

## A Case Study in the Depreciation of Modern Languages

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**Abstract:** This article uses data from a small scale research which explored modern language learning in a mainstream school in England. The focus is on the position accorded to modern languages in school in comparison to other school subjects. The research was carried out at the time when plans were being put in place for modern languages to be part of the primary curriculum in England. Drawing on qualitative data from fieldnotes, this article discusses differences, in terms of status, that exist among school subjects at the school in question. The author demonstrates the ways in which modern languages are put at a disadvantage in a number of contexts arising in the main, from pre-conceived beliefs and expectations by parents and senior managers.

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**Keywords:** Modern Languages, National Curriculum, subject status, marketing

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### Introduction

In 2002, the National Languages Strategy for England set out the entitlement that every school child at key stage 2, aged from 7 to 11, should have the opportunity to study a modern language (ML) by the year 2010. This commitment puts MLs in the curriculum for this age group and represents a significant step forward for primary modern languages. Language learning is said to provide a challenge for pupils and teachers alike (see McColl, 2000) since the entitlement of all pupils to learn a ML requires teachers to take into account the diverse abilities and needs of all pupils when planning and delivering lessons. This is noteworthy as the National Curriculum (NC) places a strong emphasis on inclusion of all pupils.

With regard to ML as a subject, it is also worth remembering that the National Curriculum for ML was launched two years later than most school subjects for fear that there might not be enough teachers to deliver the subject (Macaro, 2008). Furthermore, over the years, ML has been compulsory at some key stages but has remained optional at others. In 1992 the languages policy instructed that all students must study a ML from the age of 11 until they reach 16 (DES, 1992). Finally, unlike other school subjects, ML has only recently started at primary school level.

The inclusion of ML in the National Curriculum emphasises the belief that all pupils can learn and benefit from a second language (Moon, 2001), marking the extension of ML provision for all pupils including those in primary schools. From 1992 onward, ML policies aimed to increase language learning in schools in England in the light of European directives and global changes (see European Commission, 2008; 2009). The most pertinent of these policies was the Languages Strategy for England, published in December 2002, and entitled Languages for All: Languages for Life (DfES, 2002). This

document stresses the entitlement of every pupil to study a ML throughout key stage 2 in order to develop young people's interest in the culture of other nations, to reach a level of competence and for their achievement to be recognised on a national scheme. The long-term aim was to transform the country's ability in ML learning and for key stage 2 ML to be implemented at primary school level by 2010. However, at the time when the entitlement to study a ML was being highly recommended for younger pupils, the subject's removal from the core curriculum for key stage 4 students was announced. ML would then become optional for students in year 10, having been a compulsory subject since 1994. By the end of 2002, 30% of schools intended to make ML optional and a further 25% were also considering doing the same (CILT, 2003). This article originates from an ethnographic research which studied the class experiences of pupils identified with SEN learning a ML in a mainstream school in England.

### **Locating Modern Languages in the National Curriculum**

The National Curriculum was revised under the Education Act 1996 to promote stability in schools and put emphasis on raising standards of pupils' attainment. Its structure enables teachers to use the working document to inform the daily planning of teaching and learning. The National Curriculum contains, in the general guidelines, a programme of study defined as 'the matters, skills and processes that should be taught to pupils of different abilities and maturities during the key stage' (DfES, 2003: 6). It also contains the attainment targets for all subjects. For the subject of ML, a rationale for the importance of language learning states that 'enriching the curriculum and releasing children's and young people's creative energy through (...) languages reinforces their understanding of the basics and helps [pupils] enjoy a broader, more balanced curriculum' (DfES, 2002: 10). ML is now a statutory subject at key stage 3 and at primary school for children from the age of seven (DfE, 2013).

In the National Curriculum, the programme of study for ML provides the background for schemes of work and establishes what pupils should be taught. It also highlights ways to promote pupil motivation, and the knowledge, skills and understanding needed to succeed. In addition, it identifies pupil progress strands: acquiring knowledge and understanding of the target language; developing language skills; developing language-learning skills; and developing cultural awareness. The focus is on communicating in the target language in a range of contexts. The attainment targets for each of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) consist of eight level descriptors which identify the type of performance pupils working at that level should demonstrate. The guidelines specify the importance of language across the curriculum and provide examples of links with other subjects such as art and design, mathematics and citizenship for cross-curricular activities.

### **Modern Languages at Main Street School**

Main Street School, a pseudonym, was founded in the early 1930s and is located in the suburb of a small town in the south east of England. It is a mainstream comprehensive

co-educational school and when I joined it in the early nineties, two MLs were on the curriculum: French and German. Pupils were organised in bands of ability in the ML department at the time and French was taught to the top bands only which included pupils who were identified as more academically able. Pupils struggling with academic work and those identified by the school as having special educational needs were put in the bottom bands and taught German. These pupils were not allowed to learn French because the school senior management team instructed that they would find German more manageable because the language “sounds more like English”.

There were further restrictions to ML learning at Main Street School. For example, either French or German was taught to pupils in key stage 3, in year 7 and in year 8. Year 5 pupils did not have ML at all on their time-table. Year 6 pupils did not routinely study MLs either, however, after the key stage 2 national tests (SATs ) in the summer term, one lesson of English out of the 8 lessons that year 6 pupils usually have per week was replaced by a taster course of French lesson. This went on for five weeks and gave the year 6 pupils the opportunity to have 50 minutes a week of introductory French course to learn the basics such as greetings, colours and numbers for instance. These lessons were designed to deliver mostly basic vocabulary and very simple sentences. The taster course was given in French only, not German and the lessons were one way to enable the languages teachers to select pupils for the bands of language teaching groups for the following year when the pupils start in year 7. Pupils do not get to choose what language to study. Pupils who performed well in the taster course were allowed to learn French and the rest were taught German. The band system had been discontinued a few years prior to the start of this study and pupils are since taught in mixed-ability groups.

My research began at the school in 2011 about ten years after the school had decided to discontinue teaching German to its pupils on the request of the parents on the grounds that it was “bringing back painful memories of the Second World War”. Main Street School lies in a community where there is a military base and several pupils have one or both parents or at least a relative, distant or close, in the army. Many pupils aspire to working in the army as their future careers and some display strong sentiments for the English subject, and express pride in wanting to learn English rather than French. Some pupils show reluctance to assimilate with the French subject and its culture. Some pupils do not perform in French despite encouragement and provision, and claim that they do not need it for their future career. French is thus considered a subject for the elite by the pupils and some parents, making it a class issue. Several research studies have shown that the subjects students choose to study are closely linked with career aspirations (Bartram, 2012; Clark, 1998; Stables & Wikeley, 1997). At the same time, young people’s orientations and expectations for the future relate to their family context and socio-economic backgrounds (Irvin, 2009).

### **The status of Modern Languages as part of school events**

During big events such as Open Evening or Whole School Assembly for example achievements are recognised and praised and the main qualities of Main Street School are outlined particularly to visitors. These events are also considered to be an

opportunity for a show-off of pupils' individual achievements. During an open evening in the autumn term in 2011, the whole school gathered in the school hall with all the visitors. The visitors were mostly potential new parents hoping to view the school in order to enrol their children there the following academic year. The headteacher gave a welcome speech at the start. This is not unusual for this gathering. The headteacher's speech emphasised the school aims and values then proceeded to stretch the selling points, proudly announcing that the school was striving to:

- provide a high quality education for all pupils
- encourage pupils to have high expectations of themselves
- work together and have fun together
- care for every child's safety and welfare"

After talking for a long time on the school provision and stressing on equal opportunities, the headteacher mentioned with enthusiasm the PE facilities and sports activities the school offers and then closed the overture with high praises for the music department.

*Whilst addressing the audience, a slide presentation of different images of pupils at work, were projected on the smart board. These slides showed a couple of images of pupils working in art lessons, quite a lot of pictures of the school orchestra playing, a couple of picture of a science experiment being carried out by pupils, three images of pupils cooking in the food technology kitchen, two images of Design and Technology workshops and lots of images of PE games. The headteacher then chanted this-famous slogan: "T.E.A.M." to which the pupils in the audience responded with glee: "Together, Everyone Achieves More". A loud applause followed to end the introductory speech. (Author's fieldnotes)*

It was not surprising that sports activities and music were highly mentioned and had many more pictures shown. This is not unusual as the number of school newsletters I collected for documentary analysis show on every page, sports events and sports personalities followed by music events and music personalities. The other subjects on the curriculum rarely got a mention and ML did not feature at all on any of them. It is the same story with the school prospectus; the glossy covers of the document display large images of sports activities, musical instruments being played and pupils 'working' on computers. Any other subject features in small images but some do not feature at all. French does not feature on any document, although the school claims that it endeavours to give every pupil access to a broad and balanced education. It could be argued that this claim is mainly set to attract parents (see Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995; Whitty *et al.* 1998).

It is apparent from the newsletters and brochures of the school that the 'broad and balanced' education mentioned in the quote above is narrowed to a few subjects as it does not attempt to show all of the subjects equally. Some pupils work hard in French and perform quite well and therefore deserve to be commended, but, still do not get a

mention in the school newsletter as it would not 'sell' the school much. Subjects where performances can be easily put on show for example sports activities, music activities, computing activities and cookery activities get more attention when marketing the school. ML seems to be forgotten, and whether it is intentional or not, physical activities and music seem to get more mention.

Open evenings usually happen twice a year in the autumn and summer terms at the school. During these, the main school hall, where the event starts and where everyone gathers, is usually used to show sports activities and music after the opening speech. The other subjects are usually displayed in classrooms around the school for parents and pupils considering a place at Main Street School to walk to and have a look around. It is always interesting to notice at the end of such an event that the ML area only gets many visitors on occasions when French cheese sampling or syrop de menthe tasting is involved. At the end of an open evening I noted:

*It was interesting that many visitors came to ML to talk to the teachers when they were looking around and they were very happy to sample the variety of cheese and comment on its taste and texture. And put aside the many jokes about the fact that there was no wine to go with the cheese, it was pleasing to see many visitors showing an interest in what we learn, our scheme of work. Many visitors even took a good look at the resources in display and asked questions to find out more information. It was very pleasing tonight despite the fact, it has to be said that some visitors took the cheese and darted out again without a word but that didn't matter at all.*

It is not unusual at Main Street School for French not to get many visits from parents during open evenings although the ML department always puts on a variety of activities including role-plays, singing, dancing and interactive games on show in the language classroom but often, most parents walk as far as the sign post that directs them to the French room and take a swift U-turn. On this occasion, one of the French teachers and I happened to be in the corridor near the French rooms when we witnessed the following conversation between a parent and his son:

*Boy: French is this way, Dad.*

*Parent: Yeah, but we've seen everything now, let's go home.*

*Boy: No Dad, we haven't been in the French room yet. Can we go there quickly? It's just here, look.*

*Parent: No, we're not going in there. I don't like the French. Come on now, let's go. (Author's fieldnotes)*

The parent's attitude to French rendered us totally speechless for a few seconds. Arguably, his motivation, interests and most importantly, his goal (cf. Nussbaum, 2003) are not with learning French hence he would not let his child step a foot in the area. A former Secretary of State for education once stated: '...we need to do much more to help children ... to achieve as well as they can ...' (DfES, 2004: 16). As languages teachers

we will certainly strive to support the boy, and indeed all our pupils, in language learning and work hard to counter any prejudices passed on by parents.

### **The status of Modern Languages in school policies**

Homework is usually set in every subject for all pupils at least once a week but homework in French is a little different. When year 5 pupils join in September, they do not get any French homework in the first term. This is our school policy and it is faithfully adhered to. Recalling a conversation with one of the head of years, I remember being told that “the policy has to be implemented because most primary school pupils do not quite understand the concept of homework because they are not used to it from their primary school and French homework is going to unsettle many of them”. I was reassured that “it’s only for the first term. They can begin to get French homework at the start of the next term”. It has to be noted that this policy does not affect any of the core subjects for year 5. In year 5, pupils get one piece of homework per week in maths, English and science. Homework for the non-core subjects are introduced one by one for year 5 from the spring term on a first come first served basis, but ML is usually left till last.

Similarly, as year 6 pupils have to sit the national Standard Attainment Test (SAT) in the last term of the academic year, they only get French homework in the first term, from September to December. As soon as the first term is over, priority is given to the core subjects, English, Maths and Science. This carries on until the end of SAT and only then does the year 6 class timetable itself return to its original state for all non-core subjects and the pupils can once again get French homework. Usually, at this time, there is about 7 weeks left of the academic year, one of which is devoted to curriculum enhancement when the time-table collapses and teachers design various extra-curricular activities for the pupils, and during this week, homework is not given in any subject. Unfortunately, year 6 pupils find it hard to get back into the routine and many do moan about having to do French homework particularly and this adds on to the anxiety of ML learning which is readily emphasised by some parents at every opportunity. The homework worry is significant:

*It was announced in today’s morning briefing that key stage 2 pupils’ pantomime trip is taking place this week on Thursday. Therefore, ML department members are being reminded to bear in mind that the pupils will have a long day on Thursday and will be late home thus they will be obviously tired the following morning. We were told: “as ML is the only subject in which pupils get more anxious and teary over homework, could the ML staff members please refrain from setting any homework this week. This is just to avoid issues that might arise. We’re just trying to avoid these ...”*

There was not much the members of the ML department could say that would change the situation. The instruction was understood and adhered to by all. Nevertheless, this again demonstrates the lower status ML has compared to other subjects. All other subjects could set homework to key stage 2 during the trip week if necessary. In the

whole school inclusion process, it appears that it is favourable to exclude ML in order to avoid unwanted issues in some situations. Perhaps, conversely, it could be argued that the this particular instruction was a way of recognising the pupils' capabilities and enabling them to adhere to what they are actually able to do (Nussbaum, 2011).

### **The status of Modern Languages in marketing the school**

School subjects have different status and are seen differently by both pupils and adults. When marketing the school, inclusion and equal opportunities are terms used frequently and when success is celebrated, physical education and music activities mentioned more than other subjects. ML appears to be an 'add on' or the 'odd one' as it rarely gets a mention because it is generally not perceived by pupils to have the same status as other subjects. Pupils often exclaim "*it's only French, it don't matter, you can drop it at high school*". In the school prospectus, the lack of pictures to show off ML contributes to the subject's low status. Additionally, the subject takes up a very low percentage on the school timetable, something that is common nationally, particularly at key stage 2. Nationally, when it comes to distribution of hours for the subjects that a school offers, ML, and indeed the other non-core subjects do not get the same hours as their core counterparts. The recommendation is for schools to provide 1 hour a week for ML at key stage 2 (see QCA, 2007).

In the school prospectus, there are more references to sport related activities than all of the other activities such as science club, sculpting club, film club and cookery club put together. Moreover, when showing visitors around the school or during award ceremonies at whole school events, the headteacher's speech is always littered with allusions to the school's sporting activities and achievements, as well as allocated budgets for literacy and numeracy. The assumption that sporting achievements 'sell the school' and attract potential parents explains attempts made to raise the status of those subjects leaving French out in many circumstances. There are also times during the academic year, national examination times, when the French timetable in particular, has to give way to the 'most important' subjects, usually English and maths, as the school is not accountable on French results.

### **Final thoughts**

At the beginning of this article, I suggested that ML tends to be disregarded at school compared to other school subjects. I have discussed throughout the article the position assigned to ML in various circumstances: at school events, in homework policy, and when it comes to marketing the school. With regard to the latter in particular, literature promoting the school tends to show off the core subjects more, creating a division between core and foundation subjects. This curricular division contributes further to the low status of ML among other subjects, as teachers, parents and, more importantly, pupils only grade English particularly as relevant and essential to their lives.

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