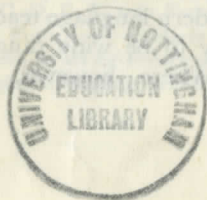SCOTTISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Modern Languages in SI and SII of the Comprehensive School

Report of the National Steering Committee for Modern Languages

Introduction

In view of the problems arising from the inclusion of a modern language in the secondary course, the Steering Committee formed d National Steering Committee for the teaching of modern languages idered that priority should be given to a short study of the place of modern languages in the first year of the comprehensive school.

This document sets out to examine the various forms of organisation and to make suggestions for the guidance of teachers and administrators. It should not, however, be regarded as either final or exhaustive, and some of the points touched upon will be the subject of further reports.

1. Organisation of Classes

Various types of organisation are encountered at the beginning of the secondary course.

(a) *Random selection* (i.e. pupils are allocated to classes by random selection, e.g. alphabetical order, and not according to their ability as reported by the primary school.) This class organisation is in keeping with the spirit of the comprehensive school but it can produce classes in which there is a very wide spread of ability, which in the teaching of modern languages creates particular difficulties.

(b) *Matched classes* (each class is so organised as to contain approximately similar proportions of able, average and less able pupils as assessed by the primary schools.) This is an attempt to ensure as far as possible that the various levels of ability are represented equally in each class.

(c) *Broad-banding* (a rough division of pupils into blocks (usually two or three) according to general ability as revealed in primary school reports. Pupils within each block are then allocated to classes in accordance with either method (a) or (b) above.) The result of this distribution of pupils is that no class has as wide a range of ability as in (a) or (b) and the resulting increased homogeneity may facilitate the work of the modern language teacher.

(d) *Allocation of pupils from the same primary schools to the same classes.* This is usually done for social reasons, and has the same implication for modern language teachers as (a) for example, that there is likely to be wide range of ability within the teaching group. Where, however, pupils have learned a

significant amount of French in the primary school, this is sometimes an additional reason for keeping them together in the same class.

There is a growing amount of evidence to show that classes organised according to the methods outlined in (a) to (d) above can be made to work well in the initial stages of the modern language course.

It is important, however, that machinery should exist to enable a regrouping based on performance in the foreign language to take place when it is appropriate. This would also allow principal teachers if they so desire to take into consideration any previous experience of a foreign language which the pupils have had in the primary school. In the modern language course a point is likely to be reached during the first year when the divergence of performance between the best and least able pupils in the mixed ability class will be so great that effective teaching is no longer possible. At this point it will be necessary to allocate pupils to new teaching groups for modern language work. It is important that this regrouping should not take place too early, and that pupils should be given ample time to show their aptitude for the foreign language. The end of the first term would be the earliest moment at which this aptitude could reasonably be assessed, and in most cases a longer period may be necessary. The length of this introductory period depends upon the conditions prevailing in the individual school, the ability of pupils, and above all, on the skill and attitude of the teachers.

A solution commonly adopted in schools is setting, i.e. division into sets according to the pupils' aptitude for the foreign language. Where schools find it impossible to set across the full age range, partial setting,* which is less difficult to implement, can be adequate.

2. Should a modern language be offered to all pupils in the first year?

Ideally, from the point of view of morale, and of offering equality of opportunity, a modern language should be offered to all pupils at the start of the secondary school, providing staffing resources are adequate. This language need not necessarily be French.

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* Partial setting: Instead of all classes in a year group which take the subject being timetabled simultaneously, groups of two or more classes can be timetabled together and setting can take place within these groups of classes. For example if six classes in SI (A, B, C, D, E, F) take French A, B, C might be timetabled simultaneously and set for French and similarly in the case of D, E, F. The fact that A, B, C and D, E, F can be set for French at different times from each other eases the position with regard to staffing, accommodation, etc.

Up till recently a modern language has been offered to 35%–40% of the school population at the most. The extension of modern language teaching to include 90% or even 100% of the pupils without due consideration of the implications with regard to staffing and organisation could create serious difficulties.

As a result progress in providing instruction in a modern language for all pupils will inevitably be gradual. Where there is a lack of suitably qualified staff, some restriction will have to be made in the number of classes being given language tuition. This will involve some selection of pupils from the beginning of the secondary course, but such selection need not disturb the general organisation of the first year; it can be effected even within a system of mixed ability classes, for example by means of setting in the foreign language only. This is preferable to delaying the start of the course or reducing the time allocation for all classes below an acceptable minimum. As far as time allocation is concerned it is strongly felt that daily contact with the language is necessary if satisfactory progress is to be ensured.

3. Should pupils be allowed to drop the modern language?

It is felt that the decision whether pupils should be allowed to drop the study of a modern language at the end of SI or SII is a matter for the individual school to decide in the light of staff attitudes, pupils' attitudes and the staffing position. At the same time, however, thought should be given to devising courses other than the traditional kind which would encourage these pupils to continue their study of the language. For example, the possibility of providing non-certificate courses, based on a restricted time allocation and with very general aims, in which background work would become increasingly important, is worth serious consideration.

4. Introduction of a second modern language

In order to enrich the curriculum of able pupils, and to ensure that a course in a second language is not unduly shortened, it is suggested that a second modern language could be offered at the beginning of the second year to pupils who had shown clear evidence of interest and linguistic ability in the first year of the secondary course. Where this is done it should not be in the place of another subject, but should be achieved by reducing slightly the time allocation in a number of subjects to allow sufficient periods for a meaningful start to be made in the second modern language.

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5. Objectives

The general aims of modern language teaching, namely understanding the spoken word, speaking, reading, writing, and a knowledge of the cultural background of the foreign country have been frequently formulated and are generally accepted. A more difficult but nevertheless important task is the consideration of the general aims in relation to the various levels of ability.

The aim which has immediate and obvious relevance to the early stages of any course of modern language study is the ability to understand the spoken word. Indeed, for some pupils the successful development of this skill might constitute the major objective. It is felt that teachers underestimate the powers of their pupils, even of the least able, in this aspect of the work.

An attempt should be made to enable all pupils to express themselves intelligibly in the spoken language, though it must be accepted that for the least able achievement in this aspect of the work is likely to be severely limited in the time available. Although as high a standard of pronunciation as possible should be aimed at, over-insistence on this aspect of language work should not be allowed to interfere with fluency.

The ability to read silently for comprehension is one which should be fully developed with a wide range of pupils, and which has direct application to the possible future needs of many children.

A proportion of the pupils now being taught a modern language will not reach the stage at which writing is a meaningful activity, and for these pupils it is better that the work should be restricted to the aspects indicated above where a degree of success is likely.

For all pupils some background knowledge of the country is essential, indeed for some this work may become just as important as any linguistic achievement. It should however not be neglected in the case of the more able pupils, who will be capable of a high degree of success in all elements of language study.

6. Methods advocated during the introductory period

It is recommended that aural and oral methods should be employed. Depending on the calibre of the pupils reading may be introduced after a time, but for the great majority of pupils no writing in the foreign language should be attempted in the early stages of the course. Pupils need maximum exposure to the spoken language, training in intonation and pronunciation and ample oral practice before reading and writing are undertaken. The sounds

and rhythms of the language should as far as possible be assimilated by careful listening and frequent repetition. The vocabulary and structures practised in the pre-reading period should be based on the material which will be used later to introduce reading and writing. The voice of native speakers either live or on tape should be used as well as that of the teacher to add variety and authenticity to the teaching.

It is generally felt that audio/visual presentation of material (i.e. a presentation which aims at the assimilation of the foreign language through listening associated with a visual stimulus in the form of printed or projected illustrations, or flash cards, wall pictures, filmstrips, slides, etc.) is the most suitable in the early stages. Pupils will respond differently to such material according to their ability. Some will do little more than understand and repeat, others will readily adapt material for their own use, and will be ready for reading and even writing at a relatively early stage. It is vital that all should be allowed to respond according to their own capabilities, and that a similar standard of achievement should not be expected from all pupils.

Chorus work will inevitably play a part in classroom activities, but it must be used skilfully and should always be reinforced by frequent individual questioning and repetition. Where a language laboratory is available much time can be saved in this task of reinforcement.

Vocabulary and structures should be introduced in a meaningful context and assimilated in the first instance by imitation. New material should always be presented orally in the first instance and not in writing; what is to be learned should then be repeated frequently and used by pupils, and only when these processes are complete should any linguistic analysis be undertaken.

Reading and writing are terms which are imprecise and cover many widely varying activities, from formal reading and writing (i.e. reading aloud in class and writing sentences in an exercise book) to silent reading for comprehension and simple copying of words and phrases. At the stage of language learning under consideration the definition of reading and writing is very elastic; e.g. to understand a caption on a picture is a very simple form of reading; to rearrange jumbled letters to form a word is a simple form of writing; to regroup cut-out words to form a phrase or sentence is an elementary form of composition.

As regards background study many of the interesting aspects of life in the foreign country arise directly from the study of the language. Individual and group project work can also be profitable

activities. As far as resources allow pupils should have access to genuine foreign material such as magazines, travel guides, tickets, and currency to help them with their projects.

All that has gone before presupposed that in classes containing a wide range of ability, pupils progress at different rates. Before it is possible to assess pupils for the purposes of regrouping it may well prove necessary to divide the class for some activities into two or three groups for different kinds of work. It is stressed that this arrangement is suggested only for a small part of the time available, and is only essential until reasonably accurate assessment can be made for regrouping purposes. A division of the class is made much easier if mechanical aids are available such as multiple listening posts, or audio-active headsets connected to a tape recorder. When part of the class is ready for reading activities group work is greatly facilitated. At all stages of the course it is likely that group work will be profitable for certain activities.

It is recognised that the above findings are of a general nature and that both method and content of teaching in the early stages of the secondary course need further detailed study.

Conclusion and future activities of the Steering Committee

The problem of assessment in the early stages of the language-course is one which has been mentioned more than once in this report. It has been felt that this problem is one which deserves a fuller consideration than is possible within the more general context of the present document. A detailed study of assessment is being undertaken by the Steering Committee, and the results of this study will be published as soon as they are complete. A number of other topics are either already under consideration or projected for the near future. These include the diversification of language taught in SI, the provision for modern languages in teachers' centres and the use of technological aids, as well as certain more general topics concerning research and methodology.

It is hoped that the present report will prove useful to those concerned with modern language teaching, and that those questions still left outstanding in it will be adequately dealt with in future documents.
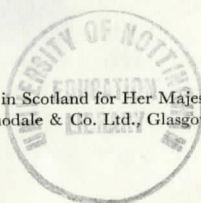
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