

From bad to worse? Pupils' attitudes to modern foreign languages at ages 14 and 15

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As part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), school students in the West of England were asked about their perceptions of the importance of modern foreign languages and about their reasons for liking and disliking them, particularly as this bore on the process of subject option choices. The results are compared with those of a similar project in the mid-1980s. Unfortunately, the students were at least as negative in their attitudes overall as in the earlier study, despite more recent changes in curricula and teaching approaches. Specific aspects of the results and their implications are discussed with reference to possible strategies to facilitate improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Contrary to what might have been expected, following the advent of the GCSE and the increased status of modern foreign languages under the National Curriculum, the evidence from this project is that there has been no discernible improvement in English pupils' attitudes to MFL since the mid-1980s. Though the results below can do no more than make a minor contribution to the debate about how to make the British keener to learn other European languages, they give some degree of insight into why the hoped-for improvement seems not to have taken place, based on the pupils' own perceptions.

OUTLINE OF THE RESEARCH

The results reported here constitute some of the findings of the ESRC-funded project "Pupils' Approaches to Subject Option Choices". This project essentially replicated one carried out by one of the authors in 1984/5. (For details, see Stables 1996.) In both 1984 and 1996, a sample of pupils comprising the Year 9 cohorts of ten West of England comprehensive schools completed a short questionnaire, inviting them to respond to all their school subjects in terms of liking and perceived importance. Later in each year, a stratified sample of 144 pupils, from four schools, were invited to interview to discuss their reasons for subject enjoyment and perceptions of subject importance, alongside other questions relating to their subject option choices, interests and aspirations. This sample was

reinterviewed at the end of Year 10 (1985; 1997), when they were invited to reflect in various ways on their (now partly chosen) curriculum and on their evolving hopes for the future.

Overall findings from the project will not be discussed here, though, at the time of writing, one article has been published elsewhere concerning subject preference and perception of subject importance overall (Stables and Wikeley 1997) while two more have been drafted and are available from the authors on request. Among the more general results, however, are a number of findings relating specifically to modern foreign languages. These will be summarised below, following a brief contextualisation of the study.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH

There are few studies of the responses of pupils at fourteen and fifteen to modern foreign languages. However, the insights that have been gained seem to indicate a decline in attitudes to languages, while the teaching of them has become more established within the curriculum for students of all abilities, and has been compulsory under the National Curriculum for England and Wales for some five years.

Among a large sample of pupils from selective schools in the early 1930s, R. A. Pritchard found French a popular subject for both boys and girls (Pritchard 1935). However, by the time of Milton Ormerod's work with higher-ability students of both genders (GCE O Level candidates) in the early 1970s, the status of the subject had declined (Ormerod 1975); in Duckworth and Entwistle's

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work with grammar school pupils (1974), French and Latin scored at or near the bottom for interest, freedom and social benefit, but very highly for difficulty at ages 12/13, though rather less so at ages 15/16. In the 1984/5 run of the option choice project, involving pupils of mixed abilities in comprehensive schools, both French and German were relatively unpopular, particularly among boys (Harvey and Stables 1984). While nothing appeared prior to the current findings to suggest a significant amelioration of this situation among 14–15 year-olds, one of the present authors was engaged in a study in the early 1990s, published in *Language Learning Journal*, which seemed to show that the increased European integration of 1992 was having a positive effect on perceptions of the importance of French and German among first-year A level students, though concern was expressed among this sample about the ‘jump’ in difficulty from GCSE to A level in modern languages (Stables and Stables 1996).

Chambers (1993) and Clark and Trafford (1995, 1996) have sought both staff and student views on why modern languages teaching is not always well received. Teachers in Chambers’ (1993: 13) study cited a range of factors (“psychological; attitudinal; social; historical; geographical”) with a compounding of these factors in many individual instances. Chambers’ students were quite willing to acknowledge the importance of learning languages, but only 10% of his sample expressed any pleasure in learning them. Where they did admit to enjoying activities, such as group and pair work, this was not always for desirable reasons. Many had low self esteem. Chambers comes to distinguish between the demotivated and the unmotivated (those who had no initial motivation to lose!). He concludes that all language learners are different (i.e. that demotivation comes in many forms); that many are put off by school learning generally, not just in modern languages; that the extrinsic motivation of the GCSE qualification often lies too far in the future; and that teachers should tackle low learner self-esteem. However, he feels as a modern languages educator that he is dealing “not with a molehill but rather a mountain” (*op. cit.*: 16).

Clark and Trafford found boys less willing to acknowledge the importance of learning a foreign language than girls, echoing earlier work by Powell and Batters (1985), and noted that the most able saw the most point in learning languages. Many students of both genders also considered a GCSE in a modern language as a relatively difficult subject. Unlike Chambers (1993), who found listening to be the least popular aspect of language learning, Clark and Trafford found no such clear trend, with patterns of relative enjoyment within the subject emerging apparently dependent on an interrelationship of gender and ability. Many pupils, however, “expressed frustration about the repetitive nature of their learning experience” (1996: 43) and the perceived lack of relevance of much of the language

learnt. Teachers in their study differentiated between the sexes in terms of learning needs. Clark and Trafford’s tentative conclusions include the desirability of more male languages teachers as role models for boys, that teachers should remember the important impact of teacher personality on student response, and that syllabuses should aim for manageable progression without undue repetition. Finally, they assert that students from less privileged backgrounds require more concrete experience of other European cultures to increase their levels of motivation. They also see grouping as a major issue, with their evidence indicating that single-sex groups might benefit girls but not boys (Clark and Trafford 1995, 1996); in terms of consequences for practice the implications of this are not, of course, very clear.

BACKGROUND TO THE CURRENT PROJECT

In the first run of the option choice project in 1984/5 (see Stables 1996), interviewees were asked about their reasons for subject preference. These were not analysed by specific subject, but they do reveal between-school differences in liking modern foreign languages and a general tendency to cite ability and activities within subjects as reasons for finding them enjoyable (or otherwise).

It might have been hoped that changes in curriculum and teaching approaches, largely due to the advent of the GCSE in the late 1980s, would have increased pupils’ interests in modern languages by the time of the second option choice project in 1996/7. However, the findings are disappointing in this respect.

RESULTS

Subject preference

In 1984, French and German had come near the bottom of the list of boys’ preferred subjects in the questionnaire survey; only religious education, drama and music fared worse. Girls, however, placed French in about the middle relative to other subjects in terms of liking, above chemistry, craft and physics, though German did slightly worse than this. (Boys were *most* keen on English, games/PE, mathematics and physics; girls on English, home economics, biology, art and general science.) In 1996, both boys and girls placed French and German equal bottom in terms of liking alongside RE and, in the boys’ case, music; the most popular subjects were: for boys – PE, technology, science, mathematics and art; for girls – art, English, drama, technology and PE. Thus while one highly unpopular subject in 1984 (drama) had increased in popularity, modern languages had declined. Furthermore, the boys’ four least liked subjects (including French and German) were the

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only subjects to be rated on a 5-point scale at below 3, indicating a tendency towards positive dislike as opposed to mere indifference. (For more details on methods, see Stables and Wikeley 1997.)

This negative view of languages in 1984 was reinforced in the 1996 Year 9 interviews, which also sought reasons for reactions to individual subjects. Across the curriculum, lack of ability was cited most often as a reason for disliking a subject, followed by subject content and then subject processes. The responses to French and German broadly followed this pattern.

When the 1996 interview sample was reinterviewed in 1997, the pupils were asked for their three favourite current subjects. While art, drama, music, PE and child development were placed among the top 3 by over half of those taking them, only 8% placed a modern language among their three most enjoyable subjects; none of these responses was from a boy (though it might be noted also that only 23% of references to English as a favourite subject were by boys).

Perception of subject importance

In the 1984 questionnaire survey, both genders regarded French and German as of roughly middling importance, relative to other subjects, though girls were slightly more positive than boys in this respect. In 1996, this situation had changed little, and may actually have improved slightly, with boys rating French and German equal 6th out of 14 subjects in terms of importance, while girls placed them equal 5th. Religious education and creative arts subjects were most lowly regarded in this respect. The significance of this finding should not be overestimated, however: English, mathematics and science dominated the rankings for subject importance to such an extent, both in the questionnaire and at interview, that modern languages were made to seem insignificant by comparison. Indeed, at Year 9 interview, modern languages were most often cited as among the three *least* important subjects, and comments about their lack of perceived career value for individual interviewees were common.

Of all reasons given for finding subjects important at the later Year 10 interviews (in 1997), 87% related to English, maths and science. Just 7% of respondents placed a modern language among the top three subjects for importance in Year 10, including only one boy.

In both sets of interviews, a strongly utilitarian view of subject importance emerged: important subjects were needed to gain employment. Neither French nor German was rated highly in this respect, the implications of which are explored below.

Other references to modern languages

Where mention was made of modern languages elsewhere in the Year 9 and 10 interviews of

1996–97, it was more often disparaging than the reverse. One relatively neutral point was that Year 9 girls were more likely to choose modern languages on the grounds of usefulness than boys. A much stronger finding, however, was that modern languages were most often mentioned as the subject(s) pupils would most like to drop in Year 9, if they could: 18 boys and 12 girls (of 127 interviewees) expressed a desire to drop languages; over double the response to maths ($\times 14$) or science ($\times 13$), the subjects next most likely to be accorded this dubious distinction. Considerations of difficulty and ability dominated the reasons for wishing to drop subjects.

In 1984 and 1996, interviewees were asked whether it mattered to them which teachers would be taking subjects in Year 10. In 1996, after a modern language had become compulsory in Key Stage 4, references to modern language teachers far outweighed references to those in any other subject area.

Finally, in the 1997 Year 10 interviews, modern languages and business studies shared the ignominy of being the subjects pupils would most like to drop (though the 1997 sample knew that they could only effectively drop one foreign language to be replaced by another).

DISCUSSION

Given the new emphasis in modern language teaching on communicative competence, on relevance and on role play, and given the increasing integration of the European Union and globalisation of the economy, why should the attitudes of English girls and (especially) boys to modern foreign languages seem to be in chronic decline?

Although the option choice project covered pupils' perceptions of the whole curriculum, so that the data referring specifically to modern foreign languages are fairly limited, the findings seem to suggest a combination of factors.

Perception of subject importance relates strongly to perceived usefulness for careers

Although on the questionnaire measure in 1996, modern languages were regarded as moderately important, the interviews revealed the extent to which mathematics, English and science dominate pupils' thinking about important subjects and necessary qualifications. Furthermore, many pupils make naive connections between specific subjects and careers (resulting in comments such as "There's no point in doing RE unless you're going to be a vicar" or "There's no point in doing art unless you're going to be an artist"). On this measure, modern languages do poorly: several interviewees stressed that they were unlikely to work in France or Germany, echoing Clark and Trafford's concern that students from less privileged backgrounds may find it hard to see much point in

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