German in Scottish education – school teachers' perspectives

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This article reports on some of the findings of a recent investigation into the learning and teaching of German in Scottish secondary education. The research was based on a series of telephone interviews, expert witness reports, a systematic review of existing research and a questionnaire survey of German teachers in Scottish secondary schools across the country. The study was carried out under the supervision of the Applied Educational Research Scheme at Strathclyde University. This article focuses on the findings from the questionnaire survey which explored German teachers' views regarding the present and future provision of German in Scottish secondary education. The responses gave an insight into the current atmosphere in Scottish secondary schools and pinpointed issues for further investigation such as intercultural learning, teaching (and learning) to speak the target language, and creative writing in the German classroom.

Introduction

According to attainment figures and national statistics from Scottish CILT (2008) German pupils achieve good results – German pupils in S1 and S2 actually outperform French pupils in every skill and every level (according to the Report of the First Survey of Modern Languages (French and German) 2001 commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department) –, but uptake of German appears to be in terminal decline. This trend is likely to affect many groups of people: existing and future German teachers and lecturers in Scottish schools, colleges, and universities, as well as Scottish businesses dealing with German-speaking markets.

In order to ensure that modern languages generally remain firmly in the curriculum McPake et al. (1999: 66f) recommended that schools get better at promoting their subject and widen the range of languages offered. Departments should ensure that the learning experience is seen as positive and successful and offer pupils more encouragement to learn a language. In an earlier study by Kent (1996) pupils claimed that the jump from Standard Grade to Higher was too demanding although some schools have now addressed this issue by introducing Intermediate 1 and 2 courses to support pupils in their journey to a Higher in a language. According to Kent, reasons for discontinuing are also personality clashes with a teacher and poor and not sufficient course materials for class and home study. Finally, some pupils in the Kent study claimed they could not see the relevance to learn a language and had no interest in going abroad. However, McPake *et al* refuted this finding and from personal experience I would concur with this. The majority of pupils in my schools

have all been interested in travelling: School trips are popular and they *do* help pupils to see the relevance of the language they study in school. I therefore firmly believe that being better informed about the personal (and material) benefits of German language skills in Europe would support the battle of German to regain its value in Scottish secondary education.

There are also specific political and societal factors that have to be taken into account for Scotland. According to Johnstone (2003), Scottish learners are critical of their language skills and compare themselves to learners of English. They may be easily demoralised because most other young Europeans are learning English at school for longer and more intense (more hours per week especially in lower secondary classes) and therefore seem to show a higher level of fluency. Scottish pupils have to be reassured that their language learning is worthwhile and that trying out even basic phrases will have a positive effect on their relationship with people from other countries.

Aims and Methods

The purpose of the questionnaire was to explore teachers' views on how German is taught in Scottish secondary schools and on the future prospects of the language within the Scottish education system.

The questionnaire consisted of six parts (cf. Appendix 1). The first part asked about resources that German teachers have available in their schools; the second part asked about uptake and offer of German within the school; the third part was concerned with the methods that teachers used; the fourth part was about the Modern Languages in Primary Schools project and teachers' views on its benefits; the fifth part gave teachers a chance to express their opinions on the future and the benefits of learning German in Scotland; the sixth and last part asked demographic questions about the teachers and their schools.

The questionnaire was sent to just over 200 secondary schools in the twenty Local Authorities that agreed to take part. With 33 forms the return rate is just over sixteen percent. However, it has to be taken into consideration that at the time of sending out the forms it was not known whether the schools actually offered German. Indeed, it is likely that many do not and consequently the actual percentage for the return rate is likely to be higher. On the other hand, it should be considered that those teachers who have replied may have felt a strong need to express their opinion on the learning and teaching of German – be it positive or negative.

Findings

Characteristics of respondents

The sample consisted of 33 schools in twenty Local Authorities across Scotland. The 33 schools consisted of fifteen schools in urban areas; ten rural schools; six suburban schools; and two other schools where no information was given. Thirteen schools fell in the category of more than 1000 pupils on the school roll; thirteen schools with up to 1000 pupils; four schools with up to 500 pupils; two schools with up to 250 pupils and one with no answer given. This gives the results more validity as the information that was given does not only stem from one type of school but from a selection of schools; from a small Highland school to a large inner city school in the central belt.

The findings show common trends across the respondents in terms of the fear that German will be replaced entirely; the lack of support from senior management and local authorities; a lack of positive publicity for German; and issues with the MLPS project (for example some secondary schools worry that German may get phased out in their cluster primaries). On the other hand there were also differences among the participating schools; for example, having links with German speaking countries depended on the individual support German departments received from their schools and Local Authorities; and views on the usefulness of MLPS were also varied.

Resources

Just under half of the respondents have a German foreign languages assistant in their language department. Two thirds have the regular use of an interactive whiteboard. Two thirds have some access to a computer laboratory with their German classes. And almost ninety percent of respondents use the internet and / or other software regularly to enhance the teaching and learning processes.

Looking at the data on course books, the majority of schools are using LOGO for classes S1 to S4. According to the questionnaire data teachers complement it with other resources available where and when appropriate and no school from the survey is solely relying on a course book to teach German. The variety of software and websites that departments from the survey have subscribed to offer different access routes to learning the lesson content and consolidating prior learning. According to respondents, websites like Linguascope should be complemented with a variety of other activities when using computers and the internet to motivate and develop pupils' learning effectively.

Arguably, the websites and software that are listed by teachers of participating schools were aimed at lower-ability learners and learners who particularly benefit from learning through games and visual impulses. Perhaps there is a case to be made to those schools and authorities to look into material and resources that are aimed at higher achieving pupils and fast cognitive learners to challenge them and their progress appropriately.

Uptake and provision of German

In the respondents' schools almost fifty percent do not offer German in S1 and over thirty percent do not offer German in S2. In S3 around 80% and in S4 82% offer German in their schools. Access German is offered in 27%, Intermediate 1 German in 15% and Intermediate 2 German in 64% of the respondents' schools. Higher German is available in 88% and Advanced Higher German in just under a third of all schools.

Looking at the uptake nationally (SQA 2008), 1459 pupils sat the Higher German exam in 2008, roughly a 10% drop from last year (1621 entries) and a 25% drop since 2003 (1908 entries). At Standard Grade level, uptake of German almost halved from 16387 entries in 1999 to 8560 in 2008. While the dip in numbers is substantial, the performance of German students is comparatively good. This suggests that German is studied mainly by able students who do well at languages. It also seems to be the case that schools that offer a second language e.g. German in S3/4 will allow the existence of "double linguists" instead of having languages compete against each other. This is one of the reasons why there is a relatively high uptake of Higher German compared with Standard Grade percentages both in the participating schools and nationally.

Teaching and learning

Pommerin et al (1996) and Pommerin (2001) recommend the inclusion of learning through creative writing and intercultural learning, and discussions in the target language which support the development of conversational skills and communicative competence. Such target language discussions can take place where and when possible and encourage pupils to practise the target language and improve their communicative competence in a situation where they cannot solely rely on set phrases and vocabulary in front of them. However, this type of activity received the lowest number of ticks. Almost all teachers use whole-class activities to teach German as well as pair and group activities.

Almost half of the participants stated that their department had an established link with a school in a German speaking country, i.e. German learners in the participating schools have the chance to get in touch with

German speakers. This is very important as it indicates a willingness to invest time and effort in keeping such a link alive in Scottish schools and German schools despite legal requirements which make it difficult to organise real exchanges where pupils stay with families and thereby experience German (speaking) life first hand.

Modern Languages in the Primary Schools

Nearly 80% of all participants said that they have an established link with their primary school cluster but respondents' opinion on how useful the language knowledge is that pupils bring with them from primary school was very varied. Sixteen out of 33 participants said that pupils' prior experience of foreign language learning in the primary school provided a useful base. Nine respondents said "maybe" and four stated clearly "no"; one gave no answer. One participant said that "(…) the MLPS project was seriously flawed from the outset"; another participant said "(…) there are huge inconsistencies in quality and breadth in the primary schools". On the other hand, it was also said that "(…) prior knowledge allowed an increase in pace in S1". These views arguably have implications for the MLPS project as it stands. On the other hand, the Curriculum for Excellence initiative (Scottish Executive 2003) may give languages teachers the opportunity to re-evaluate and adjust the MLPS course programme according to the draft experiences and outcomes. This would ensure a coherent progress in modern languages learning from P6 to S3 and above, thus improving the transition from P7 into S1 in all languages.

Benefits of learning German in Scotland

The majority of respondents mention tourism and the fact that many Germans live in Scotland as a reason to engage with the language. Other participants stress that the knowledge of other cultures and European awareness are invaluable to young people in Scotland and learning German is a means to that. For example, surveyed teachers say that every 10th book is published in German and it is the most widely language spoken in Europe. They also mention that according to internet research, the German presence in the internet supersedes most others and has 8 million internet domains. They argue that Scottish pupils should realise that their German language skills go a long way when communicating in many countries in Europe. The development of language and communication skills boosts confidence and also supports the understanding of the English language and its history. According to participants the political and economical benefits are strong for German speakers and Scottish pupils are shown that the European world on their doorstep is much closer than they thought. They believe that global citizenship and the appreciation of continental cultures are an important part of pupils' personal and social development. Being able to speak

German opens up opportunities with industries in the science, trade, business and medicine sector, beside the more obvious tourism and leisure branches. The respondents were keen to raise the profile of languages and stated that pupils need to be made much more aware of the usefulness of German within the world of work. Participants felt that non-linguist stakeholders' and educational policy-makers' opinions were often insular and did not always take into account that Scotland was part of the European community and closer to German speaking countries than it was perceived. The respondents demanded support from senior management teams and councillors to back German and give it its place in the curriculum instead of phasing it out, often replacing rather than complementing the language with either Gaelic or Spanish.

Future of German in Scottish secondary schools

The future for German according to the respondents is bleak in Scottish secondary schools. Participants demand the removal of the French hegemony and the establishment of diversity in modern languages departments across Scotland. Schools must allow their languages teachers to offer a variety of language course at different levels. Where numbers are low and languages are not compulsory beyond S2, Intermediate and Access courses in S3/4 and S5/6 are one way of attracting and re-attracting pupils throughout the years of secondary education. I understand, funding and timetable constraints, but senior managers must look at schools that practise those strategies successfully to see that it is possible and beneficial to promote a variety of languages – a notion which is supported in the HMIE report on Modern Languages (2007). The Curriculum for Excellence initiative gives schools more freedom and opportunities to offer their pupils what they need. Also a number of participants pointed out that German is more in danger in those parts of the country where Gaelic is being offered. Respondents stated that Gaelic receives a lot of funding and positive publicity at the moment and according to participants this influenced the financial support available for other languages like German which is being marginalised and in some Local Authorities completely ceased to exist.

Some respondents feel that higher ability pupils are being pushed to do three sciences instead of keeping up the study of even one modern language. A positive and enthusiastic attitude towards languages is imperative to promote languages as much as possible in the current climate in schools. Participants argue that departments are beginning to find it difficult to get new staff with German qualifications and have to consider changing to Spanish for which a much larger number of new staff are now qualified. This is of course a direct result from the fact that with fewer German graduates there are fewer German teachers being

trained and therefore fewer staff available for existing German departments, creating a vicious circle.

The majority of respondents would like to see languages compulsory until S4 and a greater variety of languages which does not favour one language over another. A reduction of class sizes to practical set numbers and the necessary equipment and staff to teach a number of languages including German is strongly supported by respondents. Most participants fear the total replacement of German with French and Spanish.

Respondents' answers to the final question in the questionnaire regarding the future of German in Scottish secondary education were detailed and rather emotional, showing the distress over the current state of languages in Scotland. One participant said that "[staff were] dismayed by the falling numbers in [their] German classrooms."; another hoped that "senior educationalists [would] see the value of German and support [the German teachers]"; one fears that "Scottish authorities make the same disastrous error as English authorities and end 'languages for all' (…) [and] that languages other than French will be forced out of schools."

A great concern of the participants is the declining number of German teachers who come through teacher education institutions. Positive publicity for German is vital at this stage to make not only immediate stakeholders but the wider public aware of the benefits of learning the language. A number of participants pointed out that Government Ministers and other prominent members of society should affirm the importance of learning other languages more frequently. This must be backed up with initiatives for better in-service and initial teacher training for languages teachers; vocational courses that include language learning; and opportunities for learners to establish links (real or virtual) with countries where the languages are spoken.

Key outcomes

By investigating what teachers think and how their schools and departments operate on a daily basis, it was possible to pinpoint a number of common issues across the country. Arguably, the future will be a challenge to all that want to keep German alive and help it to thrive again in Scottish schools. The results from this study show that the lack of awareness of German's usefulness is key in its struggle to survive. Respondents feel that parents, community, pastoral care staff, senior management staff in schools and pupils need to be given more information on why learning German can be a worthwhile experience for both personal and career reasons.

According to this study's data, the MLPS programme should take the chance to use the Curriculum for Excellence and its opportunities to

shape a primary languages programme that ensures a positive impact and considerably furthers pupils' learning. Despite the busy primary curriculum the time set aside for languages should be used progressively and coherently.

Finally, all participants in the survey stressed that they did not want German to replace other languages like Spanish, French or Gaelic. But they all agreed on the importance of diversity within the modern languages departments. Pupils could then have the opportunity to experience different cultures, establish links with different countries and learn about their own cultural background in the process.

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Appendix 1 – Questionnaire

Please type your answers in the boxes and delete "yes - no" options as appropriate.

Resources

1.	Does your Modern Languages department have a German Foreign Language Assistant? yes - no If "yes" for how many hours each week?
2.	Do you have the use of an interactive whiteboard with your German classes? yes - no If you do, please briefly say what you are using it for.
3.	Do you have access to a computer lab for student use with your German classes? yes - no If you do, please briefly say what you are using it for.
4.	Do you use the internet and / or any other software to teach German? yes - no If you do, please briefly say what for and - if possible - list favourite websites and software.

Level(s) at which you teach German in your secondary school.

Please specify below.

5. Please indicate whether your department currently teaches German at the following levels and give approximate numbers of pupils learning German.			
Level	Yes ☒?	No ☒?	Number of pupils
In S1			
In S2			
At Standard Grade level			S3: S4:
At Access level			
At Intermediate 1 level			
At Intermediate 2 level			
At Higher level			
At Advanced Higher level			

6.	If you teach German to S1 and/or S2, which course book(s) and what other materials do you use for the 5-14 syllabus (e.g. PowerPoint presentations; other published materials, etc.)? S1: S2:
7.	If you teach German at Standard Grade level, which course book(s) and what other materials do you use (e.g. PowerPoint presentations; other published materials, etc.)? General/Credit level: General/Foundation level:

Teaching Practice

8.	There are a number of methods teachers use to teach foreign languages. Do you frequently use (Please delete the methods you do NOT use frequently!) a) paired activities? b) group activities? c) discussions? d) whole-class activities? e) other methods? If "yes" for e) please describe briefly:
9.	If your school has a link established with a school in a German speaking country, what activities does your department take part in with that school?
10.	If your department sets German classes according to ability, please describe which year groups are being set and what the criteria for setting are.

Modern Languages in Primary Education

11.	Most pupils enter their secondary school career with some prior knowledge about a modern foreign language. Please specify whether a co-operative link has been established with your primary cluster, e.g. transfer of pupil information, agreed syllabus, etc. If "yes", please give details.
12.	Please describe briefly which second language experience children bring with them to their first year of learning German.
13.	Do you feel that pupils' prior experience of foreign language learning provides a useful base on which to develop the learning of German at secondary school level? Please give reasons for your answer.

Vision for foreign language teaching.

14.	What are the benefits of learning German as a foreign language in Scotland?
15.	How do you see the future of modern languages in Scottish secondary schools and what (if any) changes would you like to see in the next 2-3 years?

Your experience and environment

16.	How many years have you been teaching German?
17.	What is your type of teaching contract at the moment (e.g. permanent; supply, etc.)?
18.	Please indicate the category of your school. urban - suburban - rural
19.	What is the approximate number of your school roll in total at the moment?