

# From Exercises to Exams: The Development of Foreign Language Testing in Nineteenth-century Britain

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(Received on October 2, 2003)

## 1. Introduction: A Society Receptive to Examinations

The nineteenth-century world view did not, initially, include the notion of competitive exams. In 1800 such an idea would have been laughed at, if understood at all. However, by 1900 the idea was not alone present, but was prevalent, normal, and fully established in terms to which we can relate today. The most tangible factor to account for this newfound acceptance of examinations was a social system whose primary characteristic was an unprecedented population expansion. The 1801 census showed a population of nine million, which by 1858 had risen to 19.5 million, and by 1901 this had trebled to 30 million. In the upper levels of the workplace — for example in the Civil Service and the Army — it now became imperative to replace the old system of patronage with a more egalitarian form of selection<sup>1)</sup>. For similar reasons, matriculation examinations were now a necessary part of the progression from school to university. And, in a country attempting to establish a broad education system, examinations offered the ideal way to establish and maintain academic standards, and to give able students from less privileged backgrounds the opportunities they

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1) John Roach talks of “deciding the fitness of candidates for public office or for an independent profession”. *Public Examinations in England 1850–1900* (Cambridge, 1971), pp. 8–9.

had hitherto been denied. Socially, examinations allowed the growing middle classes to compete for a limited number of posts under conditions of ostensible equality. Thus, from the moment the Indian Civil Service adopted an examination system for entry in 1854, competitive examinations became a feature of the nineteenth-century. The rewards for the successful were particularly obvious, as were the consequences of failure. Indeed, fear of failure is a recurring theme in Victorian life<sup>2)</sup>.

The speed with which competitive examinations caught on — just a 20-year period from about 1850 — in almost every profession and educational enterprise, and at almost all levels of society, shows how practical and logical they were seen to be. It should be remembered that the period was one in which public attention was turned towards education: Oxford and Cambridge were the subject of Royal Commissions set up in 1850, with recommendations in 1854 and 1856 respectively; in 1864 the Clarendon Commission reported on the nine old Public Schools; and in 1868 the Schools Inquiry Commission (the Taunton Commission) published its report on nearly 800 grammar and other schools that catered to the middle classes. Exams appeared as a logical corollary to these reforms, and such criticisms as were voiced about them tended to be directed at the efficiency or otherwise with which they performed their job, rather than with the idea itself.

The creators of the earliest examinations were therefore free to work an untilled field with little or no criticism of their efforts. This was particularly true of the Modern Foreign Languages (MFLs), whose very incorporation into the list of subjects was in any case a conundrum to most observers. The early MFL examinations may therefore be regarded as truly naïve (in

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2) See Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (Yale, 1957), pp. 60–61.

the best sense of the word) creations, which accurately and spontaneously reflected the Victorian view of language and the best methodological practice available. With no precedents or other guidance worth noting, the early MFL examiners were forced to fall back on the only type of "testing" they knew, which were not tests at all, but were the exercises in common use in the grammar books of the preceding decades. In this paper I shall look briefly at these exercises before turning to the major examinations of the early period (1858–1870), and finally to the criticisms that began to be voiced by the 1870s. The Reform Movement, as such, is not mentioned here, partly because most of the reformers did not tackle the problems of mass testing, and also because it is important to have a clear picture of what it was that they were attempting to reform. The aim of this paper is therefore to set out how MFLs were tested prior to the fresh thinking that began to take effect from about 1870 onwards.

## 2. Exercises in Nineteenth-century Grammars

During the eighteenth century the idea of checking the pupil's comprehension of the rules, or of exercising him in the application of the rules, had become more and more a part of foreign-language teaching. Separate books of exercises to accompany grammars began to become available, sometimes written by the authors themselves, and sometimes by a colleague. For example, Hamel's *New Universal French Grammar* (1824), first published in 1796, was supported by a separate book of exercises by Hamel himself (*Grammatical Exercises upon the French Language, compared with the English*) and by another text (*Clef, ou Thèmes Traduits de la Grammaire de Nicholas Hamel*) by an un-named author. When Hamel's work was again reprinted in 1855 by Duprat MÉRIGON it incorporated many of these exercises into the text itself. This trend is seen repeatedly, one

further example being *Chambaud's A Grammar of the French Tongue* (1750) which reappeared in 1816 with exercises by M. Des Carrières.

These exercises typically took the form known at the time as “elliptical exercises”, and subsequently as “slot-and-filler exercises” that were also beginning to appear in L1 English grammars. They had the quality of puzzles, and “the pupil’s skill lay in choosing for the blank space a word that fitted the syntactic structure of the sentence”<sup>3)</sup>. This format could readily be applied to foreign language grammar, with the restriction that there would be only one correct answer. By the beginning of the nineteenth century we find interlinear exercises of the following type:

The sun, the moon, and the stars are the glory of nature.

*soleil* (m)    *lune* (f)    *étoile* (f)    *glory* (f)    (f)

(Duclos, 1804, p. 148)

The exercise generated a translation, and could be adapted to reinforce or check almost any grammatical area. Lists of nouns, as in the Duclos example above, were popular for exercises on the articles. The student was forced to focus on just one or two elements of the construction (*le, la, and les*, and the correct form of *être*). The direction of such translation exercises was usually from English into French, though it would be wrong to imagine that some “productive” skill was thereby being practiced. It was pure reinforcement.

The interlinear translation method was an established method of the times, and persisted far into the nineteenth century, particularly in the Syntax sections of grammar books. The following example on comparatives and superlatives comes from a mid-century Italian grammar:

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3) Ian Michael, *The Teaching of English* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 353.

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He was the worst man, perhaps, that ever was born. — Bocc.

That perhaps, *che forse*; ever, *mai*; to be born, *nascere*; (sub. imperf.)

(Giralamo Volpe, *An Italian Grammar*, p. 130. 1863.)

Almost all the parts of speech could be dealt with in this manner. In Tarver's edition of Wanostrocht's *A Grammar of the French Language* (1839) the following exercise appears for pronouns:

When you read the history of the Roman emperors, you will find one  
(of them)

*Quand livrez histoire (f) romain empereur trouverez  
whose name\* was Nero (Néron).*

\* Turn, of whom the name, etc. (p. 95)

By the early part of the nineteenth century there was still uncertainty about whether to include exercises at all, and, if yes, how extensively to use them. However, exercises were in step with the times, and grammars declaring themselves "practical" — meaning that they gave practice — became popular. Onffroy's *A Complete French Grammar with Exercises* (London, 1838) was a one-volume work, but as late as 1873 the Eve and Baudiss *Wellington College French Primer* contained no exercises at all, though in the following year a separate book of exercises appeared<sup>4</sup>). This little book contained over 20 sentences of translation for every chapter of the main grammar, for example:

#### Exercise II (Gr. Ch. III)

##### *On the Feminine of Adjectives and Nouns*

1. The membranes of the ear are very delicate. 2. That she may be less proud. 3. Let your expressions be less ambiguous. 4. She would have had a new dress. 5. It (*ce*) was (p.d.) a glorious

4) Charles H. Jeaffreson, *A Short Exercise Book Adapted to the Wellington College French Primer* (London, 1874).

victory. Etc.<sup>5)</sup>

However, as the century wore on, the practice of setting out grammar books according to a series of “Rules” was replaced by that of “Lessons” — though there was often hardly any difference except in presentation — and many books opted for the idea of one rule per lesson, followed by related exercises. This format, perhaps because it was more psychologically appropriate as well as more manageable for teachers in the new “mass” educational system of the later nineteenth century, therefore became common.

In addition to the interlinear translation exercises seen above, a second type exercise should be noted, because it was destined to become a feature of the formal examinations of the 1850s and after. The plethora of rules on morphology, concord, and government, plus the exceptions to these rules, meant that exercises could be devised which checked the pupil’s metacognitive knowledge of the rules — sometimes without any reference to the language itself — or around their application. The following, for example, based on Hamel’s 1824 *New Universal French Grammar*, required only a knowledge of the rules: Questions on the Gender of Nouns, the Formation of the Feminine of Adjectives, Plural of Adjectives and Substantives.

1. How do adjectives ending in eur form their feminine?
2. Are trees of the masculine or feminine gender?
3. How do substantives and adjectives ending in au form their plural?
4. Of what gender are nouns ending in lle?<sup>6)</sup>

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5) *Ibid.* p. 2.

6) *Questions Adapted to ... Grammatical Exercises of Nicholas Hamel* (London, 1832), [No author identified, but probably Hamel himself], p. 5. As an aid to teachers and students alike, a loose-leaf insert was provided giving the page in the grammar book on which the correct answer appeared.

Such exercises put a premium on a theoretical knowledge of the rules, and a line of testing was subsequently developed which made use of this form. For example, the London Matriculation examination of 1871 included the question:

*Grand.* How is the meaning of this adjective affected by its position before or after the substantive?<sup>7)</sup>

Other modern language examinations, such as the Cambridge Locals (see below, Fig. 4), continued this type of questioning until the end of the century.

The exercises associated with the grammar books, whether grammar-translation or theoretical-metacognitive, provided the material on which the formal examinations were based. There was nothing else to go on. Consequently, from c1850 a symbiotic relationship came into being between the writers of grammar books and examining bodies, with each side acutely aware of what the other was doing, and each side making adjustments accordingly.

### 3. The Early Modern Language Examinations

The sequence by which examinations took hold is well known<sup>8)</sup>. Figure 1 shows the inclusion of languages in the very earliest of these public exams.

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7) P. H. Earnest Brette (Ed.), *French Examination Papers set at the University of London from 1839 to 1871*. (London, 1871), p. 79.

8) See R. L. Archer, *Secondary Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London, 1921), pp. 221–224. Also, P. W. Musgrave's *Society and Education in England Since 1800* (London, 1968) contains constant reference to examinations. The most detailed account is Roach, *op cit.*

Examination and date	Comment	MFLs
Army Examination (184?)	Entry test instigated by the Duke of Wellington. Choose Latin or MFL.	Fr. & Ger.
East India Co. (1850)	16-yr.-old applicants had to pass a range of subjects.	Fr. & Hind.
London Matriculation (1853)	Not intended for schools, but came to be used by them.	Fr. & Ger.
College of Preceptors (1854)	Experimental exams, 1850; began testing in schools 1854.	Fr., Ger. It., Sp., Port.
Society of Arts (1856)	Adult education.	Fr. & Ger.
Oxford and Cambridge Locals (1858)	Intended for "second grade" or "middle class" schools.	Fr. & Ger.
Oxford & Cambridge Joint Board (1874)	For "first - grade" (= "Public") schools.	Fr. & Ger.

Figure 1. Foreign Languages in the early British Examinations

The Army Examination of 1849 and the East India Company's examination of 1850 announced that the new half-century would be one of competition. There would be winners and losers; for example, during the decade 1851-1861 only 65 percent of candidates hoping for a commission in the East India Company actually passed<sup>9)</sup>. More significantly, with such highly prestigious bodies using exams as screening devices for entry and for internal promotion, the practice soon became socially accepted; it was then but a short step for exams to become the *expected* way by which technical, professional, and academic progress was judged.

Within this new examination framework, the case of foreign languages is particularly interesting. In 1850 their status in the schools varied between non-existent and precarious. Nowhere were they an accepted part of the curriculum, and particularly not in the leading Public Schools, where they existed as extras alongside fencing and dancing. Yet in the various exams

9) Trevor Hearl, "Military Education and the School Curriculum 1800-1870". *History of Education*, 5.3, (1976) 251-264, p. 253.

mentioned in Fig. 1, modern languages appeared from the start, and this had the effect of thrusting into the limelight subjects whose previous existence had been shadowy at best<sup>10</sup>). Many schools and schoolmasters must have been surprised to find French, German, and so forth being examined on a par with Latin and Greek. Howatt describes this as a gain in status, but adds that there was also a loss of academic and social prestige: "Modern languages and English lost academic prestige through their association with the [Oxford and Cambridge] Locals and social prestige by their exclusion from the 'best' schools"<sup>11</sup>). In addition, at the university level, only King's College, London, and University College, London, had chairs in modern languages at this time (the latter for French, German, Spanish, Italian, Hindustani, Sanskrit, and Hebrew). Unfortunately, London's status was far from being confirmed at this date, and consequently its exams did not command the required respect. Full recognition by the very schools that were most influential in the land was not forthcoming. Nevertheless, the initial inclusion of modern languages as exam subjects from around 1850 may be seen as part of a growing awareness of these subjects.

#### 4. The College of Preceptors

The College of Preceptors produced the prototype for examining modern foreign languages. In 1846, as Roach recounts, a group of schoolmasters formed a group which had as its aim the provision of tests for secondary school assistants (assistant masters) in an attempt to raise the standard of teaching in the schools. This gave rise to the name "College of Precep-

10) "In short, designation as formal examination subjects contributed to their increasing status". Susan Bayley, "Modern Languages as Emerging Curricular Subjects in England 1864-1918". Doctoral Dissertation, McGill University, 1989, p. 181.

11) A. P. R. Howatt, *A History of English Language Teaching* (Oxford, 1984), p. 134.

tors”, which came into being later the same year. Their examining of assistant masters started in 1847, though it never attracted large numbers of candidates, and indeed on the contrary created a certain amount of ill feeling. But the modest success of the exams for teachers had sparked the idea that such examinations could be extended to schoolboys, and in the early 1850s this plan was set in motion<sup>12)</sup>. As modern foreign languages had been included in the teachers’ exam, they were, perhaps fortuitously, included in the exams to be set for the schoolboys. “Fortuitously” refers here, as mentioned above, to the fact that nowhere in Britain were modern languages an established part of the curriculum, so their inclusion by the College of Preceptors gave them a status that they did not in reality merit.

In 1852 the first formal outline of these was published (see below, Fig. 2), and in 1854 the examining of schoolboys began. The teachers’ examina-

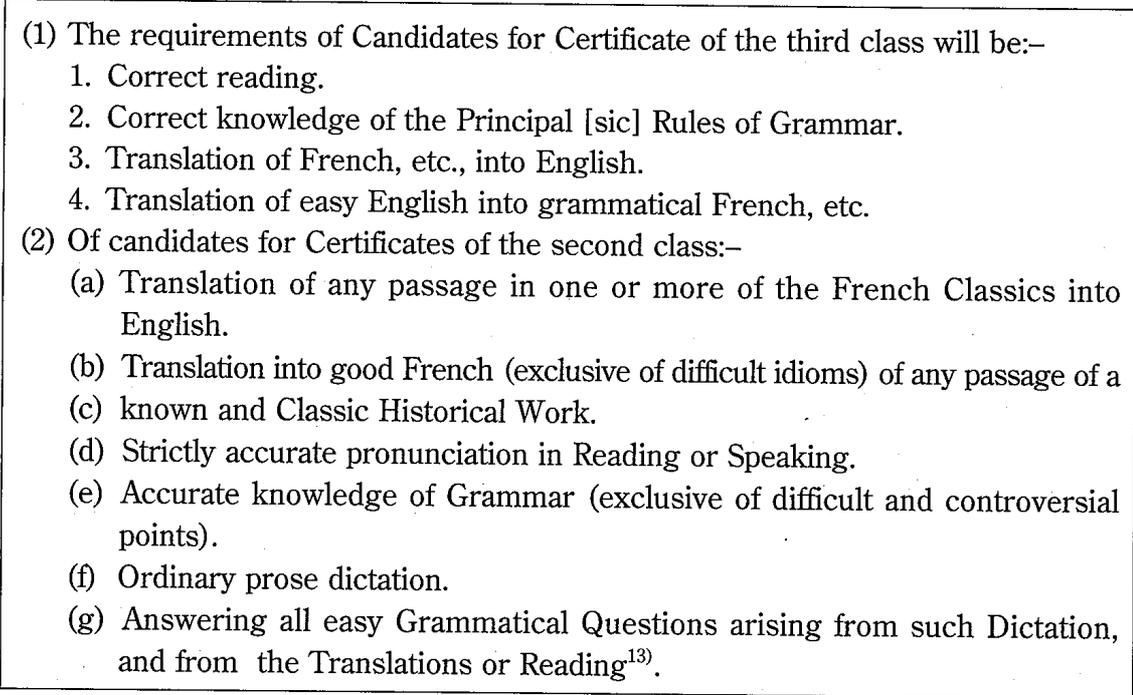
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- (1) The requirements of Candidates for Certificate of the third class will be:-
1. Correct reading.
  2. Correct knowledge of the Principal [sic] Rules of Grammar.
  3. Translation of French, etc., into English.
  4. Translation of easy English into grammatical French, etc.
- (2) Of candidates for Certificates of the second class:-
- (a) Translation of any passage in one or more of the French Classics into English.
  - (b) Translation into good French (exclusive of difficult idioms) of any passage of a
  - (c) known and Classic Historical Work.
  - (d) Strictly accurate pronunciation in Reading or Speaking.
  - (e) Accurate knowledge of Grammar (exclusive of difficult and controversial points).
  - (f) Ordinary prose dictation.
  - (g) Answering all easy Grammatical Questions arising from such Dictation, and from the Translations or Reading<sup>13)</sup>.

Figure 2. Modern Languages Requirements: College of Preceptors, 1852.

12) See Roach, *op cit.*, pp. 60–61.

13) *The Educational Times*, 6 (No. 61 consec.), p. 1. 1852.

tion, in addition to the important step of including modern languages, had also provided the College of Preceptors with some experience concerning testing. But the move into examining school pupils was essentially a whole new area. As has been mentioned, the whole testing apparatus that we are familiar with today was absent. For modern languages, even the kinds of exercises and passages for translation that appeared in grammar books (see section 2 above) were patently more oriented towards the reinforcement of learning than towards examining. In short, nobody had tried to this sort of thing before, and in this light the exams produced were a considerable achievement.

Nevertheless, from 1854 the College of Preceptors offered school exams at three levels. The "third class" was the lowest and easiest, and candidates could offer "Latin or some modern Foreign language". This was followed by the "second class" which required Latin, and "French or any other Modern Foreign Language". Finally came the "first class", which demanded a "superior knowledge" of Latin and Greek, Maths, Modern Languages, Physical Sciences, the Fine Arts<sup>14</sup>). The modern language requirements for the classes three and two are shown in Fig. 2.

The requirements set out in Fig. 2 were for the Christmas, 1852 tests, which were somewhat experimental. Their ambiguity (eg., "correct reading" and "the Principal Rules of Grammar") can not have helped candidates to prepare for them, and left all decisions in the hands of the examiners (the well-known grammar-book writer M. Delille<sup>15</sup>), assisted by M. Wattez, M.

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14) *The Educational Times*, 7 (No. 76 consec.), p. 87. 1854.

15) Delille's grammars stretched from his *New Theoretical and Practical French Grammar* (4<sup>th</sup>, 1844) to his *Beginner's own French Book* in the (26<sup>th</sup>, 1877) as well as anthologies of poetry, of prose writers, books on etymology, tables of verbs, and so forth.

Phillippe, and M. Gassion<sup>16)</sup>. Nevertheless, the broad coverage required to attain a second class certificate (Fig. 2) was linguistically demanding: the candidate had to do translation both ways, show knowledge of grammar, demonstrate his pronunciation through speaking or reading aloud, and take down dictation. The exam must have been time-consuming to administer, but this was possible on account of the small number of examinees<sup>17)</sup>. A further boost to the whole idea of examining foreign languages must have been had from the inauguration in the same year, 1852, of His Royal Highness Prince Albert's Prizes for Modern languages at Eton, with M. Delille again as one of the examiners.

### 5. Oxford and Cambridge Locals — Numbers

This was a promising beginning, but unfortunately, the College of Preceptors, and the Society of Arts too, lacked the prestige required for national status, particularly in the important area identified by educators of the time as "middle-class" or "secondary" education. They were both, says Roach, "doing useful work, but neither possessed the prestige necessary for a real initiative"<sup>18)</sup>. This led to approaches being made to Oxford and Cambridge to set up exams that would command the necessary respect<sup>19)</sup>.

In 1858 the Oxford Delegacy and the Cambridge Syndicate began to offer their "Local" examinations. Foreign language testing had now become official in some sense of that word. The respective overall figures, and the

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16) The examiners for German were the Rev. J. G. Tiarks, Ph. D., Rev. A. Wintzer of King's College School, and Nathan Lowenthal, Esq. Italian, Spanish and Portuguese were all examined by Signor Ciocci and Signor Maggioni.

17) For example, in the first College of Preceptors examination in 1854, 25 boys took French.

18) Roach, *op cit.*, p. 64.

19) See Roach, *op cit.*, p. 60ff.

particular figures for languages are of some interest:

Table 1. Oxford Locals 1858. Totals, and Candidates in Languages.

	Total Candidates (Pass)	Latin	Greek	French	German
Juniors	750 (280)	498	127	524	N/A
Seniors	401 (150)	255	118	299	65

(From: John Roach, *Public Examinations in England 1850–1900*, p. 94.)

According to Roach, the candidates at Oxford comprised mainly the “sons of merchants and tradesmen”<sup>20)</sup>, with an age limit of 15 or under. Social class may therefore account for the remarkable numbers who took French, which exceeded those for Latin at both Junior and Senior (18 or under) levels. The Cambridge figures for 1858 show that only 297 Juniors and 73 Seniors<sup>21)</sup> sat that exam, but these were mainly made up of the “sons of professional men”<sup>22)</sup>. Almost two-thirds of the Cambridge candidates passed, though whether or not this is attributable to the social composition of the candidates is a moot point. Certainly the results made the Cambridge exam look much easier than the Oxford one. In both cases a modest but steady beginning had been made, considering that many schools with potential candidates did not enter them, feeling that such exams interfered with their independence<sup>23)</sup>.

The trend first seen in Table 1, in which the number of candidates taking French exceeded that for Latin, continued to be a feature of the Cambridge Locals for the next decade, as Table 2 shows:

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20) Roach, *op cit.*, p. 99.

21) Roach, *op cit.*, p. 96.

22) Roach, *op cit.*, p. 99.

23) Harrow, for example, waited until 1875 before presenting candidates for the Oxford and Cambridge Board Examinations. Christopher Tyerman, *A History of Harrow School* (Oxford, 2000), p. 313.

Table 2. Cambridge Locals. Junior Candidates in Languages 1859–1868.

	Latin	Greek	French	German
1859	300	93	312	39
1860	224	54	213	15
1861	274	87	280	37
1862	309	81	326	31
1863	320	77	356	43
1864	392	67	446	72
1865	612	133	609	42
1866	668	144	787	56
1867	617	154	928	101
1868	668	128	827	63

(Source: University of Cambridge *Examination Papers*, (1860–1869).

The jump in numbers in 1865 is in part attributable to the fact that girls were allowed to enter the Cambridge Locals from that year, for a trial period of three years, after which the inclusion of girls was accepted permanently<sup>24</sup>). In 1866 separate rooms were used for boys and girls, with the exams taking place simultaneously. For three years the University published separate tables showing the numbers of girl candidates, as in Table 3.

Table 3. University of Cambridge Local Exams (Girls). 1866–1868.

<b>Junior Girls</b>				
	Latin	Greek	French	German
1866	11	–	91	14
1867	8	1	116	20
1868	152	57	182	25
<b>Senior Girls</b>				
1866	8	3	76	12
1867	4	2	86	30
1868	5	1	147	38

(Source: University of Cambridge *Examination Papers*, (1860–1869).

24) R. L. Archer, *op cit.*, p. 238.

Howatt argues that the inclusion of girls in the Locals was a “further reason for prejudice against the teaching of English and modern languages”. This was for the simple reason that “girls were good at them”, being better than the boys at French and German, whereas the boys excelled at the classical languages<sup>25)</sup>. This begs the question of whether the boys really had some intrinsic ability with the classics, or whether they were just more thoroughly taught in them. Nevertheless, the popularity of modern languages with girls is supported by all the figures and reports of this time, and certainly appears to have helped to create the notion that modern languages were girls’ subjects.

The Cambridge figures for Senior (under 18, both boys and girls) candidates in modern languages show that French (particularly) and German continued to hold their place against the classics:

Table 4. University of Cambridge Local Examinations. Senior Candidates in Languages.

	Latin	Greek	French	German
1859	72	43	59	16
1860	72	41	76	12
1861	94	54	90	12
1862	82	37	87	14
1863	87	48	93	12
1864	139	75	142	23
1865	181	91	186	33
1866	173	69	170	27
1867	177	95	243	44
1868	152	57	182	25

(Source: University of Cambridge *Examination Papers*, (1860–1869).

These inaugural Junior and Senior modern language papers established a number of social and methodological principles which will be discussed

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25) Howatt, *op cit.*, p. 134.

later. However, two important principles will emerge from the following section, in which the example of French will be examined in some detail.

## 6. Oxford and Cambridge Locals — French

The *Regulations* for the Cambridge Junior Local Examination were published prior to the exam and were as follows:

Passages will be given from Voltaire's *Charles XII.*, for translation into English, with questions on the parsing and the historical and geographical allusions: Also a passage from some modern French author for translation into English: And easy English sentences for translation into French.<sup>26)</sup>

Figure 3. The *Regulations* for French, Cambridge Local Examinations, 1858.

The format, therefore, consisted of one set book on which both translation into English and other questions could be asked, one modern unseen passage for translation into English, and translation of “easy” English sentences into French. In practice, the Cambridge examiners decided to create two papers, running consecutively: the first (called the “Lower Paper” and lasting one and a half hours) dealt with the set book; and the second (called the “Higher paper” and lasting the same time) dealt with the unseen and the English-to-French translation. On Friday 17<sup>th</sup> Dec. 1858, starting at 2 p.m., the Junior French paper was given. An abbreviated version is shown in Figure 4:

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26) This was an exact parallel of the Latin and Greek *Regulations*: Latin: “Passages will be given from Sallust's *Bellum Catilinarium* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book VI. for translation into English, with questions on the parsing and the historical and geographical allusions: Also an easy passage from some other Latin author: And a passage of English, with Latin words supplied, for translation into Latin.” (p. 6). Greek was the same, except that there was no English to Greek translation. German was as for French, the set book being Lessing's *Fables*.

1. Translate into English:

Les Turcs, qui cependant entouraient cette maison *tout*<sup>a</sup> embrasée, voyaient avec une admiration mêlée d'épouvante que les Suédois n'en sortaient point; mais leur étonnement fut encore plus grand lorsqu'ils *virent*<sup>b</sup> ouvrir les portes et le roi et les siens fondre sur eux<sup>c</sup> en désespérés. Charles et ses principaux officiers étaient armés d'épées et de pistolets: chacun tira deux coups à la fois à l'instant que la porte s'ouvrit; et dans le même clin *d'œil*<sup>d</sup> jetant leurs pistolets et s'armant de leurs épées, ils *firent*<sup>e</sup> reculer les Turcs *plus de*<sup>f</sup> cinquante pas. Mais le moment d'après, cette petite troupe *fut*<sup>g</sup> *entourée*: le roi, qui était en bottes, selon sa coutume, s'embarrassa dans ses éperons et tomba: Vingt et un janissaires se *précipitent*<sup>h</sup> aussitôt sur lui: il *jette*<sup>i</sup> en l'air son épée pour s'épargner la douleur de la rendre: les Turcs, *l'emmènent*<sup>l</sup> au quartier du bacha; les uns le tenant sous les jambes, les autres sous les bras comme on porte un malade que *l'on*<sup>j</sup> craint d'incommoder.

Voltaire, *Charles XII*.

2. Describe some of the events narrated above.

3.

(a) In what case does *tout* adverb agree with the substantive?

(b) *virent*. Conjugate the present indicative of this verb.

(c) *eux*. What are the rules for the use of the pronouns *moi, toi, soi, lui, nous, vous, eux*?

(d) *œil*. (1) What is the plural of this word?

(2) Is a regular plural ever used?

(e) *firent*. Conjugate the present infinitive.

(f) *plus de*. When is *more than* expressed by *plus de*?

(g) *cette petite troupe fut entourée*. Write this sentence in the plural.

(h) *se précipitent*. Conjugate the pluperfect of this verb.

(i) *jette, emmènent*. Give the first person plural of the same tense.

(j) *on, l'on*. State the cases where *l'on* is used for *on*.

4. Give the general rule for the agreement of the past participle conjugated with *avoir*.<sup>27)</sup>

Figure 4. Cambridge Local Examinations, 1858. Junior French Paper. (Set book).

The set book translation seen in Fig. 4 has been described as "difficult" by modern standards, with the comment that today's A-Level candidates "would struggle with it" even if they had prepared it thoroughly. Similarly, the grammar level implied by Question 3 is felt to be well above the current

27) University of Cambridge (1858). *Examination Papers*. Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Co., pp. 41–42.

GCSE level, and even A-level students would only have “hazy notions” about them<sup>28</sup>).

The second (“Higher Paper”) paper followed on immediately from the above, and contained the unseen passage, which was an extract from Villemain of about the same length as the Voltaire extract, to be translated into English. Then followed translations from English into French, the “easy sentences”, which are shown in Figure 5.

<p>2. Express in words: 200 men; 210 women; 180 children; the year 1858; the 14<sup>th</sup> of December; Henry IV.</p> <p>3. Render into French:</p> <p>Do as they; give him some; do not give him any; his horse and mine; which book? Which of the two? this book, this one. Also: I am going to speak; I have just spoken; I am to go; I ought to go; I ought to have gone; I had gone.</p> <p>4. Translate into French:</p> <p>A tower 300 feet high; a room 30 feet long by 20 feet broad; France is the oldest monarchy in Europe; the longer the day, the shorter the night; is it wine you are drinking? yes it is; was it a French book you were reading? Yes it was.</p>
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Figure 5. Cambridge Local Examinations, 1858. Junior French Paper (English to French translations).

The German paper was structured similarly, starting with passages from Lessing (*Der Bär und der Elephant* and *Morydan*).

The Cambridge Senior Examination in French was structured like the Junior one shown in Figs. 4 and 5. The set books were La Bruyère's *Les Caractères* and Molière's *Misanthrope*, with the unseen coming from Lamennais. In place of the “easy sentences” of the Junior exam, a long paragraph from Alison's *History of Europe* was given for translation into

28) Personal communication: Mr. Brian Davies of Culford School, Bury St. Edmunds.

French. Grammar questions on the lines of the Junior paper were also given (e.g., (d) *dans*. What distinction is made in the use of the prepositions *en* and *dans*?). The Senior German paper had as its set books Schiller's *History of the Revolt of the Netherlands*, and Goethe's *Hermann and Dorothea*, together with questions on the historical and geographical allusions, and on grammar. There was also unseen and English-to-German translation. The first report of the Cambridge Syndicate in 1859 remarked, *inter alia*, that for modern languages the translation was done best, with the French being better than the German<sup>29</sup>). It must be remembered that there were effectively only two sections, translation and grammar, so this result needs to be interpreted cautiously. However, it may indicate that the students found the recall of grammar rules and paradigms difficult, and that the boys' alleged skill with such mechanical matters did not extend to modern languages.

## 7. Foreign Language Exams — Scotland

In Scotland the University of Glasgow offered, by the 1880s, three levels of exams: Junior, Senior, and Higher for Women<sup>30</sup>). The system for the Junior and Senior certificates required that all candidates take six "Common Subjects" — English, History, Geography, Arithmetic, Scripture History,

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29) Roach, *op cit.*, p. 97.

30) The "Higher for Women" was open to all women who had satisfied stipulated criteria, in particular that they were over 18 and had passed Senior Certificate in the Locals of any university. Candidates who included "Department B" (Languages) in their exam subjects could choose from Latin, Greek, French, Italian or German. For French: "The papers will include passages for translation into English and French respectively: questions on the Grammar and History of the language: and on the literature of the period 1715–1800." This was followed by a list of seven reference books for consultation.

and Latin<sup>31)</sup> — and then select at least two further “special subjects”. The special subjects were set out in “Departments”. For the Junior Certificate “Department B” was for the languages Latin, Greek, French and German. The requirements for both classical and modern languages were set out in parallel fashion, the wording for the French being: “Passages from Bernadin de St. Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie*, and from a work selected by the Examiners, to be translated into English. Questions in Grammar. An easy passage to be translated into French”<sup>32)</sup>. The German requirements were similarly worded, the set text being Fouqué’s *Undine*. The Senior French examination did not have any set book, its blunt message being: “Translation into English of French passages selected by the Examiner. Questions on Grammar. Translation of English passage into French”<sup>33)</sup>. We may note in passing that the same two modern languages—French and German—were the languages of choice in Scotland as they had been in England.

A sample of 169 candidates (Boys = 55; Girls = 114) for the Junior and Senior Certificate exams at the University of Glasgow shows that French was the most popular exam taken, with 93 entries (Table 5).

Despite the overall domination of girls in the exam as a whole, the figures for Latin and Greek show the traditional preferences: Boys took the classics, while girls preferred French and German.

The content of the Scottish exams was also broadly similar to that of the English exams discussed earlier. Figure 6 shows examples from the Junior and Senior French examinations set by the University of Glasgow:

31) Girls were not required to take Latin. Tony Howatt suggests (personal communication) that this exemption from Latin prolonged the vicious circle in which no girls took Latin, so in due course no Latin teachers were produced, etc.

32) *Local Examinations*. (University of Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1881), p. 80.

33) *Local Examinations*. (University of Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1881), p. 81.

Table 5. Candidates in Modern Languages, University of Glasgow, 1879.

Subject	Total	Boys	Girls
Latin	48	39	8
Greek	20	20	0
French	93	11	82
German	29	1	28

(Source: A. P. R. Howatt, Unpublished Material)

Examiners — M. Monnier and Professor Young, M. D.

Translate into English —

Il fit aux généraux suédois l'honneur de les inviter à sa table. Entre autres questions qu'il leur fit, il demanda au général Reinschild à combine les troupes du roi son maître pouvaient monter avant la bataille. Reinschild répondit que le roi seul en avait la liste, qu'il ne communiquait à personne; etc.

- (a) Donnez le pluriel des adjectifs *gris, épais, heureux, doux*. Comment forment-ils leur féminin?
- (b) Donnez l'imparfait du subjonctif, et le participe passé du verbe *rendre*.
- (c) Expliquez la construction de cette phrase: un grand nombre d'oiseaux faisaient resonner ces bocages de leurs doux chants. (Fénelon)

Translate into French —

- (a) He told me to wait for you and then go to meet him and his wife.  
How long do you think he has been there?  
I have a grudge against him and his father.  
I would rather have to deal with a fool than an idler.
- (b) Thus perished at the age of thirty-nine the best but the feeblest of monarchs, after a reign of sixteen years passed in seeking how to do good. His ancestors bequeathed to him the revolution. He is, perhaps, the only prince who had no passion, had not even the passion for power, and who united the two qualities that make good kings - fear of God and love of his people.

Figure 6. Junior French Examination: University of Glasgow (1879).<sup>34)</sup>

The English to French translation (Fig. 6, Q. 3 a and b) is noticeably longer and more difficult than the comparable "easy sentences" in the Oxbridge

34) I am indebted to A. P. R. Howatt (University of Edinburgh) for photocopies of these exam papers.

Locals seen above (Fig. 5). Further, in their "Higher Examination" for women, that standard was raised again, with difficult translations both ways, questions on the history of the language, and on the literature of the period 1715–1800<sup>35</sup>.

### 8. The London Matriculation Exam

For many years C-J Delille, the prolific writer of French grammars mentioned earlier, had been the chief examiner for French in the Matriculation Exam for the University of London. He established a tradition that required the candidate to translate two passages of French into English, one long prose passage and one poem. In 1853, for example, the paper consisted of a 400-word passage from Thiers, and the poem *La Chenille* by Florian<sup>36</sup>. In 1854 there were two shorter prose passages — from Massillon and Lamartine — and the poem *La Feuille* by Arnault<sup>37</sup>.

Delille's rather literary approach was revised in 1861 when two new examiners, Professor Charles Cassal and Antonin Roche, Esq., took over. In line with the grammatical questions seen in the Locals (Fig. 4), they introduced a new section: "Grammatical Questions on the above passages." For these questions they picked words from the passages and devised questions around them, as in Figure 7:

The paper was rounded off by a dramatic exchange of seven turns from Molière, for translation into English.

London therefore fell into line with the prevailing format: papers contained a mix of literary translation and grammatical tests, and this continued

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35) *Local Examinations* (University of Glasgow: James Maclehose, 1881), p. 83.

36) P. H. E. Brette, *French Examination Papers set at the University of London from 1839 to 1871* (London, 1871), pp. 1–2.

37) *Ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

C. *Grammatical Questions on the above passages.*

1. Verbs. — *Voulurent, voir, vint, prit, fait, reçues, vécu, alla, reparut.* Write down the second person singular future, and the first person plural conditional, of each of these verbs. Etc.
2. Genders. — *Admiration, cœur, esprit, genoux, vœux, douleur, âme, âges, années, Hollande, amirauté, intervalles, mathématiques, Europe, foule.* Of what gender is each of these nouns?  
State, according to what rule or rules *pouvoir, ciel, temps, sommeil,* are masculine, and *sagesse, connaissance, fin, faveur, mesure, terre, mort, Russie, fois,* are feminine.
3. Give the plural form of *faveur, ciel, fils, fil, corps;* Etc.
4. Form adverbs with the following adjectives: — *Mortel, précieux, extrême, absolu, puissant, doux, nouveau.*

Figure 7. From the University of London French Matriculation paper (1861)

into the 1870s. On the literary side the major passages for translation — always from French to English — came from the authors mentioned above and also from Racine, Pascal, Fénelon, Corneille, Chateaubriand, Delavigne, Louis Blanc, Madame Roland, and Madame de la Fayette. On the grammatical side, Q1 always concerned verbs (eg., their present or past participles, the subjunctive, imperative, or even in 1871 to parse five of them). Question 2 usually concerned gender, with the student often required to give the underlying rule (Fig. 7). After that might come questions on plurals, making negative sentences, explaining the use of pronouns (eg., *Tu ne te trompes pas*), explaining why a grave accent is needed on some words (eg., *mère*), distinguishing between words (eg., *tout, tous*), and so forth. The only exception in this format appears in the “General Examination for Women” which London offered in May, 1869. Women, apparently, could be offered English to French translation, which never appeared for the men. Women candidates were asked to translate, for example, “My brother’s little daughter has beautiful blue eyes” into French<sup>38</sup>.

38) *Ibid.*, p. 82.

B. A. Pass level were the men required to translate English into French.

In summary, the Oxford and Cambridge Locals, the London Matriculation Exams, and their Scottish counterparts all helped to establish a pattern for British MFL examinations which, with variations, consisted of three elements: a set book, from which would be extracted a passage for translation; an unseen passage or sentences for translation into English; and some grammar questions requiring explanation or memory (e.g., of a conjugation). Most of the trappings of a modern MFL exam were absent, for example there was no aural-oral component, no interview, no comprehension questions, no writing. Nor was there any dictation, which might have substituted for an aural component. The alignment with the way the classics were examined was perfect. Regarding the areas that were examined, the translation and the grammar, the demands were high by modern standards. Both the translations and the grammar questions have been judged to be "difficult" by modern standards, with the added comment that "most current GCSE candidates would not have a clue about the grammar questions, not even the conjugations"<sup>39)</sup>.

### 9. Latham's Critique of Examinations (1877)

The most thoroughgoing critique of modern language examinations came almost 20 years after the initial work by the College of Preceptors and the Oxbridge Locals. In 1877 Henry Latham, of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, produced a remarkably perceptive book called *On the Action of Examinations Considered as a Means of Selection*. Latham was a central figure in the ongoing debate about examinations<sup>40)</sup>, and his book is a sharp critique of modern languages and their position in the curriculum. His specific com-

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39) Mr. Brian Davies, Culford School, Bury St. Edmunds.

40) See Roach, *op cit.*, pp. 234-235.

ments on the examinations are still of relevance and interest.

His general view was that modern languages were intrinsically different from what he termed “more educational subjects”<sup>41)</sup>. His categorization of knowledge consisted of three levels: At the top were “high mathematics, first-rate classical scholarship, and parts of mental philosophy”. Only “a few choice intellects” could expect to attain these because they required long and arduous climbing up the curricular “ladder”, as he put it. The second level consisted of subjects which were near the top of the ladder, but which could be learned by the pupil himself if he had the will: “History, or Political Philosophy, or Physical Geography”<sup>42)</sup>. The third level consisted of modern languages — no other subject is mentioned — because (a) they may be acquired by pupils in bilingual contexts, or (b) may be picked up in the course of duties in later life, and hence (c) they must be rated below subjects that absolutely require the instruction of a master, or even extended self-instruction. These three levels reflected Latham’s belief in the benefits of schooling, which he saw as the foundation on which all further achievement would be built. Examinations should therefore be aligned directly with the curriculum, in what Latham called his “cost of production”<sup>43)</sup> model. Modern languages were far down by this way of reckoning.

But Latham was bothered by another notion as well, that of the relative utility of subjects. Judged by their utility value, modern languages could be seen as having a far higher status than in the cost of production model. To reconcile this dilemma. Latham moved on to the idea of

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41) Henry Latham, *On the Action of Examinations Considered as a Means of Selection* (Cambridge, 1877), p. 375.

42) Latham, *op cit.*, pp. 381–384.

43) Latham, *op cit.*, p. 385.

“*immediate* use or not”<sup>44</sup>). A subject might be immediately needed for the performance of a particular job — Latham was very concerned about the Indian Civil Service (ICS) examinations — in which case it would have a certain immediate value. But a subject could also have a delayed value, that is, it might not be required until a person had reached seniority in his post. From this reasoning Latham drew the conclusion that Law still sat at the top of the ladder, since ICS officials were most likely to need this in higher posts.

All the same, Latham continued to probe into examinations, turning his attention to the aim of examinations such as that for the ICS. The aim, he said, was to secure ability, but he acknowledged that ability can not be measured, and that in practice knowledge must be measured instead: “Knowledge is only an indirect measure of ability”<sup>45</sup>). Further, the gaining of that knowledge must not do harm (“educational mischief”) to the more general process of education, or, in modern terms, must not have a negative washback effect. This washback was all the more prominent in Latham’s mind because, unlike in Germany, there was no unified curriculum in England, and examining bodies were forced to offer as wide a range of subjects as possible. This, he noted, had caused problems in the past, when Italian had once been over valued and had soon been spotted as an easy option.

By the mid-1870s many of the drawbacks of examinations were becoming apparent, particularly to those who had been involved with them from the beginning. Cramming and question-spotting appear in Latham’s critique, as does the lack of consistency across papers: “For instance, a much larger proportion of candidates can, in general, get three-fourths of the marks in a

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44) Latham, *op cit.*, p. 387.

45) Latham, *op cit.*, p. 389.

translation paper than can do so in a mathematical paper"<sup>46</sup>). In his view examination results in general were questionable, and their ability to identify the right people was suspect: "but when fifty candidates have to be chosen, the last twenty taken and the first twenty rejected do not differ much in calibre"<sup>47</sup>). Latham also realized that many of the qualities needed in later life, for example "volition and energy" remained quite outside the limits of exam results.

Returning to modern languages, Latham argued that using a set text, which had been present in British exams from the beginning, had little value in linguistic terms but was a necessity for class teaching: "no confidence can be placed in a knowledge of it as shewing acquaintance with the language"<sup>48</sup>). His solution was to extend the "unseen" passages already in use, but with a dictionary being allowed in the examination room. This liberal suggestion was not taken up by the examination bodies, and remains a subject of discussion to the present day. Overall, in Latham's view modern languages were such difficult subjects to accommodate in examination frameworks that he advocated they be made part of the preliminary exam, rather than being part of the exam itself. Although this view may seem retrograde, it nevertheless required of someone leaving school, or entering a university, that they have a knowledge of at least one modern language, a position that has still not been reached in Britain today.

## 10. Conclusion

The period from the late 1840s to the 1880s saw the establishment of

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46) Latham, *op cit.*, p. 391.

47) Latham, *op cit.*, p. 391.

48) Latham, *op cit.*, p. 397. Here Latham was adding his voice to those who were critical of set texts in modern language exams: see Roach, *op cit.*, pp. 149-150 for an account of these problems.

modern languages as valid examination subjects, and this in turn helped to raise the status of foreign languages both inside and outside the school curriculum. In addition to this national recognition, a number of details as to how to examine foreign languages were put in place. One, of course shared with all the other subjects offered, was the appropriate age for such examinations: not more than 15 (Cambridge started with 16, but from 1860 aligned with Oxford at 15) and not more than 18. These cutoff points have had remarkable longevity in the British system of education, and in the case of languages have served to demark basic from advanced knowledge of the subject, though not particularly clearly<sup>49</sup>). A second point was that the word "languages" came to mean Latin, Greek, French, and German, and that a student would be required to take at least one of them to pass the whole exam. "Modern" languages in Britain have, since that period, been overwhelmingly concentrated on French and German, a trend that has survived despite wars and other causes of international friction. A third construct was that of the set book or books, which would be examined by means of translation, and would thereby test memory and application. To counterbalance this prepared material there would be unseen passages, usually of a literary or historical type, that would test the pupil's ability to perform on-the-spot translation in the language. This approach has also had considerable longevity. A fourth is to be found in the grammar section, which pinpointed specific grammatical areas, for example conjugations, number, and agreement; it also required of the student a metalanguage to explain these. Last, by not attempting to include an oral component, the

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49) The traditional version — as with Latin — was for the student to acquire a thorough knowledge of the language in the initial phases of instruction, to be followed by a move into the literature. The Oxford and Cambridge Locals eschewed this, preferring a mixed approach. Hence, literature books appeared in the Junior exam, and grammar still retained a position in the Senior one.

Malcolm J. Benson: From Exercises to Exams: The Development of Foreign  
Language Testing in Nineteenth-century Britain

early modern language examinations established that the listening and speaking skills would not be tested. With a few exceptions, this remained true until the 1960s.