

The gender gap in modern languages: a comparison of attitude and performance in Year 7 and Year 10

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This paper addresses the issue of boys' well-documented underperformance and disaffection in MFL at KS4 by comparing the attitude and attainment of boys and girls in two year groups – Year 7 and Year 10. It presents the findings of a quantitative study conducted in a comprehensive school, which explores and compares the perceptions and attitudes of these two distinct cohorts, and compares their attainment in French. The objective is to gain an understanding of when marked differences between boys and girls emerge, and how these evolve according to their age and their experience of language learning. The data suggest that boys' underachievement and disaffection in MFL are not located, as might have been thought, exclusively in KS4, but start for many as early as their first term of French in Year 7 and tend to grow with age. The findings are discussed in the context of the recent Green Paper proposals to make MFL optional at KS4 (2002).

INTRODUCTION: GENDER GAP IN ATTAINMENT ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

The existence of a marked gender gap in attainment in several subjects has now been recognised by the Government: reference to the distinctive needs of boys and girls is now explicit in the Standards for Qualified Teacher Status which came into force in September 2002 (TTA/DfES, 2002). New teachers now have it as one of their explicit targets to develop strategies to respond to these differing needs. The gender gap in education is now so high on our national agenda that the *Times Educational Supplement* devoted two double pages to this topic (Duffy, 2002).

Researchers over the past decade (Barton, 2002; Jones & Jones, 2002; Clark & Trafford, 1996) have noted, in particular, that the disparity in performance between boys and girls is significantly greater in modern languages than in other areas of the curriculum. Clark and Trafford (1996) reported the magnitude of this gender gap as a starting point to their article in the *Language Learning Journal*, quoting the 1992 GCSE statistics which indicated that 26% of boys achieved grades A*-C in MFL compared to 43% of girls. Eight years on, statistics showed that while 44% of boys achieved grades A*-C in French in 2000, an impressive 60% of girls

got there too. We find comparable results in German with 49% of boys achieving Grades A*-C compared to 63% of girls in the same year. This would seem to indicate that, if GCSE results are an indicator of genuine linguistic performance, while there has been progress overall, the gender gap remains alarmingly wide. When put in the context of boys' and girls' performance across all subjects, it is indeed interesting to note that in 2000, the average size of the gender gap across subjects (i.e. girls' results minus boys') was 9.2%, which prompted headlines such as "Girls stay top of the class in GCSEs" (*Guardian*), "Girls take top grades in most subjects" (*Guardian*), "GCSE results reveal that boys are failing to close the gender gap" (*Independent*). GCSE results in 2001 and 2002 show that the gender gap is persisting at 9%. This compares with a substantially higher figure of 15.6% in modern languages, thus indicating that boys underperform more severely in this subject as measured against the 9% benchmark. This phenomenon was confirmed by the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (Nuffield, 2000).

GENDER GAP IN MFL IN A CONTEXT OF UNDERPERFORMANCE

In their report, Jones & Jones (2001) have shown a link between poor performance and disaffection and identified causes for this phenomenon. Particularly noteworthy is the large quantity of target language in lessons often mentioned by boys as demotivating, allied to a perceived lack of content and scope beyond the purely linguistic. This appears to make it difficult for a number of boys to define the subject, thus leading to their judgement that MFL lacks relevance and usefulness, and is also more difficult than most subjects to get to grips with.

This type of finding has led to experimenting with single-sex classes for MFL which, among other

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potential advantages, allows teachers to address gender-specific needs. Small numbers, as well as the limited duration of the experiment and the existence of compounding factors, have often made such intervention difficult to evaluate. Barton (2002), who carried out her own study in this field, is tentative in her conclusions. Whilst stating the potential of such initiatives, she concludes that: "it is the teacher's engagement with their pupils that ultimately determines the effectiveness of single-sex groups". It would seem that more research, both qualitative and quantitative, is needed in this field.

AIMS OF THE STUDY AND METHOD USED

The National Languages Strategy (2002), which proposed to make MFL an entitlement rather than a compulsory subject at KS4, potentially leading to mass disapplication from the subject post-14, has for a large part emerged from the current general malaise in MFL at KS4. The alarming degree of disaffection and underachievement in many schools, particularly among boys in this age group, reported among others by OFSTED, is now well documented (Aplin, 1991; Clark & Trafford, 1996) and extensively reported in the press (*Guardian Education*, 5 November 2002, "Forever foreign: a special issue examines our loathing of languages"). While there have been numerous studies and much debate on the causes underlying boys' underachievement (Clark & Trafford, 1996; Grenfell & Harris, 1997; Field, 2000), as well as considerable advances in identifying strategies to combat this phenomenon (e.g. Harris, 2002), less is known about when marked differences in attitudes and attainment emerge, and how these differences evolve with age and experience of language learning. Barton's research, among others, does, however, provide valuable insights in the area of pupils' perceptions in KS3 and 4 (Barton, 2001), and some of her findings are referred to in this paper. It is therefore in the context of the National Languages Strategy, and in the light of previous research, that this study sets out to explore whether boys and girls embark on the study of French with a gap in attitude and whether there is a noticeable gap in attainment after the first term of French teaching in Year 7, or whether this gap in attitude and attainment emerges later in pupils' school careers.

This article presents the findings of what is primarily a small-scale quantitative study carried out in a mixed comprehensive school between December 2000 and March 2001. A questionnaire comprising ten sections was administered to the full cohort of Y7 and Y10 pupils in French lesson time, thereby ensuring a near 100% response rate. This was supplemented by teacher assessment of these two cohorts in the form of grades on a four-point scale for the Y7 cohort, and in the form of predicted GCSE grades based on Y9 performance for the Y10 cohort. Year 7 grades were based on informal testing by individual teachers in all four Attainment Targets (listening, speaking, reading,

writing) over the course of the term. Comparability of assessment evidence was discussed and established in informal interviews conducted with the teachers involved. GCSE predictions were converted into a four-grade scale identical to that used in Y7 (see Teacher rating below). These two sets of results were compared to assess differences in attainment by age between genders. Finally, informal interviews were carried out with members of the MFL department. Responses were received for 270 pupils, of whom 148 were Y7 pupils and 122 Y10 pupils (dividing into 50% exactly of each sex). One difficulty that had not been foreseen was the fact that a substantial number of pupils had given up French at the end of KS3. Teacher assessment of these pupils was provided (predicted grades at the end of Y9) but no data could be collected directly from this group of pupils.

The two cohorts under study were given similar questionnaires so that valid comparisons could be drawn and patterns according to age could be identified.

DISAPPLICATION AHEAD OF TIME

By far the most significant aspect of the findings is the high number of boys who had been disappplied at KS4 eighteen months before the publication of the 2002 National Languages Strategy announcing the end of compulsory MFL teaching post-14: 26% of boys and 6% of girls had given up French at the end of KS3. Informal interviews with MFL staff indicate that such decisions were generally taken by senior management and that they were rarely consulted. The profile of these pupils had been weak at KS3, and this was often compounded by a history of disaffection and disruption. The assumption of MFL staff was that such pupils had requested disapplication, but this could not be confirmed. Anecdotal evidence suggests that such statistics and similar disapplication procedures may have been common for some time in comprehensive schools around the country, and that the 2002 Green Paper is merely recognising and sanctioning a widespread phenomenon. Indeed, the *TES* highlighted this alarming trend on its front page: 'Hundreds of schools are breaking the law by dropping compulsory foreign languages before proposals to make them optional from the age of 14 come into force' ('Schools jump gun in ditching languages', 24 May 2002). There has since been growing evidence that the impact of the Green Paper is already considerable: findings from an ALL survey indicate that nearly 30% of schools planned to abandon compulsory languages from September 2002. The *TES* reported on 22 November 2002 that: "More than half of England's secondary schools are poised to end compulsory languages from the age of 14 as a result of plans to change the law" ('Language learning on the brink of crisis'). Back in pre-National Curriculum days when MFL were also an option in KS4 (then Years 4 and 5), the proportion of pupils electing to take a foreign language post-14 averaged 33% nationally, with a striking gender gap: 62% were girls and 38% boys (Powell, 1986).

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Powell wrote at the time: ‘It is certainly becoming more difficult to maintain pupils’ initial enthusiasm for foreign language learning and to attract pupils of both sexes on to examination courses in Years 4 and 5’ (Y10 and 11). We are sadly about to return to the same situation today, and there are currently no indications that statistics will be any different from 1986 once the proposals contained in the National Languages Strategy have been fully implemented.

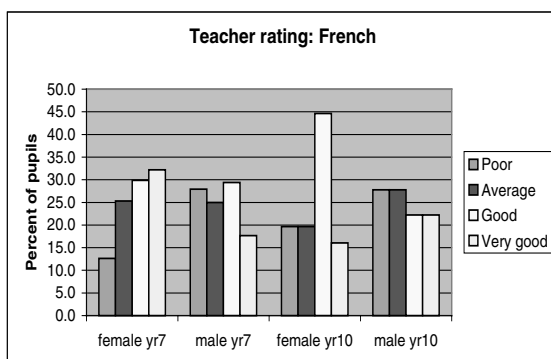
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

COMPARISON OF ATTAINMENT OVER THE YEARS BY GENDER

Teacher rating (Figure 1)

Teacher assessment of the Y10 cohort under study here is based on end-of-Year-9 internal results and expressed in terms of projected GCSE grades which have been converted into a four-grade scale – ‘very good’ for projected A and B grades, ‘good’ for C grade, ‘average’ for D grade, ‘poor’ for E and F grades. The Y7 cohort was assessed also on a four-grade scale by teachers from ‘very good’ to ‘poor’. The statistics obtained in this category (Figure 1) confirm the existence of a gender gap at KS4 as identified at a national level, with twice as many girls judged ‘good’ at French compared to boys in Year 10, and 60% of girls’ performance judged globally above average against 44% for boys. It is, however, interesting to note that more boys than girls have been put in the ‘very good’ top category. Results for the Year 7 cohort (collected in January 2001) show no substantial difference in attainment at the end of their first term of French between boys and girls in the ‘good’ category at around 29%. The picture that emerges is, however, alarming with the biggest number of girls located in the ‘very good’ category while that same category gets the smallest number for boys. Perhaps even more significant is the fact that over a quarter of boys have been deemed ‘poor’ at French (28%) at that very early stage in their study of French and that this remains constant over the years. These findings would seem to indicate that boys failing to achieve at KS4 may in fact never have got started rather than ‘switched off’ later. Boys’ overall attainment profile does not in fact alter much with age: this suggests that boys’ underachievement in MFL is not located exclusively, as might have been thought, in KS4.

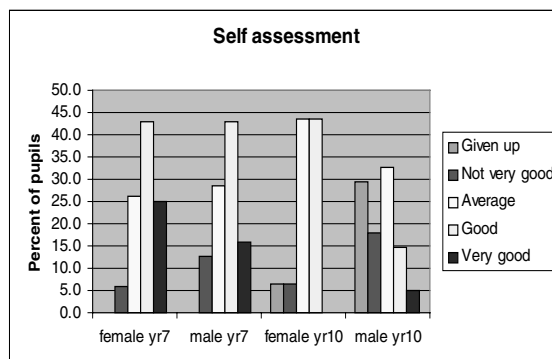
Figure 1



Self-assessment (Figure 2)

Pupils were invited to grade themselves on their overall performance in French in response to the question: How good have your results been in French this term? The same four-grade scale used by teachers in their assessment of the two cohorts was used. Their perceptions of their own attainment in French indicate a small difference in the number of girls and boys judging their attainment to be good or very good after their first term of French studies – 68% of girls were confident about their performance compared with 59% of boys (Figure 2). Girls’ perceptions tally nicely with teacher assessment at this point while it would appear that boys have a tendency to over-estimate their ability. This confirms other recent research: ‘Boys massively overestimate their ability and think they can get somewhere without expending any effort’ (Wilson, 2002); ‘Boys display a general tendency to rate their own academic ability highly, while girls display more modesty’ (Barton, 2001). It may also be the case that boys are less willing than girls to admit to others, and indeed to themselves, that they are experiencing difficulties (Graham, 1997). By contrast, Jones & Jones’ findings indicate that boys do recognise their own underperformance on the whole, and are even able to identify reasons for it (Jones & Jones, 2001). An interesting difference at KS4 is the reluctance of both boys and girls to rate their work as very good. When compared to teacher assessment, the results obtained show under-estimation of their attainment by boys and girls alike – no girls and only 5% of boys rated their performance as ‘very good’ compared with teacher assessment of 16% for girls and 22% for boys. The lack of confidence that these results indicate may, of course, have an impact on their performance in the GCSE examination and so should be taken into account as a possible factor when considering under-achievement in MFL at GCSE. The sizeable dropout rate of 29% for boys and 6% for girls is included in the denominator in a separate category as these pupils are not, by necessity, represented in the sample here. This allows us to make a meaningful comparison of figures expressed as percentages between teacher assessment, which did include these pupils who were rated prior to disapplication (see section above), and pupils’ self assessment.

Figure 2



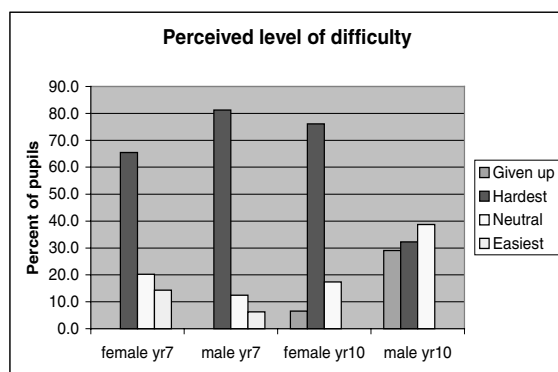
“there are ... no indications that statistics will be any different from 1986 once the proposals ... have been fully implemented”

Perceived level of difficulty (Figure 3)

Pupils were asked to indicate which of their subjects they found the hardest to learn from a full list of subjects. A large majority of boys and girls in Y7 rated French as a difficult subject in comparison with the rest of the curriculum, with an overwhelming figure of 81% for boys compared to 65% for girls. It would therefore seem to be the case that even high achievers in French find the subject hard as early as Year 7, and that boys in particular find French comparatively difficult. In this context, a surprising finding is that fewer boys than girls rated French as a hard subject at KS4: 32% of boys compared to 76% of girls. There would seem to be a contradiction between boys' underperformance at KS4 and their perception that French is not a particularly demanding subject. This also needs to be seen in the context of the large drop-out rate among boys at KS4: we may indeed plausibly infer that the 29% of boys who requested disapplication – or were disapplying – at KS4 did so partly because they found French difficult, since teachers confirmed that these boys had been poor achievers in Year 9. It does, therefore, make sense to add the 29% drop-out figure to the 32% of boys who stated that French was one of their hardest subjects, thus giving a combined figure of 61%, which corresponds roughly to teachers' estimations of average and under-average performance among boys. It compares to 82% for girls (when adding the 6% drop-out rate for girls), hence yielding a 21% differential between boys and girls that is still statistically significant. It remains the case, therefore, that more girls than boys say that they find French difficult at KS4 even on the conservative assumption that all those pupils who dropped out did so partly because they found the subject difficult. This is surprising in the light of teacher assessments for this cohort.

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Figure 3



Popularity of French (Figure 4)

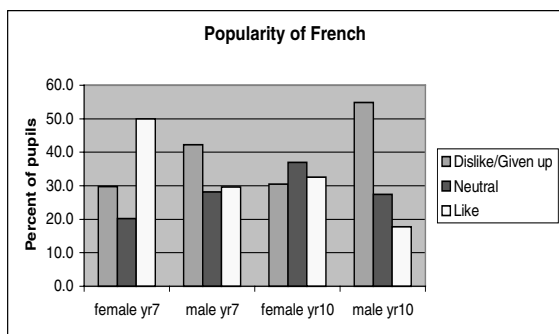
Pupils were asked to indicate which of their subjects they liked most and which they liked least from a full list of subjects. Given the context described above, it is reassuring to see that a large majority of girls feel positive or neutral about French when making a comparison with other subjects (Figure 4). Girls tend to lose some early enthusiasm and be more neutral at KS4, but their

attitude on the whole towards the subject does not change dramatically: figures indicating negative feelings towards the subject do not grow significantly with age. Boys' attitude to French is markedly less enthusiastic than girls' in Y7 – 50% of girls say they like French compared to 30% of boys. This 30% figure goes down to 18% in Y10 while the neutral category remains constant at 28%. This indicates a corresponding increase of 12% in the number of boys in Y10 who feel negative about or have given up French. Deterioration in boys' attitudes to MFL as they get older has also been noted by Barton (2001). Although statistically significant, this increase can be described as moderate and indicates that disaffection among boys starts as early as their first term in Y7 and merely becomes more widespread with time. In spite of nearly two decades of change and intense debate, I would suggest that negativity towards MFL has remained relatively constant – or is in any case currently equal to what it was in the 80s – with 33.5% of girls and 41.8% of boys expressing dislike for the subject in 1986 (Powell, 1986) compared to 30% and 42% for girls and boys respectively in this study. It would thus appear that nothing has been achieved over this period in this respect.

More specific probing about attitude to speaking in class in the target language indicates, encouragingly, that only 19% (16/83) of girls did not like to speak French in Y7, increasing only marginally to 23% (10/43) in Y10. This compares with 30% (19/64) of boys in Y7 and 27% (12/44) of the Y10 boys who continued with French. Given the high drop-out rate of boys in this particular context, however, it is difficult to arrive at a meaningful figure in Y10 for boys: the Y10 figure would increase from 27% (12/44) of the Y10 boys who continued with French to 48% (30/62) if we assumed that all of the 18 boys who dropped out did not enjoy speaking French in class, given that their attainment and, presumably, motivation were low. So, although these figures are to some extent unreliable, since the boys who dropped out could not be interviewed, they do suggest that reluctance to speak French in class does not in itself explain the large-scale disaffection among boys throughout their French studies. Previous research has, in fact, also identified speaking as a relatively popular activity, especially with boys (Barton, 2002), and risk-taking with the willingness to speak out generally as a male trait (Graham, 1997).

Comparison with other related subjects shows that girls and boys like French more than English in Y7, which may be due to the novelty of the subject. The popularity of English as a subject grows with age, and in fact doubles over the three years for girls from 39% to 79% while boys remain constant in their attitude. Overall, English is more popular than French, with fewer pupils of both sexes expressing negative feelings towards English than French.

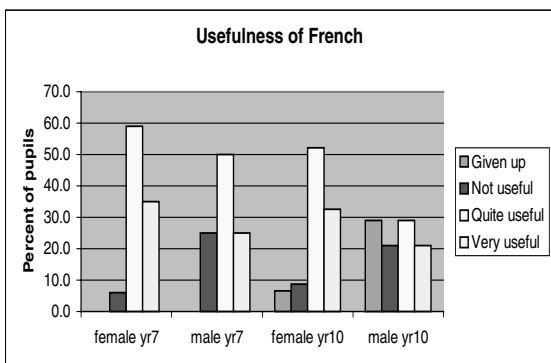
Figure 4



Usefulness of French as a subject (Figure 5)

When asked how useful they thought being able to speak French is on a four-grade scale (very useful/quite useful/not very useful/not useful at all), boys and girls rate French as a useful subject – quite useful or very useful – in large numbers in Y7 although there is a surprisingly wide gender gap: 93% of girls compared to 75% of boys (Figure 5). Both figures are lower in Y10 with a particularly dramatic fall for boys (also noted by Barton, 2001) from 75% to 50%, although quantifying change by age accurately is particularly difficult here given the 29% drop-out figure. The gap for boys between Y7 and Y10 is, however, likely to be even larger if pupils who had been disapplied were included. Such negative attitudes seem unrelated to whether pupils have travelled to France or not, or whether their parents can speak some French or not (pupils responded to both questions with yes or no). This 50% figure is comparable to the figure for boys expressing dislike for the subject.

Figure 5



CONCLUSION

It would appear from these findings that the well-documented gender gap in attitude and performance at KS4 is not located exclusively in KS4 but appears to a large extent as early as the first term of French studies and merely increases over the course of three years. Approximately 28% of boys in this study failed to make any tangible progress over their first term of French. We find a similar number of under-achieving boys in Y10, thus suggesting that boys failing to achieve at KS4 may in fact have never got started rather than have ‘switched off’ later. It would also appear from

this study that negativity toward MFL has remained constant over nearly two decades with 33.5% of girls and 41.8% of boys expressing dislike for the subject back in 1986 compared to 30% and 42% for girls and boys respectively in this study. It would thus appear that much remains to be done in spite of the intense debates and changes that have taken place over that period. Another significant finding which is of some concern is the high proportion of boys who had been disapplied at KS4, well before the publication of the National Languages Strategy.

As the focus moves nationally to KS3 – and KS2 – for MFL, these findings should be a pointer to re-appraising not just the method but also the content and, beyond this, our aims and objectives in this subject: it is essential that all pupils, regardless of their sex, should be given the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the subject right from the start of their French studies and given the means to achieve at a reasonable level. The all too frequent diet of undigested chunk learning within minimal contexts, which was until recently encouraged by the format of GCSE assessment requirements and tends to pervade all stages of MFL learning throughout KS3 and 4, has unsurprisingly led to widespread disaffection. The current emphasis on practical use rather than personal enrichment is deplored by many (e.g. Lawes, 2000). Charles Clarke, interviewed on the Today programme (Radio Four) in December 2002, stated that ‘young people are not interested in languages’ and offered this as a powerful reason to stop compulsory languages at KS4. Many before me have suggested that addressing disaffection by re-appraising our aims rather than giving up in the face of adversity is where we should direct our efforts (Pachler, 2002). As Swarbrick writes (2000): ‘Our task in the next decade is to broaden our thinking about content but also to build on the skills and knowledge which pupils are gaining in other disciplines and other aspects of their lives.’ Modern Languages Across the Curriculum (MLAC) or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), which aims to enhance the content of language teaching by integrating language learning and curriculum content more fully (Grenfell, 2002), is a promising development.

It is important to ensure that contextualisation of language learning within the target culture takes place at all stages of language learning from the outset. Lawes (2000) suggests that this should not be confined to the practical and immediately relevant but should target personal enrichment through a deeper understanding of what constitutes culture. The NC for Education for Citizenship is a helpful document which can provide a valuable framework for cultural input in MFL within clearly expressed aims. What this set of aims may lead towards is the development of a more curious and independent type of learner at KS3. This has to be the pre-requisite for the full engagement of boys, as well as girls, in MFL studies and therefore their retention beyond KS3.

“boys failing to achieve at KS4 may in fact have never got started rather than have ‘switched off’ later”

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