Curriculum Innovation on the Basis of the European Language Portfolio

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Module Six Assessment Task
MN/ 02/ 02

Describe a curriculum change you would like to see introduced in your teaching context. Explain, with justification, how you would create the conditions for the change to be successful, including a consideration of cost-benefit analysis in your explanation.

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1   Introduction

There are many examples to show that to design an innovative curriculum is one thing, but to implement it is quite another. In this essay, a curriculum change will be proposed and an approach to its implementation will be suggested in the context of secondary schooling in the Canton of Glarus in Switzerland.

In the first section, the context of the innovation will be outlined in order to provide the basis for the succeeding suggestions. I regard a detailed knowledge and thorough consideration of the system in which an innovation is to be implemented as an important first step in planning the procedure. Hence the school system concerned will be presented in some depth as it is, covering the pupils' programme as well as the management structure involved, focusing subsequently on the teaching of English as a foreign language, considering the teachers' training and the language curriculum in its existing form. Subsequently to the respective issues, some implications of the present situation for setting the conditions for change will be discussed.

I will then go on to identify issues subject to change in the light of the learners' ability to communicate being a main objective in the foreign languages curriculum. On this basis I will suggest the replacement of the current syllabus of English as a foreign language by the European Language Portfolio (ELP). A description of the ELP will then be followed by the presentation of my approach to its implementation in the Canton of Glarus' schools, taking into account the actual situation previously outlined.

Finally, the approach to implementing the change as suggested will be analysed in terms of cost and benefit for stakeholders affected by the innovation. A special emphasis will be placed on the teachers' situation, taking into account the key role they play in the change.

2 Describing the Canton of Glarus' school system

2.1 Compulsory schooling

Compulsory schooling in the Canton of Glarus starts at the age of six and includes six years at primary level (Primarschule) and three years at secondary level (Sekundarstufe 1). At primary level, pupils are taught in classes according to their age, and no differentiation concerning intellectual ability is made. At the transfer from primary to secondary level, pupils are allocated to one of three sections at secondary level ('Oberschule', 'Realschule', and 'Sekundarschule') according to their performance in the last year of primary school. In the following I will focus on the most demanding of the three sections, 'Sekundarschule' (the section I work in and have been trained for), as it is beyond the scope of this essay to explain in detail the difference between the three sections and the process of allocation. For comprehensiveness of this text I shall from now on use the terms 'secondary school' for 'Sekundarschule' and 'secondary teachers' for respective teachers.

Successful completion of secondary school basically opens two options to pupils: they may either continue schooling to pass exams ('Maturität') to entitle them for higher education at universities and technical colleges, or choose to make an apprenticeship leading to a professional diploma (this typically includes 20 to 50 per cent of schooling during the apprenticeship).

However, secondary school is not concluded by any tests although it terminates compulsory schooling, but pupils receive a semi-annual report throughout secondary school.

2.2 The organisational structure

Glarus' secondary schools are relatively small, decentralised schools (the smallest ones just consist of three classes, i.e. one for every school year), due to the small population (38000) and the

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alpine topography of the canton. They are supervised by a schools' inspectorate where one person is basically responsible for the supervision of all secondary schools. However, the fact that the multitude of schools' inspectors' duties can hardly be carried out by one single person results in an deficiency of leadership in teachers' work.

Teachers have hence on the one hand a considerable degree of independence in their work; on the other hand, teaching is weakly monitored and hardly ever assessed by authorities. This structural weakness does not seem to be exclusive to the canton of Glarus' school organisation, according to Doyle (1999) a 'lack of organizational structures' is a common feature of schools.

2.3   Implications for change

- A number of learners terminate being taught formally in foreign languages when leaving secondary school, their final report consists of a mark in the form of a number ranging from 6 (best performance) to 1 (weakest performance). My suggestion here is to provide something more expressive, for the learners as well as for other stakeholders interested in a pupil's abilities in foreign languages, for example future employers. The Language Passport, a part of the European Language Portfolio, may be a tool to meet these demands.

- The high degree of teacher autonomy as well as the weak institutional support make the case of teachers being the primary contact in the system. Nevertheless, the need for institutional support for such a 'bottom up' approach should not be underestimated (Stephenson 1994, 225; Kennedy 1988, 335).

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3 ELT in Glarus' schools

English as a foreign language is taught as a compulsory subject from year 7, i. e. from the beginning of and throughout secondary school. This has been newly introduced by a revised education law in August 2002, formerly the subject was not compulsory and was just taught in the final year. However, the amount of lessons taught per year has not changed: It is three lessons of 45 minutes per week.

3.1 The teachers' training

In secondary school, a teacher is basically trained to teach half the class' subjects, either specialising in modern languages and history or mathematics and science, and also teaching more subjects such as sports, music or art. A number of these teachers have been trained to teach English as a foreign language for the initial year. Because of the fact that the subject has been integrated in the learners' curriculum by reducing the amount of time dedicated to other subjects, EFL is now basically taught by the class' secondary teachers having recently updated or currently updating EFL teaching qualifications. The minimum requirements for secondary teachers of EFL defined by authorities to be met by the year 2006 are a Certificate of Advanced English (CAE) and a so-called 'crash course' of two days on ELT methodology organised by the schools' inspectorate.

Thus the range of teachers' different backgrounds concerning EFL includes, inter alia, the following:

- Teachers trained at the University of Zurich for the first year of EFL.
- Teachers trained to teach French as a foreign language holding or working for a degree of EFL but with no professional training to teach EFL

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- Teachers with untested knowledge of English wishing to achieve an EFL degree by 2006

All this may account for the probability that many teachers depend heavily on the course book prescribed by the canton's authorities.

3.2 The curriculum

Simultaneously with the revision of the education law, the state schools' curriculum has been revised and this revision has been promulgated this summer. In the curriculum, school subjects are grouped under four headings one of which is language, including the native German as well as the foreign French and English languages as compulsory subjects. A separate introduction concerning foreign languages contains statements about general aims including the following:

- the main concern is to learn a vocabulary which allows the learner to communicate in every-day situations

- learners receive information about countries and people where the language has its origins and is spoken as the native language

- learners should learn to understand texts used every day

- writing texts in foreign language teaching is mainly a means for language acquisition

- Learners should be interested in the structure of the language and try to find rules.

<div align="right">(The original version is written in German, the quoted extract has been translated by Suter)</div>

To this general part, a specific syllabus for every subject in every class is added. A detailed discussion of the canton of Glarus' syllabus for English as a foreign language is beyond the scope of this paper, it may hence suffice to say that an analysis of a provisional version of the syllabus in question by the author of this essay for an MA course assignment has been able to identify substantial contradictions between the aims stated in the overall curriculum mentioned above and the

EFL syllabus (Suter 2001). This is probably due to the fact that the EFL syllabus has been designed independently from the overall curriculum. Moreover, the essay mentioned just above points out that the form of the actual EFL syllabus will probably result in many teachers being dependent on the textbook they have to use, a fact to give the textbook the importance of a 'hidden syllabus', so to speak. It may therefore be assumed that the methodological approach adopted by teachers and their perceptions of foreign language learning might be influenced considerably by the textbook. A presentation of the textbook currently in use is not possible under the constraints of this paper, but two of its properties to stand out clearly may be mentioned here: The methodology adopted is based on a behaviourist view of language learning, as a quotation from the teacher's file may illustrate: 'The third person [of the present simple tense] is introduced first so as to fix the idea of the third person *s,* before the habit of using the verb without an *s* is formed.' (Ramsey 1996) As a result, a strict PPP approach is visible throughout materials.

3.3   Implications for change

Due to recent modifications in the curriculum as well as in teachers' routines it can be assumed that the system is unstable to a certain extent, and objectives appear somewhat blurred, so to speak. The implementation of change should therefore be accompanied by a supply of INSET (in-service training) activities to enable teachers to develop their personal approach to teaching EFL independently from a given textbook, obviously on the basis of current knowledge about second language teaching and learning.

4 An alternative to the current syllabus

Jacobs and Farrell (2001) describe a 'paradigm shift in second language education', defining eight

typical fields of change in second language education:
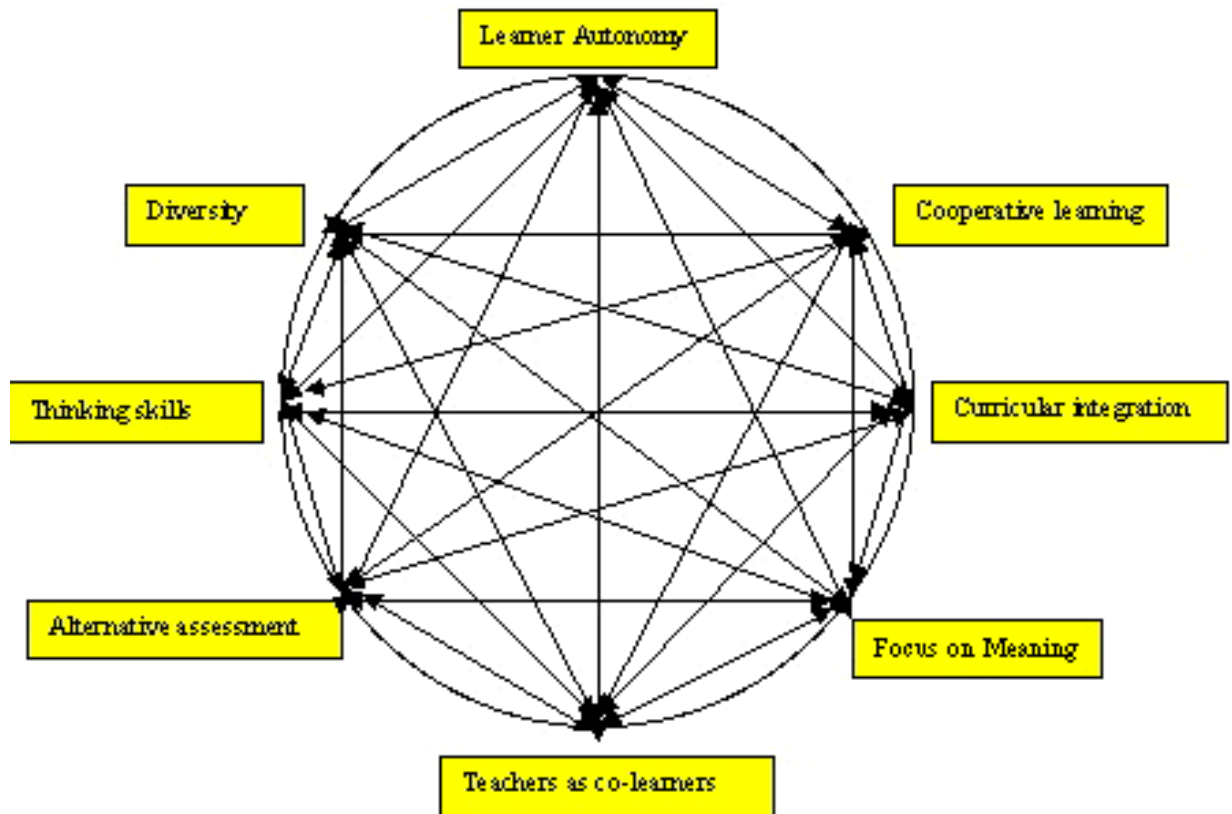
(Jacobs and Farrell 2001)

On the basis of the above description of the current situation concerning the teaching of English

as a foreign language in the Canton of Glarus' secondary schools, the conclusion may be drawn

that this paradigm shift is still in the offing. Hence, the aim of the change I am suggesting is the

paradigm shift mentioned above to take place. However, in my opinion, this can not be aimed at

by minor modifications of the EFL syllabus nor am I, under the constraints of this essay, able to

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develop a new specific syllabus. I therefore propose to base work in foreign language classes in the canton of Glarus' secondary schools on the European Language Portfolio, more specifically on its version for young people and adults developed for and edited by the Swiss Conference of Cantonal Ministers of Education (Schneider et al. 2001).

4.1   The European Language Portfolio

The European Language Portfolio (ELP) has been developed under the authority of the Council or Europe. It is designed

- to encourage the lifelong learning of languages, to any level of proficiency;
- to make the learning process more transparent and to develop the learner's ability to assess his/her own competence;
- to facilitate mobility within Europe by providing a clear profile of the owner's language skills;
- To contribute to mutual understanding within Europe by promoting plurilingualism (the ability to communicate in two or more languages) and intercultural learning.

(CLCS 2001)

According to CLCS, Educational institutions and individual teachers 'can use the ELP to describe their courses and certificates more clearly by relating them to the Council of Europe's common reference levels.'

The ELP consists of three components (Little and Perclová 2001):

- The *Language Passport* section designed to provide an overview of the individual's proficiency in different languages at a given point in time

- The *Language Biography* facilitating the learner's involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing his or her learning process and progress

- The *Dossier* to document and illustrate achievements or experiences recorded in the *Language Biography* or *Passport*

According to Little and Perclová (2001, introduction to Appendix 2), the 'Self-assessment checklists' for the *Language Passport* 'can be used to plan a course of learning' and are thus the part of the ELP which is able to serve as a syllabus for teaching foreign languages.

In my view, the European Language Portfolio can help developing various aspects of the paradigm shift in ELT as described by Jacobs and Farrell, including the following:

- Learner autonomy is supported by the fact that learners can set their own objectives with the aid of self-assessment checklists

- Curricular integration can be fostered through production of the Dossier

- A focus on meaning is adopted throughout checklists

- Jacobs and Farrell mention 'portfolio assessment' under the title of 'Alternative Assessment' (2001, 11), their actual description is similar to the ELP's Dossier. Other tools for assessment are now developed for young learners on the basis of the ELP by a team at the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, and the author of this essay is going to take part in the project as a member of a teacher's pilot group to test materials.

- The concept of the teacher as a 'co-learner' is an important one for work with the ELP, notably when new paths are followed. This might be illustrated by an example: grammar progression, an important term for most language programs and textbooks, does not occur in the ELP neither is any grammatical progression described.

Over and above that, it can be assumed that the ELP will play a role of increasing importance for foreign language teaching and learning in Europe. At present, the number of validated portfolios has raised to 30 covering Europe from Ireland to Russia and from Sweden to Italy according to the Council of Europe's ELP website (Council of Europe 2002).

5   Initiating and monitoring the change

5.1   Initiating the project

Kennedy and Edwards (1998, 58ff.) describe 'incremental, continuous and discontinuous change' as points on a continuum of change, with incremental and discontinuous change as extremes. The change discussed here tends to the extreme end of discontinuous change which is in fact linked to the term 'paradigm shift' by Kennedy and Edwards: The very basis of language teaching as it currently is may be challenged by work with the ELP, and teachers' views about teaching and learning a language or even about the learning process in general might be challenged. The difficulties involved in a project of change touching beliefs, attitudes and subjective norms have been outlined by D. Kennedy (1999, 32-35), resting on the work of Ajzen (1988). In this article, Kennedy demonstrates the sum of aspects involved to make change on this level possible or, to put it negatively, how the lack of one single factor can lead to failure. Taking into account the difficulties just mentioned in implementing discontinuous change, it seems wise to avoid approaching the change too brashly. Furthermore, Fullan (1999, 97) points out that sustainable change does not necessarily happen in public limelight. Furthermore, such a change might not be successfully introduced on a large scale in the first place. The following suggestions for the initial stage of the project aim to consider the issues discussed above:

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- **'Change starts small and grows organically'** (Senge et al. 2000, 273). This statement makes the case of initiating the change with a <u>pilot group</u> as an 'incubator of change' (ibid.). After an initial information of interested teachers about the ELP such a group could be formed. I thus suggest not to introduce the curriculum innovation to the whole of the system at a given point in time, but to start working under new curricular circumstances together with fellow teachers, having as a result the opportunity to integrate the experience of forward-looking users, as proposed by Peters and Austin (1994, cited in Kennedy and Edwards, 1998), as the project unfolds. At the same time, a culture of collaboration may be established, according to Fullan (1999, 32) an important foundation for building up enlarged capacity for change.

- **Developing a personal vision.** Fullan (1999, 33/34) insists on the idea that 'the individual's vision provides the basis for everything else' and that 'every single teacher must endeavour to become an agent of change', as do Brown (1994, 441) and Nunan (1987, 144). To establish a personal vision takes the individual teacher back to the ethical basis of his or her work (for suggestions how to develop a personal vision see Fullan (ibid.), Senge et al. (2000, 60) and Roberts et al. (1996, 233)). And because, as Block (1992, cited in Fullan 1999, 34) puts it, 'the formulation of a vision for the future reveals our doubts about what we do in the present' <u>creative</u> or <u>structural tension</u> is able to be built up (for a description of the concept of creative / structural tension see Senge et al. 2000, 167 and Fullan 1999, 39). Enabling members of a pilot group to develop their personal vision of teaching foreign languages to teenagers thus forms the basis for further work.

- **A Shared Vision** is an important concept in Senge's approach to managing innovation (Senge 1996, 251ff.). In his view, a shared vision develops out of personal visions, and it reflects in-

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dividuals' personal visions. Smith and Lucas (2000) describe an approach to shared vision process design for school contexts which could provide a basis for the next step to take in the project proposed in the present paper: To build a shared vision of ELT in Glarus' secondary schools amongst the members of the pilot group. The question to be tackled would then be: How can work with the European Language Portfolio help to advance our shared vision? Although this is a delicate element in the process, I am confident that the ELP is a suitable tool to approach the issue in question. In fact, the ELP itself seems to be the product of a vision for Europe.

5.2   Monitoring the project

Senge et al. (2000, 72) point out that 'catalyzing people's aspirations doesn't happen by accident; it requires time, care, and strategy'. They continue to state that 'we need to meet in person when we talk about what we really care about'. Moreover, it seems wise to respect the advice given by Fullan as well as by Peters and Austin (cited in Kennedy and Edwards 1998, 74/75) not to over-plan, in order to be able to take seriously the colleagues' contribution to the project. The continuation of the process initiated as proposed above will thus only be sketched, bearing in mind that in the course of the process different aspects concerning the project will be subject to unpredictable change, and when the inevitable problems will arise, it is hopefully from Fullan's point of view that they will be approached: 'Problems are our friends (…) we can not learn or be successful without them'. (1999, 54)

Features of the ongoing project may include the following:

- Pilot group meetings on a regular basis to make sure that the project is monitored by all members to help establishing a sense of ownership of the project for all participants

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- Establishing partnerships to face the challenges of everyday work with the innovation as suggested by Smith and Lucas (2000, 302)

- Work on the basis of Little and Perclová's suggestions for starting work with the European Language Portfolio.

- Exploring the suitability of innovative forms such as team teaching for the new approach

- Availability of a professional coach to individual colleagues to discuss issues of importance and to observe lessons on demand, the intention being purely to be supportive, as proposed by Hayes (1995, 260) and not evaluative

- Building up a collection of materials to meet the demands raising in the course of the work. This may include published, either in given form or adapted, or newly produced materials

6 A cost-benefit analysis

C. Kennedy makes the distinction of a rational versus a political view of change, the latter of which he describes as being based on the assumption 'that a situation is composed of competing interests where motives for actions will vary, in which unpredictable behaviour is likely and where conflict is inevitable but has to be managed if the innovation is to be implemented' (Kennedy et al. 1999, 51). The subsequent section will be dedicated to the competing interests. To be able to appraise the issue, possible benefits or gains will have to be balanced against costs or

losses from the point of view of different groups affected by the innovation. This will provide a basis to predict chances for the innovation in the way stated by Kennedy and Edwards: 'If benefits outweigh costs the desire to change will be promoted' (1998, 36).
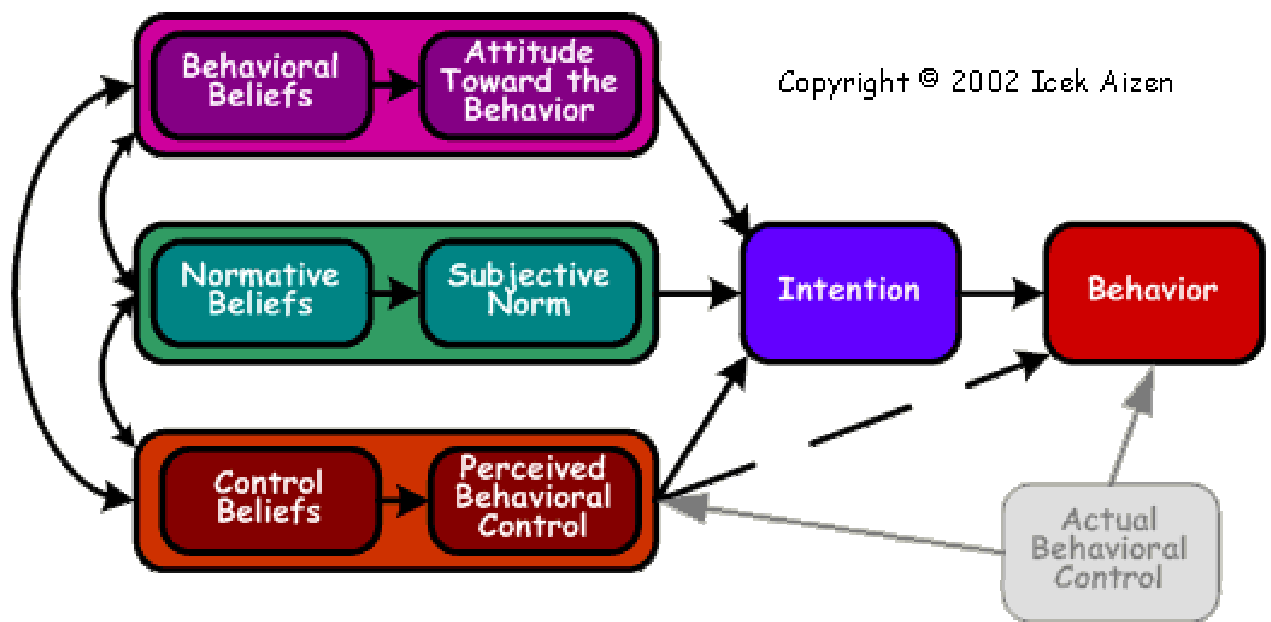
6.1 Teachers

If a political view of change as described above is adopted, the teachers' reaction to the innovation has to be taken into account in planning the process as well as during implementation, a fact pointed out by Williams and Burden (1994, 26): 'For any innovation to be successful, the concerns and anxieties voiced by the teachers must be tackled. […] It is important to recognize that teachers' views of 'what's in it for us' must be acknowledged and met.' It is hardly controversial to say that implementing innovation usually also entails an increased workload for teachers. This again shows the significance of taking into account the teachers' situation, a consideration of which may include the following.

- The European Language Portfolio is attracting more and more attention all over Europe. It may well be possible that it is to become a common tool for language learners in many contexts, including state schools. Teachers might thus be able to profit from their work on the issue in the future.

- If the project succeeds in giving teachers the opportunity to develop a personal vision of their work and to establish and develop a shared vision, the creative tension built up can act as a 'motor ' for motivation as put by Senge et al. (2000, 60): ' If you keep your vision high and the tension taut, even when the gap between your vision and current reality feels threatening or discomfiting, then current reality will move toward your vision.'

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- The teaching of French as a foreign language has revealed the limitations of the current approach to teaching foreign languages. The results are actually disappointing, and there has not been a change in the situation since French has been taught in primary school as well. A considerable percentage of pupils leave school with very limited knowledge of the language, and the majority of pupils avoid continuing the learning of French if they can. Therefore many teachers are unhappy with the situation, and I can not recall a colleague teaching French to the final year's pupils saying that this was very motivating. As a result, some colleagues have expressed their concern about having to face a similar situation in ELT. So the opportunity to change practice in foreign language teaching may be an attractive one for teachers who might like to gain increased job satisfaction. I particularly like the way this issue has been addressed by Murphy-O'Dwyer (1996, 154): 'Of course we could do things in a recipe-driven way. Life would be much more comfortable if we did it that way. But we wouldn't be able to hold up our heads professionally, so what would be the point?'

- The fact that there are no exams at the end of compulsory schooling means on the one hand that teachers implementing an innovation may experience less pressure during the process. On the other hand, a possible improvement in pupils' performance in foreign languages may not become apparent through improved exam results.

- The success of the project will depend considerably on the availability of adequate teaching materials. Teachers can not possibly change their classroom practice and adapt (or even produce) all materials by themselves at the same time.

- According to Ajzen's theory of Planned Behaviour (TpB), an individual's behaviour is monitored by her or his beliefs as shown in the following figure:

Keeping in mind Murphy-O'Dwyer's point, the participating teachers' professional self-confidence may be fostered, and the fact that the members of the pilot group would officially take part in an innovation project might also have an effect on individual teachers' perception of social pressure (linked to the subjective norm) together with perceived as well as actual behavioural control in relation to their personal context.

- Kennedy (1988) describes an action-based change as being 'extremely time-consuming' and requiring 'considerable physical and mental effort', but unfortunately, neither an increase in pay nor career development possibilities can be offered to teachers involved in the project described. Therefore other measures should be considered to take into account participants' increased workload such as a compensated reduction of weekly lessons or a compensation for pilot group meetings, either in financial form or, preferably, in the form of time provided.

6.2 Learners

Learners' experiences listed by teachers who worked with the ELP in the pilot phase include the following statements (Little and Perclová 2001, 17/18):

- Motivation of all the learners, even the slower ones

- Increases their self-confidence when they have a list of their actual abilities

- Learners spend more time thinking about their language abilities and knowledge

- Voluntary work makes them more active

- Learners can develop their own language abilities

- Learners realize that they can extend their English language out of school as well

In the light of these reportings, the European Language Portfolio seems to open a very positive perspective to many learners, and especially to learners who could not be addressed so far. Moreover, with the ELP the learner has an officially and internationally acknowledged document when leaving school, a document to provide information about a learner's foreign language abilities which was simply not available until now.

6.3 Parents

The point mentioned just above concerning the ELP's reporting function may also be of interest to parents in order to keep them informed about their child's progress (as mentioned in Little and Perclová, ibid.). Nevertheless, some parents having learnt foreign languages in a different way may be sceptical about the change, information of and contact with parents should therefore not be forgotten during the introductory phase of the ELP.

6.4   Authorities

School's authorities, i.e. in this case the schools' inspectorate, have an interest in quality teaching and should thus foster the implementation of current approaches to foreign language teaching. Over and above that, a community as small as the Canton of Glarus depends on its education system being compatible with the surrounding cantons as well as, increasingly, the surrounding countries.

A question to be tackled by the Canton's authorities however concerns the finances available for such a project, an issue to be discussed politically. It is, of course, the hope of this essay's author that the necessary means can be made available for a positive development of foreign language teaching, be it in the direction described here or under different circumstances.

7   Conclusion

This essay has examined aspects of the present situation concerning the teaching of English as a foreign language in a context of secondary schooling in Switzerland and has outlined an approach to introducing and implementing a curriculum change. It has pointed out the complexity of the task due to the different variables and interests involved. For me, the work for this essay has revealed interesting parallels to foreign language teaching: Managing a process of change may in effect be comparable to managing the process of learning a foreign language in terms of its unpredictability, non-linearity, the flexibility needed while the project unfolds, and the problem of not losing sight of a target which may move during the process.

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