



SCOTTISH EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

# Teaching of Modern Languages in Secondary Schools

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## *General Organisation*

It has hitherto been customary for most Education Authorities to distinguish the courses to which pupils may proceed at the promotion stage as two-language, one-language, and non-language courses, the first two types being considered as senior secondary courses and the last as junior secondary. The number of pupils allocated to senior secondary courses has varied from approximately 20 per cent. to over 40 per cent. of the total age-group. Recently the initial allocation to courses has tended to be less narrowly defined and to afford more opportunity for variation, but so far the position of modern languages has not been greatly affected. The great majority of senior secondary pupils, therefore, begin the study of at least one foreign language in the first year of their course and the ablest usually take two.

The modern languages taught in senior secondary schools at present are French, German, Spanish, Russian, and Italian. French is almost universally the first modern language taken, and the majority of those who complete a senior secondary course continue the study of this language throughout their course. Over two-thirds of the candidates for the Scottish Leaving Certificate are presented in French. There are, however, indications that French may in future have rather less of a monopoly as the initial language; some schools, for example, are replacing it by German in certain courses. Relatively few pupils study Russian and Italian, but there has been a marked increase in the number of schools offering at least an intensive course in the former, and one school has introduced it experimentally as a first language.

Where two languages are taken in the first or second year, one is usually Latin, but the experiment has been made in one or two schools of offering German instead. Normally the second modern language is started in the third year of the secondary school. While it is still frequently time-tabled as an alternative to science, more schools are trying to provide courses which contain both science and either German or Russian. This development has much to recommend it. Lately there has been an increase in the number of intensive sixth-year courses in an additional foreign language, whether for examination purposes or not.

Some junior secondary schools and departments also offer a foreign language, especially in those areas where the number of pupils allocated to senior secondary courses is comparatively small. Again the language is usually French, and it is taken only by the ablest pupils and more frequently by girls than by boys.

## *Staffing*

Over the country as a whole there has been until a year or two ago no shortage of qualified teachers of the established modern languages. Recently,

however, difficulty has been experienced in filling some of the vacancies which have occurred, especially in the more remote areas, and this has sometimes led to the temporary employment of teachers who are not fully qualified in modern languages and, in some schools, to over-frequent changes of staff.

The increase in the size of many secondary classes has added very considerably to the difficulties of modern language teachers, especially in connection with the development of oral work. In a number of schools it has been found possible to sub-divide large classes once or twice a week for practical oral work. This arrangement has proved helpful, particularly when the teacher of the class takes both sections.

It is still all too common to find that two or more teachers have to share the instruction of the same class. While the staffing position may occasionally make this inevitable, it is rarely a satisfactory measure and should be avoided wherever possible, especially with first-year classes.

Modern language specialists have as part of their training to spend a considerable period in the country whose language they are principally engaged in teaching. It is encouraging to note that a commendable number of teachers continue to go abroad regularly in order to further their own knowledge of the language and to maintain contacts with the country. More teachers than formerly now complete the requirements of residence abroad for a second or even a third language; the recent reduction in the period of residence required of honours graduates for recognition in a second language is undoubtedly making this easier to accomplish.

Foreign assistants (French, German, Swiss, Austrian, Spanish, and Italian) are being employed in increasing numbers throughout the country. This session there are in all 126 such assistants. Through their own personal knowledge and experience these young assistants can do much to bring to life the study of their home country and they can give the pupils valuable practice in understanding and speaking the foreign language. They are usually students, not trained teachers, and consequently their work is most effective when they receive adequate help and guidance from the regular teachers.

A few exchanges have also been arranged between Scottish and foreign practising teachers and have, on the whole, been very successful.

#### *Accommodation and Equipment*

Accommodation, although still restricted in some schools, has mainly been adequate and with the building of new schools and the modernization of others there has recently been a marked improvement in teaching conditions throughout the country. The majority of teachers now have a room of their own, in which they can—and frequently do—develop an appropriate background as an aid to their instruction by the use of wall pictures, posters, maps, models, reference books, and the like. The number and variety of wall-maps provided is, however, disappointing. The importance for the development of good oral work of allocating to modern language teachers rooms which are relatively free from outside noise and disturbance has not always been sufficiently appreciated.

Both the quality and the supply of text-books have improved greatly of late. In particular, there has been a welcome increase in the provision of supplementary reading material. The co-operation of educational publishers in meeting the demand for more modern and more attractive books is much appreciated. Library facilities in modern languages vary greatly from school to school. In

some schools only a few dictionaries and reference books are available, while in others there is an ample supply of suitable books. Particularly in some of the new schools, a stock of attractive books likely to appeal to the younger pupils has been built up in addition to the more usual works for the older pupils. The use of dictionaries with simple definitions in the foreign language seems to be growing and is to be recommended. A number of schools now spend part of their library allocation on subscriptions to worthwhile foreign magazines and have found that these prove both useful and popular.

Most secondary schools possess various teaching aids such as wireless sets, record-players, tape-recorders, and film or film-strip projectors. Many modern language teachers make occasional use of these aids, but only a few use them systematically as an integral part of their work.

#### *Courses in Modern Languages*

Syllabuses for Certificate courses are at present being re-organised because of the forthcoming introduction of the new Ordinary grade of the Scottish Certificate of Education. Until now, in far too many schools, there has been little differentiation between the language courses planned for the ablest sections and those followed by the other sections. Where a difference has been made, it has often been no more than that the lowest sections in any given year have been allowed to proceed at a rather slower speed but with no modification of the content of the course or of the methods used. It seems unlikely that schools will meantime make fundamental changes in the modern language syllabuses designed for their ablest pupils, but already more courses are being planned specifically to meet the needs of those pupils who, at least in the first instance, are unlikely to pursue the study of a language to the highest level. This diversification of syllabuses is welcome. It can be carried out all the more easily now that few schools set a common examination for all the classes in each year and there is in consequence no longer any necessity for all groups to attempt to cover exactly the same work in the same time. If more suitable courses are developed, it is to be hoped that many of those pupils who at present are discouraged by their inability to keep abreast of the work set may find it possible to continue their language study with profit.

In some junior secondary schools and departments the syllabus has been essentially the same as if the pupils were to become candidates for the Scottish Leaving Certificate examination and it has proved much too difficult for the pupils concerned. In a number of others, however, there has been an encouraging effort to develop non-examination courses which would be more in keeping with the needs and interests of the pupils. Much has been done to awaken interest in the foreign country. The approach to the language itself has been lively, good use being made of activity methods and of whatever ancillary aids were available. The main emphasis has been placed on learning to understand the spoken and written language and to speak it simply but naturally. The results in classes following such courses suggest that further experiment along these and similar lines would prove rewarding. It is possible that some of the pupils in these classes may continue at school and sit the Ordinary grade of the Scottish Certificate of Education. The type of course they have been following should form a sound basis for Ordinary grade studies provided the pupils have the necessary linguistic ability to proceed to the examination.

### The Work of the Schools

If one considers as a whole the work done in modern languages in Scottish schools during the last few years, there is no doubt that the most significant advance has been in the field of understanding by ear and speaking the foreign language. This does not mean that there is no room for further improvement, but certainly much has already been accomplished. The progress in this aspect of language learning is most noticeable in the ready understanding and willing response of pupils in the early years of both junior and senior secondary schools and again in the fluency and confidence with which some of the pupils from the highest classes express themselves when they go abroad and in their general ability to profit from these visits. On the other hand, the most disappointing part of the course in a considerable number of schools is the period preceding the Scottish Leaving Certificate examination. This is probably due to two factors. In the first place, many pupils have initially been pushed on too rapidly, with the result that much of the basic work has not been adequately consolidated and the weaknesses become more evident as the course proceeds. In the second place, many teachers are not convinced that the methods they have been using in the early years can lead to good examination results, and they therefore discard them in favour of more traditional methods. In consequence of this abrupt change, much of the valuable work done in the first two years is lost and the results obtained are generally far from commensurate with the effort expended by both teachers and pupils. This is fortunately not true of all schools. Where there has been adequate consolidation and development of the work has been uninterrupted throughout the course, the pupils have shown that the examination is well within their reach and have in addition usually developed a genuine interest in both the language and the country.

In order to give a more detailed appraisal of the work done in modern language courses, it is convenient to consider separately the different facets of language study. Nevertheless it must be emphasized that, if language teaching is to be successful, there can be no question of dividing up the work into rigid compartments. It is essential that all activities should be closely integrated so that the language always remains a living entity.

As has already been indicated, there have been significant advances in the oral and aural aspects of language teaching in the early years of the course. The initial training in pronunciation is usually carefully given and practised. Syllabification and the typical intonation of the foreign language, however, are rarely taught with equal thoroughness, so that what is said often sounds less convincing than it otherwise would. Instruction in many schools is, in the early stages, based on the regular use of the spoken language in class and on oral practice of common vocabulary and speech patterns. By the end of the second year, pupils in these schools show a pleasing ability to understand the spoken language and some confidence in speaking it within the limits of their naturally restricted vocabulary. These results are all the more praiseworthy because it is in these early years that the teachers frequently have to contend with very large numbers of pupils in each class.

In the later years the pupils continue to develop their understanding of the spoken language and seem to find this one of the most enjoyable parts of their language work. Sometimes too much time is spent on aural comprehension as a separate activity, but more and more teachers are discarding this practice since they have realized that, if they regularly use the spoken language in class and

occasionally read aloud a short passage from the reading book or some other text, they do not require to devote much time to formal tests of aural comprehension. Practice in listening to new voices is given in a considerable number of schools by the use of broadcast lessons and with the help of the foreign assistant. These lessons are most effective if they are not isolated from the rest of the work but are followed up in later lessons, and used, for example, as a basis for conversation, vocabulary work, or free composition.

The initial oral training is too rarely continued and developed in the later stages and many pupils do not progress beyond the standard of speech they had reached by the end of the second year. Many teachers feel that they cannot afford the time necessary for the development of oral work, but in most cases it is not additional time which is required so much as more systematic and purposeful training in the correct use of more difficult speech forms. For example, the time which is so often spent on cursory and frequently inaccurate oral reading of long passages could be better applied to developing the pupils' command of the spoken language and to bringing into regular use some of the new structures and vocabulary that occur in the various texts studied. Such oral practice serves to promote oral fluency and accuracy and at the same time it paves the way for a corresponding development of written work. Not only is bright, vigorous oral teaching beneficial in widening the knowledge of the language, but it also has a most stimulating effect on the pupils' morale and willingness to learn.

One other aspect of oral work—the memorization and speaking of prose and verse—tends to be considered by many teachers as quite extraneous to the normal class work. Some teachers, however, are making good use in the earlier years of the learning by heart of short, carefully chosen passages from the course-book or the reader or of short dramatic scenes as a means of consolidating new points of grammar, of increasing vocabulary, and of encouraging correctness and fluency of speech. It is to be hoped that this very useful practice will be further developed throughout the whole course.

As the course progresses, more emphasis is placed on reading and on written work. In those schools where the work is properly integrated, these activities do not supplant oral work but progress simultaneously with it. For example, the reading matter supplies much of the new material which the pupils first master orally and then consolidate by means of written exercises. It has also been found that the correction of written work requires less time and energy when the pupils have thoroughly practised the new work orally before attempting to put it on paper.

Over the country as a whole there has been some increase in the amount of reading undertaken. Most modern course-books include reading passages of graded difficulty which form the basis for close study of the meaning of the text as well as of the language structure and vocabulary. No course-book will, however, exactly fit the needs of a given class and the common practice of working through a course-book uncritically must therefore be deprecated; teachers should be prepared to omit material unlikely to be of use to their pupils and to alter the order of presentation if necessary. The intensive study of texts is usually well done in the younger classes. In the older classes, however, when the texts become more complicated, consideration of points of detail sometimes obscures the central ideas and the interpretation is accordingly too superficial.

The acquisition of vocabulary from these reading texts presents special problems. While it is sufficient for the pupils to recognize certain words when

they see them again, it is important that others should become part of their active vocabulary. This distinction is not made clearly enough in all schools and it is by no means uncommon to find that the pupils are expected to enter all new words into vocabulary note-books and that the whole responsibility for learning these words rests with them. These note-books frequently contain such serious mistakes as to render them of very doubtful value and most pupils find it quite impossible to commit to memory all the entries in them, nor do they have the necessary judgment to select the words that are most valuable. If the pupils are to acquire a good active vocabulary, they must have ample practice in using both orally and in writing those words and phrases which are specifically chosen as likely to be useful to them when they come to express their own ideas. This selected vocabulary must be thoroughly learnt and regularly revised. Failure to carry this out systematically is at least partly responsible for the ignorance of common words and the inaccuracy in spelling and genders which mar the work of many pupils in the highest classes.

In addition to the course-book, most classes also have class readers at least from the second year up. The practice of translating cursorily into English everything that is read is still prevalent and results both in poor understanding of the text and in the use of approximations and of slovenly English. Moreover, the slowness with which the book is read leads to boredom and a sense of frustration. Fortunately it has become much more usual to read texts at a reasonable speed, understanding of the meaning being tested by questions in English or in the foreign language. Many teachers sensibly vary their approach, reading easy passages rapidly and spending longer on a more thorough treatment of those passages which present real difficulty. More thought is also being given to the choice of texts which are of appropriate standard and which deal with subjects likely to interest the pupils.

The value of extensive silent reading is still generally underestimated. Some teachers encourage their pupils to read magazines or short continuous narratives at home, but it is rare to find that all the pupils in a class have additional readers which they can go on reading at any appropriate time. Yet there is ample evidence that the discovery by pupils that, with little or no need to refer to a dictionary or vocabulary, they can read through a simple story and enjoy it acts as a very valuable incentive to further study. Where the habit of reading is acquired early, it becomes more possible to ensure that the ablest pupils read with understanding an adequate number of texts in the final years of their course—a fact which is proved by the extensive reading programmes covered in the sixth year classes of some progressive schools.

It is normal to find formal *translation into English* started in the third year of a full Certificate course. Occasionally teachers and pupils have been inclined to treat translation into English as a relatively easy exercise, but this is far from being the case. If pupils have been allowed to acquire careless habits during previous cursory translation of reading texts, it now proves extremely difficult to eradicate these habits and there is consequently much slipshod work. Again, in quite a number of schools pupils are faced with complete passages to translate without being given an adequate introduction to this difficult exercise, and it is not surprising if their work is unsatisfactory. The best results are usually obtained when translation is made to follow naturally from textual study, provided the latter activity has been sensibly developed in previous years. If pupils have read through a passage, have discussed the essential ideas contained

in it, and have answered more detailed questions on it, it is only one further step to find the corresponding English rendering. Once pupils have acquired the habit of interpreting a passage, even in broad outline, before attempting to put it into English, they undoubtedly find it much easier to work out a sensible and accurate rendering. Where teachers have given careful preliminary training of this sort, the benefit to their pupils has been evident.

*Free composition* is generally started in the first year of a secondary course and to begin with is no more than the answering in the foreign language of one or two questions, first orally and later in writing. Subsequently these answers are usually worked together into a little paragraph. Pupils quickly learn to re-tell a simple story orally and on paper. Later they write a few sentences about a picture or other centre of interest; this is most successful when the topic has been previously discussed in class and where the pupils have been trained to use only the words and phrases they have already mastered. In the early years, in both junior and senior secondary schools, pupils often succeed in writing short, continuous compositions in a simple but lively style and take a genuine pride in their accomplishment. An increasing number of schools continue to help their pupils to add to the number of words, phrases, and sentences they can actively use, so that they are ultimately able to tell a simple story or write a straightforward letter with some confidence. In other schools, however, the pupils have been given too little training in how to adapt the new language forms and vocabulary they have acquired in, for example, their study of texts so as to express their own ideas, and their growing ambition has led them to use English idioms and constructions—with disastrous results. It is very noticeable that those schools which have maintained regular oral work throughout the course generally produce very successful work in free composition also.

While there has been an appreciable improvement in the writing of simple narratives on the Lower grade standard, there has been comparatively little development beyond this stage. Further guidance in the planning of an essay of a more discursive or descriptive type is clearly required in many schools. In this connection the study of suitable texts can show how good native writers achieve their effects and can provide a model for the construction of a paragraph or a full composition. It is, however, only fair to say that a certain number of pupils do achieve high standards in essay writing before they leave school.

Formal *prose translation from English* is also most often begun in the third year. Some teachers realize how important it is that the first passages set should not break new ground but should be composed largely of phrases and constructions with which the pupils are already familiar and which they have been using both orally and in their free composition, so that the pupils may realize the relevance of this new exercise to what has preceded it. These teachers help the pupils to overcome some of the initial grammatical difficulties of prose translation by referring them back to the manipulative exercises (included in almost all course-books) which they have been practising or by reminding them of some of the model passages they have memorized or studied. Unfortunately, many teachers still fail to take advantage of the possible carry-over from earlier work. Systematic oral and written practice should have kept in regular use the essential grammatical forms acquired in the early stages, but the many weaknesses in basic language structure and in common vocabulary so often evident in prose composition exercises suggest that in too many instances either the initial training was insecure or the revision inadequate. Where, in developing

prose translation, full use is not made of previous training, the amount of time devoted to this exercise becomes excessive and the rest of the work inevitably suffers. While many teachers study the type of mistake made by their pupils in prose translation in order to diagnose what remedial work is urgently required, a surprising number ignore the possibility. From what has just been said, it will be clear that the range of performance in prose composition is very wide indeed.

The development of *sixth-year work*, except in a relatively small number of schools, has been somewhat disappointing. This may be because so many sixth-year classes contain pupils who are still concerned with taking the Higher grade examination and it has been difficult to develop a new activity such as the study of literature in a systematic way. Where a post-Certificate class is provided, the syllabus is usually determined to a large extent by the requirements of the Bursary Competition of one or more of the Scottish Universities. Usually the main emphasis falls on more advanced translation from and into English and on a rather hurried study of literature. Unfortunately the study of literature seems not infrequently to degenerate into the dictation of notes, since it is felt that the questions set are often too difficult for the pupils to deal with from their own experience. As has previously been mentioned, certain schools have succeeded in developing a wide reading programme and a few have made a commendable effort to bridge the gap between school and university work, as regards both content and methods of study.

*Intensive courses* call for little special comment. The point at which they are started, the previous experience of the pupils, the amount of time available, the purpose for which they are taken all inevitably influence the planning of the work. Usually the pupils who embark on these courses have already shown linguistic ability, and are keen to study a new language. It is therefore possible to press on fairly rapidly. Even so, the tendency to undertake the more advanced activities before the basic work has been adequately consolidated can be just as dangerous as in longer courses.

*The cultural background* to modern language courses is almost always built up incidentally, but much more attention is given to it than used to be the case. Text-books and readers supply material for discussion and this is normally supplemented by the teachers' personal experience or by that of the foreign assistant. Broadcast lessons and film-strips, the singing of typical songs, wall illustrations and individual albums, occasional projects on a given theme, letters from foreign correspondents all help to form a composite picture of the living civilization of another country. Foreign travel and interchange visits have become much more common, and it is pleasing to note the number of junior secondary pupils who now go abroad. Particularly rewarding have been those interchanges where pupils live with families in the foreign country for several weeks, sharing the normal home life and even attending school there. Pupils can often learn a great deal about the country from contacts outside school, friends, general reading, television or sound broadcasts. Some teachers encourage their pupils to give short talks, sometimes in the foreign language, on what they have learnt in this way. Whatever the means adopted, the success of a course can largely be judged by the extent to which it has aroused real interest in the country whose language is being studied and in the language itself as a living medium of communication. It is a promising sign that pupils are increasingly showing an awareness of what is happening in the foreign country.

## CONCLUSION

No brief review can hope to cover all the variations of modern language courses, particularly in what is a transition period, and there are bound to be some exceptions to almost every statement made. Nevertheless, certain points stand out clearly. On the positive side, there has been marked progress in the earlier years, increased facility in understanding the foreign language at all stages, some improvement in written free composition, more extensive reading, more direct contact with foreign countries, and a livelier interest in their affairs. On the negative side, there is still much need of thorough consolidation of the basic work, both orally and in writing, of more systematic revision at all stages, of still wider reading, and of closer integration of all the aspects of modern language study.

The most urgent requirement of all, however, is for more teachers of modern languages to consider how far the courses they offer are achieving the fundamental aims of modern language teaching, whether, for instance, they enable the pupils to acquire a knowledge of the language sufficient to let them make direct contact with the foreign people and whether they awaken in them some understanding of another living nation. Some teachers have tended to allow their courses to become dull because of well meant preoccupation with the Certificate examinations and have forgotten that incentives are necessary to encourage the pupils to undertake the hard work required to learn any language. It is right that most teachers should be concerned with helping their Certificate pupils to pass the examinations at as high a level as possible, but this is by no means incompatible with the realization of such wider aims as have been mentioned. Indeed, teachers from all over Scotland have shown in a variety of ways that their pupils benefit from following a course which looks not only to the Certificate but far beyond it.

