

Towards a National Framework for Progression and Continuity in the Teaching and Learning of Modern Languages

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Purpose and Motivation

The motivation to write this article came from two quite different sources. One was the recent [article by Tony Giovanazzi](#) in the Scottish Languages Review (SLR #11). In it he **looked back** over his illustrious career at many developments that I had also experienced from the perspective of teacher, teacher educator and development officer. The other was an invitation to be a member of the Language Group formed to **take forward** the review of the curriculum 3-18 as part of the national initiative A Curriculum for Excellence (ACE). It is my hope that the ACE initiative offers us the opportunity (possibly a final one?) to achieve a 'National Framework for Progression and Continuity in the Teaching and Learning of Modern Languages'. However, in order to be ready to meet the challenges of ACE, it is important to be clear as to the point we have reached in the teaching of modern languages and how we arrived at this point. Consequently, the focus of this article is on how teaching methodology has developed during the last 15 years and what we can learn from recent developments, in particular the revisions to modern languages 5-14 and Standard Grade and the introduction of Higher Still. However, firstly let us remind ourselves of the most recent review of Modern Languages in Scotland and the context we find ourselves in!

Citizens of a Multilingual World: Ministerial Action Group on Languages

The report by HMI Inspectors of Schools (SOEID, 1998) *Standards and Quality in Primary and Secondary Schools 1994-98 in Modern Languages (SQML)* triggered a radical review of the provision of modern languages in Scottish schools. The SQML report was the first in a new series of reports, which makes evaluations of individual subjects based on published performance indicators used by HMI in all school inspections. The reports also refer back to an earlier series of subject reports on "Effective Learning and Teaching" (Modern Languages, 1990) and make judgements as to how widely the advice on effective learning and teaching has been implemented. The SQML report received wide media coverage at the time partly because it was the first in this new series of reports and it was the first report to contain an evaluation of attainment in primary schools in the context of the initiative to introduce modern languages into P6 and P7. It also attracted attention because it was seen as being unusually forthright in its criticism of the current state of affairs.

In the press release accompanying the publication of the report, the then Scottish Education Minister Helen Liddell described the findings contained in the report as a "stark warning" and stated her commitment to "Securing the place of modern languages within the 5-14 curriculum, improving the quality of modern languages at Standard Grade and raising the appeal and the standard of modern languages at Higher Grade." As proof of this commitment, a Ministerial Action Group on Languages (MAGL) was established under the chairmanship of John Mulgrew (Director of Education for East Ayrshire). The Action Group was to bring together all interested parties, including representatives of the business world, and was given the remit of working with the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC) on the following tasks:

- Reviewing the 5-14 guidelines on modern languages
- Securing the place of modern languages in the 5-14 programme
- Developing exemplar materials for 5-14 modern languages
- Developing assessment materials for 5-14 modern languages
- Advising on attainment targets for modern languages in primary and secondary
- Advising on further training of teachers of modern languages 5-14.

At the same time, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) was asked to review the Standard Grade arrangements for modern languages and the Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (SCILT) was asked to consider how they might support language teaching in schools.

Whether such a radical review was indeed required and whether or not it was feasible to address so many important issues so quickly are questions worthy of fuller discussion in a future article. Certainly, the final report (SEED 2000) has not resolved the many tensions which exist at the stages at which modern languages are taught and further development of it is required if a coherent national framework for languages is to become a reality.

Teaching and Learning in Modern Languages

Various interpretations of the 'communicative approach' with regard to the teaching and learning of modern languages have influenced recent teaching methodology in the subject. An agreed understanding of what this constitutes is essential to understand the recent changes in the methodology and assessment of modern languages at 5-14, Standard Grade and Higher.

Communicative Competence (Grammar – to teach or not to teach?)

Since the mid 1970s, the main aims of teaching and learning a modern language have been expressed as the development of communicative competence and Canale (1983) identifies the four main contributory components:

1. Grammatical competence (including phonology, orthography, vocabulary, word formation, sentence formation)
2. Sociolinguistic competence (expression and understanding of social meanings appropriate to different sociolinguistic contexts, and of grammatical forms appropriate to their expression)
3. Discourse competence (knowledge of different linguistic genres, together with their related devices for cohesion and coherence)
4. Strategic competence (ways of coping with grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and performance difficulties) (Canale, 1983:6)

Although, Canale identifies the need for grammatical competence, this communicative approach to language teaching promotes the use of real language in realistic contexts and as such represents a significant move away from the traditional, linear grammar-based methodology, which had characterised previous approaches to foreign language teaching in Scotland. Much of the educational theory that underpins communicative methodology emanates from research into how children acquire their own mother tongue and advocates that the communicative approach to the teaching of a second language should attempt to replicate in the classroom situation the

processes and conditions under which acquisition of the mother tongue takes place. (Macnamara 1975, Krashen 1982)

Curriculum design and assessment techniques (Tour de France and Standard Grade)

Alongside the development of the communicative methodology, several initiatives attempted to make the teaching syllabus more relevant to the real-life needs and interests of the learners. The identification by Van Ek (1975) of 'The Threshold Level' as part of the Council of Europe's 1971-1981 Modern Languages Project was very influential in the area of curriculum design. By identifying both the most essential contexts in which a learner needs to operate and the elements of the language required of the learner in those contexts, Van Ek provided a model of a functional and notional syllabus design, which was and continues to be influential throughout Europe.

In Scotland the influence of the development of a functional and notional syllabus, allied to the development of a communicative approach to the teaching of modern languages, was seen most clearly in the Tour de France project (1975-1984), organised on a national level and convened by a team led by Richard Johnstone of Stirling University.

The thinking behind the Tour de France initiative influenced greatly the form of Standard Grade assessment in modern languages. The Standard Grade Arrangements Document for Modern Languages (1985) describes a functional and notional syllabus built around topic areas of 'relevance and interest to the pupils' and drawing upon authentic materials. The contexts, within which the language learning will take place, have as their purpose the preparation of the pupils for direct contact with speakers of the target language, whether this involves the pupils travelling to the foreign country or the speaker of the foreign language coming to Scotland.

The weighting accorded at the time in the Standard Grade assessment arrangements to each of the four language skills reflects the perceived importance of each skill for a relative beginner, seeking to communicate in realistic situations. The skill of Speaking was weighted at 50% of the total mark, Listening was weighted at 25% as was the skill of Reading, while the skill of Writing was not part of the compulsory assessment and therefore did not contribute to the overall aggregate grade for the subject. For those pupils for whom the assessment of Writing was deemed an appropriate task, an optional paper in Writing was offered at General and Credit levels and, if successful, a Grade 1-4 was recorded separately for the skill of Writing on the candidate's certificate.

Although the influence of the communicative approach to language teaching has been most pronounced in the developments associated with Standard Grade, it can also be seen in the documentation, which lays out the aims of language learning in the other stages, at which modern languages are taught. In P6-S2, the document 'Modern European Languages 5-14' sets out the aims of modern language learning as follows:

- To develop the ability to communicate in the foreign language; *and, in doing so,*
- To contribute to how language works
- To contribute to learning about ways of life in other countries (SOEID, 1991:2)
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Strong resonance of Canale's four components of communicative competence can also still be found in the Subject Guide for Higher Still Modern Languages, stating that language competence "will depend on the learner's progressive development in:

- Knowing about language – its nature, its grammatical structure and the purposes for which it is used (grammatical and socio-linguistic competence)
- Interacting with others and being aware of the ‘rules’ of interaction or of textual structure (discourse competence)
- Successfully using strategies to cope with situations (across all skills) where a breakdown in communication has occurred (strategic competence)
- Being aware of the cultural context in which the foreign language exists (cultural competence).” (HSDU, 1997:3)

Recent Developments (expansion and contraction)

The last decade of the twentieth century saw the expansion of the teaching of modern foreign languages both in the secondary sector, where it became a core subject in S3 and S4 in 1992 (SED Circular No. 1178), and also into P6 and P7 of the primary sector, as a result of a favourable evaluation in 1993 of the extensive national pilot project: Modern Languages in the Primary School (MLPS). However, at the same time as the base for the teaching of modern languages was broadening, annual statistics issued by the former Scottish Examination Board (SEB) indicated a significant decline in the number of pupils being presented at Higher Grade in a modern language and also suggested there was a less positive correlation in modern languages than in other subject areas, in terms of performance in Standard Grade and the grade achieved the following year at Higher.

Worried by the rate of decline and eager to understand better the reasons for it, the SOEID commissioned in 1996 a team of researchers from Stirling University to explore why, according to statistical evidence from SEB/SQA, the number of students entering for Higher exams in modern languages had declined by 50 per cent over a 20-year period (1976-1996). The report of the findings: “Foreign Languages in the Upper Secondary School: A Study of the Causes of Decline” (FLUSS) was published by the Scottish Council for Research in Education (SCRE) in January 1999. Appearing so soon after the publication of the highly critical SQML report, it seemed to confirm the impression of modern languages as a subject in crisis.

This large-scale survey conducted in 25% of secondary schools in Scotland sought to uncover the perceptions of students in S4 and S5, entered for Standard Grade at Credit level, as to their experiences in modern language learning. Among the many explanations offered as contributory factors for the decline, two of the most significant were identified as:

- A lack of “instrumental motivation” among the majority of students
- A lack of a feeling of real achievement and confidence in what had been learned by the end of Standard Grade.

Among the factors identified as contributing to this negative learning experience were the content of the S3/4 teaching syllabus, the approach to the assessment of the four language skills at Standard Grade and how these in turn affected the teaching methodology used by many teachers. This was a criticism also made by HMI in the SQML report: “Teachers too often relied on the weighting of the assessment in Standard Grade examinations to provide the pattern for classwork, with up to 50% of time devoted to speaking practice.” (SOEID, 1999, p.18)

Swing back to Writing, Grammar and Knowledge About Language

The position of Writing as an optional element in the assessment at Standard Grade was identified by the FLUSS report as a major factor in the lack of successful progress to Higher Grade and again the SQML report identified the same problem: "The relatively poor performance of pupils in Writing relates to the extent to which writing is included as a skill in modern languages teaching in S1-S4, the ways in which it is taught, pupils' and teachers' perceptions of the examination as an optional extra, the nature of the main examination and the nature of the Writing examination." (SOEID, 1999, p.19)

Closely linked to the neglect of the skill of writing, both reports expressed concern at the lack of systematic development of the pupils' grammatical awareness. It is argued that this lack of understanding of how the language structure operates prevents pupils from creating their own language and often leaves them with only the knowledge of lists of vocabulary items and able to communicate only in very tightly structured role-play scenarios. Such criticism is not restricted to the teaching approach and teaching materials used in the upper secondary school, as similar shortcomings were identified in a study of modern language teaching and the teaching resources used in P6-S2, undertaken on behalf of Glasgow City Council and the University of Glasgow (Cavani and Birks, 1998).

The swing of the pendulum back towards greater emphasis on grammatical competence as an essential element in communicative competence and a more central role for the skill of writing has been discernible in literature on the methodology of the teaching of modern languages in recent years. Susan Halliwell (1993) encapsulates the problem and tension that has existed within teachers of modern languages, when faced with the dilemma of how or if to teach grammar in an explicit manner, while Heather Rendall highlights the pupils' lack of grammatical awareness of their mother tongue as a barrier to the teaching of grammar: "As the teaching of English grammar waned and the terminology to describe parts of language became as foreign as anything taught as part of a second language, so pupils understood less and less what they found in the course books." (Rendall, 1998:46)

Eric Hawkins would agree that the link between knowledge of the first language and learning a second language is of crucial importance, however he sees the link as being the key to helping pupils gain a better knowledge of how both the first and second language work. The response advocated by him in "Awareness of Language: An Introduction" is the creation of an 'awareness of language' course, the chief aim of which "will be to challenge pupils to ask questions about language, which so many take for granted." (Hawkins, 1984, p.4) Working in collaboration with their colleagues who teach English, the teacher of modern languages can draw upon progress already made by the pupils in the mother tongue "to develop insight into the patterned nature of language," (Hawkins, 1984, p.88) which is required if the pupil is to learn a second language at an accelerated rate under school conditions.

The benefits to be gained by encouraging pupils to compare and contrast aspects of the second language with the patterns, with which they are familiar in their mother tongue, enabled the HMI national specialists for English and Modern Languages to persuade the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) to finance a project called Language into Languages Teaching (LILT). The project aims to create and distribute staff development packages of guidance for teachers, in primary and secondary schools, on effective teaching of knowledge about language. The teaching

seeks to improve pupils' abilities to interpret and produce both written and oral communication in English and in the foreign language they are studying, by developing their awareness of the nature and functions of language structures and varieties. A team, drawn mainly from Glasgow University, produced teaching activities and advice relevant to both English and modern language teaching for the 5-14 Programme, the Standard Grade Programme and the Higher Still Programme and three National Seminars launched the materials towards the end of 2001.

Towards a National Framework: The Impact of Higher Still

The need for a similarly coherent approach to the teaching of modern languages across the three stages, which would identify agreed objectives and agreed approaches to teaching, is expressed clearly in the following terms by the Scottish Association for Language Teaching (SALT) in its position paper "Learning and Teaching Modern Languages in Schools and Colleges in Scotland":

"Unfortunately, in practice, the emphasis on topic areas, seen as an answer to the problem of relevance, has led to the crumbling of language study into a large number of relatively random vocabulary areas, destroying the necessary coherence of progressive language study. A return to this coherence, as spelled out in the grammar appendix to the Higher Still modern languages documentation, is urgently required to inform all language learning and teaching from P6 through to Advanced Higher." (SALT, 1998, p.6)

Based on my experience as National Development Officer and National Trainer, I would agree that many of the elements contained in the Higher Still development programme try to address many of the important issues facing the other stages at which modern languages are taught. Although the main decisions as to the format and the changes to existing practice had been taken well in advance of the publication of the SQML and FLUSS reports, the Higher Still Development team for modern languages was aware from briefing inputs by SQA and HMI as to the issues of concern. In particular the development team was eager to make changes, which would lead to an increase in the number of students continuing the study of a modern language into S5/6 and to improve the level of attainment in modern languages at this level, among pupils of all levels of ability. In this way it was intended to begin to address and dispel the 'climate of negativity' identified in the FLUSS report and a study of the Higher Still proposals, as set out in the documents 'Higher Still: Arrangements for Modern Languages' (1997). The 'Modern Languages: Subject Guide' (1997) shows how the development programme identifies and seeks to address the following concerns:

- Progression and Continuity
- Intellectual Content and Relevance
- Balance of Skills and Role of Grammar
- Clear expectations and a sense of achievement

There is a clear attempt in the recent revision of Standard Grade to articulate with developments in these areas introduced in the Higher Still programme. This can be seen most clearly in the decision to redistribute the relative weighting attributed to each of the language skills. The following table illustrates and compares the redistribution with the previous weighting at Standard Grade and with the weighting of the skills at Intermediate 1 in the Higher Still framework:

| | Previous S Grade | Revised S Grade | Intermediate 1 |
|-----------|------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| Speaking | 50% | 30% | 30% |
| Listening | 25% | 20% | 20% |
| Reading | 25% | 35% | 35% |
| Writing | Optional | 15% | 15% |

In this redistribution, it is acknowledged that at this level there should be equal weighting given to the oral/aural skills (Speaking/Listening) and to the written skills (Reading/Writing) and in doing so this mirrors the weighting of the four skills at Intermediate 1 (benchmarked against General level).

At the same time, it is acknowledged in the revision of Standard Grade that there needs to be articulation with the proposals resulting from the revision of the Modern Languages 5-14 National Guidelines. The most significant revisions include:

- The need to develop all four language skills, including writing, from the outset
- The inclusion of Knowing about Language as a strand, which permeates all of the four language skills or modes
- The development of a mutually supportive relationship between the learning of a foreign language and the skills acquired in learning a first language. This is referred to as 'Language to Languages' and requires that: "Effective learning strategies developed in first or second language across the four modes should be used and further developed in the learning and studying of a foreign language." (SCCC, 1999: 2)

Although much work still needs to be done to develop and exemplify performance at this level, the following quote from the Consultation Draft indicates the shift that is being proposed and highlights the areas of articulation with developments being implemented in the upper secondary school:

"Writing helps pupils to make sense of their learning, to see connections, to find out what they know and do not know. Moving from identification of the similarities and differences between the first language and the foreign language, the pupils will be increasingly aware of language patterns and structures from their reading and listening and will develop a range of strategies for accurate writing in the foreign language." (SCCC, 1999:21)

Conclusion

A common theme in each of the recent reports on modern languages (SQML, FLUSS, Nuffield and MAGL) is the need to achieve progression and continuity in language learning through all the stages at which a modern language is taught. The FLUSS report urges that: "National bodies develop a coherent framework for the six-year course, to support continuity and progression from P6 to S4, as students move on from 5-14 to preparation for Standard Grade" (McPake *et al* 1999:74) while the Scottish Association for Language Teaching call for this to be extended to include S5 and S6.

Although we are still a long way from achieving such a framework, I believe that the potential ingredients are in place to allow this to be achieved and indeed would argue that the framework should cover all provision from P6 to S6 and beyond. At the three stages at which modern languages are now taught in Scotland, there is now a more

consistent and agreed interpretation of the shared aim of promoting communicative competence. There is a better understanding of how progression within language learning is achieved and the role played in this by the development of the skill of writing and by knowledge of how the language system works. Professional development around 'Assessment is for Learning' has made staff in both primary and secondary sectors aware of the importance to develop clear, short-term objectives but also to share these with the pupils, and to assess pupils' progress towards these goals (as in the Higher Still units).

The Higher Still development programme in modern languages represents the first attempt to put into practice many of these new ideas and it is now well established in most schools. It is clear from the revision of the Standard Grade Arrangements and of the 5-14 Guidelines that many of the changes initiated through Higher Still will have an impact on these earlier stages. Indeed the move to align Standard Grade and the lower levels of the Higher Still framework is already gathering pace as a result of the easing of 'Age and Stage Restrictions at Standard Grade and Higher' (1998), which now makes it possible for candidates to sit Higher Still units in S3 and Higher Still courses in S4 in combination with, or as a replacement for Standard Grade.

In many respects, the timing of the creation of the Ministerial Action Group and the speed of its consultation has been unfortunate for the development of the teaching of modern languages. Ideally, the work of this group should have followed on from research and evaluation of how practitioners viewed the impact of the Higher Still changes on the teaching and learning of modern languages and how they viewed the effectiveness of the National Development and Training Programme as a means of introducing curricular change. If we are to take advantage of the opportunity, offered by the ACE initiative, to develop a coherent, national framework for modern languages, then we must learn from the past to create a brighter future. Above all, we need to learn that only by engaging fully with the practitioners who must implement the changes will the changes at any stage be successful and will a coherent framework be developed to ensure progression and continuity from whichever point the pupils start and finish their language learning.

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