



Regular updates on the campaign for languages

Making an early start

Nikki Perry on the challenges of introducing language learning into primary schools

On 10 June, the Government announced reforms to make languages compulsory from the age of 7. The Speak to the future (STF) campaign believes a focus on early language learning will bring about a step change in the language competency of the country and welcomes the Government's plans. While considerable challenges lie ahead, there are firm foundations, laid over the last eight years, on which to build.

'Everyone knows that with languages the earlier you start, the easier they are.' This, in a speech given to the University of Oxford by Tony Blair, soon after he became Prime Minister, signalled the development of languages in primary schools. The publication of the National Languages Strategy in December 2002 started to make language learning in primary schools a reality, and those schools already teaching languages reported that 'pupils who start language learning earlier are generally more receptive to learning languages and more motivated. Early language learning can reinforce literacy skills and nurture enthusiasm that is carried on into secondary school.'¹

How disappointed were those working to make this a reality when the proposed new primary curriculum, which would have made languages statutory, was thrown out as the coalition government took office in May 2010. The apparent end of central Government backing for primary languages also meant the end of local, tailored support, as the 150 or so local authority posts were axed and the army of consultants disappeared.

There had been great enthusiasm for the initiative, which was hugely successful: 92 percent of primary schools offered at least one language at Key Stage 2 (KS2; ages 7-11) and 69 percent offered languages to all four KS2 year groups.² In 2011, Ofsted judged the overall effectiveness of primary languages to be 'good' or better in two thirds of schools.



GAME CHANGER: *Michael Gove joins a French lesson at Ashlands Primary School*

considerable cognitive benefits for language learning across the whole of KS2 (from age 7).

We welcome the plans to make languages a requirement of the primary curriculum throughout KS2, starting in 2014. Indeed we believe that the government should lower the age of beginning to learn a language to 5, as suggested by Michael Gove in an interview on the eve of the 2011 Conservative Party Conference, and expect that many schools will take this approach.

In spite of the hiatus, a strong, trained workforce is in place. Up to 2011, when the programme was abandoned, approximately 6,000 teachers were trained as primary specialists in specially developed initial teacher training programmes.⁵ These teachers, who are still in our schools, can deliver lessons to their own and other classes from the earliest stages, monitor progress across the school, and provide professional development for their generalist colleagues.

Initially, the shortage of well qualified teachers with appropriate subject knowledge and pedagogic skill to teach young learners effectively presented a significant challenge for head teachers, governors and parents. However, good progress was made and, as high-quality language and methodology programmes were developed, head teachers enabled staff who lacked the confidence and/or competence to teach a language, to attend a range of training sessions aimed at all ability levels. Funding from agencies such as the British Council allowed staff to visit countries where the foreign language is spoken to enhance their linguistic skills and provide a rich cultural competence.

In the last decade, many countries around the world have lowered the age at which language learning begins. The Eurydice 'Key

The UK and Slovakia were the only countries that did not introduce compulsory languages in primary school

Primary teachers were developing their expertise, enjoying learning languages themselves, and becoming more confident. Head teachers were committing to languages and, in addition to their intrinsic value, they began to see them as broadening and enriching the wider curriculum. They also perceived languages as making a substantial contribution to children's personal, social and (English) literacy development.³ Finally, provision was becoming sustainable.

The Expert Panel that recently reviewed the National Curriculum had recognised the 'importance of modern foreign languages' and recommended that language learning should be part of the new curriculum in Upper Key Stage 2 (from age 9). STF published a response⁴ to the Expert Panel's report, putting forward a range of arguments, including



Data on Teaching Languages in Europe' (2008) gathered information from 30 countries, and found that the UK and Slovakia were the only countries that did not introduce compulsory foreign language learning in the primary school. In Singapore, languages are introduced from the first year of primary education and a large proportion of curriculum time (31 percent) is designated to foreign language learning. High performing countries see languages as a key part of the primary curriculum and so must the UK.

On behalf of STF, I am working with experienced colleagues from the languages community to ensure 'a coherent experience of languages for all children in primary school'. While we are extremely encouraged by the planned reforms, we do not underestimate the challenges in re-establishing the position of language learning at the heart of the primary school experience, and will continue to advise Government on policy and ensure that delivery is supported by Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and professional development programmes over the coming years.

Notes

1 Languages for All: Languages for life. The National Languages Strategy, December 2002

2 NFER (National Foundation for Educational Research), 2009

3 Primary Modern Languages: Language learning at Key Stage 2, a longitudinal study, January 2010, the Open University, Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Southampton, commissioned by DCSF (Department for Children Schools and Families)

4 The STF view on teaching primary languages across the whole of Key Stage 2: http://speaktothefuture.org/files/downloads/STF_Primary_View_KS2_May_2012_final_version.pdf

5 Nunn, J, 2010, Training and Development Agency

FIND OUT MORE

For the latest about the campaign for languages, or to get involved, visit www.speaktothefuture.org. We're also on Twitter @speak2future, Facebook (www.fb.com/speaktothefuture) and LinkedIn – search in 'groups' for 'Speak to the future'.



On the campaign trail

Dominic Luddy looks at recent developments

We are delighted to have launched our new website at www.speaktothefuture.org. It is taking the campaign to the next level, making it easy for visitors to tell others about the cause on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn, and to find ideas and tools to convince the wider public of the importance of languages. We are also profiling individuals who are speaking out for languages – actor Larry Lamb and Richard Hardie of UBS, a CIOL Fellow and leader of our business lobby, to name but two.

We are spending time talking to schools, most recently the Anglo-European School at Ingatestone in Essex, whose students are keen to help in getting the message across to their peers. It was great to hear about two of their students competing in the recent Turkish Olympiad, singing songs and

reading poems in the language. We want to feature inspiring individuals and projects just like these on our site.

As well as publishing a response to the Expert Panel's recommendations on the National Curriculum, Teresa Tinsley, of Alcantara Communications, wrote on behalf of the campaign to *The Express* newspaper to voice concern over their article of 15 April, 'We Pay Tutors to Teach Immigrants their own Language'. More to come in our next update, as Dr Terry Lamb introduces Objective 1 of the campaign: 'Every language should be valued as an asset'.

INSPIRING

Pupils from the Anglo-European School in Essex compete in the Turkish Olympiad