

## Back to Bacc

---

To the Editor, Scottish Languages Review

From Hilary McColl, Independent Consultant, October 2009

---

Dear Hannah,

I have recently been reading the documentation relating to the new Languages Baccalaureate and am thrilled by the improved opportunities and motivation for learning and personal development that the arrangements will offer to our brightest young people, especially the new Interdisciplinary Project! At the same time, I am prompted to wonder about the implications for the cohort as a whole.

In Issue 5 of this journal (McColl 2002), in an article about future developments in Modern Languages, I wrote: *As we develop arguments about the value and benefits of foreign language learning, we need be able to show... which aspects of our curriculum contribute to, for example, personal development, communication skills, working with others, social inclusion, citizenship, international understanding... And, of course, as we do this, **we need to show that all these benefits are available to all pupils*** (emphasis added).<sup>1</sup>

This echoed report of the Ministerial Action Group (2000: 13-14)

*...languages at school has an essential part to play in preparing **all** students for citizenship of a wider society... In this way the wider society becomes more open, democratic and inclusive* (my emphasis).

This view was endorsed in by the EU document *Special Needs in Europe: The teaching and learning of languages* which pointed out that foreign language learning...

*...extends beyond communicative competence and includes other significant educational domains and key competence-building areas involving personal and social development...* (European Commission 2005: Executive Summary).

The broader aims expressed above were always in the minds of educators, of course, but until recently it has been difficult to find specific instances of the principles being translated into practice. As we prepare to deliver the Curriculum for Excellence, this principle of **languages plus** emerges as a major theme: no longer is it sufficient to prepare students to understand, speak and write the language; the ability of all students to comprehend and contribute to a multicultural society has now become MFL's *raison d'être*, and for some students these personal and cultural dimensions will transcend language learning as the goals to be achieved via their Modern Language study.

As I read the new documentation three questions occur to me:

1. How will we prepare our students in the years leading up to the Baccalaureate, so that they will be able to exercise the skills that will be required to tackle the promising new interdisciplinary element?
2. What about students who are not high-fliers, the majority who will not be presented for the Baccalaureate award, but who would also benefit from a chance to develop the wider skills and knowledge that Modern Languages claims to offer?
3. If we are to be true to our ideals of inclusion, how can we make sure that, as Modern Languages develops along CfE lines, it remains a gateway wide enough for all to access its personal and multicultural as well as its linguistic dimensions?

In considering these questions it is worth remembering that special schools led the way towards 'languages plus' in the 70s and 80s when they began embedding simple language learning in wider programmes of personal development, using for this purpose the SCOTVEC units *Experiencing Europe* and *Investigating Europe*. The value of the special school approach was recognised and taken up by the Higher Still development team, resulting in *Life in Another Country* being incorporated into the arrangements for Modern Languages at Access levels 1 and 2. So effective did this unit prove to be in motivating students who struggled to achieve competence in language learning that the Access 2 unit was used by some schools alongside the language units at Access 3. Sadly, perhaps, Higher Still was overtaken by other developments before the new unit could be developed at other levels.

The new interdisciplinary element at Advanced Higher level take us to the other end of the spectrum, providing motivation and opportunities for our very brightest young people. With Access 1 and 2 and Advanced Higher provision now in place, perhaps it is time to look at similar provision for those in the middle; or, better still, to create a coherent and progressive strand that runs through all levels and is embedded in all Modern Language courses. This would provide the means to answer all three of the questions I posed above.

At the end of an earlier article *L is for Learning, for Languages and for Life* (McColl, 2005) I offered, as a sort of 'starter for ten', a suggestion on how this might be done. I proposed adding a new element called 'personal interest'.

*... It would require the student to make comparisons between the situation in the country where their target language is used daily, and their own experience, thereby underlining the relevance of the subject to their own lives.*

*And it would, of course, be assessed:*

*For their personal search students would, with appropriate guidance, select an area of personal interest and be responsible for carrying out the work required to produce clearly specified outcomes.*

*The area of personal interest studied would relate to:*

- *a topic covered in the language syllabus, to be studied in more breadth or depth, and from a personal angle; or*
- *another curriculum subject of particular interest to the student (e.g. science, music, history, geography... ); or*
- *the student's interests outside school (e.g. hobby, sport or other community activity); or*
- *the student's career aspirations.*

### **Outcome 1**

*A folio which might include the following items:*

- a) *A short statement which explains and justifies in personal terms the student's selection of a particular area for study.*
- b) *A detailed, brief though comprehensive log of activities undertaken and resources consulted in the course of the study. These should involve a range of media and activities, e.g. reading newspapers and other publications; internet search; writing letters; visits to library; viewing videos and films; conducting interviews in the local community or at a distance with contacts abroad.*
- c) *A note of similarities and differences observed in the course of comparing the area of interest in the foreign community with the student's own area of interest.*
- d) *At least three examples of sources which proved particularly enlightening, together with a short personal response, e.g. a reading passage in the target language, together with a short commentary in English which explains why the student found it interesting and/or useful for the study; a record or recording of an interview; a description of a website which proved particularly helpful. Some of these examples should be in the target language.*
- e) *A record of relevant vocabulary encountered in the course of study.*

*Specific Range Statements and Performance Criteria would, of course, vary from level to level. Simple standard formats could be provided for each of the elements.*

### **Outcome 2**

*An artefact or activity, based on the student's findings, which would make clear their personal response to the similarities and differences which they have discovered between the foreign community and their own.*

*The artefact or activity should be appropriate both for the subject of study and for the particular interests and strengths of the student. Some examples:*

- *a talk or PowerPoint presentation*
- *a poster presentation*
- *a multimedia presentation*
- *a booklet*
- *a video*
- *a demonstration with commentary*
- *an interactive lesson for the rest of the class, including presentation, demonstration, questions and answers, etc.*

Time and developments move on, however. Perhaps the time is now right for the *Curriculum for Excellence* team to review the existing arrangements at all levels with a view to completing the vision they have begun to put in place; a vision which will take us beyond 'languages for all' and which will help all of our young people to find a comfortable place within the global society that awaits them. Such a programme might also provide preparation, incentive and reassurance for those Advanced Higher students and their teachers who are cautiously considering the new Baccalaureate qualification.

## **References:**

European Commission (2005) *Special Educational Needs in Europe: The teaching and learning of languages: Insights and innovations.*

McCOLL, H (2002) 'Modern languages for all, or for the few?' in the *Scottish Languages Review, Issue 5* (online).

McCOLL, H (2005) 'L is for Learning, for Languages and for Life' in the *Scottish Languages Review* (online)

Ministerial Action Group for Languages (2000) *Citizens of a Multilingual World.* Edinburgh: SEED