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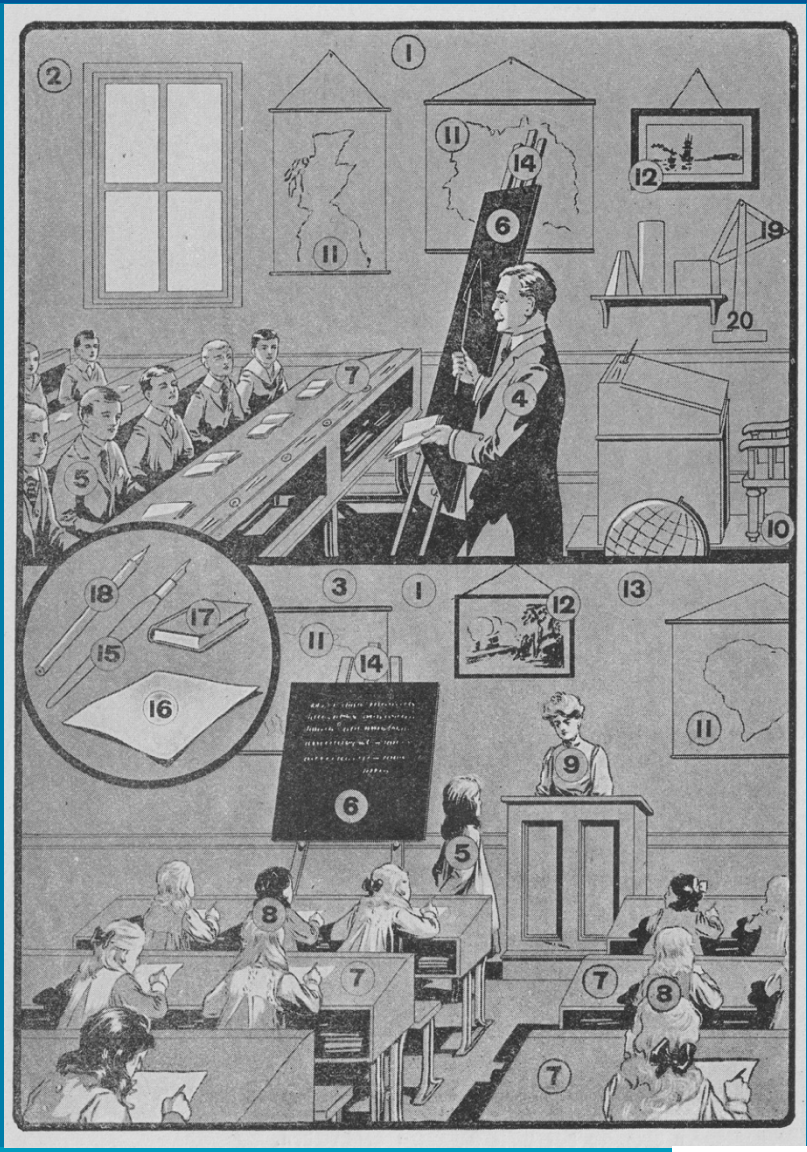
Language Teaching:
Learning from the Past
1. Differentiation and Diversity



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HoLLT.net
History of Language Learning and Teaching

This project is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Arts and Humanities Research Council

We are grateful to the following organisations for their support:

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Cover image

H. Baumann: *Pictorial German Course*, 1912. University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections

About these materials

This project addresses the need for a historical perspective in language teacher training, using research in the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HoLLT) to inform language teaching practice and policy. Taking five key themes of immediate relevance to teaching practice today, the project responds to evidence that teachers benefit from the framework that HoLLT gives them to reflect on and critique their own and others' practice and policy. Our materials translate research into packages tailored to the needs of practising teachers, making explicit links to their current and future roles. They are designed to be used without expert input, so that they can be widely used and embedded in training.

These materials incorporate an understanding of the history of language teachers' specialist discipline, equipping teachers to be more critically reflective in the classroom and thus more effective as teachers, as well as to be advocates for language learning and multilingualism.

Our project partners are the main language teacher associations and CPD centres in the UK. The training packages give teachers the toolkit they need to use an understanding of the past to make decisions about their current and future practice. The five themes all tackle topical concerns in language pedagogy, providing a historical perspective on each of the key themes:

1. Differentiation and diversity
2. What does it mean to teach culture?
3. Grammar: “The art of speaking well”?
4. Target language and (m)other tongue use
5. Making the case for languages - policy and advocacy

Contents

1. How to use this handbook

These materials form part of a series of material for languages teachers about the History of Language Learning and Teaching (HoLLT). The series aims to encourage teachers and trainees to consider current topics in MFL through a historical perspective. Each of the five units comprises the following:

- An eight-minute video
- A participant booklet which includes historical examples and discussion topics
- A facilitator booklet which includes contextual information and guidance for discussions

We suggest that facilitators proceed in the following manner for a 2-hour training session:

- Familiarise yourself with the instructor booklet
- Begin the training session by watching the introductory video in its entirety
- Complete the 'Introductory Task' with the group
- Begin the main video and pause it at relevant points as indicated in the instructor booklet
- Guide participants to the relevant page in their booklet
- During and following each pair or group discussion, note any common threads that become apparent, guide the discussion with reference to the additional information included in the facilitator notes, and link contributions to current practice.

When used as part of a teacher training programme, this unit is intended to supplement your existing training materials on differentiation. We assume that trainees and teachers will have a basic knowledge of standard models of differentiation such as 'differentiation by task / by outcome' (e.g. see Coffey, 2018a) or 'differentiation by content / process / product' (see Tomlinson, 2003). We hope that our module offers a way to extend models of adapting material toward a deeper understanding of how decisions around curriculum content and learning environment shape pupils' engagement with language learning.

2. Aims

The theme of this unit is Differentiation. The objectives are:

1. To identify the ways in which differentiation is shaped by teachers' and learners' social, cultural and political contexts
2. To broaden practitioners' understanding by examining how differentiation has been interpreted historically
3. To encourage seeing differentiated pedagogy within a wider framework of student motivation
4. To share and compare different pedagogical approaches to meet learners' differentiated needs.

3. Historical background

As with each of our modules, when used as part of a teacher-training programme, this module is intended to supplement your existing training material on differentiation. This module offers a historical perspective on differentiation in order to encourage participants to examine how curriculum content and the learning environment shape pupils' engagement with language learning.

The common national curriculum and a common national exam (the GCSE, or General Certificate of Secondary Education), introduced in England and Wales in the 1980s, posited the ideal that all pupils should be learning the same content in the same rhythm. This immediately brought into focus the need to formulate techniques to 'differentiate' learning – especially in mixed ability classes – through teaching strategies such as worksheets that set different tasks or through open tasks that could elicit differentiated outcomes. Most teacher manuals since the 1990s have helped teachers, especially those new to the profession, to implement these techniques, but often without a broader discussion of students' motivation for language learning or their identities as learners. In other words, there has been a focus on supporting or stretching pupils to handle a common body of content rather than questioning the curriculum itself and what it means to different learners. Yet pupils clearly have different ideas about the usefulness of language learning depending on what they have heard about it from family and friends and what use they imagine for it (Coffey, 2018b).

4. Introductory task

Discuss in pairs or groups:

1. **How has student diversity changed in the last 100 years?**
2. **How do you think these changes have affected language teaching?**

The introductory task should be completed before beginning the video.

The discussion might include all or some of the following:

- The separation of pupils by age
- The introduction of comprehensive schools
- The school leaving age
- Special educational needs and disabilities provision
- Pupils' countries of origin

5. Definitions of differentiation

Let's look at what we understand by the term differentiation. Decide on a definition with your partner or group.

5.1 Definitions of differentiation

Pause the video after “Structural differentiation includes … and teachers also differentiate according to learners’ interests, motivations and requirements”.

- Invite participants to draw on existing knowledge of differentiation in practice
- Organise points raised by participants into salient themes if these arise
- Summarise the discussion and paraphrase important points

6. Definitions of differentiation in teaching

Differentiation: different definitions

Differentiation means planning for student differences.

Differentiation means recognizing that pupils' learning differs with regard to speed and quality.

Differentiation requires flexibility with regard to what is taught and how it is taught, as well as responding to students' needs.

Read these definitions and compare them with your own.

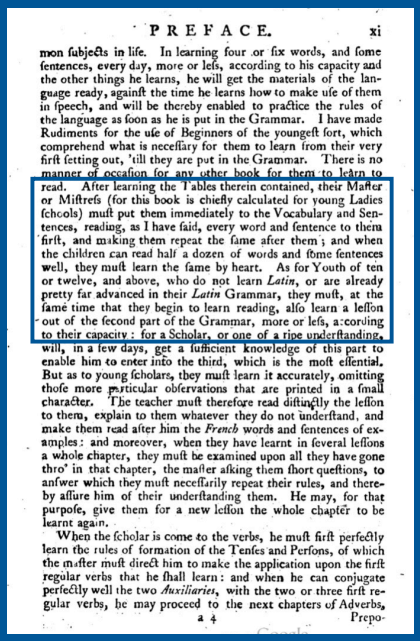
6.1 Definitions of differentiation in teaching

	Pause the video after “The term ‘differentiation’ defies clear definition as teaching is always contextual.”

This slide shows several definitions of differentiation; pause the video here to allow participants to read the definitions.

7. Differentiation by age

Age



PREFACE. xi

mon ſubjects in life. In learning four or ſix words, and ſome ſentences, every day, more or leſs, according to his capacity and the other things he learns, he will get the materials of the language ready, againſt the time he learns how to make uſe of them in ſpeech, and will be thereby enabled to practice the rules of the language as ſoon as he is put in the Grammar. I have made Rudiments for the uſe of Beginners of the youngeſt ſort, which comprehend what is neceſſary for them to learn from their very firſt ſetting out, 'till they are put in the Grammar. There is no manner of occaſion for any other book for them to learn to read. After learning the Tables therein contained, their Maſter or Miſtreſs (for this book is chiefly calculated for young Ladies ſchools) muſt put them immediately to the Vocabulary and Sentences, reading, as I have ſaid, every word and ſentence to them firſt, and making them repeat the ſame after them; and when the children can read half a dozen of words and ſome ſentences well, they muſt learn the ſame by heart. As for Youth of ten or twelve, and above, who do not learn *Latin*, or are already pretty far advanced in their *Latin* Grammar, they muſt, at the ſame time that they begin to learn reading, alſo learn a leſſon out of the ſecond part of the Grammar, more or leſs, according to their capacity: for a Scholar, or one of a ripe underſtanding, will, in a few days, get a ſufficient knowledge of this part to enable him to enter into the third, which is the moſt eſſential. But as to young ſcholars, they muſt learn it accurately, omitting thoſe more particular obſervations that are printed in a ſmall character. The teacher muſt therefore read diſtinctly the leſſon to them, explain to them whatever they do not underſtand, and make them read after him the *French* words and ſentences of examples: and moreover, when they have learnt in ſeveral leſſons a whole chapter, they muſt be examined upon all they have gone thro' in that chapter, the maſter aſking them ſhort queſtions, to anſwer which they muſt neceſſarily repeat their rules, and thereby aſſure him of their underſtanding them. He may, for that purpoſe, give them for a new leſſon the whole chapter to be learnt again.

When the ſcholar is come to the verbs, he muſt firſt perfectly learn the rules of formation of the Tenſes and Perſons, of which the maſter muſt direct him to make the application upon the firſt regular verbs that he ſhall learn: and when he can conjugate perfectly well the two *Auxiliaries*, with the two or three firſt regular verbs, he may proceed to the next chapters of Adverbs,

a 4 Prepo-

Young learners of six or seven should simply learn a few words and then some sentences each day. Understanding grammar should be reserved for "Youth of ten or twelve, and above".

Louis Chambaud: *A Grammar of the French Tongue* (1750)

1. **Chambaud assumes young pupils should engage in rote learning. What is the place of rote learning in differentiated teaching practices?**
2. **What are the ways in which you use rote learning in your teaching? How does this vary by year group?**
3. **Do you agree that grammar is not worth teaching until the age of 12?**
4. **What should be the role of primary schools in teaching grammar? What do you know about current approaches to language teaching at primary school?**

7.1 Differentiation by age

Pause the video after “Louis Chambaud, who wrote a French grammar in the 18th century, suggested different methods for younger and older learners.”

Louis Chambaud was a Frenchman teaching in England. He introduced exercises for students to do rather than simply learn dialogues by rote. The exercises were based on sentence translations designed to practise different rules of grammar.

8. Differentiation by age: Pictures

A

(3)

Cornix cornicatur, *à à* — A a
The Crow crieth.

Agnus balat, *b è è è* — B b
The Lamb blaiteth.

Cicàda ſtridet, *cì cì* — C c
The Graſhopper chirpeth.

Upupa dicit, *du du* — D d
The Whooppoo ſaith.

Infans ejulat, *è è è* — E e
The Infant crieth.

Ventus flat, *fi fi* — F f
The Wind bloweth.

Anſer gingrit, *ga ga* — G g
The Gooſe gagleth.

Os halat, *hà'h hà'h* — H h
The mouth breatheth out.

Mus mintrit, *ì ì ì* — I i
The Mouſe chirpeth.

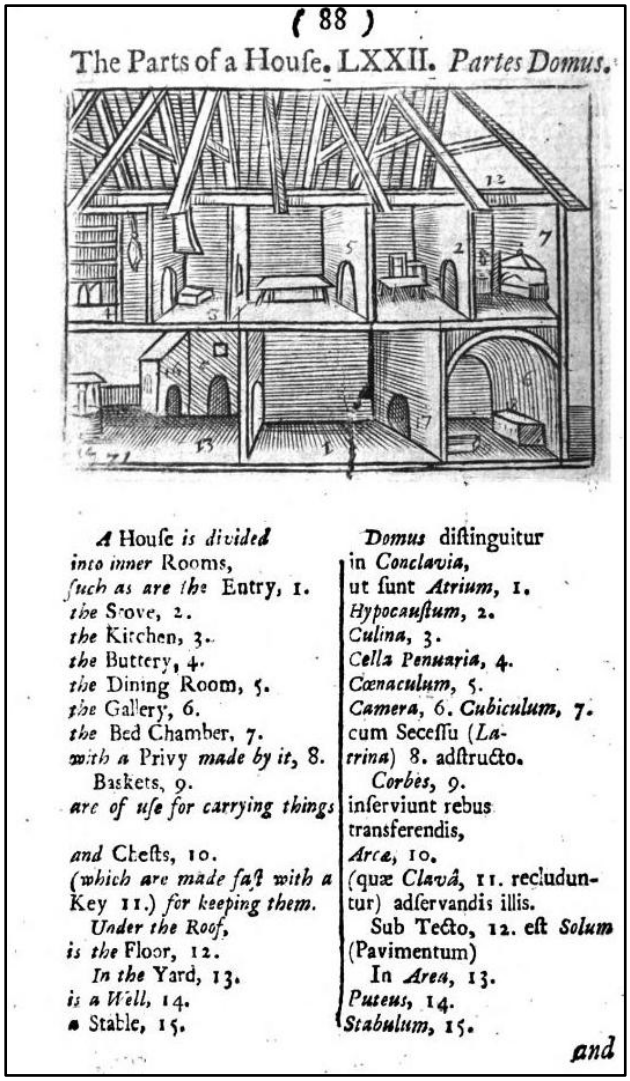
Anas tetrinnit, *kha, kha* — K k
The Duck quaketh.

Lupus ululat, *lu ulu* — L
The Wolf howleth.

Urſus murmurat, *mummum* — M m
The Bear grumbleth.

B 2 *Feli s*

B



(88)

The Parts of a Houſe. LXXII. *Partes Domus.*

A Houſe *is divided* into *inner* Rooms,
ſuch as are the Entry, 1.
the Srove, 2.
the Kitchen, 3.
the Buttery, 4.
the Dining Room, 5.
the Gallery, 6.
the Bed Chamber, 7.
with a Privy *made by it*, 8.
Baskets, 9.
are of uſe for carrying things
and Cheſts, 10.
(which are made faſt with a Key 11.) *for keeping them.*
Under the Roof,
is the Floor, 12.
In the Yard, 13.
is a Well, 14.
a Stable, 15.

Domus diſtinguitur in *Conclavia*,
ut ſunt *Atrium*, 1.
Hypocauſtum, 2.
Culina, 3.
Cella Penuaria, 4.
Cœnaculum, 5.
Camera, 6. *Cubiculum*, 7.
cum Seceſſu (*Latrina*) 8. adſtructo.
Corbes, 9.
inſerviunt rebus transferendis,
Arcæ, 10.
(quæ *Clavâ*, 11. recludun-tur) adſervandis illis.
Sub Tecto, 12. eſt *Solum* (Pavimentum)
In *Area*, 13.
Puteus, 14.
Stabulum, 15.

and

J. A. Comenius: *Orbis Sensualium Pictus (Visible World in Pictures)*, 1729

From the preface to the *Orbis Sensualium Pictus*:
"The young A b c scholar will easily remember the force of every character by the very looking upon the creature, till the imagination being strengthened by use, can readily afford all things; […] he may proceed to the viewing of the pictures, and the inscriptions set over'em. Where again the very looking upon the thing pictured suggesting the name of the thing, will tell him how the title of the picture is to be read. And thus the whole book being gone over by the bare titles of the pictures, reading cannot but be learned."

1. What is the purpose of these activities?
2. How old would their intended reader be? Explain the reasons for your answer.
3. Can you think of similar materials used today? How are these used?

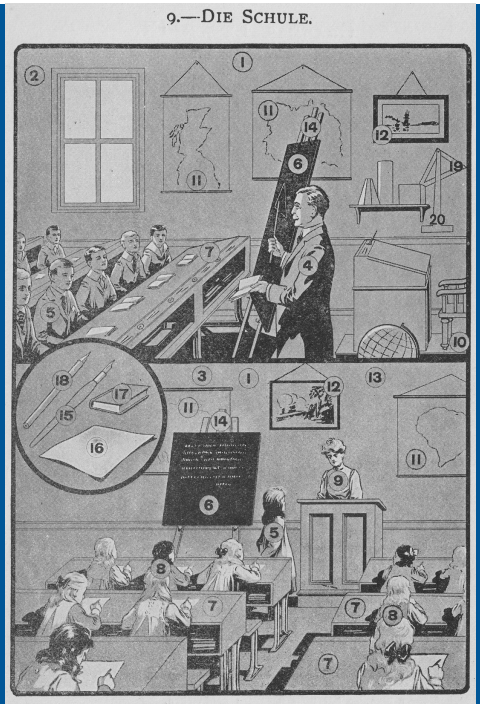
8.1 Differentiation by age: Pictures

This is additional material not included in the video.

Comenius's *Orbis Sensualium Pictus (Visible World in Pictures)* was the first modern style 'textbook'. It was originally bilingual German-Latin, but soon appeared in other languages. The arguments Comenius makes in the preface were later (in the 19th and 20th centuries) used for the direct method and communicative approach.

9. Gender in the classroom

Gender



"I know nothing – nothing in the world – I assure you; except that I play and dance beautifully, – and French and German of course I know, to speak; but I can't read or write them very well. Do you know they wanted me to translate a page of an easy German book into English the other day, and I couldn't do it."

(Seventeen-year old Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte Brontë: *Villette*, 1853)

1. **Do you think boys and girls learn languages differently? Is it fair to teach them differently?**

2. **Is there such a thing as 'boy-friendly' teaching approaches? Why are these thought to be boy-friendly?**

3. **Identify some of the current social trends that might influence girls' and boys' choices with regard to learning languages.**

9.1 Gender in the classroom

Pause the video after "History shows, then, that gender differences in language aptitude are not a given and the assumptions people have made about girls' preference for or abilities in languages are a relatively recent trend."

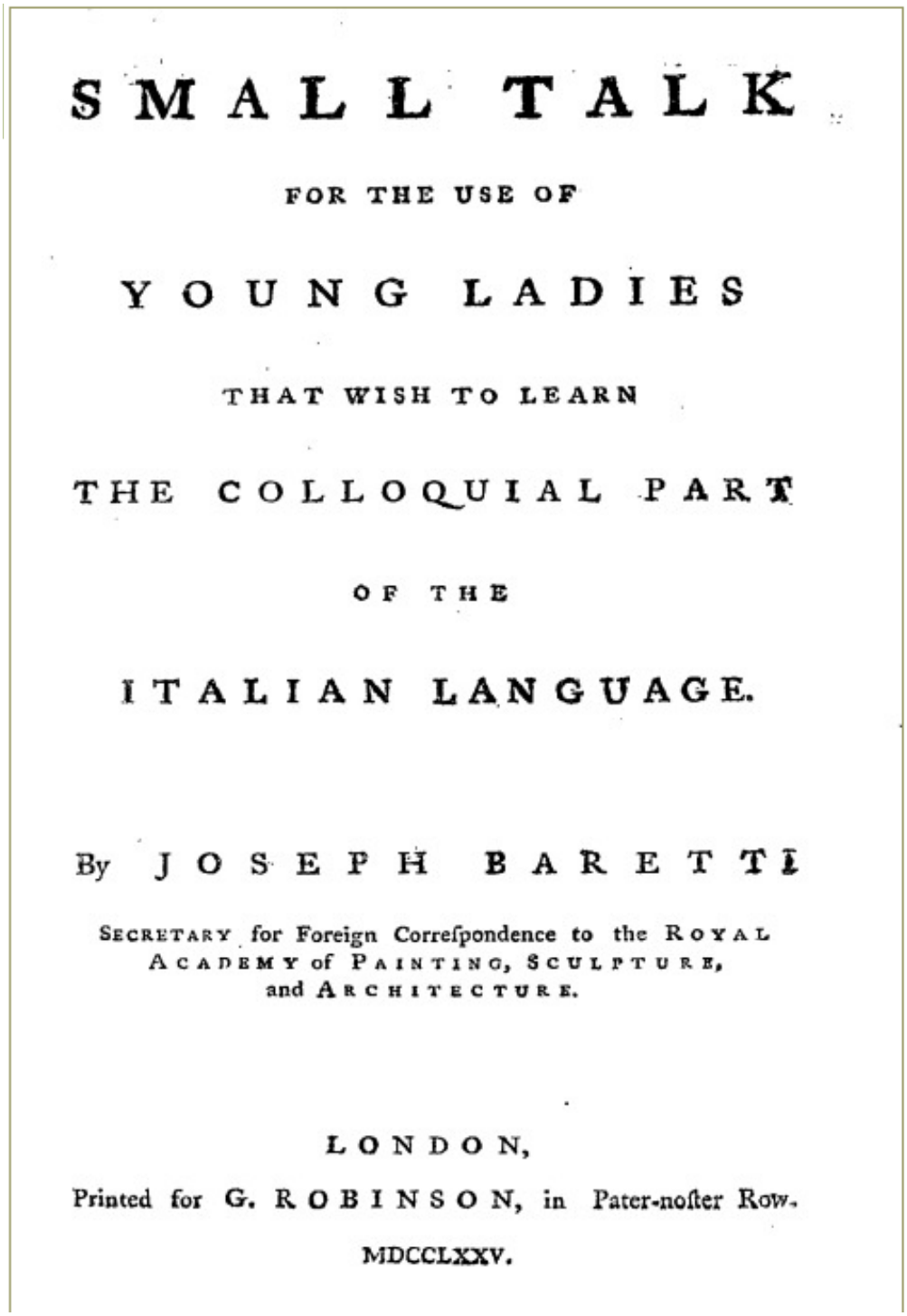
The aim of this section is to show how assumptions with regard to girls' and boys' language abilities have changed over time, often in response to socio-political developments. It is important to remember that the validity of such assumptions is not borne out by research.

***Villette* (1853)**

During Charlotte Brontë's life, considerable change in educational practices and attitudes towards education took place, and differences in girls' and boys' education were a matter of public debate. She was critical of women's education, as suggested by the character of M. Paul Emanuel who "gave lessons on any and every subject that struck his fancy". Middle-class girls' education mostly prepared them for marriage: the character of Ginevra Fanshawe engages in singing and dancing, but not history, geography, mathematics or grammar.

The position of governess was one of the few paid occupations available to middle-class women. Charlotte Brontë worked as a governess in Belgium, teaching English, but her diary entries indicate that she resented her pupils and the task of teaching them. The fictional representations of teachers in her novels show the power of education: it allowed women economic independence and social status (as the central character Lucy Snowe in *Villette* who teaches languages). Through Lucy Snowe, Charlotte Brontë questions the roles assigned to women.

10. Gendered teaching materials



SMALL TALK

FOR THE USE OF

YOUNG LADIES

THAT WISH TO LEARN

THE COLLOQUIAL PART

OF THE

ITALIAN LANGUAGE.

By JOSEPH BARETTI

SECRETARY for Foreign Correſpondence to the ROYAL ACADEMY of PAINTING, SCULPTURE, and ARCHITECTURE.

LONDON,

Printed for G. ROBINSON, in Pater-noſter Row.

MDCCLXXV.

Book cover
Joseph Baretti: *Small Talk for the Use of Young Ladies That Wish to Learn the Colloquial Part of the Italian Language* (1775)

10.1 Gendered teaching materials

This is additional material not included in the video.

Books specifically for girls or boys were published because girls tended not to learn Latin whereas boys did. In addition to learning different content, the assumed purpose of their language learning also differed: grammar and translation were taught to encourage boys to engage in rigorous and disciplined thinking, whereas girls were expected to be able to make conversation.

The Taunton Commission, which examined secondary education in 782 grammar schools and some private schools in the 1860s, found that girls "knew French better than boys, had "a correct ear", "quicker perception", and "greater aptitude". These observations explained away girls' higher achievements in spoken French compared to boys. Measured against what it was assumed really mattered, the criteria of mental discipline and grammatical knowledge (the goals in boys' schools), girls did poorly, and so their attainment was judged overall to be poor. However, language teaching reformers of the late 19th century drew on the methods used in girls' schools to achieve fluency in reading, speaking and writing (see McLelland 2017: 60-61).

Have girls been taught differently because:

1. Their background knowledge is different (they don't know Latin)?
2. Because we think they learn in a different way?
3. We have different expectations of them (to be able to make polite conversation)?

Do girls now count as more successful because we value communication skills more than in the 19th century, when writing and speaking in the language was not valued?

11. Social class and ability

Social class and ability

George Cruikshank's British Beehive (1867)

Research has found that students from a middle-class background tend to ask for help and receive it more often than their working-class peers.

In a language-learning context, how might our impression of students' social backgrounds influence the tasks we give them, the expectations we have of them, and the help we provide?

11.1 Social class and ability

Pause the video after “Hierarchical systems of education made perfect sense within a society structured as a divinely ordained hierarchy.”

It might be useful to consider the following as part of the discussion:

- What is cultural capital?
- How is cultural capital acquired?
- What is the role of cultural capital in language learning?

A 1916 textbook for advanced learners of German stated as its aim to cover only “what a German of a good average education must know and indeed does know” (Kron 1916: 3).

12. Language learning and social class

A

'The family in the living room', P.E.E. Barbier: *The Pictorial French Course*, 1901

B

A German Living Room?

Carl Teufel published a grammar for Chinese learners of German (1906-8). For Teufel's learners, the piano is a curiosity, to be seen only in the teacher's room.

The living room described by Teufel is a room used for work as well as relaxation — it may be warm or cold, dry or damp, healthy or unhealthy; there are sewing materials, an embroidery frame, and a spinning wheel.

The broom, brush and duster are also all kept in the living room; for children who misbehave, there is a rod in the corner.

1. **What does the picture (A) tell learners about French people and how they live?**

2. **Compare Teufel's description of a German living room (B) with the picture. What differences do you notice?**

3. **Not all French families live in the manner suggested by the picture (A), and not all German families have living rooms like the one described by Teufel (B). Why might the living rooms be depicted/described in these ways?**

12.1 Language learning and social class

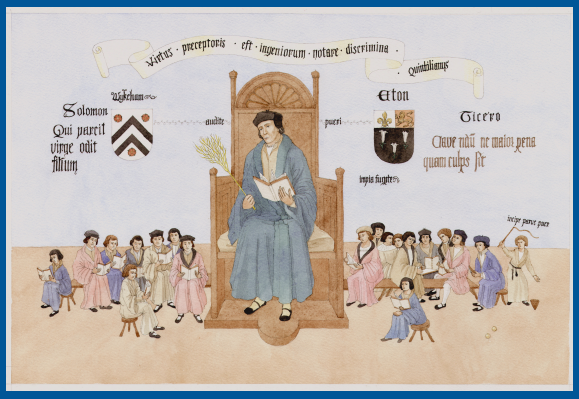
This is additional material not included in the video.

The aim of the discussion is to identify how language learning materials are tailored towards their audience.

How do materials used currently reflect their authors' views of language learners?

13. Language learning and teaching in different school settings

What are some of the obvious differences between these two classroom settings?



Pen and watercolour reproduction of a 16th-century mural found at Eton

Image © Stephen Conlin 2011. All Rights Reserved. Commissioned by Eton College

Language learning might look different in different settings.

1. **How does language learning differ across school settings?**
2. **Brainstorm some assumptions about how language teaching and learning would 'look' and 'feel' in different contexts.**
3. **How would you differentiate based on the school's location, class sizes, pupils' cultural backgrounds…?**

13.1 Language learning and teaching in different school settings

Pause the video after “Just what that means is, of course, the challenge.”

- Draw attention to the teacher holding
  - A book
  - A birch rod

  The book and the birch were enduring motifs in visual representations of teachers and pupils throughout the entire medieval period and into the modern age. These can be seen as the two pillars of learning, representing on the one hand ‘scholarly knowledge’ (what we might call today ‘pedagogical subject knowledge’) and, on the other hand, strategies for managing the learning and behaviour of the students (albeit of a quite different order from what we would see today).

- Think about the inferences we can make about the status, role and behaviour of learners and teachers, and their relationship.

- The discussion might include the following:
  - Gender
  - Ethnic diversity
  - Teacher-centred vs. learner-centred methods

14. Notions of ability

A

"[T]here are a certain number of children, more often boys, who are non-linguistic, and the poorer the neighbourhood, the more numerous they are – first, because they come from non-cultural homes, and secondly because literary English is largely a foreign language to them, which by the way, always seemed to me a conclusive reason for abolishing French in the elementary schools at least in the poorer neighbourhoods in which the King's English is really a foreign tongue."

(Cloudesley Brereton, British educationalist and writer, 1930)

B

"Teaching grammar to moderate-ability classes is largely a waste of time. […] Their limited capacity for conceptual thought does not allow them to use what they have learned in order to understand or compose meaningful utterances in German."

(Report: *German in the United Kingdom: Problems and Prospects*, 1976)

1. **Is there such a thing as 'language intelligence'?**
2. **Is there such a thing as a 'non-linguistic child'?**
3. **What assumptions is Brereton making here? Is his statement about ability or social class?**
4. **Today, we might speak about educational or cultural capital. How does this notion influence the way we teach languages?**
5. **How much do we link pupils' learning to their existing frames of reference?**

14.1 Notions of ability

Pause the video after “It is clear that disadvantage is equated here with a lack of ability.”

Consider both statements shown here. Example A is the quotation shown in the video (it has been extracted her for greater clarity).

Elicit responses linked to

- Parental support for languages
- The limiting perception of languages for work-place skills only

Some research evidence suggests that teachers’ questioning strategies have a determining effect on pupil participation. For instance, pupils respond more positively when invited to draw on their own experience rather than with reference to an abstracted reality. This is true of pupils in general, but has been shown to be especially effective in increasing participation of disaffected, low-achieving boys. According to research, this group was three times more likely to refer to personal, out-of-school experiences.

15. Reflection on historical and current practices

Working individually, note down some responses to the following questions and then discuss them with a partner.

1. **List three things you have learnt about historical approaches to differentiation.**

2. **What insights have you gained with regard to your own approach to teaching different groups of learners by looking at historical attitudes and methods?**

3. **What type(s) of differentiation would you like to see in an ideal education system?**

4. **Is differentiation – catering to learners of all abilities and ages – desirable, or might we ever (as in most of history) go back to a time when not everyone has the opportunity to learn languages?**
   What would be the advantages and disadvantages of that?

15.1 Plenary: Reflection on historical and current practices

These were the aims for this session:

1. To identify the ways in which differentiation is shaped by teachers' and learners' social, cultural and political contexts
2. To broaden practitioners' understanding by examining how differentiation has been interpreted historically
3. To encourage seeing differentiated pedagogy within a wider framework of student motivation
4. To share and compare different pedagogical approaches to meet differentiated needs.

16. Key timeline

597	First cathedral school established in Canterbury
1506	Johannes Reuchlin publishes the first European grammar of Hebrew
1576	Earliest manual to include English published as *Colloquia ou Dialogues avec un Dictionaire en six langues: Flamen, Anglois, Alleman, François, Espaignol, & Italien* in Antwerp
1605	Peter Erondell's *French Garden* is one of the earliest publications aimed specifically at female students
1870	The Elementary Education Act made education compulsory for all children in England and Wales up to the age of ten.
1872	French approved as 'specific subject' as part of elementary curriculum; Girls' Day School Trust founded
1880	Elementary education made compulsory for children between the ages of 5 and 10; German approved as 'specific subject' as part of elementary curriculum
1888	First manual of Commercial German published (Joseph T. Dann's *German Commercial Correspondence*); Cambridge Syndicate introduces a commercial examination with foreign language element
1895	Teaching of at least one modern language required in higher grade and science schools receiving government grants (as part of commercial classes or as literary subjects)
1906	Earliest known manual of German for Chinese learners published by P. C. Teufel
1910	Institute of Linguists established to support "British-born linguists" in commerce
1918	Secondary education made compulsory up to the age of 14
1947	Tripartite school system established; this consisted of selective grammar schools, secondary modern schools, and secondary technical schools
1951	Introduction of GCE O-Level and A-Level examinations
1965	Gradual introduction of comprehensive schools in the UK; introduction of Certificate of Secondary Education (CSE), which covered grades C-G or 4-1
1988	National Curriculum introduced in England and Wales; General Certificate of Secondary Education introduced in the UK
1998	Tiered GCSE structure unified across specifications: foundation tier (grades G-C) and higher tier (A*-D)
2004	Languages become optional after age 14
2015	School leaving age raised to 18

17. References and bibliography for further reading

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18. Appendix: Video Transcripts

Introductory video

Teachers know that different learners need to be taught in different ways – that is what we today call “differentiation”. While the term differentiation is relatively new, the practice of differentiation has been around for a long time, forever. In this session we will the ideological underpinnings of historical approaches to teaching specific groups of learners. On other words, we will look at some ideas from the past to help us reflect on what we do today.

Age, social class, gender, and notions of ability have always been central to the practice of differentiation, but teaching methods and beliefs around these categories have changed over time. For example, the ideal of ‘Languages for all’ – meaning that every pupil of whatever social background should have equal opportunities to study language meaningfully - has only been with us relatively recently, since the 1960s.

Children’s age was thought to be a significant factor in what they were able to learn. For several centuries, the teaching of modern languages followed historical methods based on the teaching of the Classics, Latin and Greek, – so that young children learned grammar through rote memorization and more analytical approaches were reserved for pupils of secondary school-age.

Assumptions we might make today about ability and learning preferences were often linked historically to the vision of society at different times, including what was considered the appropriate learning for different social classes.

Gender is another factor. At present, girls are often assumed to be more competent language learners than boys: girls generally outperform boys in exams and represent the vast majority of post-16 language students. Traditionally, though, boys were thought more suited to learning grammar, and it was the grammatical facts that made languages a worthy subject, helping develop boys’ mental rigour while girls’ language education was largely centred around developing on communicative competence to prepare them for their role in society as pleasant conversationalists.

We hope that this session encourages comparison of past perceptions with your own views of language learning tailored to different students.

Main video

Differentiation has become a ubiquitous term in education. While the term may have been in common use for only a short time, the challenges felt by a teacher confronting a diverse group of students are not new. What has changed are the categories that define student diversity and the names given to differentiation practices that have been developed within these.

Before the 1960s, language teaching mainly took place in grammar schools, and most pupils at secondary modern schools, who made up the majority of the school population, did not study languages or only took introductory courses. Comprehensive schools, established from the 1960s onwards, taught languages to all pupils.

Structural differentiation includes the use of different curricula or types of school for different learners, and teachers also differentiate according to learners' interests, motivations and requirements.

The term 'differentiation' defies clear definition as teaching is always contextual.

Children of different ages are generally taught in different ways.

From classical times onwards language learning began with rote-learning before progressing on to the analysis of extended texts for secondary phase learners.

The expectation that learners would memorise parts of the target language without necessarily understanding them continued for many centuries. Louis Chambaud, who wrote a French grammar in the 18th century, suggested different methods for younger and older learners.

Some teachers think that boys are less interested in or less apt at languages than girls. Training materials produced since the 1990s encourage 'boy-friendly' approaches.

In fact, language learning has been gendered in different ways throughout history, and not just because access to education was gendered. The differences in teaching assumed different interests, aptitudes and future roles for boys and girls. Most children were taught largely at home, if at all, until the 18th century. From this time sons of the gentry and middle classes were expected to participate in formal education and to travel abroad to perfect their language learning. Young men were socialised to be confident in their use of languages. It was only at the end of the 18th century that fluency in speaking foreign languages started to be seen as an unmanly attribute.

French and German were commonly taught in girls' schools in the 19th century. They were taught in boys' schools too, but Latin always took precedence. Boys were taught grammar and translation, whereas girls' education emphasised conversational competence and literature rather than grammar.

History shows, then, that gender differences in language aptitude are not a given and the assumptions people have made about girls' preferences for or abilities in languages are a relatively recent trend.

Learning foreign languages can meet practical needs and fulfil broader educational purposes. But languages have also been learnt for reasons of social standing, what we might today call 'cultural capital'.

In medieval England, the first books for French were aimed at the children of the ruling class because being able to speak the prestigious French of Paris elevated their status. German language learning books for English learners in the 18th and 19th centuries included extracts from Goethe's and Schiller's works for similar reasons.

Hierarchical systems of education made perfect sense within a society structured as a divinely ordained hierarchy.

A mural dating from the early 16th century, uncovered at Eton in 2005, is considered the oldest wall painting of a classroom scene in Europe. The Latin inscription means 'The teacher's excellence is to notice pupils' different capabilities'. Just what that means is, of course, the challenge.

In the second half of the 20th century it became common practice to group learners by ability.
Different school types prepared different groups for their place in society: grammar schools taught languages as part of a curriculum designed to shape pupils' minds whereas secondary modern schools taught the practical skills needed by the workforce.

But the distinction made between pupils of different abilities was conflated with older distinctions of social class.

In 1930, poet, scholar and schools inspector Cloudesley Brereton described what he called the "non-linguistic child". It is clear that disadvantage is equated here with a lack of ability.

History thus shows us various models of differentiation: we could offer language teaching only to some students; learners of different genders and abilities could be taught in different settings; and content and goals could differ. We can question whether all language learners need to be able to read literature in other languages, or whether practical skills and language awareness can also be useful to many learners.