



International Learning and Research Centre

## Languages and Literacy

### Teacher Perspectives on Learning from the Project



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### BACKGROUND

The Languages and Literacy Project (2001 –2004), co-ordinated by the International Learning and Research Centre, identified and developed common approaches to the teaching and learning of first and second language through a three year programme of school-based research and enquiry.

### INTRODUCTION

As an integral part of the Languages and Literacy project, pupil surveys have been conducted over a 3 year period to investigate pupils' knowledge, experience, linguistic competencies and responses to the introduction of a modern foreign language into the primary curriculum. This piece of research completes the Year 7 Pupil Survey<sup>1</sup> which has been conducted in two phases by colleagues from the University of the West of England.

Teachers from five primary schools, where the former pupils had been involved in the surveys, were interviewed by a Headteacher Researcher from the International Learning and Research Centre (*A list of schools involved is attached as Appendix 1 and the schedule of questions that were used in these interviews is attached as Appendix 2*)

The report's main findings capture teacher perceptions of their own and their pupils' learning from the project. The findings serve to add a further dimension to the pupil surveys, providing the research team with a deeper understanding of the pupils' experience of the introduction of modern foreign languages into the primary curriculum.

The co-operation of the teachers taking part in the interviews is much appreciated.



CfBT contributes funding to the Languages and Literacy Project

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<sup>1</sup> Pupil Survey September 2003  
Pupil Survey June 2004

## SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS

- Teachers employ common approaches to teaching and learning in first and second language work. These require children to access prior learning and apply common cognitive strategies to a wide range of speaking and listening, reading and writing activities.
- An emphasis on the transference of common skills from first to second language learning has provided the non-specialist teacher with an effective starting point for teaching a modern foreign language at primary level.
- Children's awareness of a common approach to language learning is perceived by some teachers to be 'age dependent.' Others recognise the value of explicitly teaching learning strategies, thereby developing children's metalingusitic awareness from an early age.
- In all the schools visited an integrated, cross-curricular approach to language teaching had been successfully achieved through rigorous planning at whole school level.
- Active learning approaches underpin teachers' practice, with planned sequences moving from oral to written responses. Such approaches foster high levels of pupil motivation and engagement across all groups of pupils, including boys and lower achievers.
- Teachers provide stimulating and effective contexts for early foreign language learning
- When rooted in strong cultural contexts, early foreign language learning was seen to contribute to children's sense of a wider community. It was strongly felt that the power of language learning as a vehicle for learning about citizenship could not be underestimated
- The vision and commitment of school leaders to early foreign language learning is believed to be a vital ingredient in shaping, extending and sustaining practice.

### **Attitudes and Motivation**

Teachers were in favour of teaching a modern foreign language at primary level believing there to be several advantages. They echoed Pupil Survey findings that there was a high enjoyment factor to early language learning that positively contributed to children's confidence and sense of self and others. This often led to an element of 'risk taking' as pupils felt empowered to 'have a go' and apply their prior learning to new contexts. Teachers cited the emphasis on active learning approaches in oral contexts as being significant in the development of high levels of pupil engagement. Significantly, boys and lower achievers were seen to favour visual and kinaesthetic approaches to language learning and teachers reported that their participation in lessons and achievement of learning objectives was comparable to that of the other children. In view of this, early language learning was seen as a great 'leveller.'

Teachers involved in the project commented on the 'fun' nature of their French lessons and their enjoyment of teaching such lessons was clearly evident. Two of the teachers commented that their practice in first language teaching had improved since involvement in the project. Through their experience of planning structured speaking and listening tasks in French, these teachers had acquired a deeper knowledge and understanding of the value of structured oracy work as a precursor to developing children's competence in reading and writing. They had been further inspired by the research dimension of the project and felt 'free to explore' learning in new, creative contexts.

### **Creating an effective context for language learning**

Teachers considered that a modern foreign language is most effectively taught when interwoven with cultural aspects. French themed weeks, a celebration of European Languages Day<sup>2</sup> and the culmination of language work in a Year 6 study visit to Normandy were all cited as examples of successful practice promoting high levels of pupil interest and motivation.

Teachers believed that the provision of native speakers through the International Learning and Research Centre had made a significant contribution to successful learning. It was felt that both French trainee teachers and language assistants had given a high profile to language teaching, providing effective role models for correct pronunciation and contributing to children's cultural knowledge and understanding of France.

Teachers spoke about how involvement in the Lingua Project<sup>3</sup> had given their pupils the opportunity of writing to and e-mailing partner schools in France and Italy. They felt that this was highly motivational for both themselves and their pupils, representing learning in real contexts. Tasks had often incorporated a strong cultural dimension and naturally had a clear purpose and audience.

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<sup>2</sup> European Languages Day designated as an annual event by the Council of Europe

<sup>3</sup> EFLL and ICT transnational project, Socrates Action: Lingua 2

*'It is important that languages are not taught in isolation. We need to help children to develop awareness that there are other languages and that people take a pride in them. The more we learn about each other, all the better for future citizenship.*

*My children have benefited enormously from direct contact with their counterparts in France, Norway and Malta.*

*Year 6 teacher*

Rooted in a strong cultural context, language teaching was seen to positively contribute to the development of children's sense of the wider community. Through a study of similarities and differences, teachers believed it fostered a sense of appreciation of diversity whilst promoting an understanding of European citizenship. It was strongly felt that the power of language teaching as a vehicle for learning about citizenship could not be underestimated. This resonates with findings from the Pupil Survey which concluded that children, as a result of their experiences, held a more international, inclusive view of the world.

### **Whole School Planning and Organisation**

***In all the schools visited an integrated, cross-curricular approach to language teaching had been successfully achieved through rigorous planning at whole school level.***

Thematic QCA<sup>4</sup> units were incorporated into each school's curriculum framework, ensuring a strong cross curricular dimension to language learning. In one school, coverage of QCA units culminated in a story focus where key skills were consolidated. A range of dual language big books had been purchased to support this approach.

There were similarities and differences in relation to how French provision was organised in each of the schools. In upper Key Stage 2 structured French lessons were built into weekly or fortnightly timetables, whereas a Key Stage 1 model favoured a 'carousel' activity approach where French was offered as an enrichment activity. Collaborative planning approaches were evident where teachers in parallel year groups took responsibility for translating objectives into activities and monitoring progress and standards against level descriptors.

In all of the schools French was incorporated into routines throughout the day and across the curriculum. Teachers felt that this approach instilled confidence and through repetition helped children to internalise key words and phrases used for early conversational French.

When assessing progress in early language learning all teachers use formative assessment during oral work to ascertain individual levels of confidence and competence. In one school, the QCA level descriptors were considered helpful as a tool for coordinators to monitor coverage of learning objectives and levels of achievement by the end of Key Stage 2. Another school used the CiLT Portfolio<sup>5</sup> through conferencing with Year 6 pupils during the summer

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<sup>4</sup> Modern Foreign Languages: A scheme of work for Key Stage 2 (QCA)

<sup>5</sup> My Languages Portfolio (CiLT)

term to record individual progress. All teachers favoured a model of self-assessment with the inclusion of ‘can do’ statements, recognising that such an approach casts a ‘positive spin’ on children’s achievements; representing ‘building blocks’ on which they can develop ‘a life long learning skill.’

Evidence of interest and commitment from the whole school community was demonstrated in all of the project schools. In one school this had been achieved through careful planning over a six year period.

*‘Work started on a small scale 6 years ago to ensure French provision in all classes. Upper Key Stage 2 was our initial focus. Structured French lessons are now built into a fortnightly timetable across the Key Stages. We have a team planning approach whereby one of the parallel year group teachers takes responsibility for identifying suitable learning objectives and matching these to the level descriptors... When we recruit new staff it is our policy to ensure that they have an interest and enthusiasm for early language learning.’*

#### ***The significance of parental involvement....***

Two of the teachers noted the high level of interest and involvement of parents in this area of learning and felt this was significant in shaping and extending the language learning programme in their school contexts.

***Clearly the vision and commitment of school leaders is a vital ingredient in developing and shaping successful practice in this field of learning. A strategy to develop confidence and skills across the whole school community addresses the key issue of sustainability and highlights the strength of a generalist model, whereby all staff feel confident to access second language learning and teaching, albeit at a level of partial competence. This will doubtlessly be of benefit to all schools in the implementation of the National Languages Strategy.<sup>6</sup>***

#### ***Language rich classrooms.....***

Within stimulating, creative and cross curricular contexts for language learning, teachers in the study were able to describe a range of effective teaching approaches. It was evident that these approaches were characteristic of language rich classrooms where a high level of verbal exchange and interaction was encouraged and seen as a valuable and essential element of any teaching or learning sequence. Displays of work, the provision of second language texts and the availability of a range of language support materials for independent use confirmed this.

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<sup>6</sup> Languages for All: Languages for Life (DfES)

**Interestingly, many of their examples demonstrated a common approach between first and second language teaching and learning.** These examples, and the extent to which children are able to apply common cognitive strategies when tackling unknown language structures and vocabulary, are explored below.

### **Active Learning Approaches in Oral Contexts**

With the introduction of new vocabulary and phrases in a second language, teachers favoured an immersion model of learning where words and phrases are internalised through imitation and repetition. They cite kinaesthetic approaches to learning as particularly successful in enabling children to acquire new language structures. During speaking and listening activities, teachers model how to match a physical action to a stress pattern or intonation.

Teachers identified that pupils follow by imitation initially, but later create their own actions. This would suggest that children recognise that actions help them to memorise new phrases and apply this understanding in new contexts.

Teachers recognise that learning at this stage is enhanced by role-play where children actively use the language in context. They perceive that the collaborative nature of this learning provides a high enjoyment factor for the children and it is therefore considered to be an important feature in their approach to teaching another language.

*‘When introducing new language it is vital to include a lot of listening and responding and speaking and responding activities. Children are encouraged to actively use the language...they must have an opportunity to play with the language at this stage.’*

*Year 2 teacher*

### ***Storytelling.....***

Through involvement in the Languages and Literacy Storymaking research project<sup>7</sup>, teachers recognised the power of storytelling as a vehicle for second language acquisition. Learning the story of the ‘Three Billy Goats Gruff’ in French a Year 6 teacher reported how rapidly her class acquired new vocabulary and phrases by active listening and imitation. Although unable to provide a word by word translation of the text, pupils demonstrated confidence and interest in the language and were motivated by their successes. A collaborative presentation of their work through role-play had enhanced both the quality and the profile of their work.

As demonstrated by findings from the Storymaking project, it would appear that auditory learning, characterised by repetition and the inclusion of repeated phrases, has been key in the acquisition of new knowledge. The use of known traditional tales is clearly significant, enabling children to make learning connections with their prior knowledge and understanding of story. A further investigation into the application of this approach to foreign language learning, both in oral and written forms, warrants further investigation.

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<sup>7</sup> Story Making Strand: a small scale project within the overall Languages and Literacy Project

## Approaches to Reading

Following immersion in new language structures in oral contexts, teachers have observed children tackling second language text with confidence and enthusiasm. In one school, a range of big books has been selected to provide consolidation of vocabulary work covered from the QCA units. Pupils' knowledge of the text is initially built through oral exchange and role-play work and culminates when the teacher introduces written text.

*'The story 'Plic, plic, tombe la pluie' provides a culmination of a lot of the weather and clothes work we've done. As well as developing children's knowledge of text, well chosen big books consolidate new vocabulary and topics and themes that have been covered.'*

*Year 2 teacher*

Three of the teachers interviewed cite the successful application of the 'searchlights model'<sup>8</sup> to unknown text. They recognise that teacher modelling of these reading strategies is fundamental to an effective teaching sequence. Examples of practice demonstrate that children are applying common cognitive strategies to unfamiliar second language texts.

*'I remind my children to look at all the clues..... they enjoy being reading detectives'*

*Year 2 teacher*

*'Children now have a greater awareness of the different forms of writing. When they look at a new second language text for the first time they recognise its shape and layout. This gives them the confidence to have a go.'*

*Year 5 teacher*

An analysis of these strategies suggests there is a natural developmental order, indicating a 'top down' processing model where children initially set out to comprehend the text as a whole prior to examining its part. Teachers made reference to the following strategies used by their pupils to 'unravel' second language texts:

### ➤ Text organisation and layout

Prior to accessing the text at word level it was evident that pupils were encouraged to look at text layout to make sense of its form and genre. For example, a Year 2 teacher scribed the

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<sup>8</sup> NLS searchlights model described in Developing Early Writing

ideas for a diary of a princess in French. Having studied diaries across the curriculum, the children were able to recall key features regarding layout and language usage.

➤ Use of pictures to support comprehension

Known traditional stories were felt to be a powerful tool for language learning and when presented in big book formats provided opportunities for teachers to model how picture clues could aid comprehension of second language text.

➤ Context clues

One teacher utilised a 'reading on' strategy herself when accessing unfamiliar text and modelled this with her class to demonstrate the effectiveness of using context cues to decipher meaning.

➤ Recognition of familiar words (cognates)

Another teacher described how her pupils, as reading detectives, 'spotted' smaller frequently used words in the text such as 'et' and 'dit' and by approximation asked whether these would translate as 'and', 'if' or 'said.' Children also identified words that looked like English words, such as 'bleu' and 'sport.' The identification of cognates in this way suggests the transference of knowledge from first to second language learning.

➤ Use of French dictionaries to find the meaning of unknown words

➤ Literal translation of text leading to discussion of grammatical differences

A literal translation of second language text had led to an interesting discussion about word order in one Year 5 class. The teacher felt that such incidental learning opportunities served to develop children's grammatical knowledge and understanding of both the French and English language.

### **Approaches to Writing**

Teachers cited fewer examples of practice in relation to writing. It was evident that written tasks had been introduced in two main contexts, firstly where they had emerged from oral work and secondly where the task had a clear purpose and audience, this most often being in the form of letter writing or e-mailing to children in a partner European school.

When part of a planned sequence emerging from work in an oral context, teacher modelling of key words and phrases was successfully used to introduce children to writing in another language. In one Year 6 class, pupils were introduced to the French alphabet through song, rhyme and actions. Interactive whole class activities using whiteboards were believed to be an effective way into learning about writing in an additional language. Teachers reported that their pupils found this approach non-threatening and when combined with games such as 'Letter Bingo' were motivated to write letters and build French words with confidence and enthusiasm.

When modelling the spelling of new words during a whole class shared writing activity the teacher made explicit reference to phonemes. Another teacher favoured a whole word approach, reluctant to explore the French phonetic system with her pupils at such an early age.

A further example of practice showed that when writing in a second language, a group of Year 6 children initially copied words and phrases from their teacher onto shared white boards. Working with a talk partner, they were then required to ‘innovate their sentences’ to make them applicable to the context.

*‘The teaching sequence started with lots of speaking and listening to build confidence and encourage the children to say and pronounce the French sentences correctly. Once immersed in the language, children were shown the words and encouraged to read and then write them down on their own white boards. Variations were gradually introduced as children explored changing their sentences to find out more information about each other:  
What is your name? (formal and informal)  
What is his name?  
What is her name?  
What is your sister’s/ brother’s/mother’s/ father’s name?’*

In all classes it was evident that writing opportunities were planned as an integral part of role-play activities. In one classroom the setting up of a French café required pupils to consider writing in a variety of forms, including signs, menus, recipes, dinner bookings and food orders. This activity provided a clear purpose and motivation for writing. The children referred to word lists and sentence starters provided by the teacher and were observed utilising French dictionaries to extend their repertoire of words that were subsequently applied in oral and written contexts.

All teachers cited examples of their pupils writing letters and/or e-mails to their French counterparts. Again, writing was modelled by the teachers through demonstration and the use of sentence starters and writing frames. As e-mail links developed, teachers noted that their pupils became more confident, wishing to include finer detail in their communications with partner schools.

In one Year 5 class this resulted in more incidental teaching of new words and phrases as they were requested by individual children. This enabled a differentiated and more personalised approach to language learning in a small group context.

Teachers recognised that pupils were more likely to extend their own learning when using writing to communicate with a real audience. They also acknowledged the potential of e-communication to build on children’s interest and motivation to develop their second language writing skills in this way.

### ***Teachers’ perceptions of pupils’ levels of awareness of a common approach***

Teachers were questioned as to whether they believed their pupils would be **aware** of common approaches to language learning. From the many examples of practice cited above it was evident that common approaches were being employed, but a key finding from the Pupil

Survey that ‘most pupils were unaware of common approaches used in their literacy and French lessons’ required further exploration.

As is evident from the following quotations, discussion about the value of encouraging pupils to identify common language learning strategies highlighted a range of teacher views and expectations:

*‘I believe that children make their own learning connections and when they experience success with one learning strategy will confidently apply it in a new context.’*

*‘Children remember the doing, not the reason why. I wonder if it is a maturity issue.’*

*‘This would benefit pupils in upper Key Stage 2 and complement L1 teaching with its increased emphasis on sharing and reviewing learning intentions with the children.’*

*‘If children can pick up these strategies now, they can be applied to any language they meet at secondary level.’*

On further questioning it was interesting to find that two teachers felt such a level of dialogue was helpful with upper key stage two pupils and complemented the school’s focus on ‘learning to learn.’ By highlighting effective language learning strategies through first and second language teaching, Year 6 pupils in a large suburban primary school were helped to tackle a German project<sup>9</sup> with confidence, enthusiasm and understanding. By accessing their prior knowledge about language (English and French) the teacher believed that these children were given the confidence and a ‘route’ into a new language.

### ***In conclusion.....***

It is evident that teachers, pupils and indeed whole school communities have greatly benefited from involvement in the project. Inspired by the high levels of motivation and engagement of their pupils, teachers have felt empowered to research and develop creative contexts for language learning across the curriculum. A significant finding has been teachers’ awareness of the central role that languages teaching has in the development of children’s sense of identity and the potential it holds for teaching about citizenship at primary level.

Commitment to a shared vision for languages has been recognised as a key consideration for all schools in the development of a whole school strategy and issues of capacity building and sustainability continue to be addressed to ensure the future success of early language learning. Whole school strategies adopted by the project schools, appear to be characterised by a generalist model of practice whereby all teachers understand and take responsibility for the learning languages agenda. This is indeed a powerful model.

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<sup>9</sup> The Anglo-German pilot curriculum project 2003

**An emphasis on the transference of common approaches to learning languages has clearly provided the non-specialist teacher with an effective starting point. Confident in their teaching and understanding of English, primary teachers have drawn on their repertoire of successful learning strategies and applied them to a second language context. Many of the examples of practice cited in this report highlight the success and effectiveness of such an approach.**

With teachers' growing knowledge and awareness of the value of applying common cognitive strategies to language learning, it would seem to follow that children interviewed in the Pupil Survey would have showed an awareness of these common approaches. However, a key finding from the study indicated that many pupils were **unaware** of common approaches employed in their English and French lessons.

On reflection, it must be asked whether such an apparent mismatch has arisen due to teachers missing a vital opportunity to engage in a dialogue with their pupils about **how** they learn a language, i.e. to discuss what these common strategies look like. As indicated earlier on in this report, teachers held a range of views on this issue, believing this approach to be more relevant for older primary pupils. Further lines of enquiry as to whether such instruction is age dependent and would in fact enhance early language learning certainly warrant more detailed study. The following hypothesis may be useful in shaping the nature of such an investigation:

'If a future model of multilinguistic learning at primary level is dependent on the development of children's metacognitive understanding of language learning, more explicit teaching of language learning strategies will be needed from an early age. In this way children will be equipped with a 'language learning toolkit' that can be utilised and developed in relation to any language they encounter in later life.'

This report complements the Pupil Survey providing the research team with a deeper understanding of pupils' experience of the introduction of modern foreign languages into the primary curriculum. Findings indicate that children have been exposed to a wide range of language learning experiences in a primary context. The quality and richness of these experiences are a credit to the commitment, enthusiasm and developing expertise of all teachers involved in the project.

**Nicola Theobald  
Headteacher Researcher  
2004**

**Teachers from the following schools  
contributed to this report**

Barrs Court Primary School

Cherry Garden Primary School

Longwell Green Primary School

Redfield Edge Primary School

St Anne's CE Primary School

## Languages and Literacy: Teacher Perspectives Questions for Teacher Interviews

- What do **you / your pupils** believe to be the benefits of foreign language learning at primary level?
- How did you approach planning for teaching and learning in L2?  
*(Daily routines, study units linked to QCA, En/Literacy links, cross-curricular dimensions)*
- Were you using common approaches when **teaching** English/literacy and French?

Please give examples of successful practice for each aspect:

- **Speaking and Listening**
- **Reading**
- **Writing**

From these examples can you identify the **methodology / teaching sequences** that were most successful.

Was there evidence that children were applying common cognitive strategies when tackling new language structures and vocabulary?  
*(To gather information regarding children's metacognitive awareness and the impact this has on their perceptions of themselves as language learners in the widest sense)*

Do you think children were **aware** of these common approaches?

- How else did you provide an effective context for early foreign language learning?  
*(Classroom environment, cultural context, cross curricular dimensions)*
- What impact does early foreign language learning have on pupil motivation? *(boys, more able/less able)*
- How did you assess children's knowledge/competencies?
- What constraints do you perceive there to be when introducing and developing early foreign language learning at primary level?
- Any further comments

### **About the International Learning and Research Centre**

The International Learning and Research Centre is an innovation and development centre which aims to promote school-based research and enquiry through a research and development strategy which includes learning from international contexts. It promotes innovation through local, regional, national and international projects which provide the focus for school-based research and enquiry. The research investigations undertaken support teachers to reflect on, analyse and learn from their own practice and the practice of others. By so doing they are refreshed as professionals, take a lead in their own learning and increase the knowledge and understanding of how to transform practice in their schools. Through these research activities the Centre enables teachers to be active, contributing members of a learning community.