2

What does language learning offer a primary school?

Introductory vignette

I think for some children it’s deeply motivating – they enjoy it because it’s different. Whether it’s because that’s to do with the kind of lessons they are, because they’re very oral and there’s music and there’s lots of games and so they see it as fun ... it’s nice that the whole school does it and the whole school is doing it together. We played some French music in assembly recently and they all noticed that it was French and enjoyed that. (Headteacher, 2005 in Hood 2006: 6)

Comment

The headteacher quoted above introduced language learning into her school because when she interviewed for teachers to cover the new PPA arrangements in 2005, she found that a language teacher was one of the two best teachers she saw. She was primarily interested in appointing people who could add value to the school. Because this was her approach, she considered languages to be an integral part of the curriculum from that point on. She had a real sense that language learning could impact on the whole curriculum and the school experience of the children, and because the subject was given equal status with the rest of the curriculum and was well taught, it did.

Chapter objectives

- To explore the nature of language learning at the primary stage.
- To suggest ways in which language learning can benefit children.

(Continued)
Initial reflection point

Consider the two brief lesson scenarios which follow; clearly there are differences, but what are they and do they matter?

Teacher A reads the class a simple story in another language about a boy who wants a pizza for tea. The boy finds the ingredients in the supermarket. There is a lot of repetition of the phrases for ‘Here is …’ and ‘I like …’. Back at home his mother asks him to unpack the bag and she checks he has all the ingredients – ‘Do you have …?’ He replies using ‘Here is …’ again. When the teacher reads it for the second time and pauses slightly at certain points the class gradually starts to join in with the names of the ingredients if they are not too hard and with the key phrases. By the end of the second reading the children are all able to say ‘Yes, here it is!’ and ‘I like …’. The teacher then makes a three-ingredient pizza using a large card ‘base’ and chooses which three by asking the class to vote for their favourite ingredients. Individual pupils then create their own four- five- or six-ingredient toppings by adding other items. If they have forgotten the word for an item or if they want an extra item not in the story, they ask for it in the foreign language.

Teacher B has selected the key vocabulary for the pizza ingredients and teaches them to the class using flashcards and asking the children to repeat each of the words several times, using different tones or speeds or emotions to give variety. The teacher plays some flashcard games, for example using a noughts and crosses grid on the board with the flashcards turned away and pupils in teams competing to guess the right item and make a line of three. The teacher then adds the phrase for ‘I would like’ and plays pizza bingo with the class. Afterwards the class practices the word-set again in pairs, asking for certain items from each other.
Comment

You could see something like both of these approaches in primary language classrooms all over England. The point of comparing and contrasting them is not to decide which is better but to isolate what the children get from each 'lesson' and whether that meets your objectives as a languages teacher. In deciding what they get from each approach we need to think about the immediate learning and the more invisible acquisition that may be occurring. We also need to consider both immediate and longer-term motivation.

Follow-up reflection

In which of those two lesson scenarios above would children be most motivated and in which would they remember more words? Would either approach lead to a greater longer-term motivation and would either embed language in their minds more strongly if used regularly?

Comment

There still are no ‘right’ answers to these questions, but you may have formed a strong view and this might reflect a personal standpoint (for example, a memory of successful language lessons when you were younger) or a deep knowledge of how primary children learn. This chapter, and indeed the whole book, seeks to offer a range of interpretations of how language learning might look, viewed from the standpoint of the children, the teachers and the school.

Some important ways of looking at the issue involve thinking about the purpose of language learning. What is language learning for? What type of language do we have in mind? Is the focus on learning the language, learning about the language or learning through the language? What about culture, and what is culture? Is it (to echo a previous series of course books) a matter of onions, sausages or castanets, or something deeper?

The teacher’s objectives and how they shape what language learning can offer

We can start this dialogue by asking what appears to be a very basic question: When you as teacher walk into the classroom to start a
language lesson, what are your objectives? We can paraphrase and widen this by asking: What do you intend to do? What do you intend that the children will know, understand and be able to do by the end of the lesson? Why are you doing this?

There are some very different possible answers to this set of questions that relate to the summary at the end of the Comment above. For example, you may see language learning as equipping children to survive in an authentic context such as a visit to a target language speaking country. Perhaps they will link with a class they have been writing to, and even stay a couple of nights with a family. If so, you may have an agenda which is about teaching and practising functional language around topics such as greeting, eating, exchanging essential personal information, expressing preferences and simple emotions. On the other hand, that may not be a likely scenario just yet and you may instead feel that to start the process of language learning you need to address some basic vocabulary areas such as numbers, colours, families, food/drink and favourite leisure time activities. In both of these cases you are very firmly in the language learning camp, with the ‘doorstep intention’ of presenting a specific set of vocabulary and phrases, mainly through aural/oral means and with the intention of equipping children to use them orally in structures such as dialogues. Your desired outcome is probably that they can use this body of language when they receive certain stimuli such as simple questions. You may decide to find out if you have been successful in this by ‘testing’ the class orally (or perhaps in writing with older children).

On the other hand, you may feel that it is still important even in the primary context that children start to build a grammatical awareness of the language they are learning. This might take the form either of some overt grammar or of another literacy-linked aspect such as strategy use. An example of the first could be awareness of parts of speech and their behaviour (agreement and position of adjectives in French or first/third person verb forms in German) and in this case it is possible that a lesson might be more expository with some rules being explained. The second might be accomplished more inductively through a ‘language detectives’ approach (as used by West Sussex LA materials, 2006 and 2008). In our earlier example with the ‘pizza’ lessons, a third scenario might involve the use of a menu in the target language with a task centred on children trying to work out what the items are and to give reasons for their choices. Clearly if you adopt such approaches you include learning about language as a major purpose.

A third scenario could have a completely different set of intentions at the threshold to the classroom. You may be using authentic texts (a story or
song, for example) and think less about giving children a particular set of items for comprehension and re-use as about their overall experience of the sounds of the language. There would probably be some inherent repetition contained within the story or song, which they would begin to catch and rehearse more informally. It might be that you want to offer the children the chance to construct meaning through context (perhaps with the visuals associated with the text) and although they will not understand the literal meaning of every word, they might laugh or feel suspense or anticipate a particular ending. You might want to deal with non-fiction and link something in the foreign language with work they are doing in mathematics, science, geography or art. You might hope that through this they will experience some reinforcement (in a different way) of some of the concepts you have been dealing with at other points of the week or term. Later you might teach them in the foreign language something from one of those other areas that is completely new. If you have these intentions you are working within the approach that involves learning in or through the language.

We want to be clear that the options above are not described with a view to you choosing an approach. Of course a single teacher might have that range of intentions either with different classes or even with the same class over a period of time. It is probably healthy for any subject to be tackled from different directions and in different ways across a whole primary school, and even across the four years of KS2. The advocates of embedding the languages element into the whole curriculum (including ourselves as authors of this book) need to remember that there is a separate language curriculum based on authentic experience of life among mother-tongue speakers of that language, in other words ‘survival’ content, which children need to learn. We need to recognise that, just as the primary strategy English curriculum includes elements of grammar, so a foreign language curriculum lasting a minimum of four years needs that too. But all teachers of languages at primary level need to consider how children learn in general and how a focus on learning through the language can certainly offer other sorts of gains as research has shown (see Chapter 9). We will now look at the nature of that learning from the child’s as well as the school’s perspective.

What do children enjoy about language learning? What can language learning offer children?

One survey of a whole primary school where all children were learning languages from Nursery through to Y6 (and where they had all started the process at the same time), found that the most popular element of
learning French was songs. This was noted by 75 per cent of the children in the school. In Hood (2006) we explored some early impressions of language learning from focus groups in the same school. In the plenary at the Primary Languages Show 2007 (Hood unpublished) we presented further data from that school which showed children able to identify the benefits of challenge, very willing to show what they knew in the form of singing authentic French songs and strongly involved in taking the language home.

So far this chapter has not mentioned the F-word. Many people associate learning languages with the fun-element and we need to address this now because fun is certainly something that language learning offers children and schools. Fun can emerge from a range of approaches: from lively active teaching and learning, from a real mixture of stimulating resources, from creative activities which use the language, from genuine contacts with speakers of the target language, and from games that involve problem-solving, collaboration and competition. It is vital to distinguish the fun that emerges from variety of stimuli and challenge from the fun which arises simply out of the games and simply out of the fact that for many children language learning, being so orally and game-based, is not ‘real work.’ That sort of fun seems to evaporate as repetition sets in, progression is more limited and challenge seems never to materialise. When children say that something is hard and then you ask them whether ‘hard’ is a good or a bad thing, very many will say that it is good, because ‘hard’ means you are learning. Similarly ‘easy’, implying a lack of challenge and a lack of thinking, is not often held up by learners as something positive. Above all they want work addressed to their own maturity level. This is illustrated by a Y10 boy on work experience in a primary school who at the end of a Year 3 lesson approached the teacher and said: ‘I wish we had done languages in primary school, because then in Year 7 we could have done some real work.’

Language learning should be active and have a large proportion of orally-based activities and should relate to a range of aspects of children’s lives, including their interests, their social life, their beliefs and their learning. This should guarantee that amongst different motivational qualities it contains genuine elements of fun. In fact fun should permeate the subject and not be a separate planning aim. Often in the early stages a combination of physical activity and rhythm and language can be stimulating and enjoyable; incorporating some thinking into this type of activity is always possible, giving both fun and challenge. A Y1 boy asked his French teacher who was teaching a supply morning which was not intended to include French: ‘When are we going to do the fun thing, I mean French?’ This teacher believed that challenge was vital in all her activities, and this is evidence that fun can be a broad phenomenon.
We will now consider the importance of some other qualities which language teaching, like all good teaching, can offer children. Conveniently these qualities can be expressed in a series of words that begin with C: these are culture, communication, content, challenge, cognition, collaboration and competition. We will look at each of these in turn, show how they link together and offer practical classroom examples through an activity or resource. We will also ask you to reflect on an aspect of each element.

Culture

Culture may seem to be an obvious component of learning a language. The Key Stage Two Framework (see Chapter 7) has intercultural understanding as one of its three equally important strands with a full set of objectives for each year group in the phase. Both French and Spanish, which are currently the major languages in primary schools, have the advantage of being global languages, spoken on three or more continents. France, Germany and Spain are themselves also multicultural societies. So ‘culture’ can include a fascinating range of aspects concerning daily lives in schools and in a multitude of different homes, cities and villages which have some resemblances to and some key differences from the experience our children will have here. And of course our own children will come at alternative cultures from a wide variety of different standpoints, many of which will not be British in origin.

The potential richness for the whole curriculum of encouraging interaction on a cultural level in language lessons is immense and some authors have approached this notion in detail (Kramsch 1996, Byram et al. 2001, Scarino et al. 2007). Such writers often deal with more advanced elements and discuss language learning and cultural
competence amongst older learners. But the breadth of vision around culture that we will get by reading Byram’s work, for example, is worth remembering, as an eventual aim. He has a model of cultural competences based on different types of ‘knowledge’: savoir comprendre – knowing how to understand, savoir apprendre/faire – knowing how to learn/do, savoir s’engager – knowing how to engage, savoir être – knowing how to be/behave (Byram and Zarate 1994, Byram 1997). This is useful in that it gives us a sense that true intercultural understanding leads to both knowing what to say and how to say it because we have a deeper understanding of the people with whom we are interacting. In other words it is eventually about understanding what makes people the way they are. At primary level we need to start with the realisation that many of our children will not have actually experienced different cultures and that we can unwittingly set up stereotypes if we dwell too much on stating over-simplistic differences and unintentionally inviting ‘horror’ (frogs’ legs, snails and horse-meat come to mind!). This starts with the power of image that gives a stream of messages we are not even aware of. In Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design, for example, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) explore the many ways in which different cultural images, including those in children’s picture books, communicate their meanings. A complex mix of existing cultural concepts, juxtapositions of visual material and conventions such as direction of ‘reading’ (inherently left to right in western cultures) create out of a simple picture an image that has as much power as dense text. We only have to look at some of the cultural ‘loading’ in our media (associations with Second World War uniforms, beer-drinking, lederhosen for Germany, for example) to see that we are in constant receipt of stereotypical imagery.

For all these reasons, when evaluating materials for use with primary age children, it is very important that teachers consider their cultural content and the power of the imagery. If a book, DVD, picture material or an online resource makes extensive use of line drawings, clip art, neutral photographs, then its contribution to cultural understanding is very limited and might even be negative. If, on the other hand, it has authentic photographs showing children of equivalent age in natural settings then this encourages children to notice and ask questions about apparent similarities and differences. Many current resources use video extracts to present language and, as with Early Start (see Chapter 10) for example, even a short clip of children eating lunch, being at school or shopping can open up the possibility of culture-based conversations. The short sequence in that resource of a French family eating at midday shows a range of differences which do exemplify some cultural attributes (for example, French children often eating lunch at home in a more
formal lunch setting, different patterns of ‘courses’, collaborative laying/clearing of the table). While there is still a place for cartoon characters in stories and for all the fantasy possible with such images, they should be combined with strong, authentic, culturally accurate representations in any good set of materials.

In the last 20 years cross-over culture has been very strong and this leads to a need to reappraise what we mean by ‘culture’. Spain as a holiday destination has continued to grow in popularity and as a result many children are familiar with much of the obvious features of Spanish life, such as some of the food, the climate and coastal landscapes. But we can delve deeper and present more traditional food and issues from the climate and less familiar landscapes if we plan this in carefully. More concrete examples can develop this theme. While food is an obvious cultural aspect of interest, there is much less value now in offering learners of French a French breakfast as an activity, though this was common in lower secondary a few years ago. Our supermarkets offer pain au chocolat and brioches as standard items as well as baguettes in plenty. French yogurts are commonly advertised on television and hot chocolate is a more common breakfast drink than before. We need to look at shopping habits, eating habits and a wider range of food items and to make the point that French food has a strong North African influence rather as ours has (amongst others) an Indian influence, and for at least some similar reasons. In sport, the premier league has brought not just French footballers into common view, but a host of French-speaking players from Africa. Countries such as Côte d’Ivoire and Sénégal are known to older primary pupils, some of whom may have seen scenes from Africa on television through watching African Nations Cup football. Spain and Portugal bring with them strong associations with South America, for example Argentina and Brazil. Access to less superficial cultural material is potentially more manageable if we can build on that initial basic knowledge. The Arsenal FC Education programme has also started creating materials with this aim in mind.

But many might see this as a partial diversion because surely children cannot handle these conversations in the target language? As with everything connected to target language use (and we deal with this in more detail in Chapter Three), we should look hard to find ways in which it might be possible before we opt for the safer English route. Scaffolding can be used to support children’s use of the target language and this can take the form of a series of questions which offer language and which support its re-use to express real opinions. By Year 6 this should be possible at a relatively high level.
Example from practice

In a PowerPoint presentation we created, which used some material from Oxfam's on-the-line website (www.oxfam.org.uk/coolplanet/ontheline/french/journey/burkina/bfindex.htm), a young girl’s daily routine in rural Burkina Faso was explored very simply. She had to get up early, then she walked an hour to school, fetched water, had a day’s lessons, walked home, helped her mother to cook and clean, and spent the later evening with family and friends making her own entertainment. Apart from some useful French language this was tapping in to Citizenship and Environmental themes. Here is a sample teacher scaffolding script:

‘Alors, Mariam se lève à cinq heures, prend le petit déjeuner et elle marche une heure (soixante minutes) à l’école.’ (This sentence is said more than once with the PowerPoint or other visuals in support. The figures ‘1 hour = 60 minutes’ can be written on the whiteboard while pointing at the clock or a watch.)

‘Se lever à cinq heures, c’est bon? Marcher une heure à l’école, c’est bon? Ça serait bon pour toi ou un problème pour toi?’ (Use mime as well as images, and elicit an answer from one pupil then ask several others so that repetition occurs. Do this in a natural manner with a range of pupils genuinely asked for their opinion – they will, after all, have different opinions so this dialogue is for a real purpose, both individually and collectively.)

‘OK, Ça serait un problème pour toi, mais pourquoi? A cinq heures tu es trop fatigué/e? Après une heure de marche, tu es trop fatigué/e?’ (Giving vocabulary such as après and trop in a definite context is important because connectives, prepositions and adverbs often allow children to express more shades of meaning. They need to encounter these words in sentences that have a real purpose and not just learn them as isolated items. Note that the ‘push’ from the teacher here is to ask for reasons. The question why in any target language needs to appear early and be used regularly.)

With these questions it is possible to respond in very simple or slightly less simple ways. This means pupils can self-differentiate but still participate – the emphasis is on communication and finding real answers to questions where the answers are not known in advance.

But it is also very positive to encourage children to experiment with using familiar language in different ways. Here they might want to express something about carrying things to school or the weather. If they are used to you as teacher wanting contributions and supporting making half-sentences into full sentences, then they may draw from previous work and offer: ‘j’aime...’, ‘parce que le sac est...’ or ‘il pleut...’. If you then supply a word like dormir, lourd or souvent, they will have the satisfaction of having made an original contribution and have a chance of remembering the new item because they heard it and put it into a real context that belonged to them.

The PowerPoint then led to a more challenging worksheet suitable for older KS2 learners with more depth of language learning behind them.
Culture, then, can be brought directly into the language teaching fabric of the lesson – it can be the lesson and is certainly not an add-on, which the teacher includes from time to time as a topic which gives a change from language work.

Reflection point
Think of an aspect of life in a target-language speaking country – preferably arising from experiences you have had personally – that would be an interesting cultural element for your teaching. What resources might you look for which would engage children and allow them to explore differences in the right spirit, and, preferably, using the foreign language? Write three questions you might use to help children notice and react to the aspect you have chosen.

Communication

Communication is obviously an essential part of language learning and teaching. Ask most modern language teachers if they have a style or method to their approach and they will reply that they are ‘communicative’ language teachers (see also Chapter Nine for a full discussion of this theme). The essence of that methodology is that learning occurs through authentic communication – real messages for real purposes using authentic language and authentic stimuli. This involves real menus, real transport timetables, real estate agents’ details of houses, real pen-friend letters from real children and real school timetables. The accepted curriculum is survival topics, which for example feature in the modern languages examinations at the national GCSE level, taken normally at age 16 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Clearly primary age children need to learn how to identify themselves and survive (with adult support) during a stay in a target language speaking country. It now seems common sense that we should achieve this by helping them to learn by using the real materials they will encounter when abroad, and that we should allow them to practise dialogue which could take place there. In doing so we should look to techniques from Drama (for example hot-seating or giving participants in a role-play ‘secret’ circumstances for the dialogue) to make the communication more inherently interesting and enjoyable. Even so, there is a danger in fashioning an entire language-learning curriculum around survival, especially when a concept such as van Ek’s ‘threshold
level’ (1975, van Ek and Trim 1991) can become diluted to a syllabus consisting of vocabulary, grammar structures and topics.

Van Ek (1975) listed the themes or topics needed as foreign language knowledge to survive in another country. With these he included the language functions, grammatical understanding, key vocabulary required, but also how the language worked as a system of communication, socially and culturally, and how speakers might compensate when their competence was limited. The ‘syllabus’ was one for survival, but in a sophisticated, linguistically competent way rather than what might be termed as at ‘phrase-book’ level.

In fact, in addition to those elements discourse competence, sociocultural competence and compensatory competence all appear in van Ek’s work and indicate the inclusion of genuine rather than staged (and stilted or mechanistic) communication. Even if GCSE examination boards maintain that this has been a part of their design, the reality is that it has not been tested at any but the highest levels. Examinations are notorious for setting the standards, objectives and ‘feel’ of teaching and learning (Volante 2004, Menken 2006) and it would appear that GCSE ML has done this. Ironically the low levels of thinking and creativity, the formulaic demand of role play and prepared questions, the endless listening and reading to spot contrived shades of meaning (that is, the lack of challenge) have resulted in the examinations being perceived as more difficult than those in other subjects. Difficulty in securing real motivation appears to have led to difficulty in fulfilling examination demands. One young secondary learner complained that her foreign language lessons were dominated by the unit tests and in the unit tests they had to learn what they were going to say or write and had no opportunity to respond using their real opinions and experience. This led to a slightly ludicrous situation where she had to write that she had visited the Louvre in Paris, when, although she really had been to Paris, she had not been to the Louvre. The option of writing the truth, that she had been to the Musée D’Orsay, was not allowed!

Of course survival in a foreign country through being able to use the language competently is a vital aim of language teaching and we should all equip our pupils with aspects of that skill, but if this is their only diet it is not surprising that learners in KS3 have often tired of it. So to explore communication more fully, we need to think what it is that learners are communicating about. This leads us to the next ‘C’ and shows us that communication as a concept by itself is limited.
Content

Content is often ignored in language teaching, where there is a tendency for the ‘medium to be the message’. In other words the content is the language itself rather than something else learned through language. As we saw above, if the content is an abstract global concept such as ‘survival’ there is a danger that processes can become mechanistic as learners try a range of parallel ways to reach a laudable but intangible aim. So objectives might focus on a list of vocabulary or a grammatical structure, or a skill such as complaining politely or the ability to give directions to a particular place. The problem with this is that it appears to learners as mostly either simply learning something for its own sake (for example, a list of words) or as relatively trivial content, unless a visit is imminent and they can see an immediate real purpose.

Using language is much more important than knowing language or knowing about language. Clearly to use language effectively you need to know some language and have some kind of overview of how it works as a system, but if objectives stop at the knowing or knowing about, it might be harder then to move on to using. If the objective is to use the language from the start, then the other factors will take care of themselves and the purpose of language learning will be unambiguous from the first lesson. Dropping a learner into a target language speaking country and asking them to survive is authentic and does have a meaningful content. But recreating that in a classroom amongst learners who all share a different language from the one being used and expecting reality to be suspended is less convincing. On the other hand, learning about something else (which may be cultural) has the effect of deflecting attention from overtly practising the language and onto solving a problem or establishing a new concept. An example of what we mean by this follows and the original of the worksheet we are referring to is available in the A La Française pack (Tobutt and Roche 2007 and see Chapter Ten).

Example from practice

Les monuments de Paris

Materials

Pictures of la Tour Eiffel, le Musée du Louvre, la Cathédrale Notre Dame

Facts (Formatted in boxes, they can also be cut up and used as a classification activity.)
C’est une église.
C’est un musée.
C’est une tour.

La construction a duré de 1163 à 1345.
La construction a duré de 1887 à 1889.
Il a été construit en 1594.

Elle a été construite par Gustave Eiffel.

La hauteur est 324 mètres.
La hauteur est 69 mètres.

La pyramide à l’entrée est 21 mètres haut.

Il y a plus de 12 millions de visiteurs par an.
Il y a plus de 6 millions de visiteurs par an.
Il y a plus de 8 millions de visiteurs par an.

Ici on peut voir La Mona Lisa de Leonardo da Vinci.

La tour a été construite de 18 038 pièces métalliques.

‘J’aime les arts.’

‘J’aime l’histoire.’

‘Je suis sportif! Je prends l’escalier!’

The activity here is to match the sentences to the monument. The objectives include learning some information about the three monuments, but also aim to broaden the knowledge of the pupils about the kind of historical sights which Paris offers, to reinforce a historical awareness that modern cities have features which originated at very different times. Language objectives are mainly about receptive language (that is, comprehension) and include, for some or all, using contextual reading to infer unknown vocabulary items, using grammatical information (il/elle and grammatical
gender). Depending on the level and experience of the pupils, the class could also be asked to reason in French. ‘La cathédrale est plus âgée que la tour’ / ‘La tour est plus populaire que la cathédrale, n’est-ce pas?’ / ‘La Mona Lisa est une peinture – c’est dans le musée.’ So, active language use as well as the receptive processing of language can be involved in an activity like this. Pupils will learn something (a non-linguistic content) and will have used language to do so, reinforcing vocabulary, pronunciation and possibly grammar.

Reflection point

Take any three common language teaching topics and list next to them three dimensions of content that you could involve in presenting the essential language to primary pupils. An example might be:

Colours – What are the primary/secondary colours? Which colours do we use to express different emotions? Survey of colours of family cars or own bedroom walls or pets.

Challenge

Challenge sits in the centre of our list of seven terms. It is especially connected with what we have just said about content and clearly links into the next issue, cognition. But all of the other ‘C’ words have a link into challenge if we interpret them in that way. Pupils generally welcome being challenged because they acknowledge that they are in school to learn and this process is often more stimulating when it is harder than when they simply coast. This is where excess repetition can be harmful, especially over time. If the content remains trivial and the curriculum is repetitive (the NC and GCSE survival topics have always tended to operate in a spiral which reoccurs at various points), if the activity types consist of short, undeveloped tasks with unsubstantial outcomes, then we should not be surprised if motivation drops. We can challenge our pupils in many ways, and the later chapters of the book will all deal with this as one of the constant themes. The main emphasis should always be on children discovering rather than being told, making for themselves connections which, admittedly, we may have set up for them, using language naturally and creatively and being inspired to go off and tell or teach someone else.

One Y4 boy responding to a questionnaire wrote the comment in Figure 2.2
The type of challenge is of course important and the same boy added this (see Figure 2.3) to a later question (we think ‘tingly’ might be the intention of the third word).

Cognition

Cognition then links to this discussion because essentially what we need to do in language lessons is make children think. This is at the heart of the learning process everywhere else so this should not be surprising. Thinking can be at different levels and in different guises. In commonly used language topics, thinking can be rather difficult to engender, because often the way these topics are approached is through fairly descriptive rather than analytical processes. When asking about likes and dislikes, for example, children may want to express more subtle shades of
opinion and you may wish to ask them why they have certain opinions. This raises more difficult vocabulary and structures. But we could argue that when languages are linked with other subjects, thinking is easier to manage. It can start at the level where children make a single, simple decision while using language in comprehension mode. Questions which operate like this might be: Did the Vikings have glass? Did they have chocolate? Is this sound from a violin or clarinet? Is this bridge made of wood or stone? Which of these animals is depicted in this collage? This level of vocabulary (that is, single words) does not need to be presented separately, or pre-taught, as the simple format of asking ‘Is it x or y?’ or ‘Was x true, yes or no?’ actually teaches that vocabulary while the learners’ minds are focused on the question being asked.

Thinking continues in the process where children make meaning from text, often as a group or whole class, as we showed in the example of the French monuments. It is present again when pupils are asked to reassemble sentences or to generate their own simple sentences in response to pictures. If we ask pupils to respond to simple open questions where the answer is personal and not already known by the teacher, we again move away from formulaic parroting of learnt material and back to a child having to think: ‘What has she asked me there? How do I respond?’

But thinking tends not to occur when vocabulary is simply repeated or when very tightly controlled pair practice or role-play is used, especially if the pupil’s own views or experience are not elicited by the task. The limitations of some common language learning activities are now clear. An example might be flashcard games which have a place in the learning cycle but will become formulaic and tedious if used at the same point in every new topic. Partly this is due to repetition of a format but also partly due to the nature of the format itself. Excessive practice of common topics, for example personal information, is a further example. If we rehearse too often questions to which we know the answer and everyone else in the class knows the answer and the pupil we are asking knows that everyone knows the answer, then the motivation to give that answer becomes minimal. The worst example of this is the type of question which goes: ‘¿Stephen, cómo te llamas?’ But asking ages in a single year class is similar unless you are investigating proportions with birthdays at different points or establishing an age order, in which case you need years and months. Even asking about brothers and sisters more than once falls into this category and needs another dimension. One good way to sidestep all of this is to ask pupils to take on a different identity and to keep it a secret. All of the same questions can then be asked but none of the answers will be known in advance. If we do not think about this, then, in the worst scenario, any real level of thinking can be absent from the entire learning cycle.
Reflection point

You have used a café menu to introduce a number of drinks. You do not want to play flashcard games with these items now, so need to consider some other activity that will involve some thinking as well as the use of the vocabulary. What could you do?

Collaboration

Collaboration is vital in language learning because language use generally involves some form of communication between two or more people. This might seem obvious given the amount of talk associated with the ML curriculum at all levels. However we do need to think beyond the obvious. Talking to a formula is not strictly collaboration and talking to a rigid formula makes the fact that two are involved in a dialogue almost superfluous. So, by collaboration we mean that a pair or a group of children are working for a real purpose (Oxford 1997, Dillenbourg 1999, Crandall 1999, Fisher 2002). This might be to make something, solve a problem or to exchange information in an authentic way. You might even combine all three if you operate a survey about pets to find out the average number of pets per pupil to create a pie-chart on pet-popularity, and perhaps push a little further by asking people whether they have had a pet who has died. While many children do know some other children’s pets’ names, colours and bad habits, this still contains a very real chance to find out unknown facts, to use the information for another purpose and to involve a more affective issue, which is all too real for many children.

But we are not just talking about talking. Children nearly always respond positively to questions which ask if they prefer to work collaboratively in general, and within the area of language learning this is especially true of reading. They tend to make much more of a text when reading in a pair or group, and also enjoy the reading more. In a group it tends to become a matter of collective ‘finding out’, of argument and it carries a greater (because more public) sense of task completion and satisfaction. Reading is also much more immediately accessible as an activity when carried out collaboratively. So we can ask children to read earlier and to read more if we do it this way. In an unpublished thesis (Hood 2000), we looked at lower secondary age children reading individually and in groups and found clear evidence of higher performance in the collaborative mode.
Competition

Very many pupils really love both playing games and solving problems and, in so doing, competing either individually or in teams. Competition can be healthy and can involve high levels of collaboration. We need to be careful only to ensure that the focus does not move so much on to competition that it leads to a desperation to win and shortcuts too much the language and the process of using the language. It can also lead to anxiety amongst some pupils (Oxford 1999, Crandall 1999, Pollard and Triggs 2000, Ortega 2007). Ortega particularly deals with the relationship between competitiveness and anxiety and offers a set of classroom procedures to ensure a healthy ethos. Whole-class games such as identifying vocabulary on the whiteboard as fast as possible have a danger of involving a very small number of pupils and leaving the majority on the sidelines at any one point. When using a whole-class format it is important to issue something (for example, a card with a number or vocabulary item) to everyone and then to carry out a team competition where an item is called out and the first person to stand up, show the card and say it correctly wins a point. This means anyone can be involved at any point. Group-based games have the advantage of involving far more people more continuously. An example of this (available in the A La Française pack, Tobutt and Roche 2007) is an envelope game involving euros that has a distant similarity to the TV programme, Deal or No Deal. Board games, which can be based on snakes and ladders type formats are popular, but tend to take more time to play. With these it is vital to think about ‘surround sound’ social language (which will be seen in Chapter 9 as language for learning) and to get as much target language activated as possible. This has to be prepared for and will not happen by itself.

Competition between the teacher and the class is extremely popular. A number of guessing games (with a number of guesses allowed or timed spans for the answer to be reached) can be played in the early stages as directly competitive and this has a certain motivational power, particularly if the class is able to work together. There is also the advantage that if the teacher is trying to guess a cultural object, location or other item that the class has chosen, he or she can use a good range of target language to ask questions and test out guesses to which the class need only answer yes or no. This has the effect of offering a good receptive language experience for the children without making impossible demands on them. Of course when the children start to want to take the teacher role they should be allowed to, even though their quantity of language will be far less.
In summary, we might say that competition which is firmly aimed at enhancing learning works very well. This can often be organised in teams so combining competition with collaboration. Competition, purely for its own sake might be popular for a time and with some pupils or classes, but in the end it will wear thin as a motivator.

Reflection point

Planning activity

- Take a language teaching lesson plan and evaluate it for Challenge by annotating it with examples of the other six Cs from the box on p. 21
- Are any of the Cs absent? Were opportunities missed?
- Could you insert them easily without changing the plan radically or should the lesson be completely re-planned?
- How challenging was this lesson and why do you think that?

From the review of the seven Cs above, we can now infer that the dangers might emerge from too much repetition or restriction of children’s natural desire to use language to communicate. If we over-rely on making it fun we may run into fun-fatigue. It is not that natural repetition or some measure of control over language is not part of the learning process and we mentioned earlier how important enjoyment is. But we need to mesh these elements in to the seven Cs to create a truly stimulating environment. To explore this further we will ask another question.

Reflection point

How can learning another language offer even more to a school (for example, by reinforcing the development of core skills such as first language or EAL, numeracy or reasoning)?

Learning another language has always been seen by teachers as a potential consolidation tool for learners with particular difficulties. For example, in Y7 teachers have often commented that ‘doing the time’ in a foreign language offers students who still have difficulties with this life skill to gain practice in a non-threatening environment with others who are also learning it for the first time in French, German or Spanish.
If we make comparisons between the core subjects and languages we can see a potential two-way process, where the foreign language draws from the skills established for the core subject but also gives back to them, reinforcing and extending those same skills. This applies to all pupils, not only those with specific or special needs and establishes ML as a truly integrated subject. In this chapter we will look in depth at examples from Literacy.

ML and Literacy

The strands that lead the objectives in the primary framework for literacy (see www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primaryframework/literacy/learning_objectives/Strands/) are as follows:

1. Speaking
2. Listening and responding
3. Group discussion, interaction
4. Drama
5. Word recognition
6. Word structure and spelling
7. Understand and interpret texts
8. Engage with, respond to texts
9. Creating and shaping texts
10. Text structure and organisation
11. Sentence structure, punctuation
12. Presentation

Each strand has separate objectives for each year group so the complete package consists of over 300 separate objectives. Some of these objectives will be difficult to envisage as realistic for ML at the parallel age level, but some can be seen in this way and we will look at two of the strands to demonstrate this.
Speaking
Here is the Y3 set for Speaking, the first strand.

- Choose and prepare poems or stories for performance, identifying appropriate expression, tone, volume and use of voices and other sounds.

- Explain process or present information, ensuring that items are clearly sequenced, relevant details are included and accounts are ended effectively.

- Sustain conversation, explain or give reasons for their views or choices.

- Develop and use specific vocabulary in different contexts.

We can see immediately that beginner language learners at the start of KS2 will not be able to use the language at a level remotely approaching how they use mother tongue or English as an additional language. But it is important to establish what they will be able to do by the end of that year. If the language lessons are sufficiently broadly based and offer enough challenge, they will have encountered simple poems, stories and songs. In joining in with more repetitive elements they will not just get words but meaning as conveyed through intonation and volume, and they will also have a sense of context. This is absolutely true of a class which contains some pupils with EAL. It is important that they are able to contribute by presenting their own work alongside that of their peers. This will often be at a simpler level but they will also learn from hearing more able first language speakers use a similar format with richer vocabulary or more complex syntax. Because it is the same format, they will make more direct gains, as they hear this language in context, and imitation at first will lead on to internalisation and their ability to make the language their own. In an ML class most pupils will be at a similar level so the teacher’s encouragement to use richer language is crucial. In a Y1 class of Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, for example, children who had heard ‘We’re going on a bear hunt’ in a morning lesson were seen in the dinner queue later playing a game in which they chorused ‘We’re not scared!’ in just the right tone and context, and they clearly loved playing a game with the language they had just met.

If the language lessons include a measure of content, for example science, then sequences will be embedded in the work the children cover. Helping plants grow well as a topic offers the opportunity to create simple checklists, combining visuals and text with either simple lists or sequences information. Figure 2.4 shows how such language might be stimulated and what the best pupils might produce at first in spoken form, and later in writing.
Language learning is expected to involve opinion giving. In KS3, levels 3 and 4 mention personal responses and opinion giving. In other words, it is expected that Y7 students have been exposed to this during the first year of learning. Clearly then, Y3 children should be able to meet contexts where they talk about an item of personal interest and give some simple reasons for their preferences. This might involve food and healthy approaches. A simple organiser to prepare for such conversations might be a matrix with four quadrants, labelled as Figure 2.5 shows. By locating foods onto the matrix children are ready to give simple opinions about healthy eating and the more able will be able to add some simple reasons. When this is put together into a paired comparative dialogue or a mini-presentation, we get material relevant to the third of our speaking objectives listed above.

The use of more precise vocabulary is also simple to draw together. Language schemes of work often involve colours in the early stages, but at Y3 level children are already more sophisticated about their colour appreciation to settle only for the major primary/secondary colours with no qualifiers. It is not complex to introduce words for light- dark- and even shiny, fluorescent and so more closely reach the expressions children want to use.
Perhaps the Speaking objectives will be felt to be a very easily accessible set for such comparisons. Grammatical strands are no more complicated, as the fact that children are focusing on such issues in English makes it very easy to focus them also in a foreign language. They will naturally seek patterns and comment on what they find. This comparative approach gives extra support to both languages. But we can look for a more complex set to see if the case for a parallel focus between Literacy and ML can really be substantiated.

**Understanding and interpreting texts**

Here is the Y3 set for Understanding and Interpreting texts – an aspect that people may feel is beyond the beginner language learner.

- Identify and make notes of the main points of section(s) of text.
- Infer characters’ feelings in fiction and consequences in logical explanations.
- Identify how different texts are organised, including reference texts, magazines and leaflets, on paper and on screen.
- Use syntax, context and word structure to build their store of vocabulary as they read for meaning.
- Explore how different texts appeal to readers using varied sentence structures and descriptive language.
As we will show later in the book, it is vital that children are exposed to text at a level commensurate with their experience in English from the very beginnings of learning. Again we should remember that an enormous amount of importance attached to text is signalled to them every day in literacy lessons. Therefore it is illogical not to make parallels with French, German, Spanish or another language. So often the ‘diet’ we give learners is simply accessed by them as individuals at an appropriate level for their current development. Children in Foundation Stage who are really interested in letter patterns through their phonics work and who pick out letters and sounds while listening to stories from a big book that they see in front of them, will naturally do the same in the foreign language. If they have not yet reached that stage in work through English, they will not. By Y3 rhyming patterns in a poem, significant stages in a story, or key words in the description of a town or village will be visible and ‘note-taking’ (probably orally and collaboratively) is more than possible. Again from the beginnings of learning in F1 or F2 children listen avidly to stories in a foreign language, look closely at pictures, ‘hear’ intonation and emotion portrayed through the reading and so identify and empathise with characters or situations. At first it may be preferable to talk in English about a story that they have heard in a foreign language, making the most of the foreign language experience of listening. As with the grammatical objectives, learners focusing on text organisation in English will be able to make similar comments about foreign language informational texts and will be able also to use that structural understanding to help them to identify and infer word meanings, so meeting aspects of the third and fourth objectives above.

Perhaps these objectives are best viewed from the point of view of a single theme – an example might be endangered species. The webpage www.linternaute.com/nature-animaux/animaux/dossiers/especes-menacees/top-10/index.shtml gives access to short dossiers which a teacher could use to produce visuals and simple facts under a theme of Sauvez...

For example from the card about giant pandas, the ‘start text’ is:

**Panda géant: Où vit-il?**

The teacher can elicit the real key words through asking the class collaboratively to supply possible endings to the sentence: ‘Le panda géant habite...’. They might offer:
This can lead to poster work – Sauvez les pandas géants, where design is informed through the preceding language work and where some Y4 shaping text objectives about persuasiveness are anticipated. Using story books linked to the theme allows it to be located in the child’s wider work – even if these are for younger children such as Eric Carle’s ‘Panda Bear, Panda Bear, What do you see?’ told in the target language.

For Objective 5, at a very simple level teachers could show, for example through simple poetry, how the language can sound different with different intentions. Ideally this could involve poems written by NS children on the endangered animals theme.

The two examples given of ML work associated with Literacy Framework objectives are not contrived to make a link that does not really exist. They demonstrate that a modern language functions as language just as English does, that we need to see the role of the language in our teaching, as well as the language, as a teaching end in itself, and that we need to encourage our pupils to communicate in and play with the language as well as to ‘learn’ it.

Reflection point

Take the listening and responding strand objectives (Y1 and Y2) from the Literacy Framework. These are:

**Y1**
- Listen with sustained concentration, building new stores of words in different contexts.
- Listen to and follow instructions accurately, asking for help and clarification if necessary.
- Listen to tapes or video and express views about how a story or information has been presented.

**Y2**
- Listen to others in class, ask relevant questions and follow instructions.
- Listen to talk by an adult, remember some specific points and identify what they have learned.
- Respond to presentations by describing characters, repeating some highlights and commenting constructively.

Which of these could you imagine being used as ML objectives for a Y3 class by the end of the year? Make a few notes about how you might approach one of them.
What differences are there between ‘language lessons’ and the experience of a child coming into a school with EAL?

To complete the final point from the previous section – that language should be used to serve our teaching and not be an end in itself – we can make a further analogy with EAL. This is the term used to describe the context of a learner who does not have English as a first language. We will explore the research base to CLIL and EAL in Chapter Eight but it is important at this stage to note that teachers working with children with EAL operate a sophisticated model of scaffolding and differentiation within what is for the children with EAL an immersion framework. Being surrounded by the language and being set carefully planned, purposeful tasks with clear outcomes should ensure a positive learning context for all to gain from it what they can. These skills are very close to what is needed by language teachers and language learning should be as broad as this. The answer to the question is therefore that the differences should be of context not so much of experience. The contextual advantage for teachers of a foreign language is that most of the class will probably know a similar amount of the language as each other, whereas the parallel advantage for teachers of EAL is that they have native or near-native command of English. Clearly the ML teacher with strong competence and who has experience also of EAL has the best of all possible starting points!

Chapter summary

What can language learning offer primary age children and what can it offer a primary school? We hope that this chapter has demonstrated that learning a language can play a very full role in a primary school and in the experience of its children. As ML enters the compulsory primary curriculum, it is difficult to see it as just another foundation subject. It needs regularity of timetabling and this is not a status offered to most other foundation subjects (except Physical Education (PE) and perhaps Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education (PSHCE)). The embedding across the day and week in its use in registration, classroom organisation and management, routines, and perhaps through music in assemblies means that it can almost disappear from having an overt focus. Certainly some schools feeling the intensity of time pressure will look to account for a major part of ML provision through embedding, and with only a smaller official time allocation. But this will not serve

(Continued)
anyone’s purpose in the longer term. It may sound greedy on our part but the embedding should not be seen as a part of the provision, but rather a way to prove that ML is a legitimate means of communication for real purposes. The way to ‘save time’ in the longer run is to give more but to ask for more back. ML can contribute to the whole curriculum by taking some of that content in every single subject (including Literacy!) and presenting it to children and asking them to work on it in the target language. But first it has to be established as an aspect of school life which has real status and real support from all staff no matter what their capability. In return the school and the school population should see an increase in confidence, self-esteem and an opening out towards the new horizons, which greater cultural exposure can provide. School linking, backed by two-way language use, is so much more satisfying than the realisation that both sides just have to use English, and that we cannot quite deliver what the other school seems able to do.

The chapter has tried to provide very practical strategies to offer a full range of experiences to pupils in schools. These have not been specific to age, ability or experience but organised to demonstrate the importance of elements such as the seven Cs. The next set of chapters will look in more detail at specific ages or specific stages of development of the language curriculum and of pupil competence in a school.

Key and Further Reading

QCA’s ‘Big Picture’, accessible at www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/Big_Picture_2008.pdf is a useful overview of how the role of individual subjects is only a small part of something much larger in terms of global educational focus. This is also, conversely, a useful way of showing the breadth and scope of any one subject. We would include Primary ML in this view.


To see a practical example from an EAL context, look at: www.naldic.org.uk/docs/resources/vignettes.cfm and choose ‘Primary Vignette 1’. This shows how a teacher can be sensitive to the language needs of learners without sacrificing challenge and cognition.