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Primary Modern Foreign Languages:

an overview of recent research, key issues and challenges for educational policy and practice

Marilyn Hunt, Ann Barnes, Bob Powell, Geoff Lindsay and Daniel Muijs

Abstract

There has never been a UK-wide policy for primary modern foreign language provision. Scotland, which has for many years managed its educational affairs autonomously, introduced foreign languages into its primary schools over a decade ago. Wales has formulated its own primary and secondary curriculum with due respect for Welsh, tending to give greater priority to its national language than other languages. Northern Ireland, similarly, has had to take account of its indigenous language and has never developed a foreign language programme for young learners. Recent government documents relating to England (DfES 2002), however, have outlined an entitlement for all primary school children in England to learn a language by 2012. In order to achieve this the DfES has provided additional funding for 19 LEA-led Pathfinder projects to identify sustainable and replicable models. It is appropriate at this point to review the current situation in order to gauge progress and development. This article, written by a research team funded by the DfES to evaluate the Pathfinder projects, outlines the national and international research context, the current national context and the key issues and challenges facing these local education authorities.

Keywords: *primary modern foreign languages, early foreign language learning,*

'A nation's fate will depend, in the end, on the quality of the education its children get in language'. (Comenius, 1630)

National and international research context

Age and L2 learning

There has been considerable research into the relevance of age in foreign language (L2) learning. The critical period hypothesis (CPH) which has given birth to the "younger the better" claim maintains that young children have a special instinctive capacity including both speech and morpho-syntactic development, that their brain has plasticity before it lateralises and that they can acquire L2 in similar ways to their mother tongue (L1). As a result, it is a common assertion by those promoting early foreign language learning[1] (EFLL) that age is an important factor contributing to success at school due to this special capacity. Indeed, this argument is used regularly, for example, by elementary schools in the USA, to justify and advertise their foreign language programmes and has no doubt contributed to the rapid growth of such provision. For example, a survey by Rhodes and Branaman (1999) concluded that 31% of elementary schools there are offering some form of EFLL, an increase of 10% over the decade since the previous survey. However, researchers today are more critical about this hypothesis and recent publications advise caution about the CPH as a valid basis for early language learning policies:

> 'It should be obvious that, given the conflicting evidence and contrasting viewpoints
> that still exist, parents, educational institutions or ministries of education should be
> exceedingly cautious about translating what they read about the CPH research into
> personal practice or public policy' (Scovel, 2000).

There remain, however, widely acknowledged key characteristics of young language learners, as cited by Johnstone (2001) who was a key figure in the development and evaluation of EFLL in Scotland: they have a more intuitive grasp of L2 structure; they are more attuned to

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[1] In this article, Early Foreign Language Learning refers solely to school-age children rather than pre-school.

the phonological system; they are less anxious; L2 helps form their sense of self; and they have more time overall.

Starting earlier does not, of course, by itself, guarantee an advantage, (see Martin, 2000a), although as Mitchell, Martin and Grenfell (1992) point out, the 'investment of more hours, through an earlier start, has at least the *potential* to raise general levels of achievement, *provided that issues of continuity and progression are properly addressed'*.

Progression in language learning is dependent on a range of variables (Johnstone, 2003): social factors (exposure, status), process factors (e.g. teaching/learning/interaction) and individual/group factors (e.g. aptitude/motivation/learning style in teachers/pupils/peer groups). Johnstone claims that progression could be improved if further opportunities were available for learners to acquire understanding of the grammatical structures of the language; to expand their vocabulary beyond the basics; to marshal and re-use existing language knowledge in new and wider-ranging situations; to take the initiative, ask questions, offer comments, justify opinions; and more generally, to develop independence in tackling and completing learning tasks.

One study in Hungary (Bors et al, 1999) justifying early language programmes in English, French, German and Italian, tested 14-year-olds who had studied foreign languages in primary schools where provision ranged from 2-6 classes per week, with programmes starting in varying year groups from grade 1 to 4. Tests included a cloze test, a reading comprehension, a listening comprehension and a writing task based on visual prompts: pupils took the same tests irrespective of the intensity or length of course or the books used. Learners performed relatively well on the tasks measuring receptive skills, whereas there were substantial differences in the results on writing. One socio-cultural pattern to emerge was the strong relationship between children's success in English and German as second languages, the number of weekly teaching hours and parents' educational background. There

was a similarly strong relationship with the schools they attended: schools which attracted more highly qualified parents had more weekly hours and better results.

However, other researchers (for example Krashen, 1982; Hatch, 1983) question the benefits of an early start. For Hawkins (2002), starting earlier cannot be a panacea: it did not prevent drop-out in previous experiments and, he argues, only works if part of a planned programme of apprenticeship.

Attitudes and motivation for Foreign Language learning

There is a paucity of research into young learners' attitudes and motivation for foreign language (FL) learning in the UK. Some pupil attitudes were gleaned from the case study visits conducted in the research project to evaluate primary MFL provision, commissioned by the QCA (2001). This followed robust methodology but represents only a comparatively small number of pupil interviewees aged 5-11 depending on the school context. The following conclusions were drawn: primary pupils are generally very enthusiastic about their primary MFL experiences and young children enjoy MFL because it appears to them to be more fun than other subjects. However, pupils in their first year at secondary school with primary MFL experience expressed some frustration about having to repeat work covered previously.

Elsewhere, more in-depth studies into primary pupils' FL learning motivation have been conducted. Djigunovic's study (1995) of primary school children learning French in Croatia demonstrated that high motivation[2] was initially 'associative' (i.e. with pleasant activities and movement in class). After three years of learning motivation became 'intrinsic' related to perception of self as a successful MFL learner, emerging meta-linguistic awareness arising

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[2] It is of course the case that some findings on pupil motivation may not be specific to MFL but may reflect a general trend.

from explicit L1-MFL shared terminology and concepts and an early approach to integrative as opposed to single-skill tasks, with writing very important for creativity. In this case the process factors were important, but the provision factors also made an important contribution: pupils had one hour per day French and they were taught by teachers with a degree in the language who conducted all their meetings in French.

In the Pécs study of Hungarian children's FL learning motivation (Nikolov, 1999), the most important motivating factors for children aged 6-14 included positive attitudes towards the learning context and the teacher; intrinsically motivating activities, tasks, and materials; and they were more motivated by classroom practice than by integrative or instrumental reasons. Instrumental motives emerged at the age of 11 or 12 but remained vague and general and the ability to speak with English native speakers was not identified as a significant factor. However, although the importance of instrumental motivation increases with age, engagement and persistence in learning activities are not directly influenced by this: children will only persist in learning tasks if they see them as worthwhile. Children appreciated all the intrinsically motivating activities which gradually shifted from 'playing' to more specific and more cognitively challenging tasks.

Classroom implications emerge from these studies: for very young children, motivating activities and the teacher are key factors. Development of self-confidence plays a major role and external rewards slowly lose their attractiveness. Instrumental motives emerge but these are balanced by classroom-related motives even at age 14.

Other surveys of pupil attitudes to FL learning in the UK relate to pupils at secondary school. These results are important when considering the extension of foreign language study to the primary phase. Mitchell (2003) sums up the research thus:

> '….. studies generally show Year 7 learners starting MFL study with a positive
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> disposition towards a new National Curriculum subject. Motivation declines over the
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> next couple of years (Chambers, 1999), and the subject is commonly rated relatively

unfavourably compared with others (Chambers, 1999; Stables and Wikely, 1999; Rawlinson, 2001). Some studies show that children have internalised a weak rationale for FL learning, so that FLs are seen as somehow connected with eventual jobs and employment chances, probably unrealistically so (Lee *et al*., 1998). However, UK students see themselves as less likely to travel/have international contacts than comparator groups in mainland Europe (Chambers, 1999).'

Mitchell (2003) questions whether a curriculum /assessment model focusing on direct skills training and controlled FL performances is likely to maximise intrinsic motivation. Other researchers (Clark and Trafford, 1996; Lee *et al*, 1998, McPake *et al,* 1999) suggest that any MFL curriculum in the UK context will confront real challenges in convincing learners of the value of sustained study of a foreign language. In the past, FL learning has often been perceived as elitist. Nevertheless, despite these fears, educational policy for England has now been set on the path of providing all children of primary school age with an opportunity to begin foreign language study. This development, it is argued, is an opportunity to improve pupils' self-esteem, to maximise learners' achievement and to make a positive contribution to their general educational growth.

European research

Although now over five years old, the European Commission research on modern languages in pre-primary and primary education across the member states of the European Union conducted by an international team (Blondin *et al*, 1998) provided a first European overview. This review revealed massive variation within and across member States in respect of starting age, time allocation, purposes, teaching staff and training and support for teachers. It suggested there was substantial evidence of positive attitudes at primary level, but there was limited evidence of successful transfer to secondary when comparing primary with lack of primary experience. There were some examples of successful language awareness schemes, but no evidence of their impact on subsequent L2 learning. In order to achieve successful

outcomes in early language learning, the report stressed the need for clear national or regional policies and funding, clear aims, teacher education, supply and support; increased time (where time is also linked to other factors); parental involvement; and building on the early start by continuity of provision.

There are now many European-funded projects that bring together enthusiasts from across the community to share local knowledge and experience of EFLL. While providing useful evidence of grass roots initiatives in specific fields e.g. dissemination of 'good practice' in ICT (Kirwan, 2002), they are generally not founded on a secure research base.

International research of FL learning in English-speaking countries

The literature on EFLL provides many accounts of local and national experiments, most of which, while stressing the assumed benefits of an early start, highlight the usual problems which schools and local authorities face in developing and maintaining such programmes. Certainly, the French immersion programmes of Canada provide rich sources of data. Recently there has been a shift in emphasis – from summative evaluation of attainment gains to learning strategies and more general educational development in pupils. Some research has, for example, considered how children's conceptual development is affected, not always positively as it turns out, by French immersion teaching. Such teaching has been found to be restrictive with over-reliance on closed questions from teachers concentrating on concrete vocabulary in the early years of a programme (Walsh and Yeoman, 1999). The author of another detailed study of 215 grade 6 learners in Montreal, concluded that mere exposure to a second language, even when that exposure is intensive and sustained, is not enough to ensure an increase in learners' grammatical knowledge and hence their ability to generate language (Morris, 2001).

When considering new policies for EFLL in England, it is particularly important to take account of experiences and results in countries that have most in common with its

sociolinguistic context. Something that has been woefully lacking in research reviews to date is reference to and acknowledgement of the impact of the dominant language of the community and its relation to the target language. Research rooted in a society where English is the mother tongue has far greater relevance to language planning in the UK than that taking place in contexts where English is the target language of instruction. In many countries where EFLL has been developed and English has been one of the languages on offer, English is already, if not an official, a customary second language; in others, its status as international language has meant that children have benefited from extensive additional exposure outside formal instruction times. What is far more appropriate, therefore, is an exploration of English-speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand or the USA. Even in the USA, it is research into the teaching of languages other than Spanish which could yield most pertinent data since that language is virtually a second language in many communities. In response to concerns about the potentially negative effect on literacy and numeracy standards, a state-wide Louisiana study in 1986 encompassing 13,200 pupils (Rafferty, 1986) concluded that adding a foreign language programme to the elementary school curriculum did not have a deleterious effect on expected gains in basic literacy and numeracy skills; rather, those studying a foreign language in the USA achieved significantly higher scores on annual tests. More recently, research by Rosenbusch (1995) highlighted the cognitive benefits, the gains in general academic achievement and positive attitudes towards cultural diversity that EFLL can bring.

A study involving 140 elementary and 451 secondary level pupils learning Chinese, Japanese and Korean in public schools in California (Sung and Padilla, 1998) analysed the attitudes of pupils and parents and the degree of involvement of the latter in their children's foreign language instruction. Perhaps unsurprisingly, younger children were more motivated overall and perceived their parents to be more involved than did high school students. The data also revealed that, regardless of age, female students reported significantly higher motivation to

learn. Problems of sustaining early enthusiasm – not a new issue by any means - were identified in the discussion of results.

Concerns expressed in the USA, even by enthusiasts, are strikingly similar to those elsewhere in the world. Such issues are difficulties in matching content to national standards; dilemmas concerning the nature and purpose of FLES programmes; choice of language and diversification; entitlement and inclusion; and recruitment and professional development of teachers. (Lipton, 2001)

While some experts have been concentrating on analysis and discussion of the problems, others have preferred to highlight, through case studies, those conditions which favour 'successful' EFLL experiences. Gilzow and Branaman (2001), for example, in their description and analysis of seven early foreign language programs, lay great emphasis on the richness of syllabus content and community support, the latter not only including parental involvement but also more general public esteem and valuing.

In Australia, the government has commissioned a number of studies in preparation for the development of a national strategy towards the end of 2004 and the major funding decisions accompanying such a development. Ongoing and as yet unpublished research by Scarino of the University of New South Wales Research Centre for Languages and Cultures Education is focussing on assessing proficiency and the creation of a framework of standards catering for the diverse linguistic communities.
Scarino's work may be seen as a response to some of the less positive results published by researchers at the Melbourne University Language Testing Research Centre. Brown et al. (2000) conducted a longitudinal study of children learning French, Indonesian, Italian and Japanese, testing their performance in year 8 after several years' exposure to their chosen language. Although no account was taken of general levels of educational achievement across the population under study, variables such as gender and home language were

considered to see if these had any impact on test performance. One significant finding was that pupils who had had most exposure to their language were not automatically those achieving the best results. Hill *et al*. (1998) investigated the effects on language learning of transition from primary to secondary in schools in Victoria and produced worrying evidence of stasis rather than progress in learning. While the State could be commended for its policies of entitlement and diversification (over 40 languages are taught across Victoria State schools, including several Asian and indigenous languages), the benefits of an early start were again brought into question. Revisiting the issues in a more recent conference paper, Hill (2002) went so far as to state that for secondary students having studied Indonesian as a foreign language at primary level, 'Indonesian study appears to have actually been a disadvantage.' It is worth reminding policy-makers, perhaps, in the light of concerns about levels of achievement and organisational difficulties, that there is currently taking place a serious re-evaluation of what the Australians call LOTE (Learning of other languages than English) in their education system.

Background to Modern Foreign Language primary learning in the UK

Following the publication of a critical and somewhat pessimistic report (Burstall *et al*, 1974) the experimental introduction of French into the primary curriculum (1964-74) faltered and was then gradually abandoned. Burstall's wide-ranging report indicated that primary MFL (specifically French) made no substantial difference to long-term achievement. However, other conclusions from this evaluation, less widely reported, remain pertinent to the current situation. It should be recognised that certain factors were impediments to success: inadequate training of teachers; insufficient liaison between primary and secondary schools; lack of continuity in FL learning between primary and secondary; and lack of differentiation by MFL teachers in secondary schools.

Nonetheless, thereafter, MFL teaching initiatives in Key Stage 2 (KS2), pupils aged 7-11, in England have been sporadic and patchy. There are, however, pockets of activity throughout

the UK, with very successful primary MFL teaching in Scotland (Johnstone, 1994; Hamilton, 1995), and schools in Kent teaching languages to the vast majority of pupils. The 1990s also saw a tentative revival of interest in primary foreign language teaching including some LEA-led growth in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Hurrell and Satchwell, 1996; Naysmith, 1999). In March 1999 the Government, in what was really a radical shift in policy, adopted a more positive approach by announcing support for the Early Language Learning (DfEE/CILT) initiative to promote and develop the provision and quality of MFL teaching and learning in the primary sector. Also receiving official approval, The Good Practice Project (CILT, September 1999 to March 2001) sought to identify, develop and disseminate good practice with projects across England and Wales. Concurrently, the National Advisory Centre for Early Language Learning (NACELL) was created to provide support for teachers and institutions involved in the provision of early MFL learning. In addition, for the first time, the National Curriculum 2000 (DfEE/QCA, 1999) included non-statutory guidelines for MFL at KS2 with an optional QCA/DfEE scheme of work for years 5 and 6.

This revival of interest in primary MFL learning prompted QCA to commission a research project (Powell *et al*, 2001) to evaluate the current situation regarding primary MFL and to examine the feasibility of extending it to all schools. The methodological approach was extensive and involved both qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis including surveys to LEAs, primary and secondary schools, case study visits, lesson observations and interviews. The report indicated that 21% of maintained schools with KS2 pupils were currently offering some form of MFL teaching, but with varied approaches and considerable regional (and structural) variations. The study revealed a generally supportive attitude towards teaching MFL in primary schools and to the principle of entitlement to MFL in some form. However, the study also made it clear that 'the resources and infrastructure necessary to support any scaling up of existing provision are not sufficiently well-developed to sustain the introduction of a national entitlement for all pupils' (QCA, 2001:3). The report recommended acquiring further evidence about effective approaches which could be

replicated more widely; preparatory measures to develop the necessary infrastructure by raising awareness of the benefits of MFL at KS2; a detailed audit of teacher availability; training opportunities; and information transfer to secondary school.

These developments and the changing social and vocational framework outlined above have created greater acknowledgement of the value of and need for MFL skills. Other potential advantages of learning languages at primary school have also been identified: more time for language learning available; more positive attitudes to FL learning and to the target cultures; improvement to communicative skills; a link to literacy; and better knowledge of Europe and the world. (Morgan and Neil, 2001:160)

The current national context

Provision of primary MFL

Various initiatives and projects presently exist, ranging from language 'encounters' (for example, where pupils have a variety of languages 'tasters'), languages taught in after-school (often commercial) clubs, language awareness programmes in varying guises, and languages (mainly French) fully integrated into the curriculum. This diverse picture creates distinct challenges for transition from KS2 to KS3 (Key Stage 3: pupils aged 11-14). MFL provision in KS1 and KS2 varies considerably both within and across regions in the time allocated to MFL learning (from 5 minutes a day to 120 minutes a week), the FL starting year (from Year 1 to Year 6), class size and teacher expertise (subject specialist, generalist primary teacher). Language provision often reflects LEA commitment to promoting MFL in primary schools or the commitment of individual head teachers who view MFL as a curriculum priority. Recently provision has been extended by the growing number of specialist Language Colleges as part of their outreach activities for primary schools.

Developments and opportunities for MFL in the UK

Recent government documents have proposed further developments at KS2. The Green Paper, 14-19: Extending opportunities, raising standards (DfES, 2002) included a languages section outlining an entitlement for all primary school children to learn a language by 2012. The National Languages Strategy: Languages for all, languages for life (DfES, 2003) reiterated this and foreshortened the time-scale stating that LEAs should co-ordinate primary language learning programmes to ensure every KS2 pupil is offered the opportunity to study at least one foreign language by 2010. The recent decision by the Government to shift the focus of compulsory language learning from 11-16 to 7-14 years, represents a significant new challenge for primary and secondary schools in England. As can be seen from our review of research, there is much debate about the benefits of an early start and what form such learning should take. The second half of this article will examine a number of important factors which need to be taken into account when evaluating the success of new EFLL programmes, at a local and national level.

Key issues and challenges

In the above -mentioned QCA (2001) study, certain issues were identified as crucial in the teaching of MFL in KS2. Currently, staff, training and resources are very limited, but projects and schemes are growing steadily. Simultaneously, more initial teacher training places for MFL KS2 teachers have been allocated and expertise is growing in this area.

In the light of the study and previous work, issues to be considered must include: curricular issues and variety of curriculum models; teacher supply issues and training; teachers' knowledge and qualifications; pupil attainment and attitudes; transition; and inclusion, special needs and equal opportunities.

Curricular issues

In England the decline of MFL, or at least the lack of opportunity for growth, in the primary curriculum has been attributed to the shortage of curriculum time, with schools placing special emphasis on the core National Curriculum (NC) subjects of English, Mathematics and Science in order to raise pupils' performance in tests. The introduction of national literacy and numeracy strategies has further increased pressure on time. At the time of the QCA survey (2001) 18% of primary head teachers surveyed stated that they had plans to introduce or reintroduce MFL in KS2, but the findings also revealed that many had some resistance to any imposed introduction of languages.

Curriculum models (content)

A range of models currently occur in the UK including language competence programmes, sensitisation/encounter programmes, cross-curricular language programmes and language awareness programmes. Each model has value, but the aims, and consequently the outcomes, are quite different.

Language competence programmes

The primary aim here is to develop children's linguistic attainment with an emphasis on performance and progression in a single language. The teacher's linguistic knowledge is important to ensure teaching quality. If the language content and skills are clearly defined, precise information can be transferred to secondary MFL teachers who can build on this in KS3. With this approach, MFL need not sit in isolation, but can be integral to the whole curriculum: foreign language can be reinforced throughout the day by inclusion within normal daily routines. Elements of the foreign language can also permeate other topic and class work such as geography, art, science and PE. Examples of such integration (Bell, 1996; Tierney and Hope, 1998; Muir, 1999) demonstrate the feasibility of promoting real communication throughout the school day.

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It is important here to consider the implications of language choice. Traditionally, French has been the dominant language and continues to be the language where most expertise exists amongst primary teachers, although there are examples of other languages being taught at primary level. The predominance of French has an impact on diversification programmes at secondary level. Switching languages between KS2 and KS3 fails to achieve continuity, though some emphasis on transferable language learning skills may help to improve performance in the second foreign language at secondary school.

Sensitisation/encounter programmes

Sensitisation programmes aim to initiate children into foreign language learning by developing an understanding of languages through encounters with one or more foreign language. Such encounter programmes can start at any age but tend to have more restricted language content where pupils develop some basic competence in a limited range of vocabulary and formulaic phrases without the emphasis on progression and performance found in language competence programmes. These are especially suitable for delivery by the primary class teacher, who may be a non-specialist linguist, lacking in confidence and training.

Cross-curricular language programmes

One recommendation from the Nuffield Inquiry (Nuffield Foundation, 2000) was that there should be a co-ordinated programme of bilingual learning, studying new curriculum content through the medium of a foreign language. The Content and Language Integration Project (CLIP), piloted in eight schools from September 2002, seeks to raise standards of attainment across the curriculum whilst improving pupils' foreign language capability and developing a more integrated approach to curriculum delivery. CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) aims to improve performance in both the content and the foreign language. A CILT (Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research) feasibility study (2003) found evidence of CLIL initiatives in 47 schools. Preliminary research indicates that schools

have adopted diverse approaches and models using teachers with a wide range of expertise in both language and content.

Language awareness programmes

Downes (2002) defines language awareness as 'explicit knowledge about language and conscious perception and sensitivity in language learning, language teaching and language use.' Good practice in the primary school can lay the foundations for learning and learning *how* to learn a foreign language.

Language awareness has re-emerged more recently in the Socrates/Lingua project (1997-2001) referred to as '*L'éveil aux langues dans l'école primaire* (EVLANG) which took up the challenge of producing and implementing a range of teaching materials to develop knowledge and awareness of the diversity of languages in order to realise how languages work and to develop more positive attitudes towards language and language learning and subsequently to improve language aptitude. This project across five European countries has now been extended to include sixteen European participating countries in a new project Ja-Ling, named after the title of one of Copernicus' books *Janua Linguarum Reserata* - an open door to languages. This programme has already carried out dissemination of the approach, production of teaching materials, training sessions, implementation of activities in the classroom and evaluation tools (teacher diary, classroom observation, teacher questionnaire/interview, parents questionnaire/interview). Language awareness is now part of Portuguese and Finnish curricula and in Greece the Ja-Ling experimentation is an official project of the Ministry's Institute for Pedagogical Research.

Different models of delivery

A variety of curricular approaches and staffing models has been developed to suit particular local circumstances and resources. Martin (2000b:9) advocates a three-pronged approach where 'three strands – foreign language, meta-linguistic awareness and intercultural

awareness - would be ideally mapped out in schemes of work jointly conceived by teachers in clusters of primary schools, drawing on the expertise of language specialists from a variety of backgrounds.'

A number of possible replicable models of delivery emerging from the Good Practice Project are outlined in *Early Language Learning: Curricular Models*, CILT (2002): individual primary schools; primary schools and links to school abroad; cluster of primary schools; partnership secondary school/language college and cluster of primary schools; LEA models – after-school provision mother tongue; and advisory teachers training class teachers for MFL.

Analysing these models, conditions for successful practice include: active support from the Head Teacher and the whole staff; clear linguistic and communicative aims; emphasis on enjoyment and enthusiasm; links with foreign countries; knowledge about the culture; e-mail or video-conferencing links; active teaching methods with extensive use of songs and games; ICT, for example, the use of PowerPoint and an interactive whiteboard, integrated into the teaching; sharing of resources and collaborative work with the local MFL secondary department; reliable transfer records; extensive training and support; and links with literacy.

Teacher supply and training

Teacher supply remains an issue for concern. There continue to be difficulties across the UK in recruiting and retaining sufficient teachers of MFL in secondary schools and the number of primary teachers with adequate subject knowledge to teach a foreign language is unknown. There is still considerable debate as to the most appropriate level of linguistic competence required to teach languages in primary schools.

Initial teacher training (ITT)

Progress has been made in the initial training of primary teachers with some expertise in a foreign language. The Initial Teacher Training Primary Languages Project began as a one-year pilot in September 2001 as a joint initiative of the Teacher Training Agency and the

Ministère de l'Education Nationale, supported by CILT, the National Centre for Languages. It aimed to bring together higher education institutions in England and Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM: University level establishments dedicated to initial and in-service training of teachers) in France with the common purpose of providing teacher training for the primary sector that included an element of teaching a foreign language. Following its success, the project expanded from 5 institutions in 2001, to 13 institutions in 2002 and 26 institutions in 2003 to include partner higher education institutions in Germany and Spain. Each university has partner institutions in the participating countries, allowing idea exchange between students and trainers as well as the opportunity to spend a period abroad in the partner country as part of the training. There are now eight Higher Education Institutions in England providing primary ITT with French specialism. Even here though, it appears improvements are still necessary to ensure the specialist language units guarantee quality teaching in schools. One conclusion of an OFSTED report (2003) of five of these institutions stated: 'although the standard of [the students'] French is perfectly adequate for teaching primary-age pupils, many lack a range of strategies to use the language consistently in the classroom and to foster its use by pupils.'

Ongoing training for existing and future staff

On-going training and support are crucial for the success of any EFLL programme. Primary classroom teachers may not have adequate subject knowledge or qualifications or the confidence to teach a foreign language beyond an 'encounter' style programme. Primary staff would need to develop and refresh their FL skills at regular intervals. Foreign Language Assistants (FLAs), native speakers, and secondary specialists can provide support mechanisms, but training would need to be implemented and sustained for all participants: for classroom teachers who need to improve their subject knowledge and expertise; for native speakers and FLAs who do not have the requisite methodological knowledge; as well as language specialists who may need training in appropriate teaching methods for primary aged learners.

Teacher knowledge and qualifications

There is some debate about who should conduct primary FL teaching: the primary classroom teacher with some language knowledge, a specialist visiting the school occasionally, or a specialist based in the school? In England MFL is typically taught by specialists without primary training or by primary teachers without specialist MFL knowledge. In Scotland, where the preferred model is language competence, there was a costly, nationally planned and supported programme involving extensive training to ensure there was one trained teacher in over 95% of Scottish primary schools by 2000. Massive funding would be required to reach a similar position in England.

The advantages of primary class teachers teaching the foreign language are clear: they have an in-depth knowledge of pupils' individual needs and can therefore differentiate according to pupils' ability; they have good existing working relationship with pupils; they have knowledge of activities suited to the cognitive development of the age group and to the range of learning styles; and they can integrate the foreign language into other relevant topics and daily routine. Appropriate resources are readily available to provide a stimulus for foreign language learning. However, the linguistic repertoire of these teachers may be severely limited. Specialist language teachers, in contrast, have the advantage of deeper subject knowledge, awareness of and ability to correct error, a longer-term view of foreign language learning to inform planning and the ability to extend pupils linguistically. They can also represent good role models of pronunciation and accuracy, vital if the aim of primary language learning is to follow a language competence model and thereby raise attainment in KS3.

Pupil attainment and attitudes

The principal benefits of primary MFL are not easily measurable: language learning is a long process. The National Curriculum (NC) identifies progression by levels of attainment in listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, Mitchell (2003) questions the

appropriateness of discrete levels and targets for MFL at school, claiming that the 'four skills' model is outdated and promotes compartmentalised training, that there is an over-emphasis on accuracy, rote-learning, fixed phrases and that the 'ladder' metaphor of language is inappropriate; in fact, it is argued, progression in language learning is more like 'snakes and ladders' – some aspects go up, others go down (see Mitchell and Myles, 1998). According to Johnstone (2003), applying the Common European Framework or NC levels to primary learners makes false assumptions about early learners. Primary pupils can do things not included in these descriptors. For example, they can act out plays using good pronunciation and can produce very impressive wall displays. In other words, the levels and framework were devised with insufficient investigation or knowledge of what early learners can actually achieve. This omission has, it appears, now been recognised. With the decision to promise access to modern foreign languages for English primary school children by 2010 has come a re-examination of how proficiency in the subject is to be described and performance to be measured. Following a feasibility study (Nuffield Foundation, 2002), the language learning ladder is being developed as part of the Government's Languages Strategy for England by the Nuffield Foundation, QCA and CILT. This new National Recognition System to credit language learning achievement is designed to sit alongside the existing qualifications framework.

A national commitment to EFLL will no doubt raise expectations about performance at KS3 and beyond. In the Scotland EFLL primary pilot, research showed that there was some carry over of success from primary leaning to GCSE level, although there was not much expansion of lexical and structural repertoire. Older children could do more, but more of the same: there was no real evidence of internalisation for language manipulation. (Johnstone, 2001)

Continuity: Transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3

The importance of building effectively on pupils' achievements as they move into secondary school is clearly recognised. Indeed, one of the explicit objectives of the KS3 strategy is to

improve progression across the key stages. An Ofsted report (2002) noted that continuity in the curriculum and progression in learning as pupils move from primary to secondary schools are longstanding weaknesses of the education system. Amongst the main findings, Ofsted recorded that secondary schools were not building well enough on what their Year 7 pupils had achieved in English and Mathematics in Year 6 and generally did not know in sufficient detail what their new pupils could do. As a result they had neglected to set targets for improving attainment in Year 7.

Ideally, joint planning of MFL learning across both phases would lead to a programme in secondary school building on KS2 work without unnecessary duplication. However, if difficulties emerge in NC statutory core subjects (English, Mathematics and Science), it is easy to imagine the difficulties of transfer in MFL. Here pupils may come to a secondary school from a range of feeder primary schools where 'entitlement' allows variety in language provision in time allocation, teaching quality (both subject knowledge and pedagogic expertise), and indeed the particular language studied. As long as KS2 MFL teachers are not constrained by statutory requirements, a wide variety of approaches will continue to exist. Good continuity in learning, meaning that pupils should not repeat what they have already learned or have to attempt over-challenging work, is a real issue in these circumstances. Even in the Scottish initiative, which was firmly based in the 5-14 curricular context and in some cases taught by secondary teachers, teachers did not necessarily build on what pupils had done during their primary education (Low *et al,* 1993, 1995; Low and Johnstone, 1997). Pupils often experienced a change from a relatively open framework, allowing for creativity, to teachers constrained by coursebook-dictated structure repeating similar linguistic demands. Year 7 interviewees in the Warwick study (Powell *et al,* 2001) expressed frustration about having to repeat work covered previously; this could have a damaging effect on pupil motivation, even after a relatively short time at secondary school.

Effective transition arrangements are clearly essential if the benefits of primary MFL are to be fully realised in secondary schools. The survey which formed part of the Warwick study revealed that only 53 of the 108 LEAs in the sample made LEA-wide arrangements to facilitate transition; only 56% of secondary teachers reported links with feeder primary schools where MFL took place; and only 20% of secondary teachers in the sample made use of transfer data. A common approach on additional prior language learning information to accompany the national common transfer file would assist secondary schools to build on primary school achievements. The European Language Portfolio, developed as a Council of Europe initiative, is an open-ended record of a pupil's achievements and progress in languages. It includes details of languages known, learned, where used and favourite activities, as well as a self-assessment record of what a pupil can do in listening, speaking, reading and writing with space for examples of work. Whilst this can act as a motivational tool for pupils, it is difficult to imagine how secondary teachers would have time to access all this information. A more streamlined record, compiled by the primary teacher, including reliable information about language work, language skills and language-learning skills covered, and some level of assessment would certainly assist in planning and differentiating in the secondary classroom. Liaison between secondary schools and feeder primary schools can greatly enhance information transfer. Time allowed for reciprocal visits and mutual observation of classes would be valuable in establishing both complementary methodology and continuity, building on content and skills, so that prior learning is valued. As primary foreign language learning progresses, there will be a need to re-think the MFL KS3 curriculum to ensure differentiation, possibly through setting and fast-tracking.

Inclusion, special needs and equal opportunities

Currently, in the UK many more pupils in independent junior schools have access to foreign language learning than in state primary schools. Foreign language learning has been an integral, formally time-tabled component of the preparatory curriculum for decades. On the other hand, 'languages for all' at secondary school has been a relatively short-lived policy. Some argue that the decision to revert to a curriculum model with MFL an option in KS4

increases the risk that the subject is perceived as élitist, only for the brightest and best of pupils (Powell, 2002). The national strategy to give entitlement to language learning for all primary pupils runs counter to this perception but as yet the notion of entitlement is rather vague and needs to be examined in the light of experience.

Many of the studies mentioned above have taken account of and reported differences in the attitudes and levels of attainment of different social groups, and with respect to gender differences. These variables, along with other, more general considerations of access need to be examined further to ensure that all pupils are treated equitably in existing programmes and the new schemes being developed. A particular issue with respect to inclusion concerns the involvement of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) whether within mainstream or special schools. Currently we are aware of no research that specifically addresses the needs of these pupils or investigates the degree to which they are included or excluded from MFL at KS1 or 2 as sometimes occurs at KS3 and recently KS4. It is also necessary to recognise the diversity of this general category. For example, children with severe and profound hearing loss will have substantial difficulties with language learning per se, as will children with specific speech and language difficulties (Lindsay and Dockrell, 2003), whereas children with substantial physical disabilities may have no language impairment. There is a need, therefore, to examine the general issue of inclusion of children with SEN into the MFL programme, and also issues concerning the particular needs of subgroups of children with SEN and the specific needs of individuals (Lindsay, 2003)

Conclusions

This article has highlighted the fact that research to date in the field of early or primary foreign language learning has not as yet yielded conclusive evidence about the benefits of such provision. This is, in part, due to the plethora of models of delivery and the countless variables that impact on children's experience of language learning. The evaluation of the Pathfinders initiative, which the authors have been commissioned to carry out, will indeed take account of the range of different practices in operation and the extent to which these

practices measure up to their stated objectives and learning outcomes, including the development of inclusive education. The key issues discussed above provide a clear, if challenging, agenda for education policy-makers and for those local authorities who are pioneering new modes of delivery. They also indicate those areas where future research must focus attention.

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