
Information technology and modern languages in the national curriculum



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The challenge of information technology

If pupils are to face up to the challenge of the importance given to Information Technology in the National Curriculum they need to be given frequent opportunities to develop their skills using appropriate hardware and software. The use of information technology, having little meaning without text, images or data to process for a specific purpose, finds an ally in Modern Language teaching with its stress on the processing and communication of information. These two compatible modes of communication can combine to mutual benefit to process information and have as their audience a foreign pen-friend or a link school, for example. Thus Modern Language teaching can give Information Technology a realistic or even genuine purpose, while the latter provides an up to date and effective means to manipulate and convey the foreign language and, at a different level, flexible and independent language practice through subject specific programs and simulations.

Examples of interesting practice and exciting developments involving computer technology and language learning are not difficult to find, yet the National Curriculum aims to achieve systematic application. This raises the questions: how ready are Modern Languages departments to help their pupils rise to this challenge? How much access do their pupils have to computers? What sort of programs do they use? This article outlines the position of information technology in the National Curriculum with regard to Modern Language teaching and then describes the results of an attempt to seek answers to these questions to illuminate future planning.

The national curriculum context

In preparation for the introduction of the National Curriculum all the individual subject working groups were asked 'to indicate the potential for using information technology (IT) and developing capability for its use in their particular areas (. . .). Thus their attainment targets and programmes of study, particularly those related to design technology, will provide the framework for the planning, delivery and assessment of work related to IT.' (Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI), (1989): *Information Technology from 5 to 16*, Curriculum Matters 15, London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office (HMSO), page iv.)

In the Programmes of Study for 'Information Technology Capability in the National Curriculum' it is stressed, in turn, that 'In each key stage pupils should develop information technology capabilities through a range of curriculum activities' (Department of Education and Science (DES) and the Welsh Office, (1990b): *Technology in the National Curriculum*, London: HMSO, p. 51), and examples are given of the sorts of tasks that could be carried out in various subject areas.

'The World of Communications and Technology' is one of seven areas outlined in the National Curriculum proposals for modern languages which 'must be covered at least over the period of each key stage'. (DES and the Welsh Office, (1990a): *National Curriculum: Modern Foreign Languages for ages 11 to 16*, London: HMSO, paragraph 6.25.) This Area of Experience 'brings together the various means of long distance communication with applications of technology' (*ibid.*, p. 105) and including computers, electronic mail and text and data processing.

Based on the work of the Modern Foreign Languages Working Group, the proposals of the Secretaries of State for Education and Science and for Wales also contain many examples of how computers might be used in various tasks to meet the criteria of the statements of attainment. Possibly mindful of the varying levels of computer provision and the consequential difficulties of

access in some schools, the Secretaries of State have accepted the advice of the Working Group not to prescribe the use of computers. They do, however, state that 'Some of our examples suggest the use of information technology. We do not mean to imply that these are the only circumstances where IT could be used, and we would wish to encourage its use wherever appropriate.' (DES and the Welsh Office, (1990a): *op. cit.*, para. 5.9.)

Information Technology has been defined as 'the technology associated with the handling of information: its storage, processing and transmission in a variety of forms by electronic means, and its use in controlling the operation of machines or other devices'. (HMI, (1989): *op. cit.*, p. 1.) However, the definition of Information Technology in this investigation will be limited to the role of the computer either used by itself or in conjunction with other pieces of technology.

Current use of computers in modern language teaching

The emphasis described above on the cross-curricular nature of Information Technology in the National Curriculum and the encouragement by the Modern Foreign Languages Working Group in their final report of the use of computers in modern language teaching led the author to investigate the present situation in secondary schools. A case-study approach was adopted in order to investigate the factors affecting the use of computers in depth.

Ten schools in four Local Education Authority (LEA) areas in West Yorkshire were selected. Of these schools six were urban schools, two were suburban schools, one was an inner city school and one was an independent school. For the sake of anonymity the schools will be referred to by an unconnected letter of the alphabet (A-J). While the schools under investigation cannot be said to be a representative sample of secondary schools in the country nor even in West Yorkshire, it is hoped that this report will shed some light on the current use of information technology in modern language teaching.

Where possible the author interviewed members of the Modern Languages and the Information Technology Departments and observed language lessons using computers. The following discussion seeks to identify the common themes and experiences arising out of these visits rather than to focus on idiosyncratic situations. A summary of the situations in the schools is given in the Appendix.

Provision of computers in modern languages departments

As will be seen from the summary in the Appendix, most of the Modern Languages departments had their own computer or were in the process of acquiring one. The whole school policy or rather the practice on the deployment of its computers was the determining factor. In several cases the computer had been given to the department as a direct result of the school upgrading the computers in the main computer room. In other schools the policy was to purchase new computers and locate them in departmental areas now that the schools in question had established a central resource of computers.

None of the departments which had their own computer equipment had found any problems with the availability for use of the computer. In many cases, as only two or three of the members of the languages department were likely to use the stand-alone computer, this was by informal arrangement. This lack of a need for a booking sheet may also have reflected the fact that

where possible the use of the computer room with a whole class was preferred by the teachers.

In two schools the use of the computer was made difficult as some Modern Languages teaching rooms were on different levels which made the movement of the computer trolley impracticable. In these cases the use of the computer involved prior arrangement and a room change which in one school had discouraged the use of the stand-alone computer by all but the two teachers on that corridor.

The most practical arrangement was seen in School C. The Modern Language teachers were fortunate to teach in rooms leading off a central area where three departmental computers and one printer were located. Small groups of pupils could leave classes to consult a database or to word-process some work. As the computers were on trolleys they could also be wheeled into a classroom for use with a class. Perhaps significantly, this department was one of the most enthusiastic as a whole in the use of computers.

Central provision of computers

In all schools visited there was at least one and sometimes two rooms of computers. The computers were usually linked on a network which made the classroom management more straightforward as pupils did not need to load the programs from individual floppy discs. The disadvantage of networks lay in the fact that the file servers could only process one work-station at a time. In one case it took seven minutes of a thirty-five minute lesson for all pupils to log on to the program. The types of computer also had an effect on their usefulness for Modern Language teaching as comparatively little modern languages software is yet widely available for machines other than the Nimbus, Archimedes and the BBC machines.

While some Heads of Department had never sought to use the computer room and were therefore unaware of how easy or difficult it would be to gain access with a class, it was clear from talking with the others that here again the determining factor was the main school policy on the use of computers.

The ease or otherwise of access to the computer room depended principally on whether the school policy was that Information Technology and Word-Processing should be taught as separate subjects or should be integrated into the main curriculum after a short introductory course for all. In the former case, access to the computer room was difficult as the few remaining vacant slots were sought by several departments. In the latter case, there was much more flexibility, often with a specialist IT teacher on hand to support the subject teacher. This flexibility had, however, tended to lead to a random approach with some pupils getting far more use of the computers than others depending on a combination of their subject options and on the enthusiasm for information technology of their particular subject teachers.

Only School I had a deliberate cross-curricular policy on information technology which was backed up by systematic practice. As part of the policy, various departments were responsible for particular information technology applications. The English and Modern Languages departments were jointly responsible for the teaching and practice of word-processing. Each class was pre-booked into the computer room for two double lessons of seventy minutes a year for word-processing in the foreign language. This policy, however, meant that little access was available to the Modern Languages department above its quota because of increased use of the computer rooms by all departments.

Use of computers in modern language teaching

With the exception of Schools C and I, the use of computers in language learning depended heavily on the enthusiasm of one or two individuals. This is not to say that in every case they were the only ones in their department to use computers in language teaching but rather that the interest in the use of computers in the department stemmed from their enthusiasm. Notwithstanding, only five Heads of Modern Languages claimed that more than half the department ever used computers in their teaching.

Only with regard to the word-processing in the school mentioned above was there any balance in the use of computers by the different language classes. Elsewhere, it seemed that whether or not a particular pupil had the opportunity to use a modern languages computer program, to search a foreign language database or to word-process in the foreign language depended solely on who taught him or her. In one school some Year 10 pupils of high ability said they were very pleased that their teacher gave them the chance to word-process in French lessons as this was their only experience of word-processing.

Even the modern language teachers who were most enthusiastic about the use of computers in modern language teaching said that they tended to use computers mainly as an extra at particular points. Some said they were used as a treat at the end of term or when many of the class were out of school. This made the use of a single computer more practical with the class. Several said that they tended to use computers when the examination classes had left in May. The reason given was the increased availability of the computer room. This end of year use, however, made it difficult to integrate some topic-based programs into classwork. Self-contained programs, authoring programs and content-free generic software such as word-processing packages were thought to be most suitable for this type of use.

While there did not appear to be a particular pattern in the frequency of use of computers with respect to the age or ability of pupils, the teachers who did use computers in their language teaching said that they tended to use certain activities with particular age groups. Word-processing tended to be used mainly, although not exclusively, with Year 12 and 13 students. Younger pupils tended to enjoy language games and holiday simulations while traditional testing programs, particularly verb programs, were popular with all ages.

Availability of software

With regard to the software programs owned by the Modern Languages departments, what was most noticeable was the general lack of choice of what to use with the pupils. Indeed only one school (G) had actually purchased more than two commercial packages. The larger number of programs in some of the other schools included self-written programs and programs written by colleagues. Indeed, money to purchase new commercial software was mentioned by some Heads of Department although not as frequently as might have been expected.

One of the main difficulties encountered with the use of software was the incompatibility of some types of computer. This has led to the discouragement in some schools to use the computer room which contained many more powerful machines but of a standard for which no subject-specific software was owned by the modern languages department. However, it was recognised that generic software programs such as content-free databases, word-processing and desktop publishing packages which can be used as tools have a major role to play in that they can serve the specific purpose of the teacher and be integrated into the other class activities.

A related problem identified in three schools in respect of German, in two in respect of Spanish and in two in respect of community languages was that little software exists for some languages. One indication of this is that the current AVP catalogue (AVP, (1990): 'Computer Software and Resources: Modern Languages', Chepstow: AVP) which is the most comprehensive educational software catalogue in the United Kingdom, lists only three programs for Italian, four for Russian and five for Spanish compared with 21 for German and 44 for French and none specifically for the other European and community languages taught in schools. The present size of the educational market for modern languages software does not seem able to support the expensive research and development costs of software houses. This is particularly so in respect of minority languages where software publishers have seen little return for their investment in terms of sales. These sales tend to be for a single disc rather than for multiple copies as in the case of textbooks.