

The Challenge of the new paradigm of Curriculum Review

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The focus in education has shifted in recent years from an emphasis primarily on imparting subject content to a greater focus on the process of learning and the development of pupils' thinking skills. Student-centred teaching and learning which promote active, interactive and exploratory approaches underpin the new paradigm.

The hegemony of English threatens to limit linguistic diversity globally and raises particular obstacles in Anglophone countries where 'English is Enough' is a common refrain. An added concern is the emerging debate around which languages should be taught. The question may be put: Should we continue to focus on teaching specific languages, or on developing the broader skills and attitudes appropriate to language learning as the information society and the knowledge economy advance.

This paper will consider these and related matters from the perspective of Britain and of Northern Ireland in particular, where curriculum review has been particularly radical and policy and practice issues for indigenous, curricular and immigrant languages are much debated in education and society as a whole.

The Challenge of Paradigm Shift

When Thomas Kuhn coined the term 'Paradigm Shift' in 1962 he intended the use of the term to be restricted to the so-called hard sciences (one thinks of Galileo's realisation that the earth exists in a heliocentric, a sun-centred universe) but it has now spread to other realms. A paradigm shift can now denote where a change occurs in basic assumptions; so, for example, closer to our time, the Cognitive revolution in psychology moved us away from the previously dominant Behaviourist approaches. To work from a purely Behaviourist standpoint today is to insist upon a paradigm that is no longer uniquely valid. But this does not mean that all the tenets of Behaviourist psychology are invalid. Psychology can accommodate both Behaviourist and Cognitive perspectives. Science, however, cannot accept both earth-centred and sun-centred views of the universe.

The emergence of the information society in what is described as the post-industrial knowledge economy of the 21st century is underpinned by the digital revolution which has generated and given access to hitherto unimagined levels of data and information. For most of the 20th century learning is considered to have taken place in the context of an industrial economy, one in which there was a much greater emphasis on transmitting facts and procedures from the teacher to the learner and where testing was carried out by means of

summative, written assessment built upon a pedagogy where, in language teaching, drilling predominated. This is basically a behaviourist model, although it predates Behaviourism itself.

Some of the traditional conceptions of learning are highlighted by Watkins et al who refer to a survey of Open University students by Marton et al. (1993) which places, at the top of the learning hierarchy, “getting more knowledge” and “memorising and reproducing” (Watkins 2007:10). This approach to learning, which focuses upon the individual, is in contrast to the type of teaching and learning we are now becoming more accustomed to in the 21st century where the process of learning is deemed to be as important as the product of acquired knowledge. In this perspective, the role of the teacher is increasingly seen as one of facilitating learning, as well as imparting knowledge. It can be debated whether or not these developments in our expectations of economy and pedagogy constitute Kuhnian Paradigm Shifts, but they can at least conform, individually or jointly, to our idea of a ‘New Paradigm’.

While we can talk of fundamental changes and a new paradigm for the new millennium, we should also remind ourselves that the 19th and particularly the 20th centuries brought about some of the greatest changes ever in the human experience, including in education. We should recall for example the widely- (though not universally-) achieved democratic goal of ‘education for all’ and the social and technological advances that developed over the period. In this context, Evans & Wurster recount in their book ‘Blown to Bits’ the cautionary tale of the Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, first published in 1768, was a successful and dominant brand for 2 centuries. By 1990, sales of multivolume sets selling for up to \$2,200 had reached a sales peak of \$650 million. By 1997, sales had collapsed by 90%. The Britannica was blown away by a product of the late 20th century information revolution, the CD:ROM. Microsoft sold cheaply, or bundled for free with its products, the steadily improving Encarta CD-Rom encyclopaedia. The CD-Rom production costs were minimal, whereas the printed Britannica production costs were about \$250, plus over \$500 for salesperson’s commission. When Britannica attempted to counter with their own CD-Rom, they found that their magnificent content was just too big for the compact disc. When they eventually produced a text-only version, they then found themselves faced by a revolt from their highly-skilled salesforce. A CD-Rom could not generate the commission of the printed version. In short, Britannica and its workforce viewed their situation through a paradigm that was no longer valid and they had difficulty in recognising their own ‘blindspots’ in face of the new technological paradigm that forced a re-evaluation of the Gutenberg paradigm of the preceding 500 plus years.

But there is hope. Britannica has now produced a range of CD and online products to accompany its extensive and expensive printed work. These products, building upon the mass of the printed product, now go far beyond its competitors in quality and quantity. By embracing the worldwide web, Britannica has re-established its position as the premier portal to a universe of high-quality material. The lesson to be learnt is that change is constant. Teaching theories and methods evolve and recycle and there is the need for teachers to keep up with changes in the ways pupils are learning, particularly now in the use of technology.

But the parable of Britannica is important in that it highlights that the greatest challenge may lie, in education as elsewhere, in how we cope with changes in the nature of change itself (Evans & Wurster, x). Evans and Wurster articulate a basic law: *There is a universal trade-off between Richness and Reach*. Your business strategy either could focus on “rich” information – customized products and services tailored to a niche audience- or could reach out to a larger market, but with watered-down information that sacrifices richness in favour of a broad, general appeal. The traditional Britannica model concentrated on Richness - richness of content but also richness of target market. Salespeople concentrated on middle income and well-off parents who wanted to ‘do something’ for their children’s education and their future prospects. The fact that in many if not most cases the children seldom used it was neither here nor there. But nowadays when parents are anxious about their children’s performance at school, they don’t buy an encyclopaedia, they buy a computer.

The New Curriculum Paradigm

The model of education qualifications in the UK can be seen as a richness model, where secondary education moves towards the ‘Gold Standard’ of the A-level, with 3-4 subjects from the age of 16-18 as the norm. Influenced in particular by Vygotsky, it is now stressed however that education should go beyond an academic content base to an environment where knowledge can be understood as something that, facilitated by the teacher, is to be constructed among and between pupils rather than or as well as being simply imparted by the teacher and received by the pupil. As Sharpe (cited in GTCNI 2010) notes,

Professional knowledge is no longer viewed as just consisting of a standardised, explicit and fixed knowledge base. It is now seen as knowledge which exists in use, is ethical in its use and is changed by experience. (Sharpe 2004).

In this perspective, it is not only the pupil’s knowledge that develops, but also the teacher who, as a reflective and activist practitioner, develops: “When teachers use their knowledge, use changes what that knowledge is” (ibid.). But the challenge for teachers and teacher

educators alike is to bridge the gap between the traditional subject knowledge, curriculum-based skills and the emerging view of the curriculum which, as well as embracing developments in education theory, claims to be grounded in recent advances in our understanding of cognitive neuroscience, of how children learn. (CCEA 2003:22). For teachers and teacher educators working in this environment of change we can thus talk of a new paradigm where ‘learning how to learn’ is at the core of education.

The General Teaching Council of Northern Ireland, in line with many other jurisdictions, has developed a competences model for initial, early, and continuing teacher education and professional development which aims

... to develop in our young people the attributes, skills and capacities that will enable them to prosper and succeed in the knowledge society and at the same time, we are expected to counteract and mitigate, to an extent, the problems emerging from an increasingly globalised economy (GTCNI 2010:7)

Education in civilised society has always striven to develop an ethical underpinning to its mission. Day (2004), cited in the GTCNI document (2010:7), reminds us that: ‘Teachers, now, are potentially the single most important asset in the achievement of a democratically just learning society.’ This philosophical burden on teachers may cause many to despair. One is reminded of Basil Bernstein’s (1970) wise comment that “Education cannot compensate for society”, alerting us to the truth that the school is only one agent in a child’s education, with so many other influences working upon them – family, wider society, and an increasingly influential digital youth environment.

While Initial Teacher Education can at least prepare student teachers for the new paradigm, established teachers must also be adequately supported in coming to grips with any new demands through appropriate Continuing Professional Development. The harsh truth is that for many teachers the radical changes required may be just too demanding and frustrating. Just as the introduction of the National Curriculum in Britain in 1988 and the Northern Ireland Curriculum in 1989 and the demands of the technological revolution led to large numbers leaving the profession, one now hears many teachers, overwhelmed by the expectations of more recent Curricular Reform, are aching to be given an early retirement package, which unfortunately the current economic difficulties will not permit.

Curriculum Monitoring

The Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) in Northern Ireland embarked upon a programme of ‘monitoring and research’ from 1998 which included a major

research project, the *Northern Ireland Key Stage 3 Cohort Study* (2002a) carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research. It was designed to discover the views of key stage 3 (age 11-14) pupils' and their teachers' views on the curriculum. In summary, these studies suggested that pupils considered that the curriculum:

- Lacked balance and breadth
- Should be more relevant and enjoyable

The studies suggested that teachers felt that there was:

- Too much emphasis on content
- Too little emphasis on emotional, social, cultural and moral development

(Murphy 2009:3))

Languages in general did not come out well. Their perceptions included:

- Modern Languages and the creative arts were consistently seen as the subjects least useful for the future. They were also perceived as the least important for pupils' current needs (CCEA 2002a:10)
- Pupils perceived modern languages to be the most difficult area of the curriculum and its level of difficulty increased year-on –year throughout the key stage, especially in grammar schools (CCEA 2002a: 12)

The follow-up report on the Key stage 4 cohort reported pupils' views that “Languages were thought to be not useful” (CCEA 2002b:6), while on continuity and progression “Irish doesn't, but the rest follow-on” (CCEA 2002b:12))

In addition to the NFER studies, other emerging influences included studies on thinking skills and neuroscience, ICT initiatives, European trends and advice from the business and employment sector. Taking these concerns into consideration, CCEA set about designing the revised NI Curriculum.

The Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum

This current Northern Ireland Curriculum which emerged exemplifies the challenges laid out for this symposium and project, and the longer-term adaptation required for what is a new paradigm in Teacher Education. After a contested consultation, proposals for review of curriculum and assessment at Key Stage 3 were published in 2003 as Pathways (CCEA 2003a). These were extremely radical and it was not until 2006 that the Revised NI Curriculum was published, followed by the Education Order 2007. Phased implementation of the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum started in September 2007. The rationale and detail are set out in CCEA documentation. The focus on 'skills' is clear.

The Overarching Aim of the Northern Ireland Curriculum

The Education Order 2007 continues to legislate for a balanced and broadly based curriculum in all grant aided schools ‘to promote the spiritual, emotional, moral, cultural, intellectual and physical development of pupils at the school and thereby of society; and prepare pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life by equipping them with appropriate knowledge, understanding and skills. (CCEA 2007: §1.2)

Rationale for the Review of the Curriculum

Consultation on the Northern Ireland Curriculum established agreement that the role of education is to help prepare learners to become successful and fulfilled individuals; full participants in society; active contributors to the economy and custodians of the environment for future generations. Consultation also established agreement that education should equip pupils with the knowledge, skills, ideas, and values they need to become lifelong learners able to use information effectively; adapt to changing workplace and social environments; and keep abreast of technological advances.

A detailed longitudinal study of learners’ perceptions about the Northern Ireland Curriculum indicated that young people are motivated by learning that is related to their lives now and in the future. They welcome authentic opportunities to explore real life problems; to think through their own responses; to develop skills; to make meaningful connections across subjects; and to apply and transfer knowledge and understanding from one situation to another and particularly into the world of work.

Surveys of employers, teachers and parents continue to stress the need for crossdisciplinary skills and dispositions such as reading; writing; listening; speaking; basic computation. They also stress the need for adaptability, team work skills, collaboration and negotiation. Alongside government, they want education to deliver a skilled and creative workforce which will contribute to economic growth and global competitiveness.

The Northern Ireland Curriculum is informed by all of these needs and perspectives. **Detailed programmes of study have been replaced by minimum requirements set within a curriculum and skills framework that moves away from a one-size-fits-all towards greater flexibility to customise learning within an agreed entitlement. The Northern Ireland Curriculum focuses more on the learning needs of individuals and the relevance of learning for life, work, society, the economy and environment.** It emphasises the development of creativity and the

skills to manage information, problem-solve and make decisions and thus to create new knowledge within the knowledge age. (emphasis by author)

(CCEA 2007: §1.1_2)

The emphasis in the last paragraph has been added and reflects the focus on transferable skills rather than subject knowledge. In the meantime, there has also been a process of curriculum review in Britain which took aboard many of the innovative proposals of Northern Ireland, but progressed more coherently from the existing English National Curriculum (QCA 2008). The National Curriculum in Britain and the Northern Ireland Curriculum, dating from 1988 and 1989 respectively, had introduced a highly prescriptive common curriculum. In contrast to the close specification of the previous curriculum, the revised curriculum is much more open to individual interpretation and is summarised on one, single page for each learning area. This is in line with the rationale presented in the Rationale document above, of “minimum requirements set within a curriculum and skills framework”. Each Learning Area in the Revised Curriculum is set out on terms of how it contributes to the overall curriculum objectives. The statutory curriculum for each subject strand is set out as ‘Statements of Minimum Requirement’ and makes reference to ‘Key Elements’ of the curriculum such as Personal Understanding, Citizenship, Mutual Understanding, Employability, Ethical Awareness and Education for Sustainable Development, etc. The statements of minimum requirement are the compulsory elements of the curriculum in terms of knowledge and understanding, curriculum objectives, key elements and learning outcomes which must be taught. (Northern Ireland Curriculum 2007). Aside from these statements, teachers can choose the content they feel best suits their teaching context. This is a new paradigm, moving away from central prescription to the individual, which will undoubtedly raise questions and uncertainties for Teacher Educators, students, and administrators alike.

Assessment

This individual focus and flexibility immediately raises questions about assessment. The state examination GCSEs are still to be sat at the end of KS4 and teachers, pupils, parents want to know what is needed for the examination. The GCSE and post-16 examinations are recognised as barometers to assess pupil achievement, but they are also useful indicators of language health and outcomes in our schools. Such outcomes should be seen in a wider perspective. The 2000 Nuffield Languages Inquiry reports that, in terms of linguistic competence, the UK (including Northern Ireland) is 'doing badly'.(Nuffield 2000:5)

As each language valiantly fights its own corner, we are losing the greater battle: 'We talk about communication but don't always communicate. There is enthusiasm for languages but it

is patchy. Educational provision is fragmented, achievement poorly measured, continuity not very evident. In the language of our time, there is a lack of joined-up thinking' (Nuffield 2000:5).

Languages at A-level, moreover, are facing an environment where a wider range of subjects are competing for students at A-level. Languages are seen as difficult and are losing popularity. This is Professor Kelly's area, but we can say that the drop in students choosing languages at A-level means that numbers in universities have dropped as well, and language departments are closing down. The fall in the number of graduates leaving university with language skills is worrying (UCML 2011). The gender imbalance is also a concern as three quarters of the language students are female. This is relevant to teacher education as it means there will be very few male language teachers as role models in schools. However, the most significant development in recent years has been that languages, after just over a decade as a compulsory subject at Key Stages 3 and 4, are no longer compulsory at Key stage 4, 14 years to 16. This has been the case in England since 2002, and in Northern Ireland since 2007. In other words, pupils are now only required to do 3 years of modern language study in post-primary education – the lowest compulsory language education in Europe.

There is still an area within the curriculum called Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) in England, 'Modern Languages' in Northern Ireland to allow for Irish. But within this area, there are the competing language subjects of French, German, Spanish, Irish, where the various languages are joined in an internecine competition for a shrinking slice of a crowded timetable. It reminds one of the Irish phrase, *Cogadh na gCarad*, the War of Friends, Civil War.

If Nuffield identified a lack of 'joined-up thinking' in 2000, the Curriculum Review process since that date displays policy contradiction. The 1980s and 1990s promoted 'Languages for All', encouraging all pupils to study a language, rather than seeing it as a rather elite subject area, and 'Diversification', encouraging a wider range of languages beyond the predominant French (Neil & McKendry), but Curriculum Review portends a U-turn. Languages are no longer compulsory at Key stage 4, from age 14. Moreover globalisation in general and the dominance of English in the media and the internet in particular have led more people to believe that 'English is enough' and languages have lost out in the timetable.

It would also be naïve to believe that the whole staffroom shares the concerns of the linguists about the pressure on languages. Unlike England, Northern Ireland has retained selection at age 11, and so we have a Grammar school/Secondary school divide which shows

a clear division of language uptake along lines of ability and social class. In most secondary school staffrooms, serving the less academic and often less economically well-off, you will find teachers who welcome languages becoming optional, since many pupils find languages difficult and results are relatively poor – and these teachers include many language teachers who find teaching to lesser able, demotivated pupils stressful and a strain. This is partly due to the way in which the so-called Communicative approach to language teaching, as it was enshrined in the programmes of study of the National and Northern Curricula, has become boring and burdensome for pupils across the ability range. As we have already seen languages came out badly in the NFER and CCEA longitudinal research, based mostly on pupils’ views.

As the Joint Council for Qualifications statistics show and the CILT Language Trends since 2002 have tracked, the numbers taking languages throughout the UK has fallen sharply.

Table 1: Number of GCSE entries by language in the UK (excluding Scotland) as a whole (percentage change over period in brackets)

	French	Spanish	German
2000	341004	49973	133659
2001	347007	54326	135113
2002	338468	57983	126216
2003	331089	61323	125663
2004	318095	64078	122023
2005	272140	62456	105288
2006	236189	62143	90311
2007	216718	63978	81061
2008	201940	67092	76695
2009	188688	67070	73469
2010	177618	67707	70169
	(-55%)	(+35%)	(-45%)

Table 2: Number of GCSE entries in Northern Ireland by Language (percentage change over period in brackets)

	French	Irish	Spanish	German	Italian
1996	13838	2021	1561	1496	156
2010	7243	2161	3296	1276	–
	-48%	+7%	+111%	-15%	

We have seen the overall drop in languages nationally in the UK, and locally in Northern Ireland, but while the general trends are similar there are some important local differences which make the Northern Ireland experience significant. As noted above, Northern Ireland still retains academic selection at Age 11. The successful pupils go to grammar schools, which have traditionally had a strong reputation for supporting languages. Other pupils go to secondary schools where the language tradition has not been so strong. Since languages became optional in Northern Ireland in 2007, there has been an almost calamitous withdrawal from languages in secondary schools at age 14. Most alarmingly, grammar schools are now withdrawing from compulsory languages in Key Stage 4, age 14-16.

This letter was received from a Grammar school headmaster in June last year.

Hello Eugene,

As a committed European and a committed linguist I am increasingly concerned at the rapid drop in interest in the “traditional” modern languages and I know this concern is shared by other grammar school principals. We are beginning to wonder if, for example, French still deserves to hold a slot in the regular timetable, or should it be offered as an extra-curricular activity.

I hear students question why we are not offering Polish and they argue that it would be more useful to them than French.

As schools move on to provide the 24 subjects at GCSE and 27 at A level (which will be required by law from 2013) perhaps modern languages will struggle to attract the interest of pupils who have other options available to them.

Maybe it’s time to inject a fresh approach, to give pupils “tasters” of other European and world languages, to help them appreciate the relevance and value of certain

languages – rather than force-feeding French and producing the resistance so evident in so many schools these days”.

We have seen the 55% increase in Spanish GCSE in Northern Ireland over the last 10 years and the 35% increase nationally. Indeed there has been a 111% increase in GCSE Spanish in Northern Ireland since languages became a compulsory subject in 1996. The reasons are many: the weather and holiday homes with cheap flights; the Beckham factor when David Beckham moved to Real Madrid football club. There is also the Spanish government policy of promoting Spanish globally through the *Consejería de Educación* of the Spanish Ministry of Education and the promotion of the belief that Spanish is easier than other languages “*El español es fácil*” is the motto, with the subtext that other languages are more difficult.

The role of government policy and cultural institute support is vital. French cultural institutions have been quietly working as before; the Goethe Institut moved much of its activities to eastern Europe with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the language has suffered in our schools as a result. Irish has been hidebound by the political appointees approach to *Foras na Gaeilge*, and Spanish support for their language is remarkable. The policy is strong and the money and resources are available for Spanish through the *Consejería* and a proactive approach to European funding. Chris Bryant, a British Member of Parliament and a former Foreign Office minister, caused a stir recently when he said that French is a useless language (Hansard 14 June 2010). We should, he said, be learning global languages like Mandarin, Arabic and Spanish. He did however make the very useful suggestion that other language interests should follow the Spanish government’s shrewd policy of appointing Spanish Education Officers throughout the land to promote their particular language, a strategy which has contributed to the great increase in Spanish teaching in Northern Ireland from 2002 on. However, foreign cultural institute and agency support depends upon local support as well.

There is a current movement to promote primary languages in the United Kingdom though future funding is not secure. The main focus currently in Northern Ireland is on a peripatetic project for Spanish. The primary project now includes Irish, and in the goal of inclusivity, Polish for local Northern Ireland children. The difficulty about this is that by the time this project was introduced in 2008, many of the Polish community have now gone back to Poland. When one of the education board officials responsible for the primary languages project was asked why French was being ignored in the project, the answer was: “French has had its chance. It’s time to do something else”. So while we are achieving diversification with

languages other than French, this is hardly the spirit of respect and diversity that we are supposed to aspire to. It can get worse. Some years ago, when Spanish had a much lower profile in our schools than today, I had the misfortune to be in a coffee queue behind a senior Hispanist academic and a senior education board languages officer who were discussing how Spanish could be promoted in our schools. To my horror, one of them said, to the enthusiastic agreement of the other: “The problem is Irish: If we could get rid of it!”

This raises a concern about what we can call the weather vane approach, where policies and promotion of particular languages change as language popularity changes. There are also of course political agendas at play as well. But ephemeral enthusiasm is not a firm basis of policy for developing personal and national competences. Nor are shortsighted academic institution policies. In the last ten years, my university, a member of the Russell group of UK Universities, has closed its departments of Greek, Latin, Slavonic studies, Italian and, last summer, its department of German. Yet In Europe German is the language spoken by most people as their first language, not Chinese, and Germany is the main trade market of the United Kingdom within the EU. To have suggested as recently as five years ago that a leading regional university would close down German would have been unimaginable. If the imperative for introducing languages into the National curriculum was on economic grounds, which it was, how can the UK system promote Spanish, but abandon German? Is it acceptable to say that the enthusiasm for Spanish is a ‘Lifestyle Choice’, as a Department of Education official said to me recently? One of the lesser acknowledged advantages of speaking a minority language is that its speakers cannot and have never been complacent. One has always to justify one’s language, whereas the recent challenge to the ‘main’ languages in schools has caught many of their enthusiasts unawares. Another challenge in the English-speaking world is to know which language or languages to choose. A strength of the revised curriculum is its emphasis on Language awareness and Knowledge about language, focusing on language in all its aspects, not just as a second language subject.

Professor Kelly has made the case for a Holistic Approach. Another term could be ‘An Integrated Approach’. In October 2010 a conference was organised in Belfast for language teacher educators from all over the island of Ireland – with full representation from the two jurisdictions of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. (SCOTENS) Teacher educators from all sectors were present, Irish, Foreign Languages, Primary, Post-Primary. This had never happened before. Indeed, there were institutions where the Irish staff had barely any contact with the foreign language lecturers. In my own institution and department,

I have friendly conversations with my English and TESOL subject colleagues, but with little real collaboration yet at a professional level.

The focus on introducing Spanish in our primary schools has been welcomed by many. But I have my reservations if it means that as the pupils progress to post-primary education, other languages will be sidelined. A particular case can be argued for the indigenous regional and minority languages in primary, emphasising cultural and environmental advantages (DENI 1974), but to see this as an opportunity to provide a portal to other languages. There is also the potential of Esperanto as a propaedeutic – a preparation for learning.

The development of positive attitudes and transferable language learning skills are to be emphasised. We are experiencing a paradigm shift in language learning in an age where, other than English, the learning certainties around traditional curriculum languages have been dislodged; an age where ‘How to learn’ is valued, rather than just telling pupils what, or which language they OUGHT to learn. Developing the Capacity to learn is seen as equally valid as the content of a syllabus.

Faut-il enseigner l’anglais en maternelle?

Il est évident que l’essentiel pour nos enfants **n’est pas l’apprentissage** d’une langue, l’anglais ou une autre, en plus de sa langue maternelle ou d’éducation, **mais l’acquisition de la capacité d’apprendre** des langues, l’anglais entre autres, et de savoir s’adapter à toutes les situations (author’s emphasis)

(Observatoire Européen 2010)

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