

## **The Problem with Languages...**

**Market forces are giving us a clear message about post-primary provision in modern languages. We are facing a crisis.**

**This happens coincidentally as we start to make a major inroads in developing innovative approaches to modern languages teaching in Primary Schools.**

**Meanwhile, the revision of the Key Stage 3 Curriculum currently provides educational leaders a golden opportunity to re-think and re-structure curricular provision.**

**The following article appeared in a recent edition of *Term Talk* and is published on NEELB's Web site. It is aimed at stimulating creative responses to the growing crisis in modern languages provision, in Post Primary Schools.**

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21<sup>st</sup> February 2008

## **The Problem with Languages...**

***They really don't fit into the school curriculum!***

At least, not within the current secondary school framework... Pupils who are voting with their feet in hundreds of thousands are giving us this message. Despite twenty years of our best (and very expensive!) collective efforts, GCSE numbers have fallen to below their 1988 level - and are sinking fast. Curriculum reform and re-reform have simply not had the effects we wanted. It is surely time for a radical review and a totally new direction.

### **The Real Thing**

Memories of school hockey are very vivid for me. Wednesday afternoons, running round the pitch a few times; then skills-practice: dribbling the ball around skittles; practising passes in pairs or threes. We put up with this routine because of the prospects of a match. After about twenty minutes some boy would ask the inevitable: "Sir, can we play a game?" Without the excitement of match prospects we would all soon have absconded. A game against our school mates was good; Saturday mornings against other schools, even better. The real thing. *Sine qua non*.

For post-primary language teachers within the present system it is nearly impossible in MFL classes to do other than spend most of our time with pupils in *practice* for "the real thing". The new practical focus of the 1988 GCSE was meant to be the salvation of languages in the UK. But the central principle of 20 years of transactional GCSE – "*Imagine you are in France. This is the language and skills you will need*" – has proved very tenuous as a motivation to endure five years of drill. It is just not working for the majority of our pupils.

Healthy human beings enjoy using language. We are equipped genetically to use it: purposefully, meaningfully, creatively and autonomously. Teachers may argue that the present syllabuses and course materials promote a communicative approach. So why don't more pupils experience this? In reality, most of what we are foisting on our pupils under the heading of communication is in fact just *preparation for* communication... somewhere, some time. There is very little real application.

## Exceptions

There is some very good practice in schools by individual teachers, able to import intrinsic interest into classroom activities, so that now and then, the illusion works: the inauthenticity is buried by a tacit suspension of disbelief; pupils become so engaged in winning a point, or solving an information gap, that they go along with the silliness (let's face it!) of using a foreign language to interact with fellow native English speakers crammed together in a UK classroom.

But within the current secondary school system there is only so far we can go with this. And it is not nearly far enough.

Things are different, thankfully, in Primary Schools where there is still more freedom to have fun with languages, concentrating on pupil engagement through intrinsic motivation, rather than on covering some syllabus. It is with alarm however that I see mounting pressure on primary schools to follow official schemes of work that are increasingly like a watered-down version of Key Stage 3. Motivation for languages among younger pupils is generally very high. We have to do all we can to ensure it stays that way.

Contact with native speakers by e-mail or through school exchanges will promote pupil engagement. We have not institutionalised this, though, and such practice remains the exception in our secondary schools' provision for language learning. Integrative motivation has long been recognised hugely important in language learning dynamics; yet it is precisely this area of motivation that is desperately underdeveloped in Anglophone countries. This deficit needs to be addressed. Spanish alone among the main European languages has benefited from its greater inherent capacity at present to inspire integrative motivation.

A significant minority of our pupils enjoy studying language in a more abstract, reflective way. They can maintain their motivation to work with a language even at a distance. The present secondary school arrangements actually suit these pupils and many of them progress well, especially in Grammar Schools.

Then there are pupils whose main motivation is academic success, pure and simple. They will apply themselves assiduously to any course of study. Again, Grammar Schools have the largest share of this group. But when these pupils have a choice, do they choose GCSE French, or something they perceive as more useful and more interesting?

**Are other subjects so interesting compared to languages?**

As things stand - with the above exceptions - *yes!* Languages differ radically from other subjects in the curriculum. Those subjects can ultimately be adapted to offer content and skills relevant enough to sustain pupils' attention over the long-haul of Key Stages 3 and 4. What can we offer in MFL? Occasionally, pupils will learn an interesting fact or two about a target-language country. But for the most part, actual cognitive content is of the type:

You can say *à la gare*; but *à* + *le* becomes *au*, so that you have to say  
*au supermarché*.

Not very exciting for a teenager engrossed in the pains and pleasures of self-discovery in a world informed and driven at every turn by the potential of the acceleratingly integrative technologies of a post-modern, information-based era – is it? And skills development under current MFL arrangements normally just amounts to extended practice for some future scenario - a whole lifetime away - and can seem equally irrelevant.

I think that arguing the needs of business and industry for future linguists will also not wash. This is an argument that makes sense to politicians. Less than half a percent of our teenagers will see this as an issue; even fewer will care. Let's not waste time and public money on campaigns for "applied" languages. Languages are *applied* when you are telling your host French family that you really would prefer cold milk with your tea; or find yourself caught up in the magic of Cologne Christmas markets, or gleefully spending your Euros in the Corte Inglés.

**What do we do?**

Despite some success stories, such as the recent boom in Spanish, and the blossoming of languages in Primary Schools, it is generally acknowledged that languages in the UK are facing a crisis. Reversing national policy and compelling people to sit GCSEs in languages - as advocated by some - will not create a generation of linguists. It certainly won't produce lovers of language.

We urgently need to make fundamental changes in our provision. Here are my proposals for kick-starting a new approach.

- Schools which still force pupils to do a GCSE in a language should phase out this practice as soon as possible. We have nothing to fear in the long-term from market forces – and much to learn.
- De-regulate Key Stage 3 for languages. The Government was right to do so at Key Stage 4. We should find the courage to take this next step.
- Instead of weekly timetabled classes in Key Stage 3, language experiences could be offered as a series of clubs or intensive events. During two or three special “Language Weeks”, staggered for each year group, pupils’ normal timetables would be suspended and they would only do MFL work. A menu of mini-modules could involve pupils in cookery; producing a foreign language drama; ICT based project work; music and poetry workshops.
- Pupil groups should be no larger than 15. We cannot develop oral skills properly with classes of thirty in busy periods of thirty five minutes. This industrial model may work for other subjects but it is desperately in need of replacement for language studies.
- Pupils should where possible experience a range of languages for varying lengths of time. It is increasingly absurd in this 21<sup>st</sup> century to force pupils to spend all their learning time focused on one language.
- Schools should budget to ensure that at least once in Key Stage 3, every pupil undertakes a field trip to a target-language region. Much useful language work could be done in preparation for this event and after it. A greater emphasis than at present should be placed on knowledge of target-language regions.
- Pupils could also engage in intensive residential language weekends in youth centres (or similar) nearer to home. They would be taught the language they need to be able to “play the game” of avoiding English for as long as possible. Teachers should get time off *in lieu* for involvement in these events.
- Teachers should be allowed *very* substantial non-contact time for developing school links; applying for EU project funding; and managing exchange programmes with partner schools. Involvement in these learning events should become the norm not the exception, especially for Key Stage 4 and Sixth Form pupils. In view of child safety issues, teachers should have sufficient non-contact time and financial support to pre-inspect foreign venues and meet host families, at least on a sampling basis.
- Explore the potential for setting up video-conferencing links. Much useful language work can focus on the prospect of seeing and talking to foreign peers using this medium.
- For pupils wanting to proceed to a more traditional course with accreditation, preparatory classes (e.g. Year 10) would give them a taster for what is involved in following a more rigid, linear syllabus. There will always be a significant number of pupils who thrive on this sort of diet. I do not agree, however, that for the sake of this minority, the GCSE syllabus should be the dominant guiding principle for 3-5 years of unappealing topic-based drill to be endured by everyone else.

## **Time for Change**

The above pointers are suggestions to stimulate further *thinking outside the box* - rather than a precisely constructed manifesto for secondary school language teaching.

Something is wrong with our present framework; the statistics and general *malaise* are telling us so. Merely trying to adjust the current system (again), in my view, is not going to fix it. I want to encourage educational leaders to try creative and radical new approaches.

Whatever we do, let's have the courage to do it differently. We cannot afford another re-hash of irretrievably outdated models.

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