



Standards and Quality in Secondary Schools

Aiming for Excellence in Modern Foreign Languages

Estyn Guidance for Schools and Local Education Authorities



Arolygiaeth Ei Mawrhydi Dros Addysg
A Hyfforddiant yng Nghymru

Her Majesty's Inspectorate
For Education and Training in Wales

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Contents

Introduction

1	Context: factors that influence take-up	1
1.1	Pupils' attainment	1
1.2	Pupils' experiences and the quality of teaching	2
1.3	Statutory Welsh	2
1.4	The place of foreign languages in the school curriculum	3
1.5	Staffing	6
1.6	The attitude of boys to foreign languages	7
2	Improving standards of achievement	9
2.1	Current standards	9
2.2	National Curriculum levels	9
2.3	Characteristics of good standards	9
2.4	Characteristics of unsatisfactory standards	10
2.5	Key skills	11
3	Improving the quality of teaching and learning	12
3.1	Characteristics of good teaching	12
3.2	The basic challenge	12
3.3	The National Curriculum	13
3.4	Using the target language	13
3.5	Developing target language use by pupils	14
3.6	Grammar	15
3.7	Use of printed materials	17
3.8	Games and competitions	17
3.9	Information and communications technology (ICT)	18
3.10	Assessment	18
4	Improving other aspects of provision	20
4.1	Curriculum	20
4.2	Staffing, staff development and management	21
4.3	Accommodation	21
4.4	Resources	22
5	Promotion of foreign languages	23
6	Main recommendations for schools and local education authorities (LEAs)	24

Introduction

The purpose of this booklet

This Estyn document is intended to contribute to the Welsh Assembly Government's National Modern Foreign Languages Strategy. It provides background information on the school context, and guidance for school language departments, school senior managers and local education authorities (LEAs). The guidance aims to contribute to improving standards of work, overall provision and take-up. It focuses on key stages 3 and 4 on the grounds that:

- if take-up can be improved in key stage 4, there will be a greater pool of students able to opt for post-16 study; and
- measures which improve take-up in key stage 4 are also likely to encourage post-16 study.

The Languages in Action project, run by the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) with the support of the National Assembly, the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and Estyn, has already shown that take-up in individual schools at key stage 4 can be improved through the efforts of language departments and school managers, backed up by external support, training and advice. This document provides nationally consistent advice for all schools, and sets achievable national benchmarks. It should be used by schools and LEAs as a basis for self-evaluation and improvement.

Some sections of this document have already appeared in Estyn's contribution to the original consultation paper on the National Modern Foreign Languages Strategy. Its content has been derived from an Estyn survey in 2000 of secondary schools in Wales, as well as from more recent inspection evidence. Other sections are drawn from Estyn's Handbook for the Inspection of Schools, or from Estyn's subject guidance to foreign language inspectors.

1. Context: factors that influence take-up

1.1 Pupils' attainment

GCSE

School managers are understandably concerned with the GCSE results of individual subjects and their effect on the school's overall pass rate. In schools with low take-up, departments often achieve good results from classes containing a relatively high proportion of able pupils. In such cases, schools may be reluctant to promote greater participation, fearing that the department's results will worsen if they have to teach a wider range of ability.

If a department wishes to increase its take-up, it needs to show that it is capable of getting appropriate GCSE results from pupils of all abilities.

Key stage 3 levels

Progress through the National Curriculum levels is also a factor. The majority of pupils begin Year 7 on at least level 4 in most subjects, but are only just beginning their study of foreign languages. Consequently, in the past, pupils were only expected to reach level 4 in languages at the end of key stage 3, compared with level 5 in other subjects. In practice, this was the outcome for the great majority.

The reform of the National Curriculum under Curriculum 2000 changed the description for level 5 in foreign languages in order to make it easier to reach. Pupils are now expected to reach level 5 at the end of key stage 3. However, the National Curriculum scores for 2001 show that fewer pupils obtain level 5 in a foreign language than in any other National Curriculum subject except Welsh second language. Moreover, there is a considerable gap between languages and the next lowest subject.

It is therefore not surprising that pupils perceive foreign languages to be difficult and less likely to lead to a good examination pass than other subjects. Where schools provide a level in reports at the end of each year of key stage 3, pupils' feeling of failure in languages may be established early on, as most pupils' level will be below other subjects for some time.

Pupils and parents should be made aware that it is normal for the National Curriculum level in foreign languages to be lower than in other subjects. The school should make clear that this is not a reason for abandoning the study of languages in key stage 4. In predicting GCSE grades on the basis of level descriptions, the school could use level 4 as the predictor for a minimum of grade C in languages, whereas in other subjects it will probably use level 5.

1.2 Pupils' experiences and the quality of teaching

As in all subjects, good teaching is a crucial factor in encouraging take-up in key stage 4. Pupils are not likely to opt for languages in increasing numbers unless they really like the subject in key stage 3. There are numerous examples of good teaching in all parts of Wales, and stimulating teaching was a significant feature of the schools visited by Her Majesty's Inspectors (HMI) where take-up is good. Section 10 reports indicate an overall improvement in the quality of teaching in the country as a whole over recent years. However, the amount of good language teaching decreases from Year 7 through to Year 9.

The promotion of good teaching is one of the keys to improving take-up nationally. At present, no LEA has a full-time adviser for foreign languages, and most do not have enough advisory capacity to promote good teaching. The amount of in-service training (INSET) is limited, and too few language departments receive regular monitoring and advice from external subject specialists.

LEAs should provide regular monitoring and advice for language departments. Since the teaching that pupils receive in Year 8 and Year 9 is likely to influence their option choices, schools and LEAs should concentrate on improving the quality of teaching in these years in particular.

1.3 Statutory Welsh

The statutory requirement to teach Welsh second language in key stage 4 is cited as affecting take-up by some of the schools surveyed by Estyn. These schools say that some pupils, particularly those who are not good at languages, feel that one language is enough, and do not see the need to study another language in addition to Welsh.

Statutory Welsh certainly seems to have had an effect in some schools and LEAs. The LEAs with the biggest decrease in foreign languages in key stage 4 in 2000 also experienced significant increases in numbers taking Welsh second language.

However, the picture is not consistent across Wales, and Welsh second language is certainly not the only factor. The Estyn survey showed that:

- many schools believe strongly in the importance of learning both Welsh and a foreign language, and are successful in promoting the two subjects;

- in nearly a third of LEAs, a significant increase in Welsh take-up does not adversely affect foreign languages; and
- there are examples of schools where pupils in Year 10 take a full course in both Welsh and a foreign language, or where as many as 90% of pupils take a foreign language alongside a full Welsh second language course.

The statutory requirements to teach Welsh should not be used as an excuse to limit expectations about foreign language take-up. It is certainly not the only factor, and there are many others that need to be addressed.

1.4 The place of foreign languages in the school curriculum

Total time devoted to language learning

In the UK as a whole, less time is spent on teaching foreign languages in schools than in most of our European neighbours. The average time spent in Wales is two hours per week in key stage 3. In reality, this is not enough time to enable pupils to make significant strides in language competence.

Some schools give more time to languages than others. Around one-third of schools provide more than two hours per week in key stage 3. A few manage more than 150 minutes, whereas around 10% of schools provide only about 105 minutes per week. Schools that provide less than 120 minutes per week cannot expect to cover the programme of study in sufficient depth.

As a result, up to the end of key stage 3, foreign language learning receives less time than most other National Curriculum subjects, being the only subject which is not taught in key stages 1 and 2. As it is not compulsory in key stage 4, more than half the pupils in Wales learn a foreign language for only three years.

In key stage 4, foreign languages have the same amount of time as other options, usually 150 minutes per week. This is adequate.

Of the schools where over 50% of pupils study foreign languages in Year 10, very few provide less than 120 minutes teaching per week in key stage 3.

Frequency and length of lessons

Most language teachers believe that pupils learn languages most effectively through frequent and relatively short lessons. Few schools timetable languages in this way and, in practice, most pupils in Wales have lessons twice a week in key stage 3. This does not provide the regular repetition and re-visiting of teaching points that enable rules and concepts to be established, and vocabulary to be absorbed. Furthermore, in most schools, lessons last between 50 minutes and one hour and teachers often resort to relatively un-productive tasks in order to fill the time.

A small number of schools provide shorter and more frequent lessons by forming language classes or sets in conjunction with another subject, often Welsh second language. This allows the subjects to be blocked together on the timetable. This facilitates the splitting of lessons, typically allowing 4 thirty minute lessons) or 1 sixty minute lesson and two thirty minute lessons instead of 2 sixty minute lessons per week.

Arrangements for learning a second foreign language

It is a matter of concern that so few pupils study two foreign languages in key stage 4. This has a knock-on effect on the number of students who study two foreign languages for A level and at university. This is reducing the number of linguists entering teaching who are able to teach two languages.

A small number of schools have recently introduced a second foreign language, but far more have dropped it in recent years. The main reasons given for this are the lack of time in the curriculum, and the fact that staff able to teach more than one language are in short supply. Of the schools that do offer a second language, a few do so only from Year 10. This arrangement provides little time for pupils to reach a good standard. The rest usually introduce it in Year 9 or, occasionally, in Year 8.

In a few schools, all pupils learn two foreign languages in key stage 3. This has the advantage of allowing pupils to opt later for the one they consider to be their stronger language. It is also more likely to lead to good take-up of the second foreign language. However, it often reduces the time available for the first language, and consequently affects the standards pupils achieve.

In practice, in most schools, the second language is timetabled only for the top sets. In such cases, time is usually taken from the first foreign language, sometimes Welsh second language and occasionally English. It is assumed, reasonably, that pupils who can cope with a second language should be able to manage with less time in other languages. It is therefore important that the pupils taking two foreign languages are carefully selected. Those who are weak at languages should be allowed to drop one language in order to concentrate on the other.

Some schools offer a second language as a non-statutory 'additional time' option. One school, for example, offers it in Year 8 in an option block with craft and drama.

On the whole, it is a better strategy in key stage 3 to restrict the second foreign language to those pupils who show aptitude or interest in languages, in order to provide more time for one foreign language for most pupils.

Diversification of the first foreign language

The issue of diversification of the first language is a separate one from the provision of a second foreign language, but many of the factors influencing schools are similar. Schools that would like to diversify often have difficulty in doing so because of the shortage of teachers of languages other than French. The fear of being unable to recruit new staff, if they lose a teacher, has a significant influence on schools' decisions about diversification.

Schemes to diversify the first foreign language almost invariably involve:

- splitting a year group in half, each half taking a different language; or
- alternating the language from one whole year group to the next.

Each system has advantages and disadvantages, though the second approach necessarily restricts pupils' choice.

Setting

Some language teachers teach mixed-ability groups extremely well, but many find it particularly difficult, especially after Year 7. Some schools have mixed-ability grouping in key stage 4 because the language classes are in different option blocks. This often causes difficulties where the ability range is wide. For example, mixed-ability grouping can hinder the teaching of important grammatical concepts to those pupils who could cope and benefit from learning them. It can limit the progress of abler pupils, and also makes it more difficult to help average or below average pupils to make good progress.

Schools should try to provide some form of ability grouping for languages, particularly in key stage 4, where mixed-ability grouping is seen to hinder pupils' progress.

Key stage 4 options

The position of languages in the key stage 4 option system can have a strong influence on take-up.

Some schools still have an option block containing mainly foreign languages, with a few minority subjects to allow very weak linguists an alternative choice. Other schools have persisted with a language block containing both foreign languages and Welsh, but also provide a compulsory short course in both subjects. This means that pupils take a full course in one of foreign language or Welsh, and a short course in the other.

The problem has to be addressed that some pupils do find languages harder than many other subjects. Less able or academic pupils, in particular, have sometimes reached a ceiling of achievement in Year 9. As a result, they are often likely to wish to drop languages. If schools wish to make all pupils study a foreign language at key stage 4, they could consider the possibility of offering less able pupils a more practical approach or even the opportunity to study a new language in key stage 4.

An option scheme intended to ensure that pupils study in specific areas of the curriculum is more likely to ensure study of languages by a large number of pupils. Whatever the option system, it is important to provide a good experience of language learning in key stage 3 in order to encourage confidence and a positive attitude about continuing study in key stage 4.

Teachers' attitudes

The attitudes and expectations of staff are influential factors. Many departments encourage pupils of all abilities in their language learning. However, a few have an elitist approach and are happy to restrict language study in key stage 4 to more able pupils. In schools where departments face the challenge of teaching mixed-ability groups, some teachers are disinclined to encourage take-up among the less able.

Where take-up is good, teachers do not consider the subject as exclusively for the more able, and they encourage pupils of all abilities to continue their study of languages in key stage 4.

1.5 Staffing

Staffing constraints in schools have a significant effect. Most schools have enough specialist staff for the classes that they currently provide, but rarely have enough spare teaching capacity to provide more classes. This can be a strong disincentive to curriculum managers to increase take-up in key stage 4. Schools should plan to increase their staff to cater for the appropriate development of their language provision.

Foreign language assistants often make a significant contribution to language teaching, as described in the National Assembly's strategy. However, many schools do not have an assistant, often because they are short of money and do not consider them a priority.

Schools should plan for the increased staffing needed, if they intend to increase take-up in key stage 4, and should consider appointing a foreign language assistant.

1.6 The attitude of boys to foreign languages

Boys are usually less successful than girls in language learning. It is often the case that boys:

- are more reluctant to participate orally;
- produce more untidy written work;
- perceive languages to be female subjects; and
- make up the majority of lower sets.

Boys often tend to sit in all-male groups in class. Sometimes this can reinforce negative attitudes. Seating pairs of boys near to pairs of girls enables them to work in mixed pairs or groups for oral work. This can bring more variety of topics into the oral work and sometimes encourages better performance and behaviour from the boys.

Good teaching is particularly important in encouraging boys. They appear to be less willing than girls to apply themselves when the work is difficult and the teaching uninspiring. An emphasis on neatness and presentation at the expense of content tends to discourage them. The use of humour and a lively approach, including games and competitions, are particularly effective. Information and communications technology (ICT) usually stimulates a good response and there is scope to increase its use. According to recent inspection evidence, only 25% of departments plan the use of ICT effectively.

Boys' perception that languages are for girls is reinforced by the relative scarcity of male language teachers. Take-up by boys is often improved when there is at least one male teacher in the department, but many departments are staffed entirely by women. All-female departments need to pay particular attention to promoting the subject among boys. Some do so with notable success.

Where there is setting, girls often predominate in higher sets. Some schools have considered ways of positively discriminating, on the grounds that the boys may be slower developers but have similar potential, and may catch up later. This may improve boys' attainment, but care needs to be taken to ensure it is not unfair to the girls. Experiments with boys-only groups have brought success in some schools, but not in others. One school which experimented with boys-only groups gained valuable experience in planning lessons that appealed to boys. Departments might consider using questionnaires or surveys to explore the factors affecting the attitude of both sexes towards languages.

Departments should have clear guidelines on gender issues. These should address, for example:

- pupil groupings and seating arrangements in class;
- gender bias in curriculum content and materials;
- classroom activities;
- assessment of content rather than presentation; and
- ensuring that oral questions are addressed to, and answered by, boys as often as girls.

2. Improving standards of achievement

2.1 Current standards

As already mentioned above, the National Curriculum results for 2001 show that the number of pupils who reached level 5 in a foreign language was lower than in all other subjects except Welsh second language. Improving standards in key stage 3 will contribute to an increase in take-up because pupils will feel more confident that they are making good progress and that they can do well later.

There is no strong evidence of a decline in standards in terms of GCSE pass rates. However, whilst the percentage of entries gaining A*-C at GCSE has slightly improved since 1992, the improvement has been less than in most other National Curriculum subjects. Entries have reduced as a proportion of the age group, and tend to contain a higher proportion of able pupils than in many other subjects.

2.2 National Curriculum levels

Language departments need to make allowances for the ability of the class and the school's intake, but the following table of National Curriculum levels provides a guide to the targets for pupils' attainment.

End of year	Expected level for most pupils
7	3
8	4
9	5

Abler pupils should be able to achieve above these levels in some or all of the four language skills. A frequent weakness is that pupils reach the expected level in listening and reading but are at a much lower level in speaking and writing.

2.3 Characteristics of good standards

Schools should not only judge the standards that pupils achieve on the basis of National Curriculum level descriptions. They should also evaluate their progress against the characteristics of good and unsatisfactory standards described in the Estyn Handbook. These descriptions, used by inspectors in their judgements, are set out opposite.

Pupils:

- demonstrate attainment corresponding to the appropriate National Curriculum level descriptions;
- progress from simple to more complex language;
- make increasing use of the target language for most aspects of the lesson, whether working as a class, in small groups, in pairs or independently;
- are able to use two or more skills in combination;
- demonstrate competence in understanding and responding to authentic spoken and written language in different registers;
- re-use and adapt, in speech and writing, language which they have encountered through reading and listening;
- exploit and adapt language encountered in one context for use in another context;
- show initiative in using the target language, and an ability to cope with unpredictable language;
- pay appropriate attention to pronunciation, clarity and accuracy; and
- show increasing awareness of the cultural context of the foreign language.

2.4 Characteristics of unsatisfactory standards

Pupils:

- demonstrate attainment below that described in the appropriate National Curriculum level descriptions;
- use only single words or short phrases in speaking and writing;
- make little use of the target language during the lesson;
- are unable to use skills in combination;
- lack the ability, at an appropriate level, to understand and respond to authentic spoken and written language, and to re-use and adapt what they have heard or read;
- cannot exploit language from one context for use in another context;
- show little initiative in their use of the target language, and are unable to cope with unpredictable language;
- have poor pronunciation;
- use language so inaccurately that they do not make themselves understood; and
- show very little awareness of the cultural context of the foreign language.

2.5 Key skills

Foreign languages contribute significantly to the development of key skills. This contribution is indicated clearly in the National Curriculum programme of study for key stage 3, and further exemplified in the Estyn Handbook. The guidance in the Handbook has particular implications for how languages are taught.

Pupils:

- develop an understanding of how language works, and of the need for clarity when conveying meaning;
- speak for different purposes to a range of audiences;
- write clearly and accurately;
- understand and use information from a variety of oral and written sources, using context and other clues to interpret meaning;
- count, calculate and tell the time in the foreign language;
- use a range of ICT hardware and software, for example in word-processing, text-manipulation or language learning programmes, or in order to access and communicate information or messages via e-mail, fax and the Internet;
- apply grammatical rules, and devise solutions to linguistic problems;
- work collaboratively on tasks in pairs or small groups; and
- develop their knowledge, understanding and tolerance of other countries and cultures.

3. Improving the quality of teaching and learning

3.1 Characteristics of good teaching

The Estyn Handbook provides a checklist of the characteristics of good teaching.

Effective teaching in foreign languages:

- ensures that pupils experience the requirements of the National Curriculum programme of study or the appropriate examination syllabus;
- provides frequent opportunities for pupils to practise their language skills in a variety of ways, for example as a whole class, in small groups, in pairs and independently;
- ensures that pupils use productively, in speech and writing, some of the language which they encounter in listening and reading activities, and gives particular attention in class to the practice of speaking skills;
- exploits a range of specialist resources, including visual aids and recorded or written language;
- provides clear explanation of grammatical rules (in the pupils' home language, if the teacher prefers, particularly for more difficult concepts) where doing so will contribute to pupils' understanding and use of appropriate structures;
- provides thorough practice of grammatical structures in the target language; and
- encourages a high proportion of pupils to continue their study of modern languages in key stage 4 and in the sixth form.

The following sections offer advice on the kind of teaching which attracts good or very good grades in inspections, and further exemplify some of the principles of the National Curriculum Orders, the Estyn Handbook, and the National Languages Strategy.

3.2 The basic challenge

If pupils are to become more competent in languages, and also more confident in their ability, they need to increase their understanding of the structures of the language studied. In their coverage of new topics, many language courses concentrate heavily on the acquisition of vocabulary but do not adequately develop pupils' knowledge of language systems and patterns.

This is not to say that teachers should neglect the broadening of pupils' vocabulary, but that they should supplement this by a structured and well-organised programme of grammar learning, coupled with an emphasis on teaching pupils to speak and write the language. Pupils need to be able to manipulate and create language, rather than merely repeat set phrases which they have learnt by heart.

3.3 The National Curriculum

Departments should look carefully at the National Curriculum programme of study for key stage 3. This provides a set of 30 statements specifying skills, knowledge and activities, and forms a valuable checklist for departments for evaluating the content of their courses. In the best practice, teachers discuss them regularly in department meetings. However, inspection evidence indicates that weaker departments do not make enough use of the programme of study as a basis for their work.

3.4 Using the target language

Lessons should have an emphasis on oral work in the target language. Pupils should be taught the language of the classroom, so that they can ask in the target language for repetition or explanation when they do not understand. They also need to know basic rules and patterns of pronunciation, so that they can associate the written and spoken word. Above all, they should have as much opportunity as possible in class to practise their use of language, whether to consolidate previously learnt language or to practise something new.

Most teachers use the target language well, often supported by good use of visual aids and classroom displays. They should continue to do so, wherever possible, but this should not be at the expense of clarity, comprehension and control. It is sometimes better, for example, to explain a complex task quickly in the home language, rather than spending so long getting the message across in the target language that the time available for the task itself is reduced. The most important thing is to maximise pupils' use and practice of the target language.

Teachers should feel justified in using the home language in specific situations. These can include:

- describing complicated tasks;
- explaining grammatical points, especially for the first time;
- explaining the meanings of words for which visual aids are not available or appropriate;
- making comparisons between the foreign language and the home or other languages; and
- disciplining pupils.

The important principle here is that, in most situations, the teacher should use the target language when pupils can, with help and patience, readily understand what is said. This level of understanding will increase as pupils gain more knowledge of the language, but it also depends on pupils' ability. For example, with many pupils, particularly the more able, it should often be possible to revise certain grammatical points in the target language.

Another important point is that, if structures or grammatical points have been explained in the home language, they should still be practised thoroughly in the target language.

3.5 Developing target language use by pupils

Inspection findings show that pupils' understanding of spoken and written language is often good. What is less good is their use of the productive skills of speaking and writing.

Re-cycling language

Listening and reading materials at level 4 or level 5 are often exploited through exercises which result in spoken or written work at a much lower level. Tick-boxes, matching or true/false exercises and one-word answers are frequent examples of this. Whilst these are legitimate ways to test understanding, they are rarely effective in teaching new language or encouraging its extended use. Teachers should have the confidence to move beyond the exercises in many course books, where these focus merely on simple comprehension or recall. Creative exploitation of texts enables pupils to use language structures again in similar or in different contexts.

Pupils are helped to reach higher levels in the productive skills, when there is a stress on re-use or re-cycling of text which is heard or spoken. This can be done through:

- repetition of the text;
- questions which require re-use of the text with little or no adaptation;
- at a higher level, question and answer work which requires pupils to adapt or manipulate the text at an increasing level of complexity; and
- teaching which focuses on the structures in a text rather than merely on comprehension of information.

Group work

Group work (or pair work) ensures that as many pupils as possible have opportunities to speak the target language in class, and is a frequent characteristic of lessons that are graded good or very good. Group tasks should be time-limited and have a clear objective. Often the focus of the work is improved if objectives are potentially assessable (even though they need not be formally assessed).

In effective group work:

- pupils are given a clear objective and, where necessary, a time limit;
- the structure and rules for the activity are made clear to all pupils, if necessary in the home language;
- criteria for successful completion of the task are clear;
- achievement is often assessed, in some cases by the pupils themselves;
- activities are generally based on familiar structures and vocabulary;
- tasks are demonstrated or practised in advance with the whole class, and then demonstrated at the end of the session before the whole class;
- written support enables all pupils to succeed, but is gradually withdrawn;
- participants genuinely exchange information, not knowing in advance what will be said to them by their partners; and
- successful completion of the task can be judged by checking how well information has been transmitted.

Talking and writing at greater length

Monosyllabic answers are often the most natural response to questions. They can demonstrate comprehension, but do not provide practice in re-using or creating language.

In response to oral or written questions, teachers should expect pupils to produce phrases or sentences rather than single words or very short answers, even though this may not be the most natural way to respond.

3.6 Grammar

The National Curriculum Orders, revised in 2000, place an increased emphasis on the importance of teaching relevant grammar. This is not an end in itself, but a shortcut to better understanding.

To be able to adapt and manipulate sentences and to write creatively, language learners must develop an understanding of how the language works. Learning phrases by heart has a part to play but pupils should not have to rely on this.

At present, in many schools, pupils' progress in understanding grammatical structures is too slow. As a result, by Year 9, when they make their option choices, many pupils lack confidence because they do not really understand the language they are using. Many Year 9 pupils, for example, cannot effectively use the different parts of a regular verb in the present tense. With such limited grammatical knowledge, they cannot begin to manipulate sentences successfully.

Learners are more likely to develop a good understanding of grammar when:

- the scheme of work clearly specifies grammatical progression, and integrates this into topic coverage;
- pupils learn to use the different parts of basic verbs in the present tense at an early stage, so that they can begin to produce sentences early in Year 7;
- teachers make relevant comparisons with the home or other languages; and
- teachers explain grammatical structures, where necessary in the home language, before practising them thoroughly in the target language.

Making links with Welsh and English

Secondary school language departments rarely know what language terminology is taught in their partner primary schools. They should familiarise themselves with the literacy strategy (for both English and Welsh first language) of their LEA and of their partner primary schools. In most cases, the strategy will specify the teaching of some grammatical and linguistic points. The language department should ensure that its approach exploits and reinforces what the pupils already know. Familiarity with the schemes being used in the primary schools to teach pupils Welsh second language will also help the foreign language department.

Foreign language departments should also try to agree a common approach to aspects of language learning with the English and Welsh departments in the school. Furthermore, departments can often adopt each other's good practice and reinforce each other's teaching. There is sometimes rivalry between Welsh and foreign language departments, especially as they may be competing for the same pupils in key stage 4. Schools need to encourage these departments to collaborate and share ideas.

3.7 Use of printed materials

Time is sometimes wasted in lessons by requiring pupils to:

- copy out vocabulary or other notes;
- draw pictures to illustrate vocabulary; and
- draw grids or charts for comprehension activities.

Such activities not only lack challenge for many pupils but, in the first example, often result in an inaccurate record of the material. In comprehension exercises, the emphasis should be on the activity itself, not preparatory copying or drawing.

In order to avoid over-use of the home language, it is good practice to explain the meaning of words with pictures where possible, for example with flashcards or the overhead projector. However, pupils should not be asked to spend time in drawing pictures. Whilst pupils may well wish to illustrate their work in their own time at home, teachers should not let them think that this is time well spent as far as learning languages is concerned. The time would be much better spent on more challenging language tasks.

Good quality prepared materials, whether ready-made or produced by the department, save time, can provide visual support, and ensure an accurate record of information for pupils.

3.8 Games and competitions

Some teachers use games and competitions very successfully in the classroom to make lessons more enjoyable and to motivate pupils. On the whole, they are not used enough.

Games can:

- involve all or most of the class at the same time;
- involve pupils working in pairs;
- stimulate friendly competition;
- involve pupils in remembering and producing language; and
- facilitate vocabulary testing or learning, or sentence building.

3.9 Information and communications technology (ICT)

When ICT is well used, it can have a strong motivating effect on pupils. Although there is a continuing increase in its use in language departments, good exploitation of ICT is still relatively limited. Schools should make plans to ensure that all pupils have regular experience of ICT in their language learning. A reasonable aim in schools where ICT is currently underexploited would be to provide one worthwhile ICT task each term. Good ICT tasks require pupils to use and practise language, and can be powerful teaching and learning tools. Some ICT language tasks, however, are irrelevant and pointless.

Departments need to become well informed about the availability of relevant software, and integrate its use into their schemes of work. LEAs can help here by providing relevant advice. CILT provides good information about available websites and software.

Examples of appropriate ICT activities include:

- drafting and re-drafting written tasks;
- using e-mail to communicate with others;
- finding information about the foreign country on the Internet;
- grammar exercises, or other exercises such as text manipulation; and
- games which involve using or understanding language.

3.10 Assessment

Most teachers mark written work conscientiously, and most departments have appropriate policies for assessment. Reward systems to encourage high quality work are an increasing feature of good and very good departments.

A great deal of marking assesses pupils' comprehension of language, but there is often too little emphasis on the quality and accuracy of pupils' use of language. Where an exercise concentrates on pupils' comprehension, it is arguable that the teacher does not need to mark it personally, as the answers will generally be the same or very similar. When such work is marked in class there should nevertheless be some emphasis on correct use of language.

When marking assignments, some teachers helpfully make a list of common errors or model answers, and go over these in a whole-class session.

A frequent weakness in assessment is the lack of regular assessment of speaking skills. This contributes to the under-valuing of this skill by pupils. Speaking skills are particularly well promoted when there is a good departmental system for assessing them.

Very good assessment:

- requires an agreed departmental policy that is realistic, workable and consistently applied by all staff;
- influences teaching and learning, and is integrated into schemes of work;
- involves the regular marking of work, by the teacher or pupils, as appropriate;
- includes opportunities for pupils to assess their own work and progress;
- enables pupils to understand the criteria for awarding marks and attaining National Curriculum levels;
- regularly addresses all four language skills, especially speaking;
- focuses on classroom performance, as well as homework;
- provides pupils and parents with information about performance in all four key skills and sets realistic targets for improvement; and
- evaluates quality and accuracy, as well as comprehension.

The 1997 OHMCI publication, *Speaking Skills in Modern Foreign Languages*, and the related CILT publication *Developing Speaking Skills*, provided further information on this topic.

4. Improving other aspects of provision

4.1 Curriculum

Where curriculum provision for foreign languages is very good, most or all of the following features apply:

- courses meet the requirements of the National Curriculum;
- pupils receive a minimum of 140 minutes per week for the first foreign language;
- pupils have more than two lessons, spread throughout each week;
- there is provision for different abilities, either through setting or by effective differentiation in class;
- option arrangements encourage high take-up in key stage 4;
- there is good provision for A/AS level and other courses;
- the school has a sensible and sustainable system to diversify the first foreign language;
- the school offers an opportunity for able or enthusiastic linguists to learn a second foreign language, at least from Year 9 and preferably earlier;
- a practical scheme of work specifies topics, grammatical progression, learning activities and resources;
- relevant homework is set regularly;
- there is a good range of extra-curricular activities in languages, such as competitions, items in eisteddfodau, clubs, language evenings and cultural visits; and
- pupils are encouraged to take part in visits abroad, including exchanges or work experience.

4.2 Staffing, staff development and management

When these are very good most or all of the following apply:

- there are enough teachers with linguistic and methodological expertise in the first foreign language;
- there are enough staff to sustain the second foreign language and diversification of the first;
- part-time staff are deployed appropriately and well supported by full-time staff;
- the department has a foreign language assistant for each main language;
- the assistants are well supported by the department and have a clear understanding of their responsibilities;
- staff collaborate in planning lessons and in creating or sharing materials;
- teachers regularly discuss teaching ideas and methods in frequent (at least monthly) departmental meetings;
- teachers have received recent and relevant INSET, which is effectively disseminated in the department;
- the department is aware of its strengths and weaknesses, and is taking steps to reinforce or remedy them as appropriate;
- the department is well managed, and the head of department monitors the quality of teaching and other aspects of its work; and
- the department development plan includes appropriate targets, and where relevant, is clearly related to the school development plan.

4.3 Accommodation

When this is very good most or all of the following apply:

- language lessons are held in specialist rooms, each room has:
 - an overhead projector;
 - a screen;
 - at least partial blackout;
 - enough electrical sockets;
 - space and furniture which facilitate pair or group work;
 - easy access to TV/video;
 - good acoustics; and
 - ample storage space.
- all full-time teachers have their own room;
- rooms are grouped in a departmental area;
- the department has a separate resources area/departmental base;
- display in rooms includes useful phrases, question words, verb paradigms, assessment criteria, and other guidance on improving standards; and
- display in corridors is stimulating.

4.4 Resources

Where resources are very good most or all of the following features are found:

- each pupil has a textbook or equivalent materials;
- each teacher has personal copies of the scheme of work, and the relevant teacher's book for each published course;
- the scheme of work and/or teacher's books specify and explain how to use the teaching materials;
- each teacher has personal copies of regularly used cassettes, tape transcripts, and other key resources;
- there is a good range of audio and visual aids for each topic, including tapes, videos, flashcards and overhead projector transparencies;
- there is at least one tape player per teacher;
- there are enough reading materials to provide pupils with regular, planned opportunities to read widely and independently;
- the department has access to computers and suitable software, so that pupils can undertake a relevant ICT task each term which is integrated into the language syllabus;
- a good range of appropriate, good quality written materials minimises the need for copying in class;
- resources address the needs of less able and very able pupils;
- library resources (particularly for Year 12 and Year 13) include periodicals, authentic documents, suitable reading books, audio and video materials, dictionaries and reference books; and
- relevant resources are easily accessible to teachers and pupils.

5. Promotion of foreign languages

All of the ideas and suggestions included in this document can contribute to improving take-up of foreign languages. However, they have to be supported by a change of attitude to language learning in schools and among parents. In order to bring this about, schools and LEAs need to be more energetic in their promotion of foreign languages.

Some schools are notably successful in promoting languages. The following ideas are derived from current good practice:

- parents' evenings, newsletters and prospectuses raise awareness about languages, and inform parents and governors of the value of learning them. Some language departments have developed a particularly high profile in the school through items in entertainment evenings, the school newspaper or newsletter, or language competitions in the eisteddfod;
- visits abroad and exchanges stimulate pupils' interest as well as improving their skills;
- the language department makes presentations about languages at options evenings. Options booklets include information on careers prospects for linguists;
- the language department visits partner primary schools to promote the subject. In many schools, primary pupils receive sample language lessons when they visit the school. In one school they are given a French breakfast;
- outside speakers provide talks on the value of language qualifications in the job market;
- mentors from industry stress the usefulness of a language qualification;
- syllabuses are monitored to ensure that careers lessons and other work-related education give positive messages about language learning;
- languages are featured in the work-related curriculum;
- a notice board is dedicated to displays of language career opportunities or advertisements for jobs for which a knowledge of languages is an advantage;
- successful former language students visit the school to speak to younger pupils;
- parents learn a foreign language in evening classes at the school, sometimes taught by the school's teachers;
- the school expects each department to include items or units on the European dimension in its syllabuses;
- the school tries to add a European dimension to its drama and music productions, and has set up a wide variety of links with schools and institutions in other countries; and
- a European and International Awareness Co-ordinator promotes and monitors the European dimension within and alongside the curriculum.

6. Main recommendations for schools and local education authorities (LEAs)

School organisation

Schools should:

- provide at least two hours per week, preferably more, in key stage 3;
- investigate ways of providing shorter, more frequent lessons;
- consider setting as soon as possible after Year 7, and continue setting in key stage 4, if possible;
- prepare a policy for maintaining or improving take-up in key stage 4, with clear strategies and numerical targets for future cohorts;
- review the position of languages in key stage 4 options;
- consider a short course in key stage 4 for all pupils;
- consider offering less able pupils a new language in key stage 4, if they have reached a ceiling in Year 9; and
- consider introducing the second foreign language in Year 8, or at the latest in Year 9, for capable or interested linguists.

Promotion

Schools should:

- establish a school policy on European awareness, which might supplement a policy on Y Cwricwlwm Cymreig;
- ensure that pupils, parents, teachers and governors understand the value of studying a foreign language for at least 5 years;
- ensure that the careers programme and work-related education encourage language take-up, and that pupils are aware of career opportunities linked with languages; and
- promote languages through school activities, such as language days, assemblies, parents' evenings and visits abroad.

Departmental provision

Schools should:

- arrange monitoring and evaluation by subject specialists of the quality of teaching within the department;
- provide professional development for language staff;
- encourage foreign language, Welsh, and English departments to share good practice and agree common goals regarding the teaching of grammar, linguistic vocabulary and language learning skills;
- review schemes of work, ensuring that they specify the relevant use of ICT and appropriate progression in knowledge of grammar;
- consider how to improve the performance and take-up of weaker linguists; and
- consider how to improve the performance and take-up of boys, and establish a policy on gender.

Support by LEAs

LEAs should:

- describe measures to promote foreign languages in the Education Strategic Plan;
- agree annual key stage 4 and A level take-up targets for individual schools and for the LEA as a whole;
- provide regular opportunities for INSET for all language teachers;
- arrange regular opportunities for heads of department to meet;
- facilitate regular visits to language departments by subject specialists, to provide advice and guidance where necessary;
- promote collaboration between foreign language, Welsh, and English departments; and
- develop coherent guidance for teaching foreign languages that take into account strategies for English, Welsh and Welsh second language.