

Déjà vu: Where are we with primary foreign languages?

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Foreign Language (FL) teaching, from Year 3 primary schools, has been a statutory requirement since 2014 (DfE, 2013) as part of the English National Curriculum. Primary schools may choose their own language to teach, modern or ancient, but it must be taught for progression and overwhelmingly most schools report doing this (Collen, 2020). This has had a positive impact on the inclusion of FL teaching within the curriculum. Most schools now report that they are meeting the requirement however provision is described as 'variable' (Holmes and Myles, 2019; Wardle, 2021).

Recent reports such as Language Trends Report (Collen, 2020), the White Paper: Primary Languages Policy in England (Holmes, and Myles, 2019) and A National Recovery Programme For Languages (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, 2019), show that little has changed since foreign languages were first explored in English primary schools and the same issues and challenges are presenting again and again. These well documented

issues of staff expertise, curriculum planning, time allocation, lack of CPD opportunities and transition (for further reading see: Cable et al., 2010; Driscoll et al., 2004a; Driscoll, 2014; Powell et al., 2000; Wade and Marshall., 2009;) all remain and have been exacerbated by years of austerity and high-stakes testing in other subjects.

Language Choice

Overwhelmingly, French is still the most taught language in primary schools, followed by an increasingly popular trend for teaching Spanish. German is taught in a few schools

and relatively few schools teach Chinese, Italian and Latin (Collen, 2020). Interestingly, those schools who do teach more 'difficult languages', such as Mandarin, Hebrew and Latin have been reported to take a more structured approach with pupils expected 'to do more with less' Wardle (2021).

Time

The current programme of study makes no reference to allocated teaching time. The previous entitlement in 2010 was 60 minutes per week (DfE, 2005). Currently,



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the average time reported by schools is less than 45 minutes a week, with some schools teaching more (an hour) and some less (30 minutes). Some schools do not teach languages each week, instead they 'block out' half days, per half term (Collen, 2020). This equates to just 2% of available curriculum time, which is half of the average OECD time of 4% (Holmes and Myles, 2019). In practice, it is likely to be much less. Many of these teaching slots are either shortened or removed to cover other subjects when the need arises, particularly in the lead up to SATs or other school events which take priority. When these timetabled slots do occur, not all children have access to them as many are withdrawn for intervention teaching in the core subjects (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, 2019; Tinsley and Board, 2014). This leads to an inequality in state education and denial of access to a broad and balanced curriculum for all ((All-Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, 2019). It also reveals that schools are still not aware of research on how foreign language learning can support children in learning their own language (Blondin et al., 1998; Driscoll et al., 2004b).

A lack of time inhibits the progress that pupils can make (Liddicoat et al., 2007). Ofsted noted the lack of progress in some schools when they carried out 24 foreign languages subject inspections between October 2019 and March 2020 (Wardle, 2021). As early as 2000, Curtain called for policy makers to be aware that there may be a minimum amount of foreign language

teaching and learning time to include in the curriculum. Below, this time allocation, the FL instruction would have no effect. The safeguarding of time for primary language lessons is again on the agenda as a key recommendation of the White Paper on Primary Languages Policy in England (Holmes and Myles, 2019).

Supporting Documents

Primary schools rely on the National Curriculum 2014 (DfE, 2013) when planning their lessons, however, schools also support themselves using the historical, non-statutory key policy document, the KS2 Framework for Languages (DfE, 2005), commercial schemes of work and in house units of work (Collen, 2020).

Staffing

Most schools now teach their own languages, using class teachers or other members of staff such as a Higher Level Teaching Assistants. Embedding languages into the curriculum can be easier if languages are staffed from inside the school as staff/volunteers can use incidental foreign language throughout the day. Fewer schools employ an outside agency or teacher to deliver

languages (Collen, 2020). It is likely that cuts to school funding may have decreased the employment of outside agencies, with more schools opting to resource languages teaching from their own staffing pool. The numbers of schools hosting a foreign language assistant have also dramatically dropped (Collen, 2020). It is not clear if this too is a financial issue for schools or if Brexit and the political rhetoric around immigration may have influenced the numbers languages assistants seeking employment.

Broad and Balanced Curriculum Schools are required to plan, teach and assess a broad and balanced foreign language curriculum (intentional learning through explicit teaching of phonics, vocabulary and grammar and assessment) (Ofsted, 2020). The delivery of which is an incredibly demanding task for most generalist teachers and teaching assistants. This is because very few members of staff possess a qualification in a foreign language and if so, this is likely to be at GCSE level. Primary teachers, during their Initial Teacher Education, receive little foreign language input: either



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of language or pedagogy (Holmes and Myles, 2019) Furthermore, once in post access to CPD is extremely limited (Collen, 2020). The Ofsted subject inspections, showed that some schools simply did not understand how progress in foreign language learning takes place, and schools were simply teaching lists of topic nouns and words, without linguistic progression. The most recent Language Trends (Collen, 2020) survey does not present a breakdown of the language skills reportedly taught, so it is difficult to understand if all language skills, (speaking, listening, reading and writing), are given coverage in most schools. In some schools, such as Shaftsbury Park Primary (London) who plan explicitly for the coverage of 'the 4 macro skills' this is certainly the case. However, historically, schools have concentrated their teaching on speaking and listening (Cable et al., 2010, 2012) infrequently teaching reading and writing (Cable et al., 2012). The removal of the level descriptors has also made planning for the correct expectation difficult (Holmes and Myles, 2019).

Assessment and Transition

Assessment within and of primary foreign languages is limited (Wardle, 2021). This affects how languages are delivered and taught, as well as the transition to secondary school. Without effective assessment records helping to bridge primary and secondary education, pupils may feel that they are repeating learning, leading to disengagement with the subject (Barton et al., 2009; Courtney et al., 2015; Holmes and



Myles, 2019). It seems unlikely that the government target of 75 per cent of pupils studying for a FL GCSE by 2022, and 90 per cent by 2025 will be attained. As of November 2021 only 38.7 per cent of students were entered for the EBacc in 2021, a decline in numbers since 2019 (Hallahan, 2021). Planning freedoms have resulted in schools not understanding the appropriate expectations and outcomes of key stages. This means that secondary schools receive children, into Year 7, operating at very different levels (Holmes and Myles, 2019). Holmes and Myles (2019) suggest that unless local arrangement regarding the choice of language, curriculum models and subject content are in place, transition will remain.

Two Tier Curriculum

Standardised tests have skewed how primary schools deliver the primary curriculum, having given increased weighting to those subjects which are tested. The data that these tests generated

has previously been used to convert schools to academy status (Morgan, 2015a; Morgan 2015b), trigger Ofsted visits and influence pay awards and so it is understandable that schools focus on the core subjects of English and maths. Schools in areas of socio-economic deprivation, an indicator of underachievement, may dedicate even more curriculum time to the teaching of the core subjects (Tinsley and Board, 2015). This has led to what has been described as a two-tier curriculum (Bell 2004 cited in Ward 2004), in which the core are given time, and status, while the remaining subjects are not. However, there are examples of good practice, schools which have embedded FL teaching into the wider curriculum. For example, one school teaches all years from Nursery to Year 6 Spanish which can also take a thematic approach in subjects, allowing children to use their new language skills.

The two-tier curriculum may now be under challenge. As part of the Ofsted methodology, deep dives into



individual subjects are now being used to help inspectors form judgements about the overall school curriculum. As such, all subjects in the primary curriculum could be inspected. 'Deep Dive' examples of positive practice include the teaching of foreign languages phonics, linked to reading writing and speech and curriculum which is progressive in nature, so that pupils gain in confidence and ability to manipulate language and grammar (Wardle, 2021).

The focus on all subjects, may encourage schools to invest more in their FL learning. However, while a focus has been added to all subjects, nothing has been taken away from the busy primary school curriculum, and no further resources, have been provided to primary schools. Schools are still operating in a less supportive primary FL environment than two decades ago.

Conclusion

It is great that so many primary schools are teaching FL, however the practice is varied, and not all pupils have access to foreign language education, particularly if they are from a socio-economically deprived area. Many of the issues which plague primary foreign languages are not new, and have been well documented for several decades. It is a shame that the introduction of foreign languages into the National Curriculum 2014 (DfE, 2013) did not address these. As such, it could be suggested that the current policy is not functioning (The British Academy, 2019), and perhaps a new way forward such as the National Recovery Programme for languages (All Party Parliamentary Group, 2019) implemented.

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Pen Portrait

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- ** Further reading for examples of good practice and Ofsted 'deep dive' feedback to individual schools can be found at:
- RiPL website (Research in Primary Languages: <https://ripl.uk/>)
 - Ofsted Curriculum research review series: languages <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-research-review-series-languages/curriculum-research-review-series-languages>
 - Ofsted reports <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/> of the 24 'deep dive' schools: [Languages in outstanding primary schools](https://www.blog.gov.uk/2021/05/04/languages-in-outstanding-primary-schools/) - Ofsted: schools, early years, further education and skills (blog.gov.uk)

