

The position of German in the Northern Ireland curriculum.

Eugene McKendry
Queen's University Belfast

Noel Purdy
Queen's University Belfast

Introduction

This paper aims to assess the current position of German in Northern Ireland schools. Anecdotal evidence and recent research (Neil, Phipps, and Mallon 1999, 2000) prompted a study to determine if German really is in decline in Northern Ireland, why this might be the case, and what, if anything, can be done to secure the future of the language in schools, particularly in the context of current curricular review, which contains potentially challenging proposals for German and languages in general.

Research questions and method

A number of basic research questions were established:

- Firstly, are GCSE and A-level German entries really falling in the province and is this a Northern Irish or Britain-wide phenomenon? To this end accurate data were obtained from the Departments of Education in Northern Ireland and London. Since Scotland follows a different examinations model, it is not included.
- Secondly, what do teachers perceive as the problems faced by German as a subject in the curriculum, and how do they see its future? Questionnaires were duly sent to all 67 post-primary schools in the province where German is taught. The response rate was over 70%.
- Thirdly, in light of earlier studies into learner perceptions, such as OXPROD, reported in Filmer-Sankey (1993), a further question was, 'how do the pupils themselves find learning German, in its own right and compared to other languages?'. In order to ascertain pupils' perceptions of learning German, interviews were carried out in a number

of 11-18 schools in Northern Ireland. These included both grammar and comprehensive schools from the controlled, maintained and voluntary sectors and were all co-educational, rural institutions. The pupils interviewed were mostly from year 11 and year 13 (years 4 and 6 post-primary), although some interviews were also carried out with a number of year 14 pupils at the end of their course of study.

- Fourthly, what are the views of CCEA, the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment, regarding the position of German? An interview was carried out subsequently to discuss the research findings with a representative from CCEA.

GCSE entries

The Department of Education for Northern Ireland (DENI) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) in London, supplied the figures for entries at GCSE in modern languages from 1996 to 2000 both in Northern Ireland and in Britain (England and Wales).

Contrary to expectations, the DENI statistics reveal that while GCSE German entries in Northern Ireland have fluctuated over the last five years, the figure for 2000 is only minimally down on 1996. French is dominant, Irish is in second position, then Spanish, which has shown a significant growth over the period, and German. Numbers for Italian are low, but 2000 shows a rally.

Table 1: GCSE entries in Northern Ireland 1996-2000

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
French	13838	13275	13213	13195	13318
Irish	2021	2171	2180	2350	2484
Spanish	1561	1737	1801	2105	1987
German	1496	1371	1380	1390	1489
Italian	156	128	93	109	199

In Britain the DfEE figures show that GCSE German entries have risen by 1% over the same period. At A-level there is remarkable consistency between the Northern Ireland and British statistics. In Northern Ireland the number of entries for German A-level has fallen by 9.3% from 216 to 196 between 1996 and 1999,

while in England and Wales there has likewise been a fall in entries of 9.6%, from 9863 to 8916. These statistics can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: GCSE entries for modern languages in England and Wales 1996-2000 (000s of entries)

	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000
French	315.8	306.1	307.3	311.5	313.1
German	126.3	127.5	127.4	129.8	127.4
Spanish	33.8	34.5	38.8	39.6	42.3
Other	18.1	17.9	18.4	19.2	19.4

Advanced and Advanced Subsidiary level

The new Advanced Subsidiary examination, where in practice pupils take four subjects in their lower sixth year instead of three, was introduced in June 2001. There were 231 pupils entered for German in Northern Ireland.

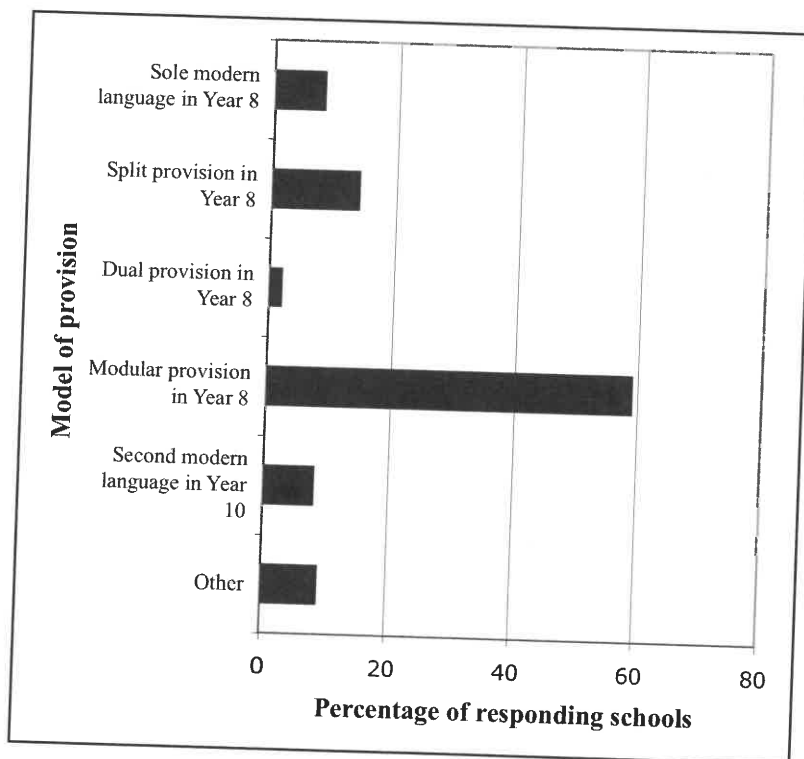
Teacher questionnaire

The second research method employed was the questionnaire sent to all Heads of Department in schools where German is taught. Firstly, information was gathered as to the patterns of provision of German in schools in the province. The results (displayed in Figure 1) show that German is introduced in year 8 (first year post-primary) in just 24% of the responding schools, and then only at best as part of split, dual or modular provision (for definitions of the models of language provision, see Neil et al. 1999:18). There were no responding schools where German is offered as the sole (first) modern language in year 8. The replies would further suggest that in the majority of schools (59%), when German is introduced it is offered as the second modern language in year 9, often as an alternative to another language such as Spanish. In a very small number of schools there is the option of beginning German later, such as in year 11 or 13.

German is therefore in the shadow of the first modern language, which is still French in the majority of post-primary schools in the province. It is most commonly offered to a limited selection of pupils who are expected to follow an accelerated course to prepare them for GCSE in four or even three years

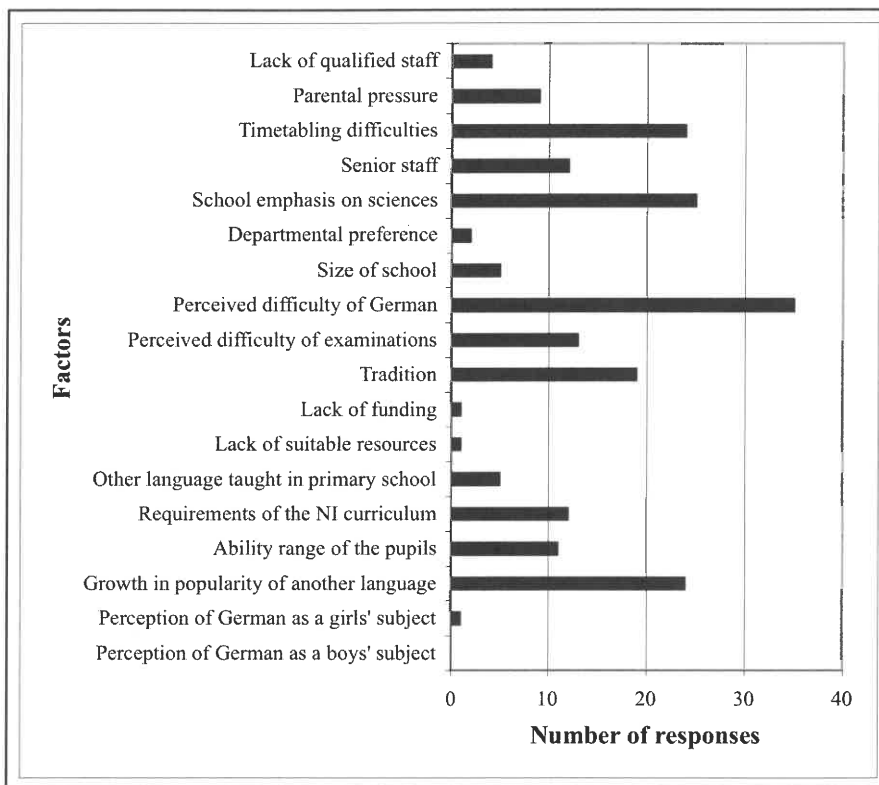
instead of the normal five. Built on such shaky foundations, the numbers of pupils taking German in the senior school are often perilously low, even in some of the largest grammar schools in Northern Ireland. The average number of pupils entered for A-level over the two years is 4.0 per responding school, a figure which must make the A-level German class one of the least cost-effective in the timetable, and while the class size extended as high as 11 and 14 in two cases, there were also schools with two or even one pupil in the class, rendering German less attractive to management than other more cost-effective subjects. The number of pupils entered for the AS examination in 2001 was, however, quite encouraging. Two hundred and thirty-one pupils took AS German in 37 schools, corresponding to a healthier average of 6.2 pupils per school.

Figure 1: Models of provision for the introduction of German in the responding schools



A further question asked respondents what they saw as the major factors preventing the maintenance or growth of German in their school. A list of possibilities was provided from which the teachers were invited to choose as few or as many as they felt applied. The results are shown below in Figure 2 and reveal that the greatest factor mentioned was the perceived difficulty of German, one of the main discussion points in the pupil interviews below.

Figure 2: Factors affecting the growth of German in schools



The next three most important factors were curriculum-related, showing a common school emphasis upon sciences, difficulty in fitting what is in most cases a second modern language into the timetable, and the growth of other languages, usually Spanish. Tradition is also perhaps a major factor in the reluctance of schools to promote German as first modern language in place of French. The size of the school and availability of staff appear

much less important factors, while the issue of gender is of virtually no significance.

In the space for additional comments, a number of Heads of Department referred to the problem of pressure in the timetable, particularly at GCSE: (1) 'We would like to see more double linguists but Triple Award Science is pushed so they have to do Additional Maths which means the pupils only have room for one language at GCSE', (2) 'German is squeezed out by full science options', and (3) 'The National Curriculum allows little room for choice at GCSE level with only a small minority studying more than one language at GCSE'.

The final question of the questionnaire gave respondents the opportunity to complete the sentence 'The position of German in the Northern Ireland Curriculum would best be helped by...'. Here, as expected, Heads of Department had much to say and often wrote extended paragraphs covering many different ideas and visions for the future. However, these can be categorized into three main areas:

- *The place of German in the curriculum.* Many felt that the position of German would be helped by, as one respondent phrased it, 'reducing the dictatorial nature of the National Curriculum' or as another recommended 'addressing the issue of science dominating the Key Stage 4 curriculum' thus 'allowing pupils to have more choice of what subjects they study'. Others called for 'renewed support for diversification of modern languages from DENI' and advocated 'putting German on a par with French and giving it a better allocation from year 8 in the timetable'. There were also many voices calling for the introduction of German and other languages in the primary schools and 'taster courses in form one to let the pupils decide'.
- *Examinations.* Several respondents mentioned the subject of examinations and the perceived difficulty of CCEA German. One called for 'more feasible examinations'. Another was more specific: 'The situation has gone too far... I feel a meeting should be called of all those involved and concerned to thrash out possibilities'. Yet another saw no alternative to 'sacking the people in charge of German at

CCEA'. This issue will be developed further in the interview below with the CCEA spokesman.

- *Raising the profile.* It was felt by many respondents that the profile of languages in general and German in particular needs to be raised. As one Head of Department expressed it, there needs to be 'greater professional and parental awareness of the value of a language in obtaining employment. Public perception is at variance with the facts of graduate employment'. Others called for 'much more PR from schools, education boards and examination boards', for 'promoting the language as fun and useful' and for more 'recognition that any modern language is useful and even essential in the global economy'. With regard to who precisely should spearhead the campaign, a number of suggestions were made: 'German needs a higher profile generally within Northern Ireland. The Central Bureau (for International Education and Training of the British Council), the Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT) or the German Embassy could possibly contribute to efforts to raise the profile of German'. The comparison was made by one respondent to the situation for Spanish: 'We need a publicity campaign: country/language/opportunities, a higher profile, and an officer in charge of German ... like for Spanish!'. In general there seemed a strong feeling that the time has come for a perception shift away from 'Hitler and the war' towards a brighter, more upbeat image.

Interviews with the pupils

The pupil interviews were revealing in that they generally reflected good motivation and an enthusiasm for the language: 'I chose German because when you're older and looking for a job, most businesses now are international and a second language is always good to have' (year 11 girl) and

A-level German has made me think more about what is going on in the world and what we can do about it ... there are so many different topics and we have studied everything under the sun this year. It's been really thought-provoking. [year 14 girl].

However it also became clear from the interviews that many pupils perceived German as a difficult option: 'Compared to French there's an awful lot more grammar to learn, like the cases and prepositions. There's no easy way of doing it. You just have to learn it and it's a very tedious process' (year 11 girl) and 'Since I have been learning German this year, it has made French seem a lot easier!' (year 11 boy).

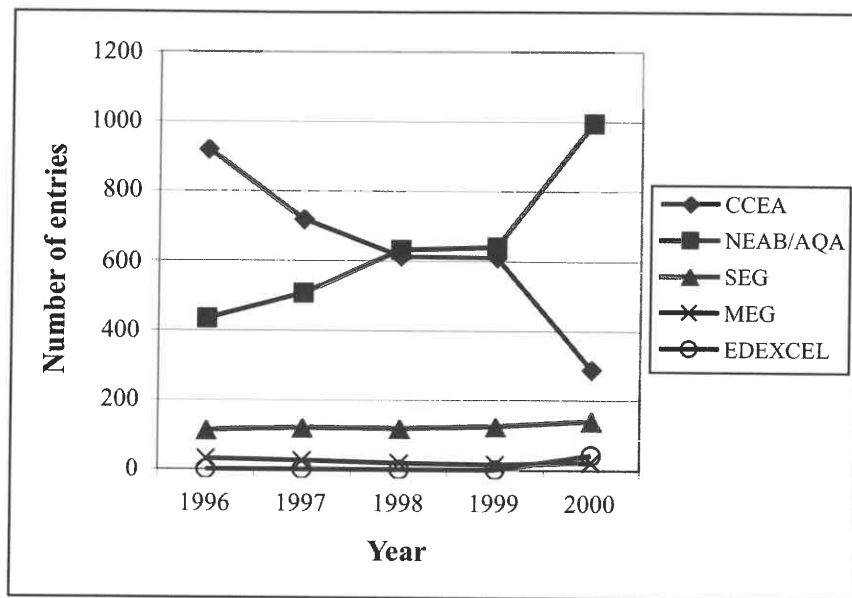
In both year 11 (beginning Key Stage 4) and year 13 (post-GCSE) most pupils remarked on the step-up from the previous year and often expressed negative views regarding the increase in workload and difficulty of their work. For most of those interviewed the initial impressions from Key Stage 3 (years 8-10) of a relatively simple, fun language appear to have been replaced by the bombardment of vocabulary and structures at the beginning of year 11 or 13: (1) 'I'm not keen to go on with German. The way it has been a big step up from third form to fourth form, I can only imagine it will be another big step up to A-level. It would be terrible if it was that bad' (year 11 girl), (2) 'I loved German at the start... it was so easy. You were using things you need like your name, your age, where you live. Now it's things like the role of women or unemployment rates ... things that you think: who cares?' (year 13 girl), and (3) 'Grammar and vocab are hard but it's the speed you have to do it that's really hard. Last year we would spend a couple of periods on a page. Now we do it in twenty minutes!' (year 13 girl).

One of the most positive aspects expressed about German was the small class size, which all of the pupils found to be educationally beneficial, allowing more teacher contact and personal attention. Moreover, many pupils spoke of the more relaxed working atmosphere. A small number mentioned the fact that there was no 'hiding' in a smaller group if homework was not complete or if the pupil did not know an answer: (1) 'In smaller classes it's more relaxed and I think you get to know the teacher better' (year 11 boy), (2) 'I quite like having smaller classes. With a bigger class we don't get as much teacher contact or discussion with the teacher. It's nice because you get a lot of attention' (year 13 girl), and (3) 'There's a better atmosphere in a small class. If the class is quite big, you can be overlooked more easily if you have a problem' (year 13 girl).

Interview at CCEA

Data were gathered regarding the choice of examination board at GCSE level from 1996 to 2000. This has been an important issue for German in recent years, and as Figure 3 reveals, there has been a dramatic swing away from the Northern Ireland CCEA and towards the AQA board.

Figure 3. GCSE German Entries (NI) 1996-2000



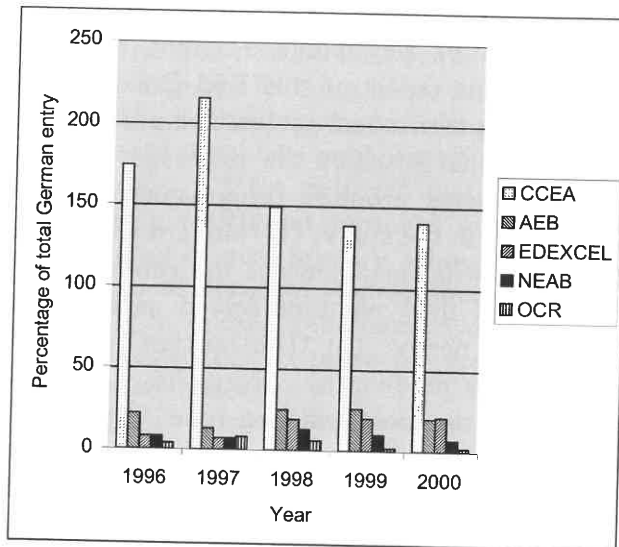
In 1996 over 61% of GCSE German entries were with CCEA, compared to only 29% with AQA. By 2000, this situation had been more than reversed, with 67% now with AQA and a mere 19% remaining with CCEA. This represents a fall of 69% in entries for CCEA German GCSE 1996-2000.

DENI also provided figures showing the examination boards for pupils in Northern Ireland at A-level from 1996 to 2000. As Figure 4 reveals, there has not been the same marked swing away from CCEA that was observed at GCSE.

All teacher respondents except one ('I don't want to reduce the standards') explained their move away from CCEA at GCSE as being mainly due to the perceived difficulty of their German examinations ('The 1998 CCEA GCSE Higher exam was impossibly difficult') and to the fact that CCEA had in 1998 announced their

intention, quickly reversed, to cease offering German at both GCSE and A-level, leaving schools to apply to the English and Welsh boards.

Figure 4: A-Level German entries 1996-2000 by examination board



The CCEA representative was given access to the quantitative and qualitative data from this research and invited to comment. He acknowledged that the numbers had fallen considerably, particularly at GCSE and accepted that the proposal to discontinue German, though unavoidable at the time, had led to further frustration among German teachers in Northern Ireland. The German team at CCEA were however aware of the situation and were making efforts to enhance the accessibility of their examinations, even in advance of the new specification planned for 2003. It was pointed out that, following the most recent CCEA German GCSE examinations (May/June 2001) there have been no letters of complaint. Since 1998 much had changed at CCEA, the CCEA representative continued, and the appointment of a Development Officer for Modern Languages, with particular responsibility for German, could be seen as indicative of CCEA's long-term commitment to the language. Much work, it was conceded, remains to be done to win back the confidence of German teachers in Northern Ireland.

Curriculum review

Curriculum Review is on the agenda in Northern Ireland and in Britain. Since the introduction of the current Northern Ireland Curriculum in 1996, CCEA has undertaken a programme of 'monitoring and research'. A major research project was carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research between 1996 and 2000 (Harland et al. 2002, CCEA 2002a). It was designed to discover the views of Key Stage 3 pupils and their teachers on the curriculum. The report of this KS3 Cohort Study underpins CCEA's approach to curriculum review and provides the research and evidence basis that justifies the proposed changes. Languages were reported as being prone to the greatest variation and in general come out badly in the study: (1) 'Modern Languages and the creative arts were consistently seen as the subjects least useful for the future, just as they were perceived as the least important for pupils' current needs', (2) 'The lack of relevance associated with languages was noteworthy, given that a third of the schools afforded this area the most teaching time', (3) 'Generally, pupils felt over-worked in modern languages and maths', and (4) 'Pupils perceived modern languages to be the most difficult area of the curriculum'.

As a result of this research, CCEA in April 2002 presented a major set of proposals, which mark 'the beginning of the biggest ever consultation carried out by CCEA'. The proposals contained in this 11-16 Consultation document are revolutionary. It is proposed that 'the statutory curriculum at Key Stage (KS) 3 should be specified in terms of curriculum areas and not individual subjects' (CCEA 2002b §3.5). At Key Stage 4, it is proposed (CCEA 2002b §4.9) that:

The core does not contain any academic subjects ... It is expected that the great majority... will continue to follow a balanced science course, to study their own and a second language, etc. No pupil should be deprived of the opportunity to do so.

A second language is included in the 'Language and Literacy' Curriculum Area (CCEA 2002b:§8.8), but it is not clear if it will be studied by all pupils, even at KS3. The statutory curriculum should be set out in just four components (CCEA 2002b §4.5):

- key transferable skills
- personal, social, and health education
- citizenship
- education for employability.

Paragraph 4.10 of the consultation paper (CCEA 2002b §4.10) is particularly important for language learning:

On the question of the second language, CCEA believes that language learning is too important to be left to age 11 ... The inclusion of some language learning in primary schools should be encouraged as soon as it is feasible to do so ... CCEA believes that alternative strategies (including a different approach to timetabling) for language learning in post-primary schools should be explored as a matter of urgency. Improvement in these areas would be likely to increase the number of pupils achieving the sort of success that is taken for granted in many other European countries.

It should be noted that primary languages do not feature in the Key Stages 1 and 2 proposals and that the developments suggested above are on top of statutory primary requirements. It is doubtful whether second language learning will be a priority in our primary schools and 'feasible' is not an encouraging word. It is also to be noted that most schools will probably opt for French or Irish in preference to German since these languages are already established in many primary schools. Spanish is also being actively promoted in the primary sector. 'A different approach to timetabling' probably presages a decrease in time devoted to languages post-primary and consequently a lessening of opportunity for the second modern language, which is the most common model of provision for German. The consultation period for this document closed on 31 October 2002 and the decisions are awaited. Whatever the outcome, the future provision for languages in the Northern Ireland Curriculum will be less generous than hitherto, and the position of German is likely to be further undermined.

A Case for German?

The most recent publication by the Northern Ireland Inspectorate reports the rise of Spanish and the decrease of German in schools

here. It continues with the admonishment, 'Schools need to address the issue of diversification to ensure that a broader language base is available in Northern Ireland' (ETI 2001, p. 2). However this is not accompanied by any advice on how this is to be achieved or on how traditional language choices can really be influenced. Without more specific and targeted measures from the Department of Education this call from the Inspectorate will surely go unheeded like so many previous calls over the past half century. Diversification remains the policy of the government, and yet this study reveals that German is actually in decline in Northern Ireland.

Far from languishing behind French, Spanish, and Irish in Northern Ireland schools, German should, if one were to consider the broader European perspective, be making a stronger case for itself. European Union (EYL 2001) figures reveal that 24% of the EU population speak German as their mother tongue, placing it some 8% above any of its nearest rivals (including English), and moreover a further 8% of the EU population speak German as a second or foreign language. The reunified Germany lies at the geographical and economic heart of Europe. Furthermore, the nation that has given us Goethe, Schiller, Bach, and Beethoven has an illustrious cultural tradition. In the past sixty years Germans have come to terms with their past, rebuilt their economy, and embraced the wider European community in ways we can only admire and envy. And yet in the Northern Ireland educational system the German language is floundering, and our pupils, fed by the popular media, perpetuate anachronistic, militaristic German stereotypes. At a time when the Spanish government is part-funding a Spanish Education Officer to promote their language and culture in Northern Ireland, apparently to great effect, German teachers are told that the Goethe-Institut in Manchester is to close. Many Heads of Department have spoken in this study of the need for concerted promotion of the German language and would call on the German embassy or indeed the Goethe-Institut to lend their support to their own efforts in the classroom. In the light of the difficulties facing German described in this paper, is it feasible to hope for a German Education Officer in Belfast?

References

- CCEA [Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment]. 2002a. *Is the Curriculum Working? A Summary of the Key Stage 3 Phase of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study*. Belfast: CCEA.
- CCEA 2002b. *Curriculum Review: A New Approach to Curriculum and Assessment 11-16*. Belfast: CCEA.
- ETI [Education and Training Inspectorate] 2001. *Improving Modern Languages in Post-Primary Schools*. Bangor: Department of Education.
- EYL [European Year of Languages 2001]. n.d. *Guidance Notes*. Strasbourg & Brussels: Council of Europe/European Commission.
- Filmer-Sankey, C. 1963. OXPROD: a summative account. *Language Learning Journal* 7: 5-8.
- Harland, J., H. Moor, K. Kinder, and M. Ashworth. 2002. *Is the Curriculum Working? The Key Stage 3 Phase of the Northern Ireland Curriculum Cohort Study*. Slough: NFER.
- Neil, P.S., W. Phipps, & R. Mallon. 1999. *Diversification of the First Modern Language in Northern Ireland schools*. Bangor: DENI.
- Neil, P.S., W. Phipps, & R. Mallon. 2000. The position of German in the Northern Ireland Curriculum. *Deutsch: Lehren und Lernen* 21:10-14.
- Purdy, Noel. 2001. The position of German in the Northern Ireland Curriculum: an investigation at Key stage 4 and beyond. Unpublished M.Ed. thesis, Queen's University Belfast.