

A LA RECHERCHE DU TEMPS OUBLIÉ

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Old men forget... well, perhaps, and perhaps not always - and perhaps they are not that old anyway. And sometimes little comments read somewhere become so many *madeleines* in the *tilleul* of current circumstances. Two *madeleines* crumbled on my teaspoon as my eye caught a remark in an edition of the SALT journal.

The first was the question about diversification of languages in the primary schools, and the musing as to whether it was ever more than a 'pious hope' on the part of the originators. The comment in itself is unexceptionable - the establishing of diversified language provision was always a vulnerable *démarche*, bad enough in the secondary curriculum, let alone in the untrodden territory of the primary. But what the comment triggered was the realisation in my mind that all the references to languages in the primary school that had swum before me since I exited left, had been imbued with the 'pious' assumption that the Scottish educational world (and the general public), had been foaming with enthusiasm at the idea from the very beginning. The same assumption that had all language teachers, (and the general public), overjoyed at the introduction of a language in the core curriculum of everyone for the first four years of secondary school - more or less my second *madeleine*. Behind both assumptions lay the natural idea that those who wrote, spoke, attended conferences, worked in development groups etc., reflected the attitudes of the whole of the language teaching corps, and that the few headteachers who stepped forward in support were tribunes of a cheering mass of colleagues. The active enthusiasts, or enthusiastic activists, were, of course, more than invaluable - they were essential if any policy were to be not only framed but also put into practice and then rooted into normality. But arguments often had to be constructed to convince - no, to cajole the reluctant, the suspicious and the immobile, arguments which more than once sparked vociferous controversy, not always civilised, from some of the more evangelical activists ready to bristle at anything which did not appear to be following the strait and luminous path.

The quest was always to come up with policies which were practical and feasible, and that could be pronounced by ministers always vulnerable to accusations of being spendthrift, of imposing policies not thought through or costed, and/or of being pushed by sectional interests. Policies had to be seen to be in the national interest, (that is why governments exist), and to have wide support, (that is why politicians exist). So the enthusiasm of the *engagés* language teachers and the 'it-seems-quite-a-good idea' opinions of the parental public were harnessed to wrongfoot the reluctance of school administrators who had 'more than enough to be going on with after Munn'dunning, Standard grade and industrial action'. Not an easy field to be stepping out on to, especially since there was no obligation to do so.

So how did it start, this primary school languages initiative? We have to look back to the circular that established 'languages for all' throughout the first four years of secondary. And that brings me to my second *madeleine* - tasted unbidden within the word 'entitlement'.

Few people know - that must be true since few people knew at the time - how close that the 'languages for all' policy came to being torn up before being issued. At that time SALT (Scottish Association for Language Teaching) did not exist, and Scottish language teachers were part of the UK language teaching association which preceded the present ALL (Association for Language Learning). A movement had been growing throughout the UK among language teachers to make a foreign language obligatory within the secondary curriculum for the period of compulsory schooling (the only period a government can legislate for – or could at that time,

when governments believed they had to work within accepted parameters). The first real shots in the process of creating a favourable political climate were put, quite deliberately, into the introduction section of the Standard Grade document for modern languages – not obvious to many outside, but cogent enough to start to condition the tone of discussions within St Andrew's House. A group of the then extant SCCC, ostensibly the Secretary of State's advisory body on the curriculum, was asked to produce a paper on modern languages. As usual with educational committees in the 80s (naturally they have changed now) they proceeded with *mañana* haste, and after much prodding eventually produced a paper saying how important languages were, how wonderful an experience, how vital for the nation, for education, for communication, for illumination – but don't make pupils study them unless they are really clever, or thrown, or both. You could write the script. You did? It's still being used? Well, fancy that! The committee was composed mainly of headteachers and officials from the educational directorates – but you guessed that. One thing that was different then, though, was that the advice was not accepted. The Secretary of State and the Department set aside the SCCC advice and proceeded with the policy in Circular 1178 issued in January 1989. It was supposed to have come out over a year earlier but the widespread teachers' industrial action of the time had put it on hold. In the meantime in England, unhindered by industrial action, an Act of Parliament, no less, had established 'languages for all' in law. Time for the annual language association conference, which that year was held in Scotland. Flushed with their success in England, their President publicly berated the Scottish authorities and issued a stirring call for Scotland to follow Westminster's lead, shrilly echoed by the Scottish delegates. A pity he had not been reading the Scottish Press, which was full of the political attacks on the Secretary of State (heading a very minority Conservative administration) for being a colonial governor tamely following Westminster's instructions. So the timing of the outburst was naively crass. The policy statement, which was ready to be issued, now became a hot cinder because of political appearances, and had to be removed from the front line until the political controversy had moved on to other things. Months then went past before it finally appeared, to the great joy of the language teachers' associations who hailed it as a signal victory for teacher pressure. This, of course, suited the Department, always happy to erect lightning conductors over any decision, and so the version survived into professional folklore.

If the circular was by this time not exactly a surprise for any with tuned antennae, one part of it did appear to come out of nowhere. That was the reference to languages in the primary school. This originated in a 'Why not?' suggestion from the Secretary of State when looking at one of the drafts of the Secondary policy statement. Why not, indeed? It was the kind of 'why not?' that, in view of the difficulties and the reluctance of the managers and administrators (*vide* the SCCC response) would normally produce several sheets of paper illustrating the advisability of 'not', and a paragraph summarising the 'if-you-really-must-but-don't-say-we-didn't-warn-you' side. It could quite easily have gone that way. However, the climate that had been established, helped by the drive and innovation that had been released with the Standard Grade developments (with all the *caveats* about the flush of novelty and the looming of routine a few years down the line), swung official opinion towards the positive, provided any initiative could be firmly grounded. So, before any pronouncement could be made, several different plans were drawn up. The essential thing was to have the kind of initiative that would not frighten the horses. It had to be capable of being set up without revolutionising the system (there was enough of that going on already), of showing some conclusions within a time span of relatively few years, and of linking up with, and supporting, the main 'languages for all' policy. The preferred project plan, the one that was adopted, was an attempt to

meet those criteria. So the section outlining the proposals for languages in the primary school duly appeared in the policy circular.

The subsequent history is well known, although one or two glosses might be of interest to the curious. Diversification, or, more exactly, the provision of diverse languages, was a consequence of the successful internal debate which established Foundation level for all languages at Standard Grade as opposed to the original blueprint which specified only French, with the others joining in at later levels. So the four-language initiative in the Primary projects was in fact designed to link up with and to support the main 'languages for all' policy, and was no more a 'pious hope' than that existing already in the secondary curriculum. That the whole languages policy in schools could turn out to be more a hope (even without the pious cliché) than the natural way of things was always obvious. Straight away, for example, teachers were asking if they could get away with giving short phrase-book courses and then switch to another language when learning had to begin. (Not for nothing had the HMI report on effective learning and teaching in modern languages of 1990 emphasised the place of systematic learning and 'sheer hard work', comments which were widely overlooked, as were the, then subversive, comments about the problems arising from mixed-ability groups). Fortunately the strong cadre of modern languages advisors at the time were able to give firm lead and direction, but as their role was diluted and then abolished, following the trend to give greater importance to the management of learning than to learning itself, and the exaltation of 'education' over its component subjects, the dangers became even more evident. The dangers were not only pedagogic (mixed-ability teaching, learning progressing in step with enjoyment, renewal of freshness etc.), but also political.

Right at the beginning, with the publication of the policy circular, one regional director of education protested that the Secretary of State had no right to impose curricular policies, and kept asking the Department to produce legal authority, otherwise he would decide for himself – which he did. He was, of course, correct, for there was no Act of Parliament – the normal practice of Secretary of State's recommendations being sufficient and flexible enough in the Scottish system – but the sub-text was an assertion of regional opposition to what was deemed central direction. The same director of education first of all withheld co-operation in the Primary project, then decided to follow his own format excluding the secondary linkage. Another went the opposite way and set up more Primary projects than the national ones with bigger funding. It was a display of power ('anything you can do we can do bigger') and also of independence, since the Department, in an attempt to forestall the kind of proliferation of individual enthusiasms which had undermined previous efforts at coherent development in the 70s, had asked authorities and teachers to let the first project year bed down before starting their own initiatives. No way, said the regional convener, and although their large projects were welcome and mirrored the national projects in format and coherence, many of the staff involved felt for a long time that they were supposed to be in opposition to the national projects, and the staff in the national projects within that same region felt they were ignored by their own officials. For a year or so there were petty aggravations that could have been done without.

It was around that time that, in the face of the continual power struggle between regional and central administration, the first rumblings of ideas to replace the Regions with smaller local authorities began to be mooted in the Conservative political circles. And, like Holmes' dog that didn't bark, the Labour party at the time was never heard. It was obvious that any future Labour administration would be quite happy without the alternative power base that the Regions represented in Scotland, especially with devolution in their manifesto. Nor is one aware of any call to restore the old large regional authorities with the coming of the present Labour administration or the Scottish Parliament.

Not that the relatively minor affair of schools' languages policies, however important they might seem to those in the field, had anything to do with the political manoeuvrings of the time, but it was occurring within that context and received a few running buffets from the protagonists. On the last dramatic morning of Mrs Thatcher's premiership there was a remote meeting set up between St Andrew's House and the education minister in Dover House (the London end of the Scottish Office) about a number of things. One of them was to do with a complaint a constituency MP had from a constituent about Italian being taught in his children's school, since this was 'a language for waiters' (*sic!*). The minister was extremely flustered, not, as it turned out, about the complaint (about which he was if anything half-hearted), but, as only became clear an hour or so later with the lunch-time news, because he was personally caught up in the, to him, tragic events of the morning, and had had to rush out of Downing Street to attend to this meeting. *Eheu fugaces!*

In this atmosphere of turmoil and rivalry, suspicion of motives was often the first reaction to any proposal, not least by the EIS of the time. There was always a 'hidden agenda'. So a delegation of the EIS modern languages committee met officials in St Andrew's House to smoke out said hidden agenda, led by the organising secretary. The language teachers who made up the delegation were quite happy when they saw there was no plan to 'do down the secondaries', or 'dump more work on them' or whatever the nefarious plot behind the Primary project might be. They were nonplussed, though, when their own organising secretary remarked sanguinely that there was not much point in these language policies, since he had had to stop in Luxemburg while on holiday to have his car fixed, and lo, the car mechanic dealt with him in decent English. The silence that followed vibrated with wonderment at the educational profundity of it all.

So, although there was plenty of enthusiasm around at the prospect of launching a serious attempt to establish languages in primary schools, a lot of work had to be done to raise the status of the initiative so that administrators and ministers would feel happy, and even flattered, to be associated with it, and the teachers would have a sense of participating, and even leading, a prestigious operation. It was a process that had already been done in the development and implementation stages of Standard Grade. First of all the in-service courses for teachers were held in decent hotels, in contrast to the traditional practice of college accommodation at best. This was an initiative that was driven through by the modern languages sector and afterwards followed by all the others to become a norm taken for granted. Then there were in-service courses for groups of teachers held abroad, negotiated with the foreign authorities and with no cost to our own taxpayers or to the teachers themselves – a revolutionary thing at the time. There was the close collaboration with Council of Europe projects, and the mounting of project workshops in Scotland. Although these were billed as Council of Europe workshops they were in fact in-service, or launch, conferences for our own new initiatives – the first being in support of Standard Grade, and the second for the primary languages project – which is why, in a departure from the Council of Europe workshop parameters which had to be fought for (since they had been designed by boffins for theoreticians), they had a much higher proportion of Scottish participants, and, what is more, of classroom teachers.

The French connection was especially influential in raising the profile of the Scottish project. It also nearly didn't happen. When the plans were being drawn up for two-legged workshops hosted by two partner countries, the delegate from Yugoslavia immediately proposed to partner Scotland. She must have taken polite evasiveness as assent, for she was not best pleased to discover a few days later that the pact had been sealed with France. Anyone reading of the goings-on in the Yugoslavian parliament at the time had to suspect that a civil war was in the making, and so it

would not be prudent to enter agreements extending two or three years into the future. Perhaps the English colleagues had not been reading the papers very well, for the lady then did a deal with them, and they passed it over to a college in Wales, who in turn found their second-leg workshop without a partner a few years later. The French, however, were very anxious to link with Scotland, as we were with them. Both projects were starting at the same time and had a similar philosophical and practical basis. Both were trying to marry central coherence with local autonomy. Both were aiming for primary/secondary continuity as a way of making an all-through policy become a natural part of the curriculum. Both had to harness enthusiasm to convince the sceptical and the reluctant.

So, being linked closely in partnership with such a major country as France conditioned the Department into being generous with its support, and the opening 'workshop' was given a prestigious location, good funding, Ministerial presence and high press coverage. The French were worried that when it came to their turn they would not be able to match this scenario - and so it proved two years later. The French connection led on to reciprocal exchanges of teachers in primary schools and to short courses in France for primary teachers. Here also the tensions between central focus and local autonomy were never far away. In one area, no sooner had the primary teachers come back from their (publicly funded) course in France than the local organisers decided that the language this year was to be German, and so those same teachers would just slot into helping out with teaching German to their pupils instead of French. It appeared communication was the thing (or the fetish) and the actual language was immaterial. The cry was 'the process, not the product', which was fine in edu-theory or experimental terms, but the public, and hence the government, looks for product for its money, as subsequent educational policies have underlined. The best practitioners used the pupil-centred process of the primary classrooms to achieve language, while the less attuned contented themselves with accumulating 'activities' to simulate progress. But then that was also a common observation in the secondary classrooms. The autonomy tension was felt in the Colleges of Education as well, as they resisted any calls for more than a token optional place for languages in their Primary courses since, after compulsory Science etc. they might have little further freedom of manoeuvre in the way they made up their courses.

Round about this time, with the heightened status of modern languages being accepted in the Department, thoughts began to turn to how to establish a system that could be a support to developments in the future. The Department, through the HMI, could not maintain such a heavy input, and SCC was looking increasingly moribund. Every few years there was a statutory review of the value of the Scottish Office contribution to CILT in London. Consultation was held with all the educational interests, all of whom thought it 'a good thing', but strained to pin down a practical benefit. At the turnover of representation on CILT, Dick Johnstone of Stirling University was asked to be the Scottish representative, which turned out to be the catalyst for the proposals to set up a Scottish CILT, which has progressed from small beginnings to become a focus and clearinghouse for developments. The centrality of modern languages had by now been established. No mean feat in a time of turbulence, suspicion and underlying reluctance.

So, it is good to see that languages in the primary schools are still surviving and, one hopes, thriving. Whether they can continue as more than a '*cachet*' for schools competing for 'clients' without a strong follow-through into the secondary curriculum is at least debatable. Every SALT journal contains enthusiastic articles by teachers recounting innovative and encouraging language experiences in Primary classes. There is, though, little about the effects or influence of these experiences in the secondary schools. In fact, official reports and general press coverage are not very

optimistic at all about language learning in secondary schools. Nothing new there and, from past experience, **they are probably too sweeping**. But more than a decade after the start of a national policy for modern languages in the primary school one might have expected a focused and integrated implementation to have borne more fruit. Perhaps the *sensibilisation v compétence* controversy has been won by the former. Perhaps it was always inevitable. In a radio programme in the early nineties the convener of one region was at pains to reassure the presenter and the audience that they were not really making the wee things learn a language - it was much more a 'fun thing'. That sounds like the kind of thing that used to be said in the 70s by slipshod interpreters of the Primary Memorandum about language (alias English) or environmental studies (alias?), until, thirty-odd years later, the public, via the government, decided it wanted to see some product from the fun.

So, without the follow-through it seems as though languages have not managed to root themselves as a natural part of the curriculum, judging from the retreat from obligation to 'entitlement'. It was a move that was clearly signposted when the Higher Still programme, itself largely the product of accommodating local authority and college autonomy in a reaction to the coherent focus of the Howie report, camouflaged languages within 'communication'. (Interesting to see how the new English 6th form proposals are almost a clone of the essentials of Howie, and how the opposition is for *stasis* or a Higher Still suchi belt). Maybe, to be fair, the term 'entitlement' has been used in the demotic 'River City' sense of 'obligation' e.g. "I'm your mother – you're entitled to look after me!" but if so it will hardly be taken as such by the managers. As the old Italian proverb has it: *fatta la legge, trovato l'inganno* – i.e. 'the law no sooner made, than loophole found' (no doubt the mechanism is already being oiled to take advantage of the new 'specialist schools' initiative, as it has been for its clones elsewhere). And whatever exegesis is made of the term, the committee's administrator members must be well pleased at the rescue of their own autonomy.

Another sip of tea and through the *madeleine* came the closing words of my SALT presidential talk back in 1995: '...school organisers will complain that a language in the curriculum reduces their room for manoeuvre, most pupils don't benefit very much, and anyway it does not lead anywhere because only a few specialists are going to opt for it post-16 since it is not compulsory there. And the Government of the day will agree. And many language teachers will be relieved – until they find themselves redundant. And then they will start a campaign to have languages in the curriculum for all.' *Le temps retrouvé*, right enough.