

## Diversification of the First Foreign Language - A Review of the Literature

(Diversification refers to the teaching of languages other than French in the earlier years of post-primary education)

### Key Findings

- Diversification is not merely an idea of the 1980's or 1990's; languages such as German and Spanish in particular have had considerable support for decades, at least in theory.
- The "Languages other than French: teacher qualifications and experience" project concluded that there was a substantial number of teachers able to teach a language other than French, though in some cases retraining would be necessary.
- Preliminary findings of a survey conducted in 1995 showed that only 25% of pupils in the first year of post-primary schools throughout the UK were learning a language other than French as their first foreign language.
- In Northern Ireland French remains the dominant language. There is no evidence to show that encouragement towards diversification is succeeding here, though entries for GCSE languages support the view that a greater choice of languages is now available in many schools.

GCSE Languages: entry in NI CCEA examinations

	% of total language entry	
	1990	1993
French	70.5	69.0
German	8.7	8.8
Irish	11.5	11.4
Italian	0.9	1.4
Spanish	8.4	9.4
All Modern Languages	100.0	100.0

### Introduction

1. This literature review draws upon UK sources relevant to diversification, that is, the teaching of languages other than French in the early years of post-primary education.<sup>1</sup> Renewed and vigorous interest in diversification is a feature of official documents and studies since the 1980's, its benefits for teachers, pupils, trade and industry now undisputed, especially in the wider context of European Community membership.

### Historical Overview

2. The French-dominated curriculum peculiar to the UK was until recently a product of historical and social factors, perpetuated by organisational considerations such as teacher supply and demand, rather than any intrinsic qualities making French more accessible to language learners.

3. Official recommendations in favour of diversifying first foreign language provision, made repeatedly from as early as 1912, albeit at times with non-educational aims in mind, had previously been met with reticence, at times contradicted by later reports, but in general largely ignored. A 1930 Board of Education report, for instance, showed that pupils (especially the less able) achieved better results in German and Spanish, in addition said to be more accessible languages for beginners. Yet findings over three decades later in the Newsom Report (1963) revealed that opportunities for foreign language learning in most modern schools were few, and that the majority of pupils learning French were the most gifted.

4. In the past, even where a few other modern languages (usually German, Spanish, Russian and Italian) were being taught to the chosen minority, selection and teaching methods reinforced inappropriate stereotypes which are yet proving difficult to dispel. Traditionally, German was taught to the academically gifted, through a grammar-based approach similar to that adopted for teaching the Classics, contributing to the belief that German, like Russian, is a difficult language. Similarly, had the recommendation in the 1962 Annan Report on the teaching of Russian been implemented, namely that Russian be introduced earlier in secondary schools as a first or second language, it is unlikely that it would be struggling for survival in the UK's school curriculum today. Spanish, on the other hand, taught to the less able with strong emphasis on its commercial value, has suffered from cultural impoverishment and lack of prestige in general.

5. Such approaches to modern language teaching persisted in spite of advice encouraging greater diversification in more languages, especially Spanish and German, from teaching bodies such as the Incorporated Association of Assistant Masters (1949), and a caveat in the Norwood Report (1943) strongly discouraging utilitarian over-emphasis in modern language teaching, since schools were incapable of producing the level of language proficiency required by commerce.

6. The 1960's finally seemed to herald a new era of progressive accessibility to modern language learning for a greater range of pupils. Innovations in audio-visual and audio-lingual technology, the development of corresponding new modern language courses and comprehensive schooling meant that modern language learning was no longer the almost exclusive preserve of grammar schools. Progress remained slow, however, with languages other than French often offered in fourth or fifth year, as second or third language options only. Indeed, modern language learning suffered a setback due to the 1970s primary French project, (documented by Burstall et al, 1974) which ensured that French became even more entrenched in the secondary school curriculum, a situation reflected to some extent by the current Scottish primary school project (Johnstone, Low, et al, 1995). Previously diversification did not refer specifically to the early years of post-primary education.

7. The Hadley Report, (1981), concluding that "there is nothing in the nature of a language other than French [...] that makes it either more or less feasible than French as a first foreign language in a secondary school" prefigures a series of government documents seriously investigating diversification, political impetus perhaps more pressing in view of the Single European Act to be implemented in 1992. Nevertheless, support for diversification was clearly established by the 1988 policy statement which coincided with the introduction of the Education Reform Act, itself preceding the National Curriculum and compulsory language learning for all pupils.

### **Research and Evaluation Projects**

8. Attention was now being oriented towards the practicalities of introducing diversified modern language provision, such as organisational models, staffing, resources, teacher training and retraining, and eventually, pupil attitudes and attainment. The "Languages Other Than French: teacher qualifications and experience" survey was undertaken to identify the scale of untapped teaching skills in modern languages, identified in the 1988 DES document. It concluded that there was indeed a substantial number of teachers able to teach a language other than French, after necessary retraining.

9. The Educational Support Grant study also recommended retraining, and reported successful increases in languages other than French in diversified schools. The four main models of diversification operating in the ESG project were evaluated by Dickson and Lee (1990). The main difficulties highlighted in the OXPROD study (1987-92) which focused especially on Spanish and German, and examined diversification from the teachers', pupils' and schools' perspective, related to time tabling, parental views and transfers-in. Preliminary findings of the TES/CILT survey carried out in 1995 show that approximately only 24.7% of pupils in the first year of post-primary schools throughout the UK are learning a language other than French as first foreign language.

### **Languages in Contrast**

10. Arguments advanced about the relative difficulties and distance from English of various languages, where the order of difficulty depends on the skill in question, (James 1979), seem less of an obstacle now, given the communicative emphasis on conveying meaning as opposed to dogged insistence on grammatical accuracy. Russian in particular is said to have benefited enormously from the communicative syllabus (Rix & Pullin in Phillips [ed.] 1989).

### **Attitudes**

11. Investigations into boys' and girls' attitudes towards language learning from The Leathes Report (1918) to the present day reveal that girls perform better at languages than boys. Moreover, languages are more popular with girls and viewed more positively by them, a factor purportedly due to a stereotypical attitude towards femininity in the UK, which causes boys to react adversely to French (Pritchard 1987). Attitudes to language learning have been demonstrably linked to attainment, with positive attitudes prevailing more among pupils who had already visited the foreign country.

### **Position in Northern Ireland**

12. In Northern Ireland, French remains the dominant language, the only significant model to diversification that where Irish is offered alongside it (DENI 1994). There is no evidence to show that encouragement towards diversification is succeeding here, but entries for GCSE languages between 1990 and 1993, published by DENI in 1994, support the claim that a greater choice of languages is now available in many schools. Recommendations necessary to adequately address the diversification question in Northern Ireland include the undertaking of studies into teaching capacity and evaluation of models of diversification in schools where diversification is currently operating. The special position of Irish in the curriculum, with additional comparison between pupils in the ordinary and bilingual sectors, would provide findings of international interest.

### **The Project**

13. The project was undertaken by the Centre for Modern Language Teaching and the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research, School of Education, Queen's University, Belfast. The cost was £5,000.

### **Full Report**

14. The full report entitled 'Diversification of the first foreign language - a review of the literature', DENI Research Report Series No 4 1997, by Peter S Neil and Rosemary Mallon, is available free of charge from DENI.

**This paper is a summary of the research report, and as such any views it contains are not necessarily those of DENI.**

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