

## L is for Learning, for Languages, and for Life

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*'Ah, Miss, how dae we huv tae dae French?'*

*'Ah cannae dae French onyway.'*

*'Ma da says I'm never gonnae need it – a 'buddy speaks English.'*

*'It jist disnae mak' onae sense – whit's the point?'*

All too familiar? A daily dirge in some classes, from all accounts.

Well, are they right? What IS the point?

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The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, in its 'Notes for the User', says that the scheme is based on the assumption that the aim of language teaching is *to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned...*<sup>i</sup> Well, that's OK as an aim if you're reasonably **sure** you are eventually going to **be** competent and proficient in the language you've chosen (or been obliged) to study, but what about those that aren't that confident? What about those whose 'entitlement' to language learning feels like being condemned to 500 hours of hopelessness, humiliation and frustration? And what of those who simply have no interest in becoming competent and proficient in **any** language (perhaps even their own) – and those for whom the usual economic and vocational arguments just don't make any sense right now?

Faced with increasing numbers of reluctant language learners, as teachers report, we need a pretty convincing rationale if we are going to change hearts and minds. Perhaps we're focusing on the wrong question? Perhaps we need not ask, 'What is the aim of language learning?' but 'What is its purpose? What is it FOR? What can it do for our young people, each and any of them, here and now?

The report by the Ministerial Action Group on Languages came up with an attractive answer:

*[E]ducation in languages at school has an essential role to play in preparing all students for citizenship of the wider society. If it helps them to become sensitive to the languages and culture of others and develops in them sufficient confidence and competence to be able to use their languages, however modestly, in their interactions with other citizens, then we believe they are more likely to understand others and to be respected by them. In this way the wider society becomes more open, democratic and inclusive*  
(Citizens of a Multilingual World, p 13-14).<sup>ii</sup>

On the face of it, this provides some really good reasons for all of us to study languages: we are all citizens (whether we think of this in terms of Scotland, UK, Europe or globally); we surely want our young people to be sensitive to the language and culture of others, to respect others and to be respected by them; and we aspire to be a more open, democratic and inclusive society. These are good enough reasons to justify language learning, even if some never get very far with it, and never leave this country. Language learning, from this point of view, is not just an end in itself; it is the **gateway** to all these other benefits. But...

But does the process of language learning **automatically** confer these benefits? Do we teach towards these outcomes? Do we assess them? If we carried out an audit of our national courses, could we be sure to find those outcomes? **Do** we, in fact, lead all our young people through this gateway to a wider world that they might inhabit a bit more comfortably?

'Ah, but you can't teach values', some will say, 'they are caught, not taught...' True enough, but if you're going to catch something, even a common cold, you have to be exposed to it.

Are our language learners 'exposed' to sufficient opportunities to acquire these values? Certainly, in some cases, the answer to this question is 'Yes'. Significant efforts are now being made to form links with schools abroad and our investments in ICT provide many more intercultural opportunities than existed in the past, but, if our learners themselves are to be believed, these are not opportunities that are available to all, or only infrequently.

In 2004 Scottish CILT reported the outcome of a survey carried out the previous year amongst a sample of S4 students throughout the country in which they sought to examine attitudes to modern language learning and to find out which learning activities students enjoyed and preferred<sup>iii</sup>. Top of the list of Preferred Activities (Table 3) was *Learning about people and ways of life in other countries*, yet Perceived Frequency of Foreign Language Activities (Table 2) showed this as only ninth out of the ten activities listed. For the authors of the report the conclusion was clear: *the students in this sample would like more time spent on this activity than is currently allocated to it*. So when 3C walk in reciting their daily dirge, are they just trying to wind us up or are they trying to tell us something?

The question we now have to ask ourselves seems to be: Are the courses we offer fit for the purposes we have identified? Do we, nationally, provide a context for language learning which adequately validates that activity either in terms of the purposes we have declared or in the eyes of the young people we teach?

Examples of good practice are all around us; teachers in special schools showed us the way long before the advent of Access levels. Special schools never did teach languages just for their own sake; they know that some of their learners are unlikely ever to be 'competent and proficient' linguists, but they clearly see other benefits which **will** be of value to their young people, and those were the same values and dispositions that we claim to be seeking to impart to all of our young people now.

We can see the same aspirations manifested in the pan-European report on languages and special educational needs (European Commission 2005) published earlier this year. Success in foreign language learning it says,

*extends beyond communicative competence and includes other significant educational domains and key competence-building areas involving personal and social development [and thus] describing success is not a question of foreign language learning for the sake of learning a language, but foreign language learning as a platform for enhanced education and personal development.*

(Executive Summary, p. iv)<sup>iv</sup>

Looking closer to home, both in time and space, we find that Access 1 and 2 in Modern Languages are attracting greater numbers of entries each year. According to at least one of the teachers teaching the subject at these levels, the main attraction was the existence of an additional unit that provides, not an alternative, but a **context** for the language learning undertaken in the other units at Access 2. This additional unit, *Life in Another Country*, covers the same topics as the other language-based units. It has only two outcomes: Outcome 1 requires the student to display familiarity with at least two aspects of life in a country where the language he/she is learning is spoken, and to compare them with the same or similar aspects of life in their own community. Outcome 2 involves familiarity with a small number of foreign language items associated with the aspects of life studied. It is this link between **communication** and **community** which seems to draw teachers in, and which learners find motivating. Indeed, so motivating have some teachers found the Access 2 unit that they are using it alongside Access 3 units as well (where there is currently no equivalent), and some are planning to introduce similar content at other levels, despite there being no way of formally assessing it. One experienced teacher, after speaking about the enthusiasm generated in her class by a small piece of 'cultural input' went on to say that she nevertheless felt guilty afterwards because *there's not really enough time, given the amount of language we have to get through*<sup>v</sup>.

So where do we go from here? How can we develop our subject so that its appeal is not only to those whose ability is matched by their vocational and/or leisure aspirations, but to **all** learners, regardless of ability or ambition? How can we make our subject deliver all of the benefits we claim for it, both in terms of language learning and also in terms of personal development, identity, community, citizenship, etc?

It seems to me that there are three inter-linked ingredients we have to put into the curriculum mix, and each has implications for learning and teaching:

1. **A rationale 'for all'**

We need a rationale which is not only meaningful and relevant to each learner and all other stakeholders and decision-makers (parents, education management, government, employers), but which is also reflected in the tasks, outcomes and assessment arrangements that we ask learners to engage with. (In fact, we already have such a rationale, but it seems that its intentions have not been sufficiently clearly communicated to teachers, learners, course writers, examiners etc. and so its implications for the languages curriculum have not been translated into common practice.)

2. **'Communication' taught within the context of 'community'**

We need to make explicit the purpose of communication within and between communities; to provide opportunities for comparison between alien/distant and familiar/home communities; to spell out the links between language, identity, citizenship and values. This means, amongst other things, providing regular and systematic opportunities learning about language/languages in general and about the people whose particular language is being learned; and demonstrating to our learners how cross-curricular and local community links as well as links with foreign communities can provide meaningful contexts for their language learning<sup>vi</sup>.

3. **Experience of success**

We need to be able to deliver lessons in which each learner can experience success on a regular basis. This means, amongst other things, making deliberate and informed attempts to identify and remove or reduce the barriers which hinder effective learning, providing challenging but 'do-able' tasks, giving individual feedback which facilitates progress, and providing whatever opportunities are needed for consolidation and review of learning<sup>vii</sup>.

On re-reading the *Curriculum for Excellence*<sup>viii</sup> it occurred to me that we could add a fourth ingredient: the need to **personalise learning**. This can mean many things in terms of modern language learning, but it surely includes developing courses which meet the aspirations of our young people so that its relevance to individual learners is plain for all to see, including – indeed, **especially** – our young learners.

Early in my career, an inspirational department head assured me that criticism was welcome, but only if accompanied by suggestions for improvement. What follows, therefore, is an attempt to suggest how our modern language courses might be developed in order to reflect more clearly the wide range of aspirations we have for our young learners. It is certainly not the only way, and no doubt there are aspects which people will find contentious. The suggestions are offered simply as 'a starter for ten', in the hope that the wider language community will be able to develop the broad thrust of the ideas in ways that are practical for our teachers and attractive and effective for our learners.

Here we go, then. Imagine that...

In keeping with the spirit of the *Curriculum for Excellence*, we could add a new element to the modern languages programme. This element could be 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 may 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**

This could consist of a folio that might include the following elements:

- a) A short statement that 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**

This might consist of 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.

If some scheme such as this were to be adopted, details would no doubt be the subject of wide-ranging and detailed discussions with practitioners. It is worth noting that the suite of units entitled *Life in Another Country* already caters for Access 1 and 2. These National Units emerged from existing good practice and have already been well tested by schools all over the country. The 5 – 14 Guidelines already embody suggestions that could readily be adapted to fit a similar contextualisation at that level. So the work has already begun...

Reactions to the above proposals will be mixed, I am sure! The main objection no doubt will arise from a concern about where all this baggage might be fitted on to wagons that are already heavily laden. Note, however, that the proposal, overall, provides a **context** for existing language programmes, not new programmes. The move towards use of texts that are culturally relevant and intrinsically interesting would provide some ready-made source materials, and, by the same token, the individual search undertaken by the learners should unearth valuable new material. To pick up the 'wagon' analogy again: perhaps the new study element, when installed, would simply provide the grease to make the wagon wheels revolve more easily?

To summarise the advantages: an additional element, as proposed, would provide:

- a meaningful and personalised context for the speaking, reading, listening and writing activities by which foreign language learners traditionally engage with the foreign language they are studying;
- opportunities for cross-curricular activities, independent learning, communication, ICT, citizenship, use of media, and, no doubt, many other activities, both in and out of school, that are relevant and attractive to individual learners;
- a focus for homework and private study.

And lastly, but most importantly, it would help to validate language learning in the eyes of the learners themselves, their parents, school managers, and all those others who from time to time doubt whether language learning is worth all the bother. We would finally have a programme that sets language learning firmly within the social framework at home and abroad, and goes some way to match our stated rationale. I finish by repeating my earlier reference from 'Citizens of a Multilingual World'. I make no apologies for quoting this extract again, for it surely embodies our ultimate aspiration for our language learners: which is not (surely not!) just to enable them to pass Standard Grade, but to nurture a generation that accepts and values cultural and linguistic variety and feels at home in a multilingual world. What we need now is to make that a reality for all our young people:

***[E]ducation in languages at school has an essential role to play in preparing all students for citizenship of the wider society. If it helps them to become sensitive to the languages and culture of others and develops in them sufficient confidence and competence to be able to use their languages, however modestly, in their interactions with other citizens, then we believe they are more likely to understand others and to be respected by them.***

(Citizens of a Multilingual World, *op cit*)

### **Acknowledgements**

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## Endnotes

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- i *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching and Assessment*, page vi. (Cambridge University Press 2001). Also available online: <http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio//documents/0521803136txt.pdf>
- ii *Citizens of a Multilingual World* (SEED 2005). Available online: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/mwki-00.asp>
- iii Published in *Proceedings of the SEED National Conferences on Good Practice in Modern Language Teaching* held in Autumn 2003 (SCILT 2004). Available online: <http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/PDFfiles/SEEDreport.pdf>
- iv *Special Educational Needs in Europe - The Teaching and Learning of Languages: Insights and Innovation*. (European Commission 2005). Executive summary available online: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/specialsum\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/specialsum_en.pdf). Main text available online: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/special\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/lang/doc/special_en.pdf)
- v A verbal comment made by a teacher at a CPD event earlier this year.
- vi For some suggestions on how we might set about this, see McColl, H (2005) 'Foreign Language Learning and Inclusion: Who? Why? What? – and How?' *Support for Learning* **20** (3), 103–108. Abstract available online: <http://www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.0268-2141.2005.00372.x>
- vii For further thoughts on this, see my article in SLR Issue 5. Available online: [http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/SLR/Issue5/discussion\\_paper.htm](http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/SLR/Issue5/discussion_paper.htm)
- viii *A Curriculum for Excellence* (SEED 2004). Available online: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library5/education/cerv-00.asp>