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Valuing languages from an early age

There is a long tradition of successful language learning in the UK. Unfortunately it has not been available to everyone. Language learning has been and in some respects still is a pursuit of the elite. That is why the introduction of languages into our primary schools has been such an important initiative. It is only when every child has a rich experience of languages from an early age that there will be a “level playing field” for language learners. Only then will we be able to rectify some of the current fault lines in our language provision. Achieving this goal will require us to build on progress made between 2003 and 2011 – in curricular development, teacher training and resource provision. It will also require a clearer understanding of the specificity of early language learning, and the potent links between the acquisition of a new language and the child's first language, both English and the many other languages now spoken in our community.

It may seem counter-intuitive – even perverse – to claim any success for language learning in what seems by most measures to be an incorrigibly monolingual country. Certainly hardly a week goes by without an example of blatant or more often unthinking Anglo-centrism in our media – in the quality as well as the popular press. Why indeed is the British Council concerned with multilingualism – does it mean that the battle for language hegemony has been won? Perhaps not, but for sure it is now accepted wisdom that England, indeed the whole UK, is a dunce in the languages classroom. Any objective measure, such as the Eurobarometer surveys, and doubtless the forthcoming European Indicator, would seem to confirm this.

Clearly the role of English as a “hypercentral” language has something to do with this apparent lack of linguistic progress among its native speakers. There cannot be any other reasonable explanation for endemic monolingualism. Unless of course we share Milton's view about the inherent linguistic disabilities of the English:

For we **Englishmen** being far northerly, do not open our mouths in the cold air, wide enough to grace a southern tongue; but are observed by all other nations to speak exceeding close and inward: So that to smatter Latin with an English mouth, is as ill a hearing as Law-French.

Looking back over my time involved in promoting languages I would certainly agree that we have faced two major challenges – neither of them to do with the shape of our mouths! The first is indeed this English question which has inculcated a view –among politicians, educationalists and the general public – that actually English “might indeed be enough”. I also believe that in language matters we have also been particularly vulnerable to the deep-rooted elitism of our education system. Languages, even bilingualism, have been fine for the few but have never been widely seen as necessary for all, or indeed valued in respect of those “non-elite” members of society who possess them.

In the 1990s, period of much curricular change and reform, our conclusion was that languages were viewed as an advantage but not as a core part of learning or communication. In simple terms they were “important but not essential”. Despite many reviews, programmes and initiatives since then, perhaps this is still the case.

So what then is to be done? Other contributors will summarise the challenges and possibilities in secondary education and Universities. Important as these sectors are – and I myself was originally a secondary teacher who worked in the University – I am convinced that primary education is the key. Some say – and it has indeed been said again recently by a research group – that there are serious weaknesses in our primary school language programmes and little evidence that early language learners make any faster progress than those who begin at 9, 10 or 11.

The most notorious such judgement was Claire Burstall's review of the early pilots in primary language learning – “French from Eight” – which concluded that an early start offered no discernible advantage in terms of later performance. This detailed research provided the justification for the then Government to withdraw funding from the fledgling initiatives which largely withered on the vine.

There is not time now to review the Burstall Report, and many contemporaries reached rather more nuanced conclusions. It is perhaps important however to say that perhaps she was answering the wrong question. Since the 1970s we have, I think, understood much more about the likely objectives and strengths of early language learning which may be to do with developing oracy – “education of the ear” and promoting empathy – openness to others – at a particularly propitious stage in a child's development, rather than with achieving high levels of formal accuracy. It is interesting to see that such thoughts have also reached the political classes. Over 10 years ago Jack Lang was justifying French initiatives in early language learning with these words:

Pourquoi cet engagement obstiné en faveur de l'apprentissage dès le plus jeune âge de deux langues vivantes?

The Minister gave two key reasons for his determination:

L'oreille musicale de l'enfant [...] et [...] la préservation de notre langue nationale.

Similar ideas can also be attributed to British politicians of the previous and current administrations. A new language is increasingly seen as part of the child's communicative and cultural education and as a key factor for increasing competence in his or her first language.

Another lesson from the early experiments is the necessity for solid foundations if early learning is to be successful. Peter Hoy, one of the HMIs (Her Majesty's Inspector), responded to Burstall with a thoughtful review of the necessary conditions for success in primary languages, of which perhaps the three most important were an agreed common rationale, sustained and consistent provision for teacher supply and training along with clearly understood and realisable objectives. It perhaps goes without saying that resources are also vital!

Between 2003 and 2010 we developed a strategy for languages in this country at the centre of which was the introduction of languages from 7 for all pupils. I would say that many of Hoy's “necessary conditions” were then put in place. An innovative teacher training programme involving collaboration with 4 other European countries was bringing nearly 1000 primary teachers with a language into the system every year; large amounts of public funding were supporting in-service programmes of training and support in all local

authorities; an agreed rationale and programme had been developed with the support of teachers themselves – The Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages. As a result of these and other initiatives, by 2009 over 90% of primary schools were teaching a language.

Behind the statistics there was enthusiastic commitment from the teachers as well as palpable enjoyment for the children. We were also developing a major shift in curricular thinking – a redefinition of the role of languages linking new (aka “foreign”) languages to the learning of English and other first languages. We had the opportunity perhaps for the first time to develop a powerful “languages education” encompassing all three of these elements including the languages spoken in our multilingual, multicultural communities. The curriculum due to have been introduced in 2011 would have provided the basis for this to happen.

Sadly and frustratingly it was not to be. Life and politics intervened. We now await the outcome of another review which is indeed likely to take us forward to more languages for all, but probably not as far as we would have gone. Yet much of the groundwork has been done and the commitment and enthusiasm remains. Perhaps we will still be able to show that in the 21st century language competence is not merely an important asset but an “essential part of being a citizen”.

Learning a language is like [...] like having a window inside your head. And through the window you can see other people.

Year 9 pupil, 2008