotland as the education community has moved from one in which the 'new' learners simply joined classes in the pre-existing framework, which many of them found failed to meet their needs, towards one in which inclusion and an entitlement to successful language learning for all pupils is becoming a practical possibility.

Policy and practice in Scotland after 1989

In 1989 the then Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Forsyth, in his Standard Circular 1178, expressed the view that *the learning of foreign languages is a useful experience which can benefit pupils across the whole range of ability*. Yet eight years later, in 1997, the Scottish Office Education and Industry Department (SOEID) was still reporting that *evidence from inspections of mainstream and special schools indicated that a significant number of pupils with special educational needs were not being taught a modern European languageⁱⁱ*. In fact it had been clear for some time that practice

was not keeping pace with policy and in 1994 SOEID set up a two-year project, *Europe, Language Learning and Special Educational Needs*ⁱⁱⁱ, with a remit *to explore why [some] pupils were not being given access to foreign language learning; to consider how access could be improved; and to provide advice on effective learning and teaching of modern languages to pupils with special educational needs*. SOEID hoped that, following publication of the project report in 1997, modern languages would thereafter *be accepted as a core aspect of the secondary curriculum of all but a very small number of pupils with special educational needs*.

The biggest surprise at the outset of this project was to discover just how much language learning was already being done in special schools. The main limitation these segregated schools reported was not, as might have been expected, the unsuitability of foreign language study for their pupils, but lack of suitable linguistic skills in their teaching workforce. With or without foreign language study, the European dimension was well developed, schools pointing out to the researchers that their pupils were 'Europeans too'. Where schools had felt able to introduce some foreign language learning, it was enthusiastically received by pupils and viewed by pupils, parents and teachers as an enriching educational experience.

This contrasted with the overall picture in mainstream secondary schools where modern language teachers had received little or no preparation, either in their initial teacher-training course or as in-service training, for developing new approaches to language learning, which would accommodate pupils with a wider range of educational needs. Although Circular 1178 had introduced a statutory requirement that schools should provide classes for all pupils, regardless of ability, from the later stages of primary school until age 16, the courses that were then on offer and the teaching approaches in common use in secondary schools proved to be unsuitable for some of the new generation of learners. This meant that some pupils of lower ability experienced failure on a daily basis; they became discouraged by their inability to learn, and some of them ended up creating serious problems for their teachers.

Some secondary schools reacted by withdrawing certain pupils from foreign language classes, arguing that their time would be better spent on core skills in their first language (English), such as basic number work and reading. Teachers were reporting that, even where problematic pupils managed to complete their course of language learning, some failed to turn up for the final examination and thus had no qualification to show for their four or more years' work. Scottish Examination Board (SEB) figures showed that many others took the examination but scored such low marks that the value of their effort was questionable^{iv}. Of course there were exceptions; some pupils were fortunate enough to find themselves being taught by teachers who believed in their right to be

there and who knew how to make the experience enjoyable and rewarding. However, in the mid-nineties, around 10% of the cohort entered for Standard Grade examinations at the beginning of their final year of compulsory education were either failing to take the examination or failing to achieve worthwhile results.

There is some evidence to suggest that curriculum managers and teachers in mainstream schools, in common with pupils and their parents, tended to see these failures as evidence that modern language study is just too difficult for some pupils and that they would be better spending their time acquiring other, more basic, skills. But the question had to be asked: how could it be that pupils in special schools were finding their 'European entitlement and foreign language learning' a pleasurable and rewarding experience, while children with similar or less significant needs in mainstream schools were not? Here was an anomaly that cried out for further exploration.

The European dimension

The SOEID Project Officers, in their publication of 1997^v, reported that the teachers encountered by project officers in special schools had enthusiastically embraced the need to introduce a European dimension into the curriculum of all of their pupils, and that for some pupils this included elements of language learning. In most of the cases examined, study of 'foreign culture' was explicitly linked to the concept of 'community' and pupils were encouraged to compare what they were learning of 'foreign' cultures with their own experience. This linking of close/familiar communities with distant/unfamiliar communities provided a comprehensible context and a purpose for whatever language learning was undertaken, giving it a validity in the eyes of pupils, parents and teachers that appeared to be lacking in the mainstream setting where there was less experience of cross-curricular working. The Project Officers concluded that, although in mainstream schools modern languages as a subject had always been thought of as having a cultural dimension, this was often taken for granted and 'culture' did not figure explicitly in syllabi or assessment structures. Absence of an explicit cultural context did not appear to worry more able pupils, but its presence evidently provided strong motivation and a sense of purpose for those who were less able linguistically.

Assessment and certification for all, after 1997

It was not until the introduction of the 'Higher Still' reforms in the late nineties that the opportunity arose to incorporate these successful features into a formal system of national assessment, which could then legitimately provide training opportunities for the teachers who would be involved in delivering the new programmes. The National Qualifications which resulted from the reforms provided a range of certificated programmes designed to accommodate the needs of all but a very small number of learners, regardless of the setting in which they were being educated and regardless of

their abilities or disabilities. Pupils who had found the previous modern language programmes and/or the associated examination arrangements unmanageable, now had the opportunity to follow 'Access' programmes in Modern Languages which had been developed with the successful experiences of special schools in mind.

The new Access units are available at three levels, all of which are assessed internally. The number of topics to be covered is limited, and assessment follows closely on learning. This means that pupils are judged on the standard of performance they are capable of attaining at a given moment, while the language learned is still familiar, rather than on their ability to memorise and retain language and language structures for performance on a future occasion. For some pupils whose working memory and power of recall are limited, these arrangements make it possible for them to be credited with relatively high levels of performance without being penalised for their inability to retain information for significant periods of time before recall is required. The new Arrangements documents make clear to teachers the standards required and the conditions in which they may best be achieved, so that even without additional training, most modern language teachers are now able to offer an alternative programme of study and an assessment regime which are more appropriate for certain learners. One major result of this is that pupils experience success more frequently and are better motivated to learn. Scottish Qualifications Authority^{vi} statistics for the 2003 diet of examinations in both French and German at Standard Grade show a marked drop in numbers of candidates failing to achieve a satisfactory result – only 4.8% of those registered obtaining a Standard Grade 7 or No Award. At the same time, numbers successfully taking the alternative Access 3 units are rising each year.

Pupils following the Access 3 programmes are normally assessed in speaking, listening and reading only. Whilst it is recognised that writing in the foreign language can be a useful aid to learning and regular practice is recommended, writing as a discrete skill is not assessed. For some pupils who find writing a great burden, the removal of this barrier is crucial to their success. On the other hand, arrangements are sufficiently flexible for certain pupils (for example, those who are deaf) to be assessed on the basis of their performance in the written (i.e. visual) forms of the language, with less emphasis on speaking and/or listening.

Cultural studies

At Access 2 and Access 1, levels which cater for students for whom previously there had been no nationally assessed modern language programmes, basic foreign language study can be linked to study in English of related aspects of life in a country where the language being studied is spoken. Using the examples of good practice observed in special schools, pupils are required to compare and

contrast life in the country studied with the same aspects of life in their local communities; thus, as they move from the familiar to the unfamiliar, providing learning experiences which directly affect their everyday lives as well as providing a broader and richer experience than that which they might otherwise encounter. At Access 1 the focus of the programme can be on sensory experiences related to cultural study and these in turn can be linked to pupils' individualised educational programmes.

Although there is no explicitly cultural unit in the modern languages framework at Access 3, some mainstream teachers who have become aware of its benefits at lower levels have been actively looking for ways of providing a similar context for learning at Access 3. In some cases this involves finding a unit outside the modern languages framework which can serve as a relevant context. For example, one mainstream school is running a 'Language Experience' option for pupils aged 14-16. This is a joint venture between the Home Economics department and the French department and leads to certification in both subjects. Another school is developing a programme involving an enterprise activity which can be certificated alongside the work in French. It may prove possible to incorporate the Core Skill 'Working With Others' into the same activity. These are early days, but pilot projects such as these are providing convincing evidence that appropriately designed programmes of modern languages which exploit some of the resources already existing within the school and local community can provide enjoyable and enriching educational experiences for those pupils for whom a plain diet of French or German has so far proved unpalatable^{vii}.

The current position

Providing an appropriate programme in modern languages for almost every pupil is now a practical possibility. It is clear from the rising number of entries for certification in Access programmes that many teachers already feel able to plan and deliver successful schemes of work; others report that they will soon follow suit. Special schools and units responding to researchers in 2002^{viii} reported a growing interest in developing modern language programmes for their pupils. Local Authorities now have responsibility to provide any training that is required, and some of them have commissioned materials to support the new programmes. One of Her Majesty's Inspectors for Education (HMIE), speaking in autumn 2003 at a series of Conferences to celebrate Good Practice in Modern Language Teaching, reminded participants that *pupils with specific learning difficulties or special educational needs can benefit greatly from studying a modern language. There should be no assumption that such pupils will be excluded from learning a second language.*^{ix}

Training issues

Successful as these new programmes are proving to be, however, there still remain a number of issues to be resolved, notably issues of training for teachers.

Some special schools responding to a research survey^x explained that they did not offer their pupils a modern language programme because they felt they did not have in their workforce appropriately qualified personnel. In some Authorities, teachers who work in special schools and units and who are not modern language specialists are offered training alongside teachers who are being trained to teach a foreign language in primary schools and this appears to be sufficient for the amount of language required at the Access levels. The availability of such training to those who teach in special schools and units differs across the country. Local authorities, who now have responsibility for in-service training of the teaching workforce, need to examine the level of language proficiency of all those providing modern language programmes, regardless of the sector in which they teach, and to arrange in-service training accordingly.

Access levels are not suitable for all pupils who are experiencing difficulties in foreign language learning. Some young people who have special educational needs or who are experiencing social or emotional difficulties are capable of achieving higher levels of performance if provided with teaching that takes their special needs into account. Training to equip mainstream teachers to recognise these needs and to devise appropriate responses is not readily available, so it is not surprising if problems still remain. As more and more young people who experience difficulty in learning are included in mainstream classes, training in the skills developed by teachers who have specialised in learning difficulties needs to be made available to mainstream subject teachers.

Collaborative practice

In some schools, staff and/or curriculum development has been achieved by providing opportunities for subject specialists and learning support specialists to work together to plan changes to the way in which the modern language curriculum is presented to pupils so that more of them will be able to experience success. Through collaborative planning and teaching, the modern language teacher has an opportunity to reflect on his/her practice, to profit from the knowledge, experience and skill of the learning support specialist, and to broaden his/her repertoire of responses to pupils' learning needs. A pilot project currently under way in four schools in Edinburgh, Scotland, is attempting to demonstrate that well-managed opportunities for collaborative planning and implementation in modern languages result in real benefits to pupils^{xi}.

Using collaborative in-school development projects as ways of managing curriculum and staff development has several advantages over the more traditional 'away-day' in-service courses:

1. They are cost effective

With support of senior management and flexible timetabling, time can be found in school to allow modern languages and learning support staff to meet together at regular intervals over a given time-span to plan and review the development. Training projects of this type are relatively inexpensive if it is considered that:

- They affect transfers of knowledge and skills between teachers already in the school;
- There are no outside trainers' fees to pay. Senior members of staff or local authority advisory personnel can be mobilised to act as mentors if required.
- Teachers do not leave school or miss their classes, so no additional teacher costs are incurred.
- There are no claims for travelling expenses.
- They are not limited to a single day's input but can last as long as the school determines is correct for the circumstances.

2. They are focused

Each project focuses on a specific pupil or group of pupils who are giving cause for concern, or who seem likely to fail if no change is effected. Both members of the project team (a modern languages and a learning support teacher) observe the group, barriers to learning for pupils in that particular class are identified, and measures are devised which seem likely to remove or at least reduce the barriers. Thus there is an immediate benefit for the pupils who have been targeted.

3. They are 'low-key'

There is no need to change everything. Sometimes a relatively small change to the way in which a single task is organised can result in significant benefits in terms of accessibility for pupils. Pupils may not be aware of deliberate change. Gains can be built up cumulatively as new measures are seen to be successful or are modified in the light of experience.

4. The benefits are transferable

The measures adopted are evaluated on a regular basis and adapted as necessary. The principles behind those that are found to work can be applied to other tasks and/or can be tried out in similar situations elsewhere in the school.

5. They are relevant

Every project is different since this approach does not offer pre-determined solutions. It is simply a method of managing the collaborative process in order to respond to whatever local needs are

posited. The outcomes of the project therefore have immediate relevance to the situation identified.

The problems

This approach to staff and curriculum development has many advantages, but there are also many barriers in the way of its implementation. Although suitable learning programmes, assessment regimes and certification arrangements are now in place which should allow all our young people a chance to experience success in the field of foreign language learning, learning support specialists are in short supply in some schools; dedicated time to pursue these improvements is not available; there is not enough 'slack' in the system to facilitate the collaborative planning that is needed to effect the necessary changes to classroom practice. In such schools there is little hope that languages will become accessible for all pupils.

The challenges

The benefits of successful language learning for children of all abilities and disabilities are incalculable, as so clearly evidenced in the submissions contained in this report. Some of the benefits are predictable, others are not, but all of our pupils are citizens of a multicultural and multilingual world and we now have enough evidence to show that all can be enriched by the experiences that successful language learning has to offer.

The challenge to teachers is to devise ways of presenting foreign language learning in contexts that are meaningful to learners and in ways that are accessible to the least as well as to the most able. But teachers need time and help to do this.

The challenge to those who manage education is to create the conditions in which this can happen; to make available the staffing, the resources, the encouragement and the opportunities which will make it possible for committed schools and teachers to ensure that of their pupils are well-prepared to assume the responsibilities of international citizenship.

Modern Languages has a unique contribution to make to community and international harmony. We have the opportunity to show the way, to show how modern language study is indeed relevant to the lives of all our young people.

ⁱ Hilary McColl taught French for twenty-five years in mainstream schools in Scotland before being seconded as National Curriculum Development Officer to look at how pupils with special educational needs were being catered for in Modern Languages. Now working as an independent trainer, consultant and writer, she has particular interest in bringing together teachers who specialise in modern languages and those who specialise in supporting learners, believing that collaborative working is the best way to ensure viable modern language programmes for learners with special educational needs. The views expressed here are her own.

ⁱⁱ From the Introduction to *Europe, Language Learning and Special Educational Needs*, McColl, H. Hewitt, C, Baldry, H. (SOEID 1997)

ⁱⁱⁱ The *Europe. Language Learning and Special Educational Needs* project ran from April 1994 April 1996. The project report of the same name was published in 1997.

^{iv} In 1996, for example, of the candidates entered for Standard Grade French at the beginning of the academic year, 9.6% received the lowest grade or failed to complete the assessments required. The percentage for German was 9.4%. These figures compared unfavourably with figures for other 'core' subjects: 3.1% for English and 2.8% for Mathematics. Ref: Scottish Examination Board: Examination Statistics 1996.

^v As item 2.

^{vi} The Body now responsible for awarding National Qualifications in Scotland is the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

^{vii} Ideas for developing programmes such as those described can be found in documents published by Learning and Teaching Scotland: *Access in Modern Languages: a Guide for teachers* (2001, updated July 2004) and *Modern Languages: Life in Another Country: Access 1/2* (2000). See: <http://www.ltscotland.com/nq>

^{viii} *Modern Languages in Special Schools and Mainstream Units in Scotland 2002*, McColl, H. with McPake, J and Picozzi, L. Published in 2003 and available on Scottish CILT's website: <http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk>

^{ix} *SEED National Conferences: Proceedings*. Published by the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) and the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching (Scottish CILT) in March 2004.

^x As item 8.

^{xi} *Working Together to improve access to the modern languages curriculum*. The Edinburgh Schools Project is described elsewhere in the EU report.