

Modern foreign languages at primary school: a three-pronged approach?

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This article considers different approaches to instruction in school-based primary MFL schemes. It suggests a curriculum with three strands for England, in which the language element is nearer the sensitisation end of the spectrum but with an enhanced knowledge about language component and a strengthened intercultural dimension. It also proposes a tripartite staffing model, with primary class teachers supported by language specialists, foreign language assistants (FLAs) and other native speakers working together in partnership.

INTRODUCTION

Across the length and breadth of the UK there is a renewed surge of interest in early foreign language learning, which was marked by the launch on 25 March 1999 of the DfEE Good Practice Project (*Early Language Learning Bulletin* 1999). The aim of this initiative is to enhance the provision and quality of early foreign language learning. This was followed in May 2000 by the recommendation of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry that early language learning should form part of a coherent national strategy for languages education in the UK (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000: 89). In this paper I consider the possible content of a pre-11 programme. I comment on the

- purposes of early foreign language learning;
- foreign language content;
- development of children's knowledge about language;
- promotion of intercultural awareness; and on staffing.

PURPOSES OF EARLY FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Early foreign language programmes in the UK tend, broadly speaking, to fall into one of three categories, namely language competence programmes designed to teach children a foreign language (Giovanazzi, 1992), secondly, programmes intended to sensitise children to one or more languages (Mayes, 1999), and thirdly, language awareness programmes, in which most

of the discussion is in English on various features of language and languages.

Language competence programmes

Language competence programmes aim to enhance children's linguistic attainment and because they emphasise performance and progression, require more curriculum time and are almost inevitably based on the concentrated study of a single language. As such, they place requirements upon the teacher's linguistic knowledge and until recently have tended to be based on a 'drop-in' model with visits by a peripatetic specialist who teaches the foreign language in a discrete timetabled slot. The approach to instruction is thus an overt one, and the language itself the prime focus of each lesson. Particularly when language competence programmes are offered at primary level, it is essential that secondary schools take account of pupils' prior learning so that progress in the foreign language is maintained.

Sensitisation/encounter programmes

The aim of sensitisation programmes is to develop children's understanding about language learning by means of an encounter with one foreign language and, occasionally, several of them, with an emphasis on the primary child's present interests and cognitive development. Sensitisation programmes can start at any age, including KS1 or pre-school and are typically delivered by the primary class teacher, assisted by resources designed with the specific needs of the non-specialist linguist in mind and by in-service training or occasionally, native speaker support. These custom-made packages have an intentionally restricted inventory of language items so as to enable the teacher to present a modest stand-alone language element, which is integrated in varying degrees into the daily life of the primary classroom. Economical as far as curriculum time is concerned, they may be well suited to the context

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in England, where many teachers are constrained by a combination of lack of confidence, training and time. Sensitisation tends to be more within the reach of the retrained primary teacher, as content is less prescribed and the promotion of positive attitudes is typically prioritised. Pupils may develop some basic competence and confident handling of a limited number of formulaic phrases but not to the same extent as in a language competence programme. Where sensitisation programmes are offered over several years, continuity of learning is crucial from class to class throughout the primary school.

Sometimes children move on from sensitisation to language competence style work in the final years of KS2. Language competence and language sensitisation programmes are both ways of initiating children into foreign language learning, although with different emphasis, and both may incorporate an element of language awareness work, linking the foreign language to L1, but this occurs infrequently.

Language awareness programmes

There has been substantial debate over the role of language awareness work in primary foreign language schemes (Poole 1994, 1995). For many years Hawkins (1984) has argued that language awareness programmes are a means of preparing for language learning, learning 'how to learn', providing 'education of the ear' and a forum for the discussion of language diversity. It has also been claimed that language awareness *on its own* allows for better co-ordination from primary to secondary levels, as language learning is intentionally limited to knowledge that will not be viewed as an interference upon transfer to secondary school. Language awareness programmes are usually taught by the primary teacher, who needs to have little active knowledge of the foreign languages.

It is necessary to clarify the aims of foreign language programmes and be cautious about what can realistically be achieved by primary children who are learning languages, particularly in view of the coming on-stream of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. Rather than allowing early MFL to be squeezed out by additional statutory requirements, we need to explore ways of making links between foreign language learning and literacy and numeracy (Cheater and Farren, forthcoming). Indeed, the Nuffield Languages Inquiry recommends that foreign languages be designated a key skill alongside literacy, numeracy and ICT (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000: 8). Building on current examples of good practice from both early MFL, English and Mathematics, we must continue to pool ideas about an appropriate curriculum for pre-11 learners, taught by teachers who are not foreign language specialists but who, as Sharpe (1995) reminds us, *are* experienced primary practitioners, with a whole range of

professional skills. So what might the content of a programme comprise?

I wish to suggest that, ideally, early foreign language programmes should comprise three strands: foreign language content in the sense of skills acquisition; the development of children's knowledge about language; and the promotion of intercultural awareness. These three strands would be mutually supportive but not necessarily offered in equal proportions. The first would be taught mainly in the target language and the second and third mainly in L1.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE CONTENT

Firstly, if time for learning is as important as it seems to be (Burstall *et al.*, 1974; Edelenbos and Johnstone, 1996), then this first encounter ought surely to include the development of at least some initial foreign language competence, and not be based purely on a language awareness approach. There will naturally be considerable variation between what individual schools can offer and sustain, but I believe that the main element of any programme must be a core of realistic, manageable, but *systematically* taught foreign language content. Fragmented approaches based largely on the promotion of positive attitudes make it difficult to keep track of the language content and are more likely to be disregarded at the transfer stage to secondary school. Introductory foreign language topics which fit naturally with the primary curriculum such as those pioneered in Kent (Rumley, 1991; Sharpe, 1991, 1992) are more likely to be achievable by primary teachers, given both the limited time and in-service training currently available. By pre-defining the body of language to be taught, it should be easier to ensure some coherence and inform secondary MFL teachers more precisely about what ground has been covered, thereby enabling the foreign language begun at primary level to be a modest first step in a continuum of foreign language learning which can be built on at secondary level.

At secondary level, under the National Curriculum for MFL, the Language of the Classroom will be a major feature of foreign language lessons, and a very good foundation for this target language can be laid by the primary teacher in her everyday routines. This prepares primary pupils for one significant aspect of their secondary programme, but does not require the primary teacher to take on board vast amounts of foreign language, an important consideration given the demands of the National Curriculum overall. Many of the expressions are used repeatedly throughout the primary school day and can be built in quite naturally (Satchwell and de Silva, 1995). The daily routine of calling the register, collecting dinner money, lining up, entering and leaving the classroom, prayers, changing the date and weather chart, and talking about the time,

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greeting and dismissing the children: all are a means of using the foreign language for everyday activities within the normal life of the school. Similarly, it is possible for the primary teacher to conduct classroom business in the foreign language using basic vocabulary to organise, praise and control pupils.

There is also evidence to suggest that primary pupils themselves would appreciate learning some 'coping language' to enable them to interrupt the incoming flow of target language, to ask for repetition, seek clarification and make routine requests of their teachers.

This content might be presented as a stand-alone element involving solely the foreign language. However, making it part and parcel of the rich primary experience which contributes to a child's overall personal development should make the most effective combination.

As has been amply demonstrated in Scotland, one means of meeting the heavy demands of the primary curriculum is to integrate some of this language content with the ongoing work of the class. This can be achieved in a number of ways (Council of Europe, 1992; Doyé and Hurrell, 1997) and is altogether more feasible when the primary class teacher is responsible for the foreign language provision, and especially when she is teaching her own class. Where this is the case, elements of the foreign language can permeate other topic and class work, such as art, craft, music, science and PE, as the teacher consolidates foreign language learning throughout the school day. Teachers can also replace children's L1 with the foreign language to reinforce tasks covered elsewhere, such as mental arithmetic and multiplication tables.

There are numerous examples (Hurrell, 1995; Bell, 1996; Hutcheon, 1996; Tierney and Hope, 1998; Muir, 1999) to show that integration with pupils' daily activities is a realistic strategy, with the potential to promote real communication in a natural setting. It allows a 'drip-feed' approach to foreign language instruction and enables a start to be made in situations where a stand-alone component is not possible, especially if foreign language resources and expertise as well as curriculum time are scarce.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN'S KNOWLEDGE ABOUT LANGUAGE

Where language competence is the aim, there has generally been a reluctance to incorporate a language awareness dimension, on the grounds that too much discussion would take place in English. However, findings from the Scottish Pilot (Low *et al.*, 1993, 1995) and other European research (Edelenbos and Johnstone, 1996; Blondin *et al.*, 1998) indicate the importance of an understanding of L1 and of language *per se* in the development of foreign language competence.

There is also the question of exactly *where* the foreign language fits into the primary school curriculum. It is arguable that foreign language work needs to be explicitly associated with English language work and that the second strand of an early foreign language programme should be designed to develop children's metalinguistic awareness.

As Johnstone (1994) noted, literacy can be promoted through language awareness work. As soon as learners have a basic level of literacy in their L1, they might be taught how to listen carefully in order to discriminate sounds, the interrelationship of sounds and writing, how to match sound to print by shared reading aloud of familiar texts, using poems, rhymes, songs, stories and 'big books' in other languages as well as English (Martin and Cheater, 1998; Skarbek, 1998). This would enhance ongoing work as part of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998b; Primary Languages Network, 1998). So, for example, one LEA is currently trialling a framework which attempts to link selected learning objectives from the Literacy Framework with the early teaching of French, setting out early foreign language learning activities for word, sentence and text work.

Furthermore, one of the recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000: 43) is that language awareness should form part of the National Literacy Strategy. Children's curiosity about how different languages work can be raised by considering the similarities and differences, between, say, numbers one to ten in Romance languages, such as French, Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, and in Germanic languages, for example, Danish, Swedish, Dutch and German. Puzzle-type activities involving looking for clues to decipher which number is which and then co-operatively attempting to re-order numbers in the individual languages in the correct sequence, can lead to productive discussion about language families. Similar tasks, also involving investigating the meaning behind certain names, can be carried out when primary children are learning the days of the week or months of the year. Language awareness develops learners' consciousness of recurring patterns in language, and helps them make logical deductions and recognise graphic and orthographic clues.

Depending on local circumstances, activities might include awakening children to the existence of dialects and home languages of individuals within the class, drawing on pupils' own knowledge of other languages, in the case of bilingual children. Earlier versions of the National Curriculum for English (DfEE, 1998a: 2) recognised that 'the richness of dialects and other languages can make an important contribution to pupils' knowledge and understanding of standard English.' This would open pupils' minds to language variety and raise the status of community languages.

**"literacy can
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