# Thinking through languages: a multi-lingual approach to primary school languages

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## ABSTRACT

The beginning of the 21st century in England has seen a rapid growth in interest in foreign languages for primary age learners. This article presents an alternative approach to primary school languages based on a Nuffield-funded pilot in Coventry LEA. A brief overview of recent developments in primary MFL is provided, followed by an account of the approach. The pilot project draws upon language awareness and develops it towards a multilingual approach to foreign languages for primary learners. The approach fosters links with the literacy hour and citizenship, and has the aim of raising pupils' awareness of the diversity of languages and the challenges and rewards of language learning. The article includes some practical examples of activities for primary age children and is interspersed with comments from MFL PGCE trainees who were involved in one aspect of the project (a language encounter) as well as primary teachers' views.

'A nation's fate will depend, in the end, on the quality of the education its children get in language'. (Comenius, 1630)

## SETTING THE CONTEXT

An alternative approach to primary school languages, drawing upon language awareness to develop a multilingual approach, has been the focus of a curriculum development project in Coventry LEA based on a Nuffield-funded pilot. This initial section outlines a range of factors so as to clarify the background and context of this project which is set against a changing framework in both primary and secondary education.

Until recently there has been no UK-wide policy of providing modern foreign languages (MFL) in the primary sector. Following the publication of the critical NFER report (Burstall et al, 1974), the government withdrew its support and abandoned the experimental introduction of French into the primary curriculum (1964-74) in England. The 1990s saw a revival of interest in primary school foreign language teaching with a major policy initiative in Scotland. There was also some LEA-led growth in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In March 1999 the government announced the DfEE Early Language Learning initiative to promote and develop the provision and quality of MFL learning in the primary

sector to be managed and co-ordinated by CILT. The Good Practice Project (September 1999 to March 2001) sought to identify, develop and disseminate good practice with projects across England and Wales. Concurrently the National Advisory Centre for Early Language Learning (NACELL; www.nacell.org.uk) was created. In addition, for the first time, the National Curriculum 2000 included non-statutory guidelines for MFL at KS2, with an optional scheme of work for Years 5 and 6.

This revival of interest prompted the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) to commission a research project to explore the current situation regarding MFL in primary schools and the feasibility of extending it to all schools. The report (Powell et al, 2000), submitted to the Secretary of State for Education in March 2001, indicated that 21% of maintained schools with pupils in key stage 2 currently taught MFL, but with considerable regional variations. Approaches to teaching MFL at key stage 2 were extremely varied, with some approaches perceived as more effective than others. The study revealed a generally supportive attitude to teaching MFL in primary schools, alongside support for the principle of entitlement to MFL in some form in key stage 2. However, the study also made it clear that the resources and infrastructure necessary to support any scaling up of existing provision were not sufficiently well developed to sustain the introduction of a national entitlement for all pupils. The report recommended: acquiring more evidence about which approaches were effective and which could be replicated on a wider basis; preparatory measures to develop the necessary infrastructure by raising awareness of the benefits of MFL at key stage 2; and a detailed audit of availability of teachers, training opportunities, and information transfer to secondary school.

I concluded that if foreign languages are taught in primary schools, they should be taught in a fun and enjoyable way. Relevance should be made to their realities as well. If this is done, pupils will leave

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primary school with a positive attitude towards learning a foreign language and the transition to learning foreign languages at secondary school will be easier and learning will take place at a far superior level. (MFL Trainee)

Recent government documents have proposed further developments at key stage 2. The Green Paper 14-19: *Extending opportunities, raising standards* (DfES, 2002) includes a section on languages outlining an entitlement for all primary school children to learn a language by 2012, and this was reiterated and the timescale shortened in the Languages Strategy (*Languages for All: Languages for Life. A strategy for England,* DfES, 2003), where it was stated that LEAs should co-ordinate primary language learning programmes to ensure every key stage 2 pupil is offered the opportunity to study at least one foreign language by 2010.

The recent commitment, signalled by the Government, to shift the focus of compulsory language learning from 11-16 to 7-14, is a massive undertaking and will of course not be fully realised until the end of the decade. In the meantime there is likely to be much debate about what form primary languages should take. The project outlined here seeks to enter this debate with a scheme which involves local primary schools, local companies, higher education institutions, the LEA Minority Group Support Service and the LEA Advisory Team. The project relates to the recommendations of the Nuffield Languages Enquiry (The Nuffield Foundation, 2000) by:

- "Fostering notions of equality and acceptance of diversity at the earliest possible age" (Recommendation 3)

- Providing children with a sound basis for language learning for life (Recommendation 5)

- "Introducing into the National Literacy Strategy modules of language awareness the content of which would be to bridge the gap between English, literacy, and Foreign Languages" (Recommendation 6)

- Exploiting new technologies to the full (Recommendation 13).

## LANGUAGE AWARENESS, LANGUAGE APPRENTICESHIP AND A MULTILINGUAL APPROACH

Adopting a multilingual approach draws upon previous work in the field of language awareness, with aims such as to 'bridge the "space between" the different aspects of language education' (English/foreign language/ethnic minority mother tongues/English as a second language/Latin)' (Hawkins, 1987: 4). Language awareness has re-emerged more recently in the Socrates/Lingua project referred to as *'L'éveil aux langues dans l'école primaire (EVLANG)'*, which took up the challenge of producing and implementing a range of teaching materials to develop knowledge and

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awareness of the diversity of languages in order to realise how languages work and to develop more positive attitudes towards language and language learning and subsequently to improve language aptitude. This three-year project across five European countries has now been extended to include sixteen European participating countries in a new project Ja-Ling, named after the title of one of Comenius' books *Janua Linguarum Reserata* - an open door to languages. This programme has already carried out dissemination of the approach, production of teaching materials, training sessions, implementation of activities in the classroom and evaluation tools (teacher diary, classroom observation, teacher questionnaire/interview, parent questionnaire/interview). Language awareness is now part of the Portuguese and Finnish curricula, and in Greece a Ja-Ling experiment is an official project of the Ministry's institute for pedagogical research.

> The pupils demonstrated a positive attitude to learning the language. Not only did they use the words with me after the assembly, such as 'Adiós' but also they asked many questions on how other words would be said in Spanish. They also asked questions about Spain. (MFL Trainee)

Downes (2002) defines language awareness as 'explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use.' He envisages a wider definition of language awareness for schools, for example: basic structures of language, links between speech and writing, language in its cultural context, language and geography, and language and history. There is an argument that a multilingual approach might be a solution to the obstacles of linear language learning at primary level. It could support cross-curricular delivery to diminish the constraints of time in the already over-loaded primary curriculum. Furthermore, it could use and develop language skills available within a school to alleviate the pressure on recruitment and redeployment of specialist language teachers. It would reduce the problems associated with transition to secondary school, whilst laying strong foundations for language learning, and it would avoid the reduction in language diversity.

The language *apprenticeship* model, outlined by Hawkins (2002) perhaps gives further support for a project of this nature. As the National Curriculum Working Group (DES, 1990) points out: 'One of the most valuable general skills which the study of a modern foreign language can impart is the enhanced ability to learn other languages at a later stage. To be fully effective, however, this needs to be a conscious objective of the course'. Good practice in the primary school can lay the foundations for learning and learning *how* to learn a foreign language. However, many researchers (see, for example, Hatch, 1983 and Krashen, 1982) call into question the benefits of an early start. For Hawkins (2002), starting earlier cannot be a panacea: it did not prevent drop-out and works only if part of a planned programme of apprenticeship. He therefore advocates as a way forward in key stage 2 modules of language

awareness as part of the National Literacy Strategy and a full training programme for all primary school teachers in education for the ear, awareness of language, matching language to the real world and confidence with language.

> The pupils were not afraid to attempt correct pronunciation, and I was really impressed with the results. The level of enthusiasm was amazing! (MFL Trainee)

Other major national initiatives, (for example, the *National Literacy Strategy: framework for teaching* (1998), *Key Stage 3 National Strategy: Framework for teaching modern foreign languages: Years 7, 8, and 9*, (2003), and *Citizenship*, (2002), form the backdrop to this project and help provide both a framework and a rationale for a project of this type.

## APPLYING THE APPROACH TO THE COVENTRY CONTEXT

The pilot study undertaken within Coventry LEA and funded by The Nuffield Foundation was developed under the title *Thinking Through Languages*. The project lasted for one academic year (2002–2003) and involved six primary schools from varying contexts including suburban and multicultural inner city. Various elements of the project were supported by external partners, including the University of Warwick, Peugeot PLC and Language Centre Publications.

Language awareness materials were used as the starting point. However, not surprisingly, many of these appear somewhat dated in an era that has embraced literacy, citizenship, thinking skills and the internet. In fact, the internet emerged as the central resource when developing materials, despite the commonly held perception that it has become an English language ghetto. As the medium becomes increasingly widely used throughout the globe so it has become more multilingual. This enables us to access sites where, in the words of David Crystal (2001: 220-221): "… we are encountering language presence in a real sense … sites which allow us to see languages as they are". Thus, there are a large number of sites from which teachers can select materials and present pupils with authentic examples of spoken and written language.

However, for some of the schools involved, the internet is less essential than for others. This is because the school can draw upon the expertise of bilingual speakers already present within its community. Global migration has enriched the classroom context, and, in a recent survey conducted by the Coventry LEA Minority Group Support Service, it was revealed that over 50 different mother tongues were spoken by Coventry pupils. These issues formed the core of a video produced as part of the project, celebrating linguistic diversity in the city.

> Having asked some of the pupils to tell me 'Hello' in their home language, many pupils were surprised and delighted when 'Pepe' not only said 'Hola' but 'Hello' in English, Punjabi, Urdu and French. Some of the pupils began to make

comments and sat up. The idea of using the pupils' home languages as well in the introduction was to draw the pupils closer to the Spanish language by relating it to their own and enhance the fact that all languages are of equal value. The pupils immediately repeated 'Hola'. (MFL Trainee)

Many of the pupils speaking other languages are newly arrived and it is critical to ensure that they have maximum opportunity to access the English language. Nevertheless, in some situations it appears that they have to abandon their mother tongue as soon as they arrive at school, and this is to the detriment of their cognitive development and self-esteem. It also prevents their monolingual fellow pupils from gaining an insight into a range of languages. In the words of Baroness Ashton of Upholland (Ashton, 2002): "There needs to be a greater recognition of community languages and opportunities for children to share their languages with others…we believe that the primary stage is where we should begin".

The approach we favour, therefore, as well as promoting social cohesion, aims to provide a foundation for future language learning and returns to Hawkins's notion of the language apprenticeship (see above). In so doing, it aims to address two major misconceptions that exist at the centre of the language learning process in the UK. The first, often held by the language learner and based on the rise of English as a global language, is that the English language represents absolute truth and the foreign language represents some kind of lesser confection of the teacher. How many secondary teachers have not heard pupils' comments such as: "Why do we have to have all these 'le' and 'la' words? It's stupid". The patient teacher will endeavour to point out that languages behave in different ways and gender exists in many different languages. However, would it not be preferable to address such issues by exploring a range of languages prior to learning a particular one?

The second misconception is held by the language teachers and arises from the notion that it does not really matter what you do at the early stages of language learning as long as it is fun. This is all well and good but increasingly pupils are declaring that they enjoy their first year of language learning but lose interest when it gets harder. Thus, why not build in stamina for language learning by developing language learning strategies across a range of languages? Consequently, if a pupil fails in one activity this will not necessarily mean failure in language learning per se.

## THE COVENTRY MODEL

From the outset, the approach adopted in the Coventry project aims to foster a curiosity about language and language learning in the learner. In Year 3 pupils reflect on the variety of languages and the people who speak them. They learn to identify two languages in their spoken and written forms and to pick out words which occur regularly in a spoken passage. Pupils look at similarities and differences

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across languages, considering different scripts and word origins. They learn to copy words accurately and start to pronounce individual words and words in simple poems and songs. Thus the learner becomes a language *investigator* with a series of challenges, outlined below.

1. *Language identification:* Imagine that you are at an airport and you can hear lots of languages being spoken around you. How many of those languages could you identify? (This is quite an interesting challenge to give language teachers too!) The majority of people would, at best, be able to identify a handful. Yet how many people in the world could identify English? What are the implications for us as custodians of the world language?

   The above scenario enables pupils to encounter and explore a range of languages. If you do not have access to a range of samples within your school, then sound files could be accessed on the internet through a website such as www.travlang.com.

2. *Comparing languages:* Once a language has been identified, then you can start to consider similarities and differences with other languages. Pupils at All Saints' Church of England School in Coventry explored the opening paragraphs of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* in five different European languages. A range of strategies can be developed which link to primary literacy work at word, sentence and text levels. Other tasks include, for example, comparing colours in English, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and Punjabi to discover which words are most/least similar.

3. *How languages work:* The literacy link continues here with opportunities to identify different aspects of grammar within another language that have already been learnt in English. In another activity, pupils were given examples of different texts in Portuguese ranging from football reports to horoscopes. Their task was to identify the different genres of text. In another task, pupils linked the article and the headlines from newspaper articles in Danish, Japanese, Finnish, Russian, Flemish and German.

4. *Language as code:* This presents opportunities to explore different scripts. Online translation tools enable pupils to translate short sentences into many different languages including Mandarin, Chinese and Japanese. Pupils in a couple of schools undertook a translation activity where they were presented with a number of different place names in the Cyrillic alphabet and using a support sheet they were able to translate it into the Roman alphabet, thus recognising the place name. Another task involved the months of the year in Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Greek, Hungarian and Swahili to identify different scripts.

Once pupils had undertaken a range of investigative activities, they began to encounter opportunities to become more productive in the languages. These, alongside the investigative activities, are featured on

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the project's associated website www.language-investigator.com.

One opportunity which can be easily organised is for pupils to meet a visitor who is either a native speaker or a highly competent speaker of the foreign language. This works particularly well in the context of *Thinking through languages*, as it can be prepared for prior to the visit and reviewed afterwards.

## A LANGUAGE ENCOUNTER

One key element of the project is the language encounter (or as many encounters as you can or want!). A language encounter can be made concrete in many ways. One way exploited in the Coventry project involved PGCE students' contributions. Having already worked in Warwickshire primary schools in October 2001, the activity involving PGCE MFL (secondary) trainees at the University of Warwick was expanded to include Coventry schools involved in the *Thinking through languages* project (a total of fifteen primary schools were involved on the day). The chosen day was 17 October 2002.

Prior to the day itself, and to aid with individual planning, some introductory context was supplied for the new PGCE students, including input from Ana Neofitou, teacher at Tile Hill Wood School and Language College who teaches in local primary schools as part of her role. Ana provided an excellent framework to help the students plan their tasters, by exemplifying suitable activities and outlining some principles. Trainees were also given a detailed booklet, which worked through the planning process with them, and they were expected to hand a copy of their lesson plan to the class teacher on the day. One aim in most schools was for the pupils to learn something which they could then share almost immediately in assembly.

This process was certainly a win-win situation. Schools and primary age pupils benefited, and the trainees learnt a great deal in a short time, as these comments taken from evaluations demonstrate:

> Very well-received by the children. The activities were entertaining and at the correct level. (Primary teacher)

> The whole afternoon was really great and I found myself adapting the material to suit each group. The experience gave me more confidence and allowed me to try my own style. It was also quite strange because as I was teaching, I was aware of things I should have done differently. (MFL Trainee)

> Very well-prepared. Good, clear visual resources. Nice and positive approach with the children. (Primary teacher)

> The OHP exercise was repeated with speed in assembly, which meant the pupils were really excited about showing Year 5 and 6 how quickly they could do it and how well they had remembered the names. (MFL Trainee)

> I think it's an excellent project benefiting both schools and students. (Primary teacher)

Essential elements of a language encounter (as described here):

- Meeting a native or near-native speaker of the TL.

- Some target language (e.g. numbers 1-10, colours, pets …)

- Some interaction/fun/positivity (e.g. TL words to familiar tune)

- Something to remember/take away/display

- The chance to ask questions (linguistic, cultural …)

This framework can be adapted in various ways, depending on the situations that arise and which foreign language near-native speakers become available.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The project was very successful and immensely enjoyable and feedback from head teachers has been positive:

> ... introducing 'the learning of languages' in Yrs 3/4 is important in promoting positive attitudes to languages.

> An excellent way not only of introducing MFL but also of embedding it in the primary curriculum.

> Glad that it involves all children at KS2 and that a general 'appreciation'/'awareness' of languages has been promoted, eventually leading to learning specific language skills.

The groundwork covered during this project has enabled Coventry LEA to be successful in its bid to be one of the Pathfinder LEAs for primary MFL. It is now extending its programme substantially to include a multilingual programme in Years 3 and 4, a cross-curricular programme in Year 5 (teaching new content through the medium of a foreign language) and a bridging unit of discrete language learning in Year 6. The activities and materials outlined in this article (for example, the web-based materials and the lesson templates) are proving fundamental in the development of primary MFL in Coventry.

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