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# The history of language learning and teaching in Britain

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## ABSTRACT

This article provides an introduction, based on the most recent research available, to the history of language learning and teaching (HoLLT) in Britain. After an overview of the state of research, I consider which languages have been learnt, why and how that has changed; the role of teachers and tests in determining what was taught; changes in how languages have been taught (and why); and the emergence of the modern infrastructure of language teaching policy and practice. I conclude with case study of the contribution of Walter Rippmann, a key figure, in the period 1895 to ca. 1920, a time of professionalisation of language teaching and of efforts towards innovation and change, which set the agenda for many of the major developments of the twentieth century, including a call for scientifically based language teaching and a greater emphasis on the spoken language.

## KEYWORDS

HoLLT (history of language learning and teaching); Walter Rippmann; language teaching methods; language testing; language policy; modern foreign languages

## The state of research

Research on history of language teaching and learning begins with Foster Watson's work on the history of 'modern subjects' in the early twentieth century (Watson 1909). Since then, relatively little historical research has been done by Britain's own foreign language pedagogy experts, who are relatively few in number, a consequence both of the relatively weak position of modern languages in the core school curriculum and of the historical structure of teacher training (as a one-year postgraduate certificate, including considerable teaching practice). Two valuable exceptions are the chapter-length historical overviews by Stern (1983) and Hawkins (1987). Reflections on the history of language teaching since the 1960s can be found in Hawkins (1996), while some of the entries in Byram and Hu's encyclopedia (2012) also give a useful historical perspective. Chapters on Britain or the British Isles have also featured in surveys of language learning in Europe, e.g. Caravolas (1994, 2000) and Glück (2002, 2013).

However, most of the significant contributions to the history of language learning and teaching (HoLLT) in Britain have come – in a series of books since the 1990s – from three other groups of scholars.<sup>1</sup> First, specialists in individual languages have worked from the perspective of the cultural and linguistic history of 'their' language: French (Kibbee 1991), German (Ortmanns 1993; McLelland 2015, as well as Fischer 2000 for Ireland) and Russian (Muckle 2008). Relevant, too, are contributions on the pre-modern history of teaching Latin, which was, after all, *the* foreign language learned in and for formal education for many hundreds of years (e.g. Hunt 1991). Howatt's history of English as a foreign language (Howatt 1984, revised with Widdowson 2004) contains much of interest about the teaching and learning of languages more generally in Britain, especially for the pre-modern period. Second, some historians have also examined the cultural place of language learning in

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society, including Gallagher (2014) for the period up to 1700, Cohen (1996, 2003) for French and Martinez (2014, 2015) for Spanish. Their contributions have been particularly helpful in drawing attention to historiographical methods and sources with which language specialists may be less familiar. Third, book historians have also contributed to the cataloguing of primary sources: note Alston (1985) for French, Jefcoate and Flood (2000) for German, as well as the chronological bibliography of textbooks for learning German since 1500 in McLelland (2015). McLelland (2017) offers the first comprehensive overview of the HoLLT in Britain. Written to meet the needs of foreign language professionals including teachers, teacher trainers and policy makers, it covers the history of language teaching and learning, whether in formal schooling or in other settings, from the earliest evidence up to the most recent history of language teaching, assessment and policy.

### Who learned which languages in Britain, and why?<sup>2</sup>

Britain's multilingual history, with its indigenous Celtic languages and the languages of colonisation, empire, migration and conquest (Roman, Viking and Norman: cf. Tyler 2011) means that much informal language learning must have been going on for which we have scant or no evidence. The earliest evidence of formal language teaching is in the form of bilingual English–Latin dialogues for young monks around 1000 A.D. After the Norman conquest in 1066, French – initially the language of the conquerors and the elite who collaborated with them – became, over the course of generations, the first foreign language and language of prestige for those outside the clerical education system. Britain's continuing close ties with neighbouring France and France's cultural pre-eminence in Europe for centuries have kept French as the 'first' foreign language for most British children ever since. French remains the most widely taught foreign language in secondary schools, and in 2014–2015, the first year in which it was compulsory for primary schools to teach a foreign language to all pupils from age 7 (Key Stage 2) and up, French was the language chosen by 77% of primary schools (Board and Tinsley 2015: 121). Many British people have little or no useful command of French, but nearly everyone with some education recognises a few words of French (e.g. recognising *Mercy buckets* as a jocular corruption of *merci beaucoup*). The same could not be said of other English-speaking countries such as Australia.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the popularity of learning Italian, Spanish and German waxed and waned as political, commercial and cultural interests changed. From a modern perspective, Dutch was surprisingly prominent, a reflection of the importance of trading ties with the Low Countries, especially in the cloth trade, and the first textbook for English learners of Dutch was published in 1606, decades before any such text was available for German (1680). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the growing popularity of the 'Grand Tour' as a kind of finishing education for the leisured elite gave language learning, including the reading of literature, a new relevance and prestige. After French, it was German that flourished most in the eighteenth century, its prestige helped, no doubt, by the fact that Britain's monarchs from 1714 (beginning with King George I) were from the German House of Hanover. Thus, when formal education became more widespread in the course of the nineteenth century, French was generally the first foreign language learned, but German was most often the second. That partnership – French, then German – produced generations of language teachers qualified in French and German, who in turn maintained the status quo of language offerings in British schools. This pattern survived even the very real damage to the status of German caused by two World Wars in which Germany was Britain's enemy.

However, the status quo was finally shaken by the rise of Spanish in the late twentieth century, and in 2001, Spanish overtook German as the second foreign language at GCSE (General Certificate of School Education, the examinations taken around age 16 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland). There had been lobbying for Spanish as useful commercial language since the early twentieth century (see Martinez 2015), and it is significant that already in 1952–1953, when the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) set French, German and Spanish papers as part of its School Commercial Certificate, Spanish candidates (40) outnumbered those for French and German (19 and 0). Even if all but 6 of the 40 candidates failed, the larger number reflects the perception of Spanish as a language of

practical, commercial value. Yet Spanish only really took off in schools much later in the twentieth century, once the affordability and popularity of Spain as a holiday destination from the 1960s onwards produced a generation of parents with some affinity to Spanish (joined much more recently by growing interest in South America too). Spanish was also consistently presented by its advocates as easy to learn. An early example is a 1930 Board of Education report (1930: 33–34) noting that ‘Spanish is a language of unusual simplicity and facility’, its syntax ‘clear and easy’. The relative ‘easiness’ of Spanish was perhaps especially appealing in the 1980s and 1990s, when little formal English grammar was taught in British schools, preparing pupils less well for the case system and word order rules of German. Even in the 1980s, Spanish was taken by only about a quarter of the number of pupils who sat German in their General Certificate Examination (GCE), but it overtook German in the equivalent GCSE exams in 2001.

The first grammar of Russian (in any language) was published in Oxford in 1693 (Ludolf 1696). As the language of the communist superpower, the Soviet Union, Russian – though never more than a ‘niche’ language in schools – benefited from a flurry of interest in the second half of the twentieth century. An intensive Russian language teaching programme ran for selected national service conscripts throughout most of the 1950s, equipping unprecedented numbers of people with good knowledge of Russian language and culture, and there were ambitious Russian language teaching and research projects in the 1960s and early 1970s too (alongside similar projects for other foreign languages). There was another flurry of interest in Russian after the collapse of Soviet Union and the opening of Russia to the west.

As for the one remaining (at least nominally) communist superpower, since 2004 the People’s Republic of China has been vigorously promoting Mandarin worldwide through its extensive programme of cultural diplomacy, especially through its Confucius Institutes, and Britain is no exception. Currently 29 Confucius Institutes are housed in British universities, also offering Chinese language and cultural activities to local schools and communities. Chinese has thus far largely been available as a formal subject in fee-paying schools rather than in the state schools attended by most of the population, but in 2016, the government launched a £10m ‘Mandarin excellence programme’ with the flagship aim of bringing at least 5000 young people towards fluency in Mandarin Chinese by the year 2020. Within little more than a decade, then, the prominence of Chinese in British language education has been transformed from virtual invisibility to privileged status. It has eclipsed all other Asian languages, many of which – including Japanese, Arabic and the languages of the Indian sub-continent such as Urdu – are widely spoken in the UK, but are barely taught at all in mainstream education. They (and many other community languages such as Russian and Ukrainian) are, however, taught more or less formally to children from those communities in so-called supplementary schools, typically on Saturdays.

### **Who decides what pupils learn? Teachers and tests<sup>3</sup>**

The institutionalisation of language teaching in schools is a recent phenomenon. For most of history, foreign languages were chiefly taught by native speaker language masters, who either set up their own language schools or went from house to house as private tutors. Claude Hollyband, author of many French textbooks in the sixteenth century, a Huguenot refugee who arrived in London in the 1560s, ran one such school in London; several flourished around St. Paul’s Churchyard (near St. Paul’s Cathedral), the centre of the London book trade (Kibbee 1991: 131, 191; Howatt 1984: 20). Other teachers were bilingual by upbringing, like John Florio, who wrote Italian manuals, and Hil-lenius, who boasted in his Dutch manual of ‘having from my very Cradle been acquainted with both these languages of English and Dutch’ (Gallagher 2014: 45). Teachers were nearly always male until the nineteenth century; one exception was the eighteenth-century eccentric German Theodora Grahn (1744–1802, a.k.a. Mr de Verdion), who earned a living in London from about 1770 as a language teacher, translation and antiquarian book dealer, but always appearing in public as a man (Jefcoate 2015: 92).

By the early nineteenth century, women too were earning a living by teaching French and German in Britain, usually as live-in governesses. Their status was very low (see Tomalin 2011 for the depiction of French governesses in the literature in the early nineteenth century), and many were poor; indeed, a home for German governesses who had fallen on hard times was established in London (Weber 2013: 235, n. 15). However, with rare exceptions like Johanna Clara Louise Lehzen (1784–1870), governess to the future Queen Victoria, very little is known about them.

When, in 1858, Oxford and Cambridge Universities both introduced public ‘Local’ examinations to be taken by pupils at age 16 and 18, French and German were among the subjects offered. For modern languages – meaning French and German – had begun to find a place in formal boys’ education in England, alongside the still much more prestigious Latin and Greek (Proescholdt 1991). French and German were initially often taught by male native-speaker teachers. Often less qualified than their English counterparts teaching other subjects, usually paid less, and perhaps hampered in keeping order by their own restricted knowledge of English, they did not automatically command respect. Meanwhile, with the growth of modern languages as university disciplines in the second half of the nineteenth, a class of British-educated modern language experts emerged, keen to distance themselves from the native speaker language masters whose sole qualification was their fluency in their mother tongue. As Cambridge lecturer Karl Breul explained in a paper read to the College of Preceptors on ‘The Training of Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages’, university students of German would be trained in both philology (i.e. language history) and phonetics; they should also be taught ‘the outlines of German life and thought, customs and institutions’ (Breul 1894: 229). Modern language teaching associations and journals began to be established across Europe. In England, the Modern Language Association was founded in 1892 (the precursor of today’s Association for Language Learning) and its membership exceeded 1000 by 1911 (*Modern Language Teaching* 1911, vol. 7: 11). Its journal, the *Modern Language Quarterly*, founded in 1897 and renamed *Modern Language Teaching* in 1905, provided a forum for discussing all aspects of teaching practice and principles, and a language teaching profession began to emerge.

As for *what* was taught to pupils studying French, German or any other language in Britain, that was – and remains – very decentralised and hence very variable. Not only did Scotland have its own system entirely (and still does), but even within the remainder of Britain, multiple examination boards were free to stipulate their own syllabi and examination requirements. Not until the National Curriculum was introduced in 1988 did the state have any direct say in what should be taught; since then, examination boards (of which, after various mergers, there are now only three in England) set their requirements subject to the specifications of the National Curriculum. Certain generalisations can be made, however. Until the 1960s, the curriculum was dominated by the teaching of literature; explicit teaching of grammar was also expected. At least until the 1930s, examination papers might include questions requiring explicit explanation of grammatical facts, e.g. ‘What are the rules for the use of the pronouns *moi, toi, soi, lui, nous, vous, eux*’ or ‘*cette petite troupe fut entourée*. Write this sentence in the plural’ (UCLES 1858: 41, in the Lower-tier Junior [under 16] French paper). Translation – both into and out of the language – was the main written task required by examinations. While the passages set might seem fiendishly difficult by today’s standards,<sup>4</sup> we should bear in mind that there was often no expectation that the average candidate should be able to pass all sections. Translation requirements gradually became more within the reach of more pupils (featuring more everyday, less literary, language and shorter sentences), and the conviction remained ‘that translation tests, if wisely set, are of validity unsurpassed’ (IAAM 1952: 305).

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, notions of ‘validity’ of assessment changed. Examinations were no longer solely intended to differentiate the very able from the less able, but – since it was recognised that examination requirements dictated what went on in the classroom – should rather reflect the kind of things that learners might be expected to need to do with the language in the real world. This was understood to mean testing the ability to hold a conversation, comprehension of the language (spoken and written), and the ability to write in order to ask for

information or to express an opinion, for example. Developments in testing more widely also brought a change in mindset. Whereas translation had been valued as an excellent all-round test, now examination tasks were designed to *avoid* confounding the assessment of individual skills, so that one could be sure that the test result had measured what it was intended to measure. Specifically, all ‘four skills’ – the ‘receptive’ skills of reading and listening comprehension, and the ‘productive’ skills of speaking and writing – should all be measured separately.

A reading comprehension test was first introduced in the 1940s as an alternative to, or replacement for, translation into English. Between the 1950s and 1970s, candidates might be required to answer questions in the target language or (less commonly) to write a *précis* in English. However, both formats required abilities beyond mere comprehension (writing in the target language, the ability to recognise and summarise key information), and so were later replaced by multiple choice tests, whether in English, in the target language or in a mixture of both. Listening comprehension first took the form of dictation tests in the early twentieth century. Even in the 1960s, examiners were still feeling their way in how to assess aural comprehension, and tests tended to confound it with other skills, for example requiring candidates to re-tell in writing a story that had been read to them.

The productive skills of speaking and writing (as distinct from translation) – not measured at all at first – grew in importance through the twentieth century. In the early twenty-first century (e.g. in the AQA exam board’s GCSE 2010 specification), the productive skills of speaking and writing were even briefly weighted more heavily than the receptive skills, each worth 30%; reading and listening comprehension were each worth 20%. (Currently all four skills are generally weighted equally.) Optional conversation tests had featured in school examinations since the 1880s, but – until recording equipment became readily available and affordable – they were expensive and time-consuming to arrange. Even if taken, their result was only used to decide whether a distinction should be awarded. As for writing, nineteenth-century school examinations did not generally allow candidates any scope to write freely in the language – so-called ‘prose composition’ did not mean composing, but translating into the language.<sup>5</sup> When free composition was first set, by the Cambridge board in its Junior examinations of 1911, the examiners were not impressed by the results, which they judged ‘largely worthless’ (UCLES examiners’ report Cam.c.11.51.54: xxx). However, when the new School Certificate was introduced in 1918, the Joint Matriculation Board required a free composition, initially expected to be based on the set books studied, later on topics such as the duties of parents to their children; a sailor’s life or an ideal holiday; or pupils could write a guided composition, following a given outline.

By the mid-1960s, examinations taken at age 16 generally required a short piece of guided narrative writing following either a picture story or an outline in the target language. Meanwhile at the A-level (Advanced-Level) examinations taken at age 18, candidates were required to write more (250–350 words by 1970), A-level examination and with a growing tendency to require candidates to present a view or argue a case, e.g. “The student protests have only anarchy as their goal” – what is your view of this statement?’ (UCLES German 1970). Earlier generations of examinations might require either an essay, a letter, or narrative piece, in more or less free variation, but since the late twentieth century, assessment criteria differentiate carefully between text types (competing a form, letter, narrative piece, presentation of a controversial topic) and match these to different attainment levels. Within the National Curriculum (as in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)), learners are expected to progress from highly constrained text types such as a postcard or a form to fill in (cf. CEFR level A1), to short notes (A2), to descriptive and narrative writing (B1), to making a case in writing (B2).

For a brief period since 2010, GCSE assessment of languages (and all subjects) allowed for coursework and controlled assessments alongside examinations – under ‘controlled assessment’, students were able to work in class time and homework through guided steps towards a final piece, produced under controlled conditions. As of 2018, however, GCSEs revert to examination-only assessment.



## Changes in language teaching methods and practices

The history of language teaching methods and techniques in Britain does not differ materially from elsewhere in Europe or in North America. Indeed, at least until the early twentieth century, there was a good deal of recycling and repurposing of teaching and learning materials right across Europe; examples include the sixteenth-century Noel de Barlemont dialogues, Meidinger's 'practical grammars' in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the patented methods of Ahn, Ollendorff, and the like in the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth century, texts were often published both in North America and in Britain (as with Walter Rippmann's textbooks, which popularised Reform Movement ideas including emphasis on phonetics and on the spoken language in the classroom, see below). Since the late twentieth century, the formulation of language teaching goals and attainment levels in Britain has been very much influenced by the CEFR, which Britain also helped shape, through John Trim, Director from 1978 to 1987 of Britain's Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (see below, and Alan Dobson's article in this issue), who was instrumental in developing the CEFR in his role as Director of the Council of Europe's Modern Languages projects from 1971 to 1997.

As elsewhere in Europe, a typical textbook of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Britain would almost always consist of a grammar and bilingual dialogues (with the target language and the English translation in parallel columns). Many, especially later in the period, also included some selected passages for reading and/or translation, model personal and/or commercial letters, a more or less extensive vocabulary, perhaps also lists of idioms or proverbs. Authors' prefaces commonly recommended working through and memorising the contents of the grammar, a section at a time. After a first part of the lesson spent on grammar in this way, the rest of the lesson could be devoted to reading, memorising and practising and/or varying the dialogues – the textbooks of the eighteenth-century Italian master Giuseppe Baretta provide a lively picture of how such a lesson might proceed (see de Gasperin 2018). Four aspects of this almost universally adopted general approach are worth noting. First, note the prominence of conversational practice – an emphasis on spoken communicative skills is not an invention of the twentieth century. Second, note the reliance on materials presented bilingually (still common today in many teach-yourself manuals and in readers for languages such as German and Russian, but generally frowned upon in classrooms). Third, explicit knowledge of grammar was expected, in part to differentiate expert teachers from mere native speakers without the specialist knowledge of their language, (in part to put the mastery of the less prestigious vernaculars on the same footing as the teaching of Latin), but, fourthly, there was no such thing as a targeted grammatical exercise to practise the grammatical points studied. That began to change in the second half of the eighteenth century – Louis Chambaud, a teacher of French in London, was perhaps the very first to have the idea of producing exercises to accompany specific points of grammar. Nicolas Wanostrocht was the first to put grammar and exercises in a single volume that he called a 'practical grammar' of French (1780), and this model of the practical grammar was popularised throughout Europe by Valentin Meidinger (see McLelland 2017: section 4.4 for further details on the birth of the grammatical exercise). The exercises generally took the form of translation of short sentences into and out of the language, all drilling the particular grammatical point. Out of this innovation, with the laudable aim of helping learners gain practical facility in applying their grammatical knowledge correctly, was born the so-called 'grammar–translation method' of the nineteenth century, viewed with such disdain by the proponents of self-proclaimed modern methods ever since.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the popular association of the nineteenth century with dreary grammar and translation, many textbooks produced in that century were innovative in various ways, whether within the broad framework of grammar and translation, or offering a more radical alternative, like Claude Marcel and Thomas Prendergast (Atherton 2010; Lorch 2016; Smith 2009). It is undeniable, nonetheless, that in formal schooling, language teaching was largely dominated by grammar and translation, an approach that was reinforced, if not largely driven, by the format of the examinations of the period (see above). The approach had two advantages: one ideological and one practical. First, it treated modern languages the same as the much more prestigious Latin – and therefore as potentially no

less valuable to a liberal education and to rigorous mental training. Second, it protected the English teachers of modern languages in public schools – who, in the early days at least, were unlikely to have any real confidence in speaking the language themselves – from exposing their weakness compared to a native-speaker master. However, innovation was in the air, and it came from two sources: the flourishing language schools for adult learners, such as those established by Berlitz, with the emphasis on the target language; and from language teaching in schools for girls, where the ladylike ‘accomplishment’ of conversational fluency had long been valued, and where girls were less likely to have to be coached for public examinations, so that there was more scope for experimentation. These laid the ground for the Reform Movement in language teaching (see below), which, though initially of limited effect (as examination practices were very slow to change), ultimately set the challenges tackled by the language pedagogues of much of the twentieth century: valuing spoken language fluency, the beginnings of reflection on how an understanding of the target culture can be imparted, and – more fundamentally – an attempt to design teaching methods ‘scientifically’, both in the light of the latest pedagogical theories and of the theories of language acquisition in particular.

### **The modern infrastructure of language teaching policy and practice**

Since the late nineteenth century, language teaching – like all education – has increasingly become a matter for public debate and come under the eye of the state (see McLelland 2017: chapter 6). Besides the work of professional language teacher associations such as the Modern Languages Association and the Association of Assistant Masters (which produced four overviews of modern languages teaching between 1929 and 1967), a succession of government reports, whether specific to modern languages (such as the Leathes Report of 1918) or with a broader remit (such as the 1864 Clarendon Report and the 1868 Taunton Report), have given views on the place of modern languages in schools and universities. From the 1960s onwards, modern language education researchers and teacher trainers based in higher education have produced research and textbooks reflecting on the purpose, methods and assessment of modern languages education. Unusual, perhaps, compared to other countries, is the role played at a local level in the 1970s and 1980s by Language Advisors appointed to lead language teachers’ professional development in their Local Education Authorities (of which there are 152 in England), although few survived budget cuts of the later twentieth century. Another unique voice – and a crucial development for the support and advocacy of modern foreign languages – was the Centre for Information on Language Teaching (CILT), established in 1966 on the recommendation of the Committee on Research and Development in Modern Languages (CRDML) which was active between 1960 and 1970. The CRDML’s very title signalled that language teaching was now recognised as a field that required specialised ‘research and development’. Languages had been taught until the Second World War for their ‘general formative or cultural value’, but the Committee argued that ‘the war showed the importance of practical skills in languages (and, in particular, oral skill)’ (CRDML 1968: 1) – a major and lasting shift in perspective. From 1966 to 2011 (when it was closed down by the newly elected Conservative Government), CILT supported language teaching by promoting and disseminating research, producing sample materials and curriculum guides, and monitoring trends in language teaching (see also Dobson, this issue).

The second half of the twentieth century brought a democratisation of language learning – languages ceased to be the preserve of the elite private schools and the selective ‘grammar schools’, and were offered in all comprehensive schools, to pupils across the full ability range. Qualifications were adjusted accordingly, first with the less academic CSE (Certificate of School Examination) alongside the O-level (Ordinary Level), then, from 1988, with a ‘Foundation’ tier alongside the Higher qualification at GCSE. For a while, as part of the National Curriculum introduced in 1988, the vast majority of pupils learned a foreign language, with a high point in 1997, when 82% of boys and 73% of girls were entered for a modern language at GCSE (Vidal Rodeiro 2009: 5). However, in 2004 the then Labour government decided that a modern language should cease to be compulsory at GCSE, although a language should still be taken until age 14. This well-intentioned move, intended



to allow those pupils who were wholly unsuited, unmotivated or unable to learn a language to make better use of their time, resulted in a steep decline in the take-up of modern languages at GCSE (down to 47% of entrants in 2007), and at A-level and university too, a trend which government and language advocates have been trying to reverse ever since. It remains to be seen whether the introduction in 2015 of compulsory modern language learning in primary schools from age 7, and the inclusion of a language in the so-called 'English Baccalaureate' (known as the EBacc, a new qualification – with its first cohort in 2019 – which pupils in England will earn by studying English, maths, science, history or geography and a modern foreign language until they are aged 16) will be enough to create renewed momentum in favour of modern languages. Many fear that these encouraging policy decisions may be scuppered by practical problems, including a serious projected shortage of suitably qualified teachers and the loss of momentum in the transition from primary to secondary school language learning.

### **Case study: innovation in the early twentieth century – the Reform Movement and beyond**

As noted above, Britain's history of language teaching goes hand in hand with developments in Europe and beyond, despite differences in the degree of centralisation and state governance of language teaching. The Reform Movement is a particularly emphatic example of a European-wide phenomenon, although research comparing its manifestations in the different countries of Europe and in North America remains a desideratum. I conclude this survey, therefore, with a more detailed case study that gives a flavour of the Reform Movement discussions in Britain of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to trace the career of one reform-minded teacher and textbook author, Walter Rippmann (1869–1947).<sup>7</sup> Rippmann, born and bred in London (of German parents), was a typical British 'modern languages' teacher in that he taught both French and German. He was also at the centre of the process of professionalisation of language teachers – he was editor from 1897 to 1911 of the Modern Language Association's *Modern Language Quarterly* (co-founded with Cambridge lecturer Karl Breul) and its successor *Modern Language Teaching* from 1897 to 1911. After graduating in Modern and Medieval Languages at Cambridge University, he initially taught there as an Assistant Lecturer until 1896 and was also an examiner for several years for the University of Cambridge Syndicate's 'Local Examinations' for schoolchildren. He then took up two teaching positions in London: from 1896, Professor of German at Queen's College (University of London) and, from 1897, Lecturer in German language and literature at Bedford College, which became part of the University of London in 1900. Founded in 1849 and 1849 respectively, both colleges were among the earliest institutions offering higher education and academic qualifications to young women, and this pioneering setting gave Rippmann scope to trial new approaches with his female students. It is worth noting too that at least two women textbook authors thanked Rippmann for his support as editor of the publisher Dent's Modern Languages series (McLelland 2012: 127–128).

Rippmann's career, at the forefront of language teaching in Britain, also illustrates the international momentum behind innovations in language teaching at the time. In 1897, he joined the International Phonetic Association (founded in Paris in 1886), and his two strongest influences were from the European continent too: Wilhelm Viëtor and Sines Alge. He probably knew personally the German Wilhelm Viëtor, whose famous pamphlet of 1882 is generally credited with launching the Reform Movement in Europe, and reviewed the definitive 1905 issue of the pamphlet in *Modern Language Teaching*. Rippmann adapted several works by the Swiss pedagogue Sines Alge for English learners and teachers, beginning in 1898 with the *First French Book* and the accompanying *Hints on Teaching French*, followed by the *First German Book* and *Hints for German* in 1899 (all with the publisher Dent). In 1897, Rippmann was one of 26 teachers from England who attended the continent's first modern languages holiday course, held in Marburg. The holiday courses in Marburg – soon mirrored by similar courses for foreign students offered at the University of London, of which Rippmann was Director from 1903 until World War II (Casey 2017) – were just one example of an emerging European infrastructure to

help language teachers and their pupils gain first-hand experience of the target culture. Two other initiatives were the pen-friend scheme for schoolchildren developed between enterprising teachers in France, Germany and England and run from 1896 until the outbreak of World War I in 1914 (see Schleich 2018); and the Language Teaching Assistantships, which – beginning between France and Britain in 1904, and extending to Germany from 1905 (see Finkenberger 2005; Wörsching 2012) – also marked the beginning of the state’s involvement in this kind of cultural diplomacy.

Rippmann’s approach to language teaching can be gleaned from his writings. Rippmann (1899: 15) wrote that for beginners, ‘[t]ranslation from the mother-tongue into the foreign language, usually called “composition”, is to be entirely avoided’. Rippmann cited his Cambridge fellow-lecturer and fellow UCLES examiner Karl Breul’s treatise for training secondary school language teachers in support: ‘Very little ordinary composition, i.e. translation from English into the foreign language, should be done, and only with the most advanced pupils’. One need only ‘read the Examiners’ Reports in order to estimate the value of the [translation] work sent up by the vast majority of candidates’ in UCLES examinations’ (Breul 1899: 11–12). Breul and Rippmann advocated guided free composition instead, which Rippmann’s 1911 *Easy Free Composition in German* was intended to support. As a member of the International Phonetic Association, and trained in phonetics too at the Marburg holiday course, Rippmann made extensive use of phonetics, which, at a time before recordings were readily available, promised a scientifically grounded means of imparting good pronunciation. Rippmann provided a complete phonetic transcription of the passages from lessons 1 to 10 at the back of his German primer, as well as for all new words introduced in later lessons. ‘If a pronunciation is to be learnt at all, it should be learnt in a scientific fashion’, he wrote (Rippmann 1921: v).

In his *New First German Book* (1905), Rippmann made conversation between teachers and pupils the very starting point for learning, as the teacher and pupils together explored wall pictures. Rippmann introduced classroom language gradually through the manual to help teachers and pupils use the target language in the classroom as a matter of course (e.g. *Öffnet die Bücher, Schließt die Bücher!*, ‘Open your books, close your books!’ p. 5). Using pictures as teaching aids to reduce the need to translate new vocabulary, Rippmann sought to minimise the use of English in the classroom, although with large classes and limited time, some time-saving use of English rather than the target language was acceptable (Rippmann 1899: 11). All this makes Rippmann’s ideal classroom look very like a communicative classroom of today, but it must be remembered that the weight he gave to the spoken language was not because spoken fluency was a goal in itself. Rather, he wrote, ‘Do not be afraid to speak in class; for the more you do so, the sooner you will be able to read’. Once able to read, learning German provided access to a rich culture, ‘the key to a vast treasure-house with many beautiful and precious things, which great and good men and women have been gathering for hundreds of years’ (Rippmann 1905: vi). Rippmann may not have put it as bluntly as his somewhat less radical Reform-minded contemporary Otto Siepman, but probably concurred that it would be ‘pitiful’ to ‘learn the language of a great and cultured people, possessing a great literature, with no other object in view than to “bandy light prattle deftly at a railway station or a dinner table”’ (Siepman 1900: viii). That is, nonetheless, arguably all that the vast majority of twenty-first century British language learners achieve ...

## Notes

1. The bibliographical overview given in this section is indicative only. For more comprehensive bibliography, see McLelland (2017). With the exception of Fischer (2000), the focus of all the research discussed in this section has tended to be on the most populous and culturally powerful part of the British Isles, England.
2. This section is based on my history of which languages have been learnt in Britain and since when (McLelland 2017: Chapter 2). The reader is referred to that chapter for fuller references and further details.
3. This section draws on research presented in Chapters 3 and 5 of McLelland (2017), and further details on the examples presented here can be found there.
4. For example, the passage for translation into German in the German Senior examination set by UCLES in 1858, a passage by the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke, begins: ‘He that would seriously set upon the search

of truth ought in the first place to prepare his mind with a love of it: for he that loves it not, will not take much pains to get it, nor be much concerned when he misses it' (taken from McLelland 2015: 176; see discussion there).

5. By contrast, tests for admission to Sandhurst Military Academy and Civil Service examinations from the 1850s to 1880s did often include a question requiring free composition.
6. For a careful history of the invention of the so-called grammar translation method, see Kirk (2018), who does much to correct the often simplistic portrayal of its origins and form.
7. This section is largely based on the research presented in McLelland (2012).

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