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Coherence and continuity: first steps towards a national policy

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INTRODUCTION

We all know the fundamental difficulty we have in this country in getting a coherent pattern of language teaching in the education system. With English as the prime international language we suffer from the lack of an incentive – a personal incentive from individuals and a national incentive from the public at large and thus from the springs that bring forth policies. In the eighties we seemed to have cracked both after years of development. If we think the system is undergoing constant change now, just remember the sixties and seventies. Then there was the turmoil of the raising of the school leaving age, the abolition of the 11 plus and the extension of secondary education to all, the establishment of the comprehensive school (as the norm in Scotland but as part of patchwork in England), the creation of new larger regional and local authorities, the elevation of night schools into colleges of further education and their upward expansion into degree-awarding polytechnics. Vive la différence!

In the languages field the arrival of a much wider spread of pupils imposed the development of methods to cope with the sharpened personal incentive problem. For the more biddable and the more capable the solution was sought in the practical approach, i.e. language for communication with foreigners either abroad or here, on matters of everyday survival. For the less biddable, since they were less studious we devised courses which were always called 'studies' to tell us what they were not. So 'Classical Studies' was 'not Latin', and 'French Studies' was 'not French'. This system has proved very popular and can be found today in every university in the land.

However, we soon moved away from the palliative of 'studies' courses to develop active practical language courses for all and seemed on the way to overcoming the problem of personal incentive by the revivification of the learning/teaching process itself.

NATIONAL INCENTIVE

The national incentive had a few false starts with the off/on enthusiasm for joining the EEC, but the imminence of the Single European Act provided a boost and Willy Brandt (remember him?) provided the soundbyte without which no policy can be germinated. 'You can buy from me in English, but if you want to sell to me *dann muessen Sie Deutsch sprechen.*' So everything fell into place. The teachers were showing that they could teach languages to everyone, and our rich customers were telling our politicians that we needed languages. The policy was therefore made. We had Utopia – we had 'Languages for All' (only to 16 and only in secondary school), and we had different languages, or were trying to have. So, were we happy? Well, not quite. For a start many teachers would much rather have stuck with the system of smallish classes of selected pupils learning their grammar and writing their essays and preparing to become language teachers themselves. So there was an immediate search for escape hatches from full compulsion – a search which continually crops up, not only in languages, in every new policy initiative. For another thing, despite all the gains in practical competence and, possibly more important in our society, in confidence in using the language, the public do not seem to be convinced. Where, I ask myself, is the public awareness of what has been going on in language teaching in our schools since the mid-eighties? Interviewing journalists always start off by asking why are we so bad at languages in Britain and what should we do about it? Why is it that the only newsworthy items about language teaching are either gushing wonderment at languages in the primary school (invariable coupled with pleas for a start in nursery school 'like everywhere else in the world' ... one of the great modern educational myths), or else university Germanists bewailing the abandonment of grammar (declensions in decline).

Where are the recruitment policies in the commercial world that can ignore the fact that every

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year now something like 50,000 16 year olds take a Standard Grade in a foreign language – that is 1% of the whole population of Scotland. I don't know what the English figures are but the proportion must be similar. That does not mean that they are all fluent, or very good but it does at least mean that they all had been given some measure of confidence in being able to read the essentials of the up-to-date language and, what is more, have had to talk in the language for something like fifteen minutes. But why should we excoriate the commercial world for not building upon the language skills of 16-year-olds when the very educational establishment itself sets them aside in its post-16 arrangements with an almost audible sigh of relief at disposing of a nuisance? And this at a time when AIESEC (an international *students'* organisation not of language students but of students of economics and commerce) put as its first recommendation after a series of seminars earlier this year that 'every student at university must be encouraged to learn and allowed access to, a language course of their choice.' In the meantime, ponder this fact- in 1989, of the graduates recruited by Guinness to work in Britain all of them (100%) were British graduates. By 1993 only 66% were British (only two out of three and the figure was falling) – because by 1993 they needed their graduates to have languages even if they were working in Britain, and the open EU employment market gave them access to skills which our graduates were lacking. And if you think that the internet and the information highway have caused everyone to use English listen to a senior director of IBM who only the other week was telling a senior official at the Scottish Office that they were having to set up a helpline staffed in a range of languages to cope with their Internet enquiries from around the world, from enquirers who did not speak English.

"policy is too important to be left to politicians"

SCHIZOPHRENIC VIEW

We have a schizophrenic view of languages. On the one hand they are invoked as practical necessities for our economic well-being, but on the other they are regarded as nice little hobbies for some. The DTI is at present pushing a national campaign to promote the use of languages in business – internationalise your business, learn the languages of your customers, train your staff, have recruitment policies, understand the culture you are dealing with. The other week (March 1996) in the House of Commons, a junior minister, I think from the DTI, was addressing fellow members (very few – it looked even more sparse than the attendance at Scottish questions...or even Welsh questions). Smirkingly he begged the honourable members to excuse his accent as he quoted Willy Brandt saying '*dann muessen Sie Deutsch sprechen*'. Why the smirk? Why the excuse? Willy Brandt (and it's high time they found a more up-to-date source) never asked anyone to excuse his accent in English. The psychology is revealing. The minister was reading a brief proposing (gently though) that businesses should use languages, but his mind was saying "Gosh! fancy anyone doing this...all right for some I suppose." The topic was then quickly put to its proper use -pre-electoral slanging (see what you pick up cat-napping in front of afternoon TV!), during which he accused an opposition member of being able to speak French, Spanish and German and therefore, when he lost his seat at the election he would no doubt 'find a job as a Maitre D'. So much for the value of languages! And this is the raw material on which policies are founded, and on which they founder. As Sir Humphrey probably said: 'policy is too important to be left to politicians.' But whether they actually make the policies or not it is they who have to give utterance to them.

Our reforms were supposed to rectify this schizophrenia. They were meant to establish systems that would lead to the natural embedding of language learning in our schools in a policy that would be both encompassing and coherent. Instead we seem to have been clutching at bits of tactics for different stages to pacify current concerns, and calling them policies, much as teachers clutch at 'activities' to keep the class going, and then call this a syllabus. The principle was, and is, quite simple... everyone can learn to use a language. The extent and quality of the use can vary enormously but you only pass or fail in getting your meaning across in practical situations. That is the principle reduced to its essentials and it is fine for the adult working world. It is fine for the Threshold Level which was developed for migratory adults in a context of '*education permanente*' and for quick fix targets. But the world of school education operates on principles which are not quite so spare and its aims and interconnections are more complex.

Through the developments of Standard Grade in Scotland, and GCSE and the national curriculum in England and Wales progress has been made. Self-confidence has been given to many many more pupils than before. Unlike their predecessors they are much readier to try to speak and much more able to sustain a conversation, maybe within a narrow range but nevertheless positive progress. But at the upper levels we know the pupils are better in many ways but fear that in other aspects there has been if anything some regression.

PROGRESS VERSUS PROGRESSION

The problem is not progress but progression, and how to measure it. We have descriptive criteria linked to grades, or attainment targets or performance outcomes linked to levels. Progression from one level to another is a linear image, but the concept of linear progression in language learning is not the one which is used in the criteria. The criteria describe progress rather than progression. By the

top grades one can clearly read more comfortably, speak more easily and for longer, understand with less need for repetition etc. What is not clear is whether there is increasing mastery along with increasing aptitude. The natural assumption that the two go together may need to be questioned. Every day experience lends strength to the proposition that a learner can have increasing performance without a proportionate increase in knowledge. How does one acknowledge and accredit the performance without giving the impression that there has been a progression in knowledge of the language if there has not been? In real life it does not matter, but the educational world has to have indicators of knowledge which it equates with educational progress and intelligence, and whatever indicators you come up with they will be used in that way.

Even at an early stage in the developments it was obvious that an active and confident use of a language required more curricular time than was available, and which was constantly reducing, in the secondary school timetable if it were not to be narrowed to a superficial functionality for those who were capable of more. Attempts to raise the demands at the upper levels were traduced in the time-honoured fashion by the examinations trying to get down to the level of the candidates. One could also see in advance that the Single European Act would cause employment problems for our next generations in their own country unless they were comfortable in another language, as Guinness and others are now proving. So, harnessing this far-sighted view to achieve educational, personal and economic aims, we went for a coherent development and implementation of language in primary schools.

PRIMARY LANGUAGES

Why? To have languages rooted firmly in the curricular consciousness and in the psychological experience in teachers and pupils so that, over the whole span of school education, language competence might have a chance of becoming instrumental rather than a perpetual adjunct – in other words of its being a 'core skill' in the sense of being taught and practised in real educational and curricular contexts rather than a simulation divorced from the rest of the school day. The crucial element in the development was continuity from primary to secondary – not just in the actual language being taught (as I find it often misconstrued) but in the teaching being a continuum. Lack of this continuum has been the cause of failures of other similar initiatives here and in other countries, at present and in other times. In 1963 HMI in Scotland were saying that languages in primary schools could not succeed unless there was continuity with secondary schools. The much-quoted NFER Burstall report some ten years later said the same thing, as did the Girard report in France at the same time. But you cannot have real continuity where the two sectors are divided by psychology and approach as they were then, and as they still often are now. And it is not just the a of physical separation of the two sectors. Even when they share the same institution, as in many independent schools, there is often little collaboration between the sectors and where languages are done in primary classes they are simply re-started in the secondary. So continuity is a pedagogical concept and in Scotland we used the climate of the reforms to strengthen this, particularly the 5–14 programme which, like the English national curriculum with its key stages, attempts to build bridges between upper primary and lower secondary stages.

To stimulate the contextual instrumental approach the development was rooted in the primary curriculum; to achieve the continuum it was premised on a collaboration between primary and secondary teachers and an association between schools; to develop national capabilities in the context of the European Union it was promoted and supported in the four main European languages, French, German, Italian and Spanish. While the pilot project still had two years to run there was a Ministerial announcement that the teaching of a foreign language was to be extended to all primary teachers in Scotland and an appropriate training programme for primary teachers was set up to enable the whole country eventually to be covered. This training programme is at present funded up to 1998. So, not bad in a time of short funding and when the institutional map is being changed so radically. But then, when was it ever any different?

KEY FACTOR – PEDAGOGY

Precisely because you can never bank on the system being immutable, or the managers and policy-makers staying the same, you have to make the pedagogy the key. That was obvious from the beginning, although maybe not to everyone for teachers were always crying out for the system to be accommodated to them. Schools were already feeling the pressures of testing, real or threatened, in the so-called 'basic' subjects. So if the school week was full beforehand logic would suggest that there was no room for a foreign language. However, by considering the nature of the primary curriculum in our system we began to see the obstacle as a vaulting-horse helping to propel us forward rather than a barrier stopping us in our tracks. The curriculum is to a very large extent integrated. That is to say that subjects are not taught entirely separate from one another but the various curricular areas, such as language, mathematics, environmental studies, expressive arts, are often exploited together in themes or centres of interest. whatever happens to the teaching style in primary schools as it adjusts to the prevailing wind, it is likely that the

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curricular areas will always have interconnections. Thus, by weaving the foreign language into the normal activities of the primary curriculum we have a better chance of not only inserting foreign languages without reducing the time spent on the basic curriculum, but in a more positive way, of using the foreign language to enhance the rest of the children's learning. Which, according to most observations, it does, with general improvements in confidence, in reading skills, in capacity to listen, in attention to detail. These are important considerations since, despite the appearance of great enthusiasm on the part of the public for an early start to language learning, there is everywhere a strong current of reluctance and even at times opposition from those who think it is a waste of time, that pupils should be taught more of their own language, that it cannot be organised, that we do not have the teachers.

In Scotland the pilot projects were founded on a partnership between primary and secondary teachers. The secondary teachers brought the language input, the primary teachers the curricular context and the reinforcement of the language between the visits of the secondary teacher. Most important of all was the clear signal that continuity to secondary was the key factor. The arrangement was difficult enough when it was fully funded in a pilot scheme. It became even more difficult when the local authorities had to take over and immediately dragged their feet. It becomes more difficult still when the local authorities themselves become smaller and then when the schools become ever more self-standing. In the meantime, however, the project had established liaison groups between primary and secondary language teachers which were based predominantly on the pedagogy, and this pedagogy will be the basis of the teaching programmes to be added for the primary stages in the 5–14 guidelines about to be amended.

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PROBLEMS

The policy thrust, and the government's commitment to it, is further underlined by the highly job-focused language training being given to primary teachers. The system might have been better manipulated here, especially since it was known that the large regional authorities were going to be broken down into smaller councils. There was an opportunity to map out where the expertise already existed in the primary schools and to focus training on areas where one could gradually phase down the input of secondary teachers and so gradually cover the whole country. Instead, primary teachers volunteer for the course seemingly irrespective of where they operate or what prior experience they have, and secondary teachers are no longer in the picture. Small wonder that one already hears from pupils that there is no follow up or follow through in the secondary, and the collaboration which had been striven for between the two sectors has not proceeded as much as had been hoped.

On top of all this you have the difficulties caused by the fact that we can no longer rely on the arrangement of schools into clusters of primaries feeding into one or two secondaries. Not to mention the competition which has set one school against another. So, without a clear framework there is the risk that primary languages could disintegrate into the uncontrolled individual enthusiasms which caused their demise in the seventies. Already the same scenario is to be seen. Pupils who are learning one language in primary suddenly find themselves doing a different one in secondary with nary a 'by your leave'. They are then given the impression that what they had been doing previously was a waste of time. The cry then goes up from teachers that primary languages destroys diversification, along with a simultaneous lament that it also destroys the feeling of novelty that they relied on in the first year. Sometimes they achieve that novelty by switching the language anyway. Who says education is only about education? So they often fall back on saying that languages in primary school are not for learning – just for preparing to learn...the real stuff will happen in the secondary. Ah yes....language awareness. So that's what we'll spend all the money for? That's what we'll make room in the crowded, and scrutinised, primary curriculum? Can we not use the same argument at the end of secondary year two to keep the novelty factor, change the language or something? Better still, lets get off the hook and call it 'language awareness studies'! Better than a policy anyway. If you go down the language awareness path in primary in order to solve the continuity difficulties you will end up like France where *apprentissage* quickly became *sensibilisation* – to be done in no more than 15 minutes a day, and that using audio-visual methods...code for 'solve your staffing problems – put on a video!'

No-one has a complete answer to the organisation of diversified language provision. The national need is to have the range of languages represented in the national capability. The individual teachers' interest is to teach their own favoured languages. Recruitment and appointment procedures can only pursue language priorities up to a point because most of the time teachers themselves are influenced to work in a particular school by reasons of a more domestic nature than a missionary zeal for one particular language. So, do we look for a policy for the nation as a whole to ensure a proportionate national capability, or one that applies to every school? If the former, then the policy can be held, even if with some difficulty, so long as it is clearly promoted, supported and recognised as government policy. This is more difficult now that HMI have been transmuted into little more than Keystage cops. If the latter, then language provision will blow like a feather in the shifting breezes of bureaucratic expediency, and parental choice... or is it apathy? There may not be the widespread expansion of the teach-

ing of a range of languages that language associations like to dream of, but it is pretty certain that the range will continue to be taught – they have after all come through much less propitious times than these. What is clear is that diversification should not become the distractor that diverts attention from the fact that what is needed is a coherent language policy that is founded on a clear pedagogical continuum.

CERTIFICATION

Without a methodological approach that creates its own continuum languages will be subject to initiatives rather than policies. Education goes in fashions. We are at present in the midst of a fashion for certification. It's easier to manage than education (and careers are built on management), it is a tangible proof of success that can be trimmed to the prevailing market, it can mean what you say it means. Above all it furnishes provident cheques of variable exchange rates in a world where pupils are regarded as customers of an educational supermarket, whose best sellers are the packages most easily consumed. National educational policies nowadays seem to start from some kind of Poujadiste logic and progress to the illogicality of the absurd. Ionesconomics!

What has become clear in recent years, particularly in the field of language learning, is that an excessive emphasis on certification leads to a concentration on the specific outcome to the detriment of the learning process used to produce that outcome. Thus, when certification is split into closely adjacent levels there is the risk that the levels, which begin as an administrative device, take on the appearance of objective reality. They then end up as 'modules', or 'units', or attainment targets' which purport to establish little frontiers around sections of language learning, and teachers and learners head straight for the frontier with as little baggage as possible. As a goal for adults with immediate utilitarian purposes this is perfectly satisfactory (though not for all), but it crystallises the ambivalence of the place of language learning in an educational curriculum. In the educational process the 'can do' philosophy may be too simplistic – unless the goal is a nation of Forrest Gumps.

RELEVANCE AND 'RENEWABILITY'

This is the same ambivalence shown in the equation of education with training in current political practice. However practical the outcomes are to be the process should not be aridly utilitarian, otherwise its educational worth, and hence its claim on curricular space, is weakened. If the same four or five years of French which previously only produced a few teachers now only produce phrase-book tourists then the argument is little more advanced. The problem is to have a practically-based curriculum which is obviously relevant and is constantly renewable. The contexts which have been most often used are those of the external world – the classic 'me abroad or foreigner here'. But the most obvious and constant contexts are those of the educational curriculum of which language learning is a component. In other words pupils are engaged in other subjects and pursuits in the course of their school work which the language class largely ignores. To use these contexts as the source of language work and language practice lends immediacy, variety and self-generating applicability. Recycling, and hence consolidation, arise more naturally. The process continues within an educational framework which is still a practical one, and even if it may not guarantee a greater mastery from pupils it at least has them operating their linguistic resource in a wider and less predictable range. This is the principle which has gained currency in the way languages are done in primary schools. It is a principle which has gained a consensus in many countries in Europe in the primary sector despite great differences in organisational structures and teaching systems. The principle is equally applicable in secondary schools but it demands managing the teaching in a different way. It is not a case of expecting an expertise from the language teacher in areas of other specialisms, simply that it is possible to collaborate with the pupils themselves in setting the contextual agenda. That way lies real student autonomy, which in its more user-friendly title of 'learning to learn' attracts great interest from many countries in Council of Europe seminars, which in turn suggests that governments' interest in finding ways of making educational services more flexible and effective may depend more on finding the right pedagogy than the right management.

If a content/context based language learning approach were to take root beyond primary school then one could envisage a constantly renewable and progressive syllabus whatever the level and capacity of the learner. Teachers might not then find themselves repeating the same situations with the same pupils and ending up with disaffection. If the foreign language were capable of being applied to other educational contexts then it would be seen to be a core skill and as such continue its curriculum position into the upper school and on into Further and Higher education.

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CONCLUSION

We thought we were doing well in languages. We had established principles for national objectives, established systems that would help the teaching to develop to support those objectives, taken steps to maintain the progress of the weaker and to rectify the under-stretching of the more capable (them-

selves often victims of management that organised classes more for the concentration of resources than of learning). But then we find that the inclusion of a language as a core skill in the post-16 curriculum is thrown out. What is more, the whole post-16 curriculum is now to be totally unitised into small units, and coherence will be achieved by fitting units together like pieces of Lego. Lego always looks wonderful on the illustrations on the box, but in most households the best you can hope for are a few weird constructions and a host of bits and pieces. But the marketing is good. So much so that it looks like crossing the Border to invest England and Wales. Lego on the march – be warned.

So instead of continuity and coherence we look like having neither. How can there be continuity when each stage is subject to separate initiatives and each looks for an escape hatch from the other (lets lower the leaving age for some; lets have specialist schools for others)? And how can there be coherence when one ministry (the Department of Trade and Industry) can be promoting languages for business while another (whatever it is now called) is proclaiming that there is no need for languages at the very stage when youngsters are preparing to enter higher education and the world of work?

Our language policies have been hacked around to fit in with whatever current organisational fixes are hot news. It is time to put an end to this short-termism and map out a continuous road that knows where it is heading.

Notes for Contributors

Contributions

The Editorial Committee welcomes previously unpublished articles, reports and other contributions, which will further the cause of language learning.

Contributions are expected to fall into one of these categories:

(a) Articles of about 4000 words.

(b) Brief (up to 1000 words) items of information, notes on innovative practice, discussion points (including those arising from previous articles).

(c) Reviews usually of about 300 to 400 words (but longer reviews or review articles may also be accepted). Please send your contributions direct to the Reviews Editor.

The guidelines below are intended to help contributors:

Presentation

Type with double spacing.

Please give your article one title only, not a title and a sub-title, and divide it up with (short) sub-headings. An abstract of about 50 words should be provided.

Give full references for all sources quoted, using the Harvard system. In the text the author's name, year of publication and page number where relevant should be quoted in brackets, e.g.: (Jones,1993: 27).

Please send three copies of the article and keep another for yourself.

Clean copy and articles supplied with IBM or Macintosh compatible disc (MS Word preferred) are of great assistance in reducing printing costs. Graphs, pie charts and other diagrams should be supplied as camera ready, hard copy. If prepared on a computer, graphics files on disk are also of use, presented as TIF or postscript files.

Illustrations

Photographs are particularly welcome, as are charts, diagrams and tables where relevant. Please send these at the same time as your typescript.