

Management of Curricular Change

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In my article in the previous edition of SLR (Templeton, 2005), I began by expressing the hope that the review of the curriculum 3-18, being undertaken as part of the national initiative *A Curriculum for Excellence* (ACfE), offers us the opportunity to achieve a 'National Framework for Progression and Continuity in the Teaching and Learning of Modern Languages' and I ended with the observation that,

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" (Templeton, SLR Issue 12).

In this follow-up article I report the findings of some personal research conducted precisely to ascertain the views and perceptions of those teachers who had ultimately to implement the new Higher Still programme. I offer them in the hope that the insights they give on how to manage curricular change may influence those who are charged with taking forward the next phases of the *ACfE* initiative.

Background to the Research

The research, on which I am reporting, represents the second stage in an evaluation of the impact of the Higher Still development programme on the teaching and assessment of modern languages in S5/6. This research was conducted between 2000-2002 as schools were completing the implementation of the Higher Still Development Programme and prior to the publication of the Ministerial Action Report on Modern Languages and the subsequent release of the review of Standard Grade Arrangements and 5-14 Guidelines.

The main strategy in both stages 1 and 2 of the evaluation was a survey of teacher perceptions of the effect of implementation of Higher Still on teaching and learning and the effectiveness of the National Development and Training Programme. In stage 1, this information was gathered by means of a questionnaire sent to all 31 Principal Teachers of Modern Languages in Glasgow City schools and the content of the questionnaire was determined in part by the outcome of semi-structured interviews with six key participants (Field Officers,

Development Officers and National Trainers) involved in the delivery of the National Development and Training Programme.

Stage 2 of the research set out to extend the sample in order to find whether teachers of Modern Languages in other parts of Scotland shared the perceptions of the Glasgow teachers. Consequently, the questionnaire used in stage 1 (pilot phase) was amended slightly and was circulated to 240 secondary schools throughout Scotland. Responses were received from 144 schools. The findings, which follow from the national questionnaire, do indeed indicate a high level of concordance between the perceptions of the Glasgow and the national groups.

Methodology

Information was gathered from a series of semi-structured interviews with key participants in the Higher Still Development Programme:

- Chief Development Officer in the Higher Still Development Unit (HSDU) with overall responsibility for the Higher Still programme;
- Field Officer in HSDU responsible for modern languages;
- SQA Qualifications Manager responsible for modern languages;
- Co-ordinating Development Officer at the time of the creation of the Arrangements Document;
- Development Officer responsible for overseeing the development of Support Materials for teaching;
- One of the National Trainers responsible for delivering the National Training Programme who is also a Principal Teacher of modern languages.

This information was incorporated into the design of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was then piloted and distributed to all 31 secondary schools in Glasgow (Stage 1) and to 244 schools throughout Scotland (Stage 2). In each case the Principal Teacher of Modern Languages was asked to complete the questionnaire after having consulted others in his or her department as appropriate.

Questionnaire Design

Part A: Background Information

The opening part of the questionnaire elicits relevant background information concerning the respondent. It concludes with two open questions, which require respondents to give their general impression regarding the Higher Still Development Programme. The Principal Teachers are asked to give their impression as to whether the Higher Still changes have led to an increase in the number of students and in

their level of attainment and motivation. They are also asked to list any positive and any negative aspects of the Higher Still development programme in modern languages. These questions are included in this opening section so that respondents' answers are not influenced by the closed questions in Part B.

Part B: Perceptions regarding teaching, assessment and staff development

This section tests the hypothesis that certain key changes, introduced as part of the Higher Still programme, are perceived to have improved teaching and learning (and thereby motivation and performance). The questions in Sections 1-5 are in the form of closed statements requiring a scaled response on the five point Likert scale. In each section, between three to ten closed statements, requiring responses using a five-point scaling from Strongly agree – Strongly disagree, are provided on each of the following key changes:

- The prescription of themes and topics (Section 1);
- The internal assessment of units (Section 2);
- The external assessment of the course (Section 3);
- The structured approach to teaching incorporated into the support materials (Section 4);
- The process of consultation and staff development (Section 5);

Each section ends with an open question inviting respondents to expand upon any of the answers given in that section or to add any additional comments.

The final Sections 6-9 are in the form of open questions. Sections 6 and 7 seek the views of respondents regarding the implications of the changes, initiated at Higher, for the proposed revision at Standard Grade and at 5-14. Section 8 is a "catch-all" to allow respondents to add comments on any aspect of the Higher Still development programme, while Section 9 allows for the addition of any comments specific to German, Italian, Russian or Spanish.

Presentation and description of data

Responses to the questionnaire in stage 2 were received from 144 secondary schools throughout Scotland and the data gathered from this national sample is presented below in descriptive form and comment is made on general patterns emerging.

Responses to Part A: Background Information

In addition to background information concerning the school, respondents were asked in this opening section to give their general impression of the Higher Still changes before moving to consider the

Likert statements in Part B for fear that the statements might influence their response. When asked if the change to Higher Still had affected student numbers, 58% indicated an increase while 42% indicated no change. When asked if the change had affected the level of attainment in the external assessment, 71% indicated an increase and 29% indicated no change. When asked if the change had affected the level of motivation, 47% indicated an increase and 53% indicated no change. While these responses suggest an encouraging trend, it would be dangerous to draw conclusions from these statistics after only two years of operation, particularly as factors other than the change to Higher Still may have contributed to the perceived increase in numbers and attainment. However, it is now perhaps time to review statistics available from SQA to verify if an increase in numbers and in the level of awards has in fact taken place since the introduction of Higher Still.

When asked to identify any **positive** aspects of the Higher Still Development Programme in Modern Languages, responses could be grouped as follows:

- Clearer definition of the teaching content and the corresponding linking of it to the content of the internal and external assessment;
- Motivation provided by the successful completion of the internal assessment and the progression it provided towards the external assessment;
- Quality of the support materials for teaching;
- Quality of the training seminars.

When asked to identify any **negative** aspects of the Higher Still Development Programme in Modern Languages, responses could be grouped as follows:

- Stress caused by internal assessment on staff and particularly on pupils studying a number of different subjects;
- Problems posed by teaching bi-level groupings in the same class;
- Difficulty of trying to 'cascade' the training to others in the department.

These responses would suggest that there is a positive response to some of the key changes specific to modern languages and that the negative responses highlight issues that are not peculiar to modern languages. The appearance of issues surrounding the introduction of internal assessment in both the positive and negative aspects would suggest that this remains an area of tension for teachers.

Responses to Part B: Perceptions regarding teaching, assessment and staff development

As indicated earlier, in Sections 1-5 of this part of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agree/disagree with the statements made. In the discussion that follows, the frequency of responses has been summarized for each question by adding together the categories 'strongly agree + agree' and 'strongly disagree + disagree', so that results can be grouped in terms of positive, neutral and negative responses.


1. Arrangements Document and Content of Teaching

Very strong support was expressed for the decision to define more clearly the content of the teaching syllabus (92%) and the prescribed themes, topics and topic development strands were considered appropriate in terms of interest and relevance by 80% of the 144 respondents.

2. Internal Assessment of Units

All bar one of the respondents (143) supported the decision to establish a close link between the content of the teaching and the content of the instruments of assessment in the National Assessment Bank (NAB). Almost the same number (142) felt strongly that such instruments should be produced and pre-moderated nationally and not by individual departments. Such almost total consensus was not apparent in the responses to the remaining statements in this section.

A small majority (40% positive / 39% negative) agreed that the number of internal assessments in modern languages was appropriate and manageable. Larger majorities felt that the form of the internal assessment had led to an improved level of performance in Speaking (62% positive / 10% negative), Writing (65% positive / 15% negative) and in the external assessment (35% positive / 32% negative), while a small majority (38% positive / 34% negative) agreed that the internal assessment had led to increased motivation among the students.

Although the responses are generally supportive of the way internal assessment has been introduced to and has impacted on modern languages, some respondents expressed reservations in their additional comments. These concerns were mainly regarding the cumulative overload of assessments for pupils studying several subjects and regarding the 'log-jam' of assessments facing staff and pupils in February and March. One centre was  very strongly against internal assessment in any form and one centre questioned the value of internal assessment where it does not contribute directly (as a percentage) to the external assessment.

3. External Assessment

The decision to establish a close link between the content of the teaching and the content of the external assessment tasks was supported by 142 of the 144 respondents, who all also agreed that the weighting given to each of the four language skills was appropriate. Strong approval was also given to the introduction of the new, more practical and more predictable Directed Writing task at Higher level (85%). The perceived result of these changes was that the new format of the external assessment gave students a better chance to demonstrate their level of ability in each skill (67% positive / 8% negative) while not giving too great a reward for learning and memorising (49% positive / 31% negative) and that this had led to an improvement in results in the external assessment (72% positive / 5% negative).

While the responses again indicate a high level of satisfaction with the general approach and the specific changes adopted in the external assessment of modern languages, it would be dangerous to attach too great a significance to two years' results and to assume a directly causal relationship between the introduction of Higher Still and the perceived improvement in results.

4. Support Materials for Teaching

All but one of the 144 respondents were strongly in favour of the central production and national distribution of support materials and agreed that the volume and quality of the support materials produced in modern languages were greater than in any previous initiative. A significant majority (57% positive / 14% negative) agreed that the structured teaching approach built into the teaching materials was helpful in developing the language skills and grammatical awareness of the students and did not feel that this recommended approach was too restrictive (60% positive / 34% negative). Whatever their view on the particular approach advocated in the support materials, all but four of the respondents were in favour of the prominence given to the need for progression in grammatical awareness as indicated in the Higher Still Grammar Appendix.

5. Development and Training Programme

A significant majority (75% positive / 4% negative) agreed that the development team in modern languages had consulted with teachers throughout the programme and that the team had made amendments to the programme as a result of the views expressed by teachers. Very positive support was also expressed for the content and relevance of the National Training Seminars (81% positive / 2% negative) and for the opportunity they provided teachers to clarify issues and raise concerns (89% positive / 3% negative). However, considerable disquiet was expressed regarding the way in which the information from the National Seminars was then communicated to

other teachers. The majority (45% positive/ 43% negative) did not agree that it was realistic to expect Principal Teachers to 'cascade' the information from the seminars to the others in the department, while the vast majority (84% positive / 3% negative) felt that all teachers (not just PTs) should receive input directly from National Trainers. A clear majority (80% positive / 1% negative) also agreed that the implementation studies that were carried out led to prompt remedial action being taken.

6. Implications for Standard Grade

In this section respondents were asked three open-ended questions regarding the proposed revision to the Standard Grade teaching syllabus and assessment and how this integrated with the Higher Still framework.

- (a) All respondents expressed support for the revision to Standard Grade, with many qualifying it with comments such as "being long overdue" and "not going far enough". A large number (45%) expressed support for the change to the weighting given to each of the language skills, however a significant number (35%) voiced very strongly their concerns regarding the use of a Writing Folio to assess candidates, particularly those at Foundation level.
- (b) The majority of respondents (58% positive/ 28% negative) indicated that they are currently considering using the corresponding levels of the Higher Still framework to complement or replace Standard Grade. The most common strategy was to use the cluster of three units at Access 3 level as a replacement for Foundation level, while some centres were considering using Intermediate 2 level for their most able pupils as an alternative to Credit level. A few schools indicated the intention of replacing Standard Grade entirely with the Higher Still levels beginning with the in-coming S3 classes, while an equal number had no intention to change from Standard Grade in the foreseeable future.
- (c) When asked if they would be in favour of the merger of the Standard Grade levels with the corresponding levels in the Higher Still framework, a significant majority (42% positive/ 22% negative) indicated they were ready for such a move.

7. Implications for the 5-14 programme

In this section respondents were asked if they were in favour of a National Development Programme, similar to that for Higher Still, being established to take forward at a national level developments in the curriculum and assessment at 5-14 and Standard Grade. The vast majority (88% positive/ 10% negative) was in favour of such an

approach to curriculum development. Respondents were also asked what aspects, if any, of the Higher Still Development programme they would wish (a) to be replicated and (b) to be avoided in such a programme. Most respondents found some positive aspect to comment upon and the following three quotes reflect the recurring aspects of the Higher Still programme, which centres would wish to see replicated in a national 5-14 or Standard Grade programme:

- *“All of it – including a high level of consultation with modern languages teachers.”*
- *“I would like to see NABs developed to standardise the 5-14 attainment levels.”*
- *“Central production of materials and assessments, good exemplars of performances and quality in-service.”*

8. Any additional comments on any aspect of the Higher Still development programme:

Only a few additional comments were provided and they were typically very short statements, which either reinforced points made earlier by the respondent or referred to problems with one specific unit or level such as the late arrival of support materials. No new issues emerged, which is perhaps testament to the exhaustive nature of the earlier part of the questionnaire.

9. Any additional comments specific to German, Italian, Russian or Spanish

15 respondents provided comments and again these were typically short statements often referring to specific problems with materials for a specific unit at a specific level. The main recurring theme to emerge from these responses was a plea for parity of treatment for these languages in terms of the amount of support provided for French.

Conclusions

Stage 2 of the research project set out to extend the questionnaire used in Stage 1 to a wider audience in order to investigate to what extent the perceptions of the Glasgow teachers are shared by colleagues from other parts of Scotland. In doing so, the study also set out to identify the implications of these findings for the proposed developments in the teaching and assessment of modern languages at 5-14 and at Standard Grade.

The findings from Stage 2 indicate a high level of concordance between the perceptions of the two groups. This concordance was particularly strong in the perceived benefits deriving from the following features:

- The clearer definition of the content of the teaching syllabus and the establishment of a closer link between this syllabus and the content of the assessment instruments both internal and external;

- The national production and distribution of materials to support the teaching and assessment process;
- The interactive nature of the consultation between the development team and the Principal Teachers spanning the five years of the National Training Programme.

There was also concordance between the two groups as to the least successful aspect of the development programme, namely the expectation that the Principal Teachers should 'cascade' the information from the national seminars to the other members of the department in school. There was agreement that this was an area where further support was required and where the Principal Teachers felt strongly that all members of department should have direct access to inputs from the National Trainers.

The implications for 5-14 and Standard Grade

As the research was being conducted simultaneously with the Ministerial Action Group Review, its findings were unable to influence the report and the revision of 5-14 and Standard Grade. However, the responses to the questionnaire highlight important issues regarding the process by which curricular change is initiated as well as the following specific issues:

- While welcoming the revision of Standard Grade, there is significant disquiet at the introduction of a Writing Folio as a compulsory element and as the means of assessing this skill;
- While welcoming the attempt to revise the teaching and assessment syllabus to provide clearer articulation with the Higher Still framework, a relative large percentage (42% positive/ 22% negative) was in favour of more radical change, involving the merger at national level of the best features of the Standard Grade levels and the corresponding levels in the Higher Still framework.

This desire for a national approach to the development of a progressive teaching and assessment system was expressed most clearly and consistently in relation to the proposed revision of the 5-14 guidelines. Considerable disquiet was expressed at the lack of specific detail and lack of exemplification contained in or even to be expected from the draft consultation document. There seems little doubt from the response to this questionnaire that the Principal Teachers of Modern Languages expected to receive more than guidelines, which they will each be expected to develop in their own way.

The degree to which the experience of Higher Still has raised expectations among teachers as to the level and quality of support that should be provided to sustain any curricular innovation is best

illustrated by the following quotation from one school in response to **Question 7: Implications for the 5-14 programme:**

“The strengths of Higher Still in Modern Languages lie in the central organisation. This avoids everyone ‘re-inventing the wheel’ and avoids wide disparity in interpretation of criteria. Thus I would welcome (1) a national course and support materials (2) a national assessment bank (3) a national training programme.”

Implications for A Curriculum for Excellence

This research has now provided information regarding the perceptions of Principal Teachers of Modern languages in 170 secondary schools throughout Scotland and as such represents the views of a significant percentage of teachers at the end of the second year of implementation of the Higher Still reforms.

Although it is acknowledged that problems remain with the use of the ‘Cascade Model’ for the dissemination of information and training, the National Development and Training Programme, which was a key feature of the Higher Still initiative, has been strongly endorsed by this research project as a means of promoting consultation and the implementation of curricular change. This approach to the management of curricular innovation is in stark contrast to the speed and form of consultation that characterised the work of the Ministerial Action Report on Modern Languages and the review of Standard Grade assessment procedures and the 5-14 Guidelines.

The experience of Higher Still has raised expectations among Principal Teachers of Modern Languages as to the level and quality of support that should be provided to sustain any curricular innovation. However, if that level of support is forthcoming, there appears to be a willingness among the Principal Teachers of Modern Languages to be involved in the development of a national coherent framework for teaching and assessment, which builds on the basis provided by the Higher Still framework and which supports continuity and progression from P6-S6.

These findings should be of interest and offer encouragement to those charged with taking forward the second phase of ‘engagement and development’ in *A Curriculum for Excellence*. Given the importance of the task, there is a desire for a **nationally** led and **nationally** resourced development and training programme in which those teachers who must implement the changes feel that they have been consulted and thus involved in the change process.