

# 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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through  
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In addition, children's knowledge about language could be extended to include an awareness of strategies for language learning. Children might discuss with their teacher techniques for memorising familiar words and phrases. They might also be encouraged to discover basic grammatical patterns for themselves by simple analysis, to enable them to begin to progress beyond a memorised repertoire of pre-fabricated chunks.

## THE PROMOTION OF INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

Particularly where a diversity of languages and contexts - both foreign and mother tongues spoken in any given classroom - are being explored, there is the potential to celebrate the cultural richness of what pupils have to offer, and to identify similarities alongside differences. Therefore, I would suggest that the intercultural awareness strand, implicit in so many programmes, is strengthened, especially as children seem to have a capacity for openness towards others which declines as they get older.

Currently, however, the cultural aspects of early foreign languages education are typically based on somewhat ad hoc procedures and we need to share with each other practical ways of exploiting opportunities to explore 'otherness' (Jones, 1995). This might be through the medium of cross-curricular activities, and tasks which allow children to actively contribute towards the process of understanding more about their own culture and themselves, as well as that of others (Barzanó and Jones, 1998). There is also evidence that children are not 'neutral' in attitude and do not wish to be simply on the receiving end of snippets of cultural information, but have questions of their own about topics of personal interest and wish the process to be more reciprocal. Barry Jones (1995) has already provided examples of activities which enable pupils in Years 7-12 to develop an appreciation of otherness. Many of these have the potential to be adapted to younger foreign language learners. Indeed, Jane Jones and colleagues (1998) demonstrate how one of these, the exchange of cultural boxes of items which the senders feel are representative of life in their native country, can stimulate both children's and their teachers' cultural awareness, and are especially valuable in localities where few children participate in trips abroad.

Such projects are also a means of keeping teachers up to date. This is important because the inclusion of an intercultural dimension has implications for teachers' own cultural knowledge and awareness, which implies that we need to consider means of equipping them with the wherewithal to deliver this element effectively. As Driscoll (1999) points out, generalist teachers tend to have limited first-hand experience of the target

culture and find plugging gaps in their knowledge problematic.

Thus, the delivery of the cultural element could be shared between the primary teacher and, where they are available, native speakers and language specialists, with each having a complementary role. Thus cultural awareness work could be carried out in both spontaneous and pre-planned ways (Kramsch, 1993: 205). Where intercultural awareness is an aim, *all* teachers, primary, native speakers and specialists, are likely to require guidance and support in explicitly integrating this element in a manner which is appropriate to young learners. Otherwise, gains in intercultural understanding are likely to be slight (Mitchell, Martin and Grenfell, 1992).

## STAFFING

The incorporation of a foreign language adds yet another dimension to an increasingly full primary curriculum, frequently meeting with objections concerning overloading both the curriculum and the class teacher. However, a shift in priorities might be worth considering. Although Scotland has gone for the language competence model, a different approach based on a combination of less ambitious foreign language content, modest integration of the foreign language into the daily routines of the primary classroom, together with discussion in English of 'language and cultural awareness' might be more suitable to the context south of the border. The primary class teacher, appropriately supported, is admirably suited to carry out these tasks.

It is not just that the primary teacher has the knowledge of activities suited to young learners and skills and broad conceptual understanding of how and where the foreign language is best likely to fit (Sharpe, 1992, 1995). There is also a sense in which visiting teachers always remain to some extent 'outsiders' in individual classrooms. It is often difficult for visiting teachers both to be as fully accepted by children as their own class teacher and to differentiate according to the needs of pupils in a class which they meet infrequently (Martin and Mitchell, 1993). In contrast, the class teacher is well placed to have an intimate knowledge of each of her pupils' backgrounds and individual needs. Consequently primary teachers are usually those with whom children can develop a confident working relationship, especially important since their early foreign language experiences need to be high-quality, positive ones (Satchwell, 1996).

Under a three-pronged approach to staffing, the primary teacher's work would be supported, where possible, by that of foreign language assistants (FLAs), native speakers, and specialists who would work with the primary class teacher in partnership. The deployment of FLAs and other native speakers was endorsed by the National

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Association of Head Teachers (NAHT, 1992:4 iii) and as long as they can be properly guided, their contribution is especially valuable when the primary generalist is not particularly confident in the foreign language herself and has limited or less recent experience of the foreign country and its culture.

More than teachers of other subjects, MFL teachers are role models, with a particular responsibility to ensure accurate pronunciation of the foreign language, since imitation is an aspect in which young children typically excel. FLAs can provide native speaker competence, an up-to-date knowledge of the foreign language and a good intonation model. And since the longer term aim of enhancing the primary teacher's intercultural experience by means of stays abroad can currently only be offered to a minority of teachers, improving the learning environment by bringing the foreign country into the classroom by means of real native speakers seems to be worth encouraging.

When FLAs are used in a peripatetic capacity in projects in which the primary class teacher has only a peripheral role, owing to the special conditions pertaining to their deployment, the language element can be offered only on an irregular basis (Martin and Mitchell, 1993). However, by incorporating the class teacher into the primary MFL scheme, and using FLAs to support her work, regular rather than occasional teaching can be undertaken. This gives a more extended experience of the foreign language, with the opportunity for increased exposure overall and more intensive practice during blocks of time when FLAs are available.

Undoubtedly, secondary specialists will always have a key role to play and there are many excellent schemes in which they have been long established. However, the ongoing shortage of linguists to deliver the MFL National Curriculum in KS3 and 4 makes their widespread deployment in the primary sector on a national scale unlikely. Furthermore, it would be inadvisable to impose inappropriate secondary style methods on primary teachers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps what is required is a blend of what is best in the 'language competence, visiting teacher' model and the holistic approach which integrates the foreign language into the primary curriculum. In practice, a variety of curricular approaches and staffing models will continue to co-exist, each valid for particular local circumstances. Indeed, the experience gained over the last decade demonstrates that there is probably no single 'right' answer to the complex question of how to implement early foreign languages. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile exploring a tripartite staffing model, with the primary teacher empowered to undertake the majority of the foreign language

teaching, but supported by native speakers and specialists, for whom we need to consider new roles to deploy their expertise.

Finding sufficient time for the foreign language work might be partly addressed by viewing the foreign language encounter as an integral part of the whole school language curriculum, and making explicit links with English and other languages. For this to happen effectively, the challenge will be to identify common concepts and a shared terminology and teaching methodology so that English and foreign language work complement and build on each other's distinctive contributions. At secondary level, traditionally English and MFL have been perceived as very separate elements in the curriculum. Perhaps it is in the primary school that we shall see the first moves towards closing the divide.

This would help prevent an early foreign language programme being offered as a 'bolt-on' experience. Instead, there would be three strands - foreign language, metalinguistic awareness and intercultural awareness - ideally mapped out in schemes of work jointly conceived by teachers in clusters of primary schools, drawing on the expertise of language specialists from a variety of backgrounds.

Of course, if strengthened language awareness and intercultural dimension strands are incorporated into primary language programmes, as part of a wider cross-curricular context in which the foreign language component is taught, then there will inevitably be less foreign language and more discussion in English. This will mean a move towards a position somewhere between the current language competence and sensitisation models, with the foreign language content probably nearer the sensitisation end of the spectrum.

Elements from the three-pronged approach, integrated into the existing literacy and numeracy strategies, could be delivered at any point, including early years classes, if sufficient resources and funding were made available to empower primary teachers. Initially, their efforts might be supplemented in the final half term of Year 6 (after SATs have been completed) by work with a stronger language-competence focus. This could be taught by appropriately briefed MFL specialists from the secondary schools into which children from cluster schools feed, who would build on the primary teachers' foundation. As numbers of linguistically qualified primary teachers increase, the competence element could be gradually rolled back to an earlier beginning. The non-statutory guidelines for teaching foreign languages at Key Stage 2 (QCA, November 1999), and optional schemes of work (forthcoming) would provide additional support and promote coherence.

As we continue to investigate the feasibility of an extension of language learning within the

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primary school curriculum, we need to be pragmatic about what can be achieved yet retain our high aspirations.

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