



## Histories of language learning and teaching in Europe

Richard Smith & Nicola McLelland

To cite this article: Richard Smith & Nicola McLelland (2018) Histories of language learning and teaching in Europe, *The Language Learning Journal*, 46:1, 1-5, DOI: [10.1080/09571736.2017.1382051](https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2017.1382051)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2017.1382051>



© 2017 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 02 Feb 2018.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 312



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## Histories of language learning and teaching in Europe

The articles in this special issue consider the history of learning and teaching languages within particular European countries or regions, including Britain. The papers, by leading scholars in the field, provide accessible, state-of-the-art overviews which cover similar facets of history, enabling comparisons to be usefully drawn and interconnections identified.

In a previous special issue of the journal *Language & History* (McLelland and Smith 2014a), we assembled a different kind of collection of historical overviews of second/foreign language teaching in Europe. Separate articles there considered the parallel overall histories of French, German, Spanish and English learning and teaching in Europe, and surveyed research into these different language traditions. As our introduction to that special issue made clear (McLelland and Smith 2014b), research relating to the history of learning/teaching specific languages is still, in some cases, comparatively rare. Thus, within Europe, there have been relatively few studies of the history of teaching English as a foreign language; only in Germany has there been a significant amount of relevant research, and this is mostly available in German, rather than in English. On the other hand, historical research is relatively well developed in relation, particularly, to the international teaching of French, as is made clear by Besse (2014), reviewing over 25 years' work by scholars associated with SIHFLES, the Société Internationale pour l'Histoire du Français Langue Étrangère ou Seconde, which publishes its own scholarly journal, *Documents pour l'histoire du français langue étrangère ou seconde*. Partly, of course, this discrepancy is accounted for by the fact that the rise of English as a foreign language is relatively recent, whereas, as the articles in the present collection make clear, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, French was the generally preferred second language throughout Europe. Italian, meanwhile, was favoured in sixteenth-century Germany, as Schröder's article in this issue indicates, and, of course, Latin was taught across Europe for centuries.

The present collection of articles is a counterpart to our previous *Language & History* special issue. It 'cuts the cake' of the European history of language learning and teaching in a different, more situated, socio-cultural and multilingual way, viewing history according to geographical location of the learners, classrooms and teachers, rather than according to specific target language. Thus, the present issue contains separate historical overviews of language teaching in Britain (going back to the Norman conquest), the Netherlands (1500–2000), the German-speaking parts of Central Europe (Middle Ages to the present day), France and francophone Switzerland (1740–1940), Spain (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries) and Portugal (eighteenth to nineteenth centuries). Clearly the picture represented here remains incomplete – we would have liked to feature articles on other European countries or regions including Italy and Scandinavia, for example; also, as can be seen, the temporal ranges of the articles vary. Nevertheless, just as our *Language & History* special issue was innovative in bringing together different language-based histories for the first time (though see also Reinfried 2014), the present issue represents a relatively unique case of language learning/teaching histories in different parts of Europe being deliberately juxtaposed.<sup>1</sup>

In order to attain some degree of comparability between different articles whilst simultaneously allowing authors flexibility to draw on their specific expertise in a particular period of history (hence the different temporal ranges noted above), we suggested the following possible topics to authors of the area histories in this volume:

- The state of research in relation to the geographical area in question.
- Which languages have been learned and taught, including necessary social, economic, educational background.
- Who have the learners been? Who have the teachers been? What motivations have there been for learning different languages?
- Policies, curricula, textbooks.
- Teaching methods and practices.
- Case study/case studies.

The articles broadly adopt the framework we proposed<sup>2</sup> though different authors place emphasis on different aspects, according to differences in interest and stance with regard to historical research.

Thus, while covering all the above topics in her article about the history of language learning and teaching in Britain which opens the collection, Nicola McLelland places a particular emphasis on policies, curricula and assessment, providing a useful long-term perspective on the changes in all three of these areas which have so influenced learning and teaching in British schools in recent times (cf. Dobson, this issue). Rather than 'infrastructure', Frans Wilhelm, on the other hand, emphasises teachers and textbooks in his overview of foreign language teaching and learning in the Netherlands from 1500 to 2000. Like McLelland, he rounds off his account with a case study of the late-nineteenth-century Reform Movement period, while presenting a balanced treatment of different periods of history overall. The next article, Konrad Schröder's survey of eight centuries of modern language learning and teaching in German-speaking Europe, provides, perhaps, the most even chronological balance of all the articles, although this is necessarily achieved at the expense of a thematic treatment. Schröder places great emphasis on the multilingual nature of early modern Europe, a factor which is also emphasised by Blaise Extermann in his overview of the teaching of modern languages in France and francophone Switzerland (1740–1940). Extermann's approach is strongly influenced by present-day sociolinguistics, while Ana Clara Santos, in her history and historiography of foreign languages teaching and learning in Portugal, brings in insights from another social scientific theoretical framework – the sociological study of disciplinisation. Her article concentrates on the teaching and learning of languages in the best-researched period for Portugal, the nineteenth century, when the establishment of a state education system, successive reforms to public education and the growth in production of didactic materials reveal a hierarchy of knowledge according to a certain vision of the world and of education. Both Extermann and Santos focus on relatively recent history but Javier Suso López, in his article on Spain, considers an earlier period, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. He demonstrates the need to adopt a pan-European, plurilingual perspective on the history of language teaching and learning, placing analysis of learning materials in Spain within a framework of cultural and social history and the history of ideas.

These differences in emphasis among different accounts are instructive for those considering engagement in historical research of their own, and one aim of this collection is, certainly, to form a foundation for, and to stimulate further, such research. The accounts (or, at least, comparisons among them) reveal gaps to be filled for the respective contexts, at the same time as providing possible models to be emulated. Apart from being important as scholarly contributions in their own right and as stimuli for further research, the overviews in this collection are also likely to have value in the practical realms of teacher education and language policy reform, in particular in contexts for which no comparable overview of overall language teaching history has previously existed.<sup>3</sup>

This brings us to one of our major intentions in encouraging a historiographical focus on the relatively sociolinguistic or socio-cultural dimensions of *which* languages have been learned and taught, *who* the learners and teachers have been, and *what* motivations there have been for learning and teaching different languages, as well as the political aspects of curriculum and policy in different contexts.

Firstly, focusing attention on such dimensions encourages a certain 'putting of method in its place' – in other words, it can help the language teaching profession escape from the straitjacket of the

universalistic ‘method histories’, critiqued long ago by Stern (1983) (see also Howatt and Smith 2014: 92), but which are still most familiar, at least in English-speaking contexts. And they can do this, as the articles in this issue show, by ‘situating shifts in language teaching theory and practice [...] within broader social, political, economic and cultural transformations’ (Howatt and Smith 2014: 93).

Secondly, and this is related to the point just made, a focus on specific geographical areas fulfils the need for ‘decentring and localization of [...] history via accounts of practice and theory in multiple contexts’ which Howatt and Smith (2014: 93) identify as a desirable antidote to falsely universalistic histories emanating from ‘centre’ contexts. Adopting a locally situated, multilingual perspective improves the chances of escape from conventional monolingual treatments which, as is implied most strongly in this issue by Extermann, can blind us to contemporary needs for a plurilingual perspective.

Further historical perspectives on current issues assuredly arise from the locally specific and trans-European phenomena revealed in this collection of articles. We wish to leave the reader free to make their own inferences, in relation to their own context, but we end with some images from the articles which strike us, in near-Brexit Britain, as particularly worthy of note.

The first of these concerns cultural arrogance, and the way imperial powers (or imperial powers in decline) seem to be a special case where language learning is concerned. Thus, according to Suso López (citing Caravolas 1994: 266), from the Renaissance to the sixteenth century, ‘the teaching and learning of languages was far less important in the cultural life of Spain than it was in the Netherlands, in England or even in France’. Suso López’s explanations seem quite pertinent to the current situation in England, with the added, unignorable factor that the English language has spread enormously in the world, albeit relatively recently, since John Florio’s (1578) widely circulated comment (also cited by Suso López) about it being ‘worthless beyond Dover’. That this spread is putting pressure on the learning of languages other than English both in Britain *and* in other European countries is clear, as alluded to in Dobson’s article, and all the more reason for asserting the value of plurilingual, multicultural European traditions of language learning and teaching via this special issue.

Indeed, finally, there are several positive images of trans-European interchange and collaboration (including between Britain and ‘the Continent’) which emerge from these pages. Cases particularly highlighted by authors themselves include the Europe-wide circulation of books of dialogues in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (for which Suso López identifies a precursor in William Caxton’s *Dialogues in French and English* (1480)), and of multilingual or ‘polyglot’ texts (referred to in the articles by McLelland, Wilhelm and Schröder) during the same time period. A similar phenomenon occurred in the nineteenth century with works by the German authors J.V. Meidinger (1756–1822), J.F. Ahn (1796–1865) and H.G. Ollendorff (1803–1865), as mentioned variously by McLelland, Wilhelm, Extermann and Santos in their articles. These authors’ books were published in several European countries for a range of combinations of target and source languages. Meidinger’s model of the ‘practical’ grammar, in particular, can be considered influential in the early development of what came to be called the grammar-translation approach to language teaching, although McLelland cites other candidates as source for the innovation of grammatical ‘exercises’ in language learning.

Two further phenomena are certainly better-known nowadays for having been pan-European developments in the history of language teaching. One – the late-nineteenth-century Reform Movement – constituted the bedrock for ‘progressive’ approaches to language teaching in the twentieth century throughout what Howatt and Smith (2014) have called the ‘scientific period’ of language teaching (see also Howatt and Smith 2002). The other – the work of the Council of Europe from the late 1970s onwards, in particular in developing the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) – has had considerable impact in bringing together language teaching and assessment systems in Europe. Both McLelland and Wilhelm devote case studies in this issue to the Reform Movement, while Dobson considers the CEFR in his article, highlighting both its impact and the British contribution to it in the person of experts like John Trim (1924–2013).<sup>4</sup>

In sum, in our work here and in McLelland and Smith (2014a), while encouraging a focus on particular countries/regions and languages, respectively, we find that we have been enabling the exploration of points of commonality and cross-transfer as well as diversity and divergence. This special issue and the previous special issue of *Language & History*, combined with a forthcoming set of volumes (McLelland and Smith 2018a), have, we feel, brought together hitherto disparate historical research into modern language teaching in Europe in a relatively coherent and cohesive fashion. Sufficient interconnections have begun to be established for us to talk with confidence about an emerging new plurilingual, intercultural and interdisciplinary field (cf. McLelland and Smith forthcoming 2018b), that of the overall, language-independent yet language-*interdependent*, geographically discrete and yet geographically intertwined 'History of Language Learning and Teaching' (HoLLT). At the same time, the task of developing a (unified) European history of language learning and teaching seems to be becoming steadily more possible.

## Notes

1. However, see Hüllen 2005 (in German); Caravolas 1994, 2000 (in French) for the period 1450–1800; Maux-Piovanò (2010) (also in French) for the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries; and Howatt and Smith (2002) (in English) for the Reform Movement period (approx. 1880–1910). These represent previous, all of them also partial, moves towards providing an overall *European* picture of developments in different geographical areas. Additionally, Wegner (1999) is an interesting attempt to compare the history specifically of German as a foreign language in two countries (France and England) in the twentieth century.
2. The exception is the final article, by Alan Dobson, which was separately commissioned. We very much welcomed the suggestion that it could be included in this special issue, due to its historical basis and current relevance, but note that it was not written with our general framework in mind.
3. This is certainly the case for Britain, as McLelland's article in this issue (drawing on McLelland 2017) makes clear. For the Netherlands, the chapter by Wilhelm relates to a recent monograph by the same author (Hulshof, Kwakernaak and Wilhelm 2015), as in the cases of McLelland and Extermann (which itself relates to Extermann 2017). For France, the article by Extermann here both complements and extends Puren (1988), as does that by Schröder for Germany in relation to Hüllen (2005). For Spain and Portugal, there have been no equivalents to the overviews in this collection.
4. See our interview with John Trim (Smith and McLelland 2014) for his own perspective on European cooperation in the field of language teaching and its antecedents.

## Acknowledgment

We are very grateful to Elspeth Broady for her expert translations of three of the articles (those by Extermann, Suso López and Santos) from the original French.

## Funding

All the papers in this collection apart from those by Extermann and Dobson (which were separately commissioned) were first presented at a symposium at the University of Warwick, 28–29 July 2013, the second in a series of three events organised under the auspices of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded research network project, 'Towards a history of modern foreign language teaching and learning' (15 July 2012–14 July 2014; AH/J012475/1). We gratefully acknowledge AHRC support, also, for Open Access publication of this special issue.

## References

- Besse, H. 2014. La Société Internationale pour l'Histoire du Français Langue Étrangère ou Seconde (SIHFLES), ou vingt-cinq ans d'investigations historiographiques sur l'enseignement/apprentissage du français langue étrangère ou seconde. *Language & History* 57, no. 1: 26–43.
- Caravolas, J. 1994. *La didactique des langues: Précis d'histoire I. 1450–1700. Anthologie I. À l'ombre de Quintilien*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Caravolas, J. 2000. *Histoire de la didactique des langues au siècle des Lumières: Précis et anthologie thématique*. Tübingen: Narr.
- Extermann, B. 2017. *Histoire de l'enseignement des langues en Suisse romande, 1740-1940*. Neuchâtel: Alphil.

- Howatt, A.P.R. and R. Smith, eds. 2002. *Modern Language Teaching: The Reform Movement*, Five Volumes (I: Linguistic Foundations; II: Early Years of Reform; III: Germany and France; IV: Britain and Scandinavia; V: Bibliographies and Overviews), with a General Introduction and Separate Volume Introductions. London: Routledge.
- Howatt, A.P.R. and R. Smith. 2014. The history of teaching English as a foreign language, from a British and European perspective. *Language & History* 57, no. 1: 75–95.
- Hüllen, W. 2005. *Kleine Geschichte des Fremdsprachenlernens*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt.
- Hulshof, H., E. Kwakernaak and F. Wilhelm. 2015. *Geschiedenis van het talenonderwijs in Nederland. Onderwijs in de moderne talen van 1500 tot heden*. Groningen: Uitgeverij Passage.
- Maux-Piovano, M-H., ed. 2010. Enseigner les langues modernes en Europe, XV-XVII siècles. Special issue of *Recherches*, 5.
- McLelland, N. 2017. *Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages: A History of Language Education, Assessment and Policy in Britain*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- McLelland, N. and R. Smith, eds. 2014a. *History of Modern Language Education in Europe*. Special issue of *Language & History*, 57/1.
- McLelland, N. and R. Smith, eds. 2014b. Building the history of language learning and teaching (HoLLT). Introduction to special issue on 'History of Modern Language Education in Europe'. *Language & History* 57, no. 1: 1–9.
- McLelland, N. and R. Smith, eds. 2018a. *The History of Language Learning and Teaching*, 3 volumes. Oxford: Legenda.
- McLelland, N. and R. Smith. 2018b. Establishing HoLLT: the history of language learning and teaching. In *The History of Language Learning and Teaching*, vol. 1, ed. N. McLelland and R. Smith, chapter 1. Oxford: Legenda.
- Puren, C. 1988. *Histoire de la méthodologie de l'enseignement des langues*. Paris: Nathan-CLE international.
- Reinfried, M. 2014. European history of Romance language teaching. In *Manual of Language Acquisition*, ed. C. Fäcke, 255–73. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Smith, R. and N. McLelland. 2014. An interview with John Trim on the history of modern language learning and teaching. *Language & History* 57, no. 1: 10–25.
- Stern, H.H. 1983. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wegner, A. 1999. *100 Jahre Deutsch als Fremdsprache in Frankreich und England*. Munich: iudicium.

Richard Smith  
University of Warwick, UK  
 r.c.smith@warwick.ac.uk

Nicola McLelland  
University of Nottingham, UK