

TOWARDS A WHOLE-SCHOOL APPROACH TO MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

In this paper I will argue that a foreign language competence is most profitably developed when it is integrated into and contextualised within a whole-school framework. I will define the parameters of 'the whole school' and discuss contributions and support mechanisms as well as identifying areas of difficulty. Finally, I will propose policy guidelines and ways in which such a policy may be implemented. Whilst the most natural setting is the Primary school, this model has application in the Secondary phase.

DEFINING "THE WHOLE SCHOOL"

There is a superficial tendency to think of the school unit as a sum total of its teachers and pupils but, in fact, the influences and impact come from and are felt by a much broader sphere. This sphere extends some way beyond the four walls of the school building. The most important influence outside of the school and yet inextricably linked to the 'product' (pupils) and 'process' (learning experience) is, of course, the family, a term I use in preference to the parents, given the varied, diffuse and extended nature of families these days. Research has shown conclusively that supportive home-school links are crucial in maximising the child's potential. Proactively seeking to involve parents in the learning experience is a vital strategy to further this aim. Pollard asserts that: "The argument for a close working 'partnership' between parents and teachers is unassailable. When it occurs it is beneficial to the children's learning and experience"¹.

¹ Pollard, A. Learning in Primary Schools. Cassell, London 1990, p. 71.

The school is also part of a larger community in which some institutions have a direct role to play in education. These would include neighbouring schools and any other institutions with which there were links, Teacher Education Colleges, Colleges of Further Education and the accountability structure inherent within and emanating from the Inspectorate. All of these contribute to the shaping of the MFL curriculum in some way either directly or indirectly. The community comprises also the commercial sectors of business and leisure with whom productive links can be forged to secure sponsorship deals and support of various kinds which should be welcomed and cultivated.

The school/community network, I am suggesting, is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional with the potential for a substantial supportive role in children's learning endeavours. It extends and can build on the internal whole-school structure with its special reference to shared visions, beliefs and values of all those working in the school.

Returning to the image of the child closeted within four walls, this is a very bleak but all too common reality. It borders on absurdity when subject areas become boxed off and compartmentalised, especially in the secondary phase of learning. The child's vision of the world and its natural approach to learning is complex and cross-referenced. It is, in essence, holistic and what I am proposing is an approach which seeks to create aspects of a more integrated curriculum, a curriculum which is entirely suitable to the primary learning experience and one which would incorporate the foreign language. It would provide what Hargreaves² calls "coherence" in learning, as he explains:

"Coherence is about the way the curriculum as a whole hangs together. When a curriculum is coherent, the various parts of the curriculum have a clear and explicit relationship with one another. The curriculum has a rationale and can be planned so that many different parts fit together to make it a whole. An integrated approach .. requires teachers to achieve between subject coherence"

Whilst acknowledging the danger of Bernsteinian³'weak' borders to subjects which can degenerate into fairly aimless topic work, when cross-curricular work is well planned, it is a superior learning opportunity for the pupils. It is also of immense value to the teachers who themselves can learn through collaborative working practices through extensions into subject areas other than their own.

² Hargreaves, D. in *Teaching and Learning in the Primary School*, Pollard and Bourne (eds.). Routledge, London 1994, p. 185.

³ Bernstein, B. 'On the Classification and Framing of Educational Knowledge' in *Class, Codes and Control*, Vol 3, Routledge and Kogan Paul, London 1977.

AN EXAMPLE OF GOOD PRACTICE

The best recent example I have come across is in a Primary school where a 5 week module of work on the theme of 'Communication' was planned for a class of 8 year olds. This brought together teachers of the foreign language, English mother tongue, History, Maths, IT and Art. The module was carefully crafted to provide an interpretation of the topic through each subject. The structure of this is shown in figure1.

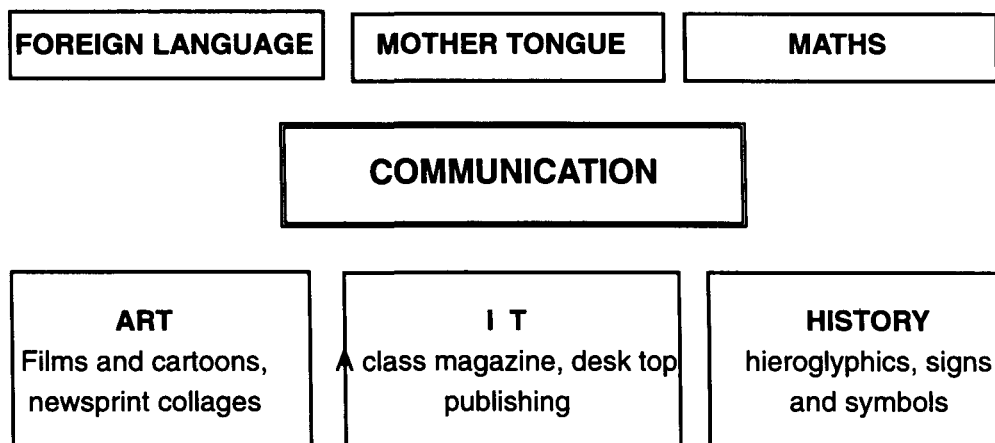


Figure 1

Each contribution was logged to provide weekly integrated blocks. If we consider the advantages for the foreign language alone, the foreign language was liberated from its regular 2 hour slot on the timetable and expanded into another areas of the curriculum, providing a more authentic context of learning. Support and reinforcement were provided by teachers of the other subjects, and, possibly more importantly, validation and positive reinforcement which may serve to develop good attitudes and increased status generally. The topic of communication is particularly apposite, being heavily language dependent and a powerful tool for developing language development generally. However, almost any topic has potential for similar exploitation.

A large measure of collaborative working was required from the teachers which may understandably be an obstacle to such learning ventures. I acknowledge the practical difficulties of lack of time, even overt resistance

from colleagues. What might the source of such resistance be? Possibly linguistic inadequacy in which case a little, preferably enjoyable, in-house training will be necessary. Thereafter, the module becomes infinitely recyclable and provide a template for other models. The satisfaction of the teachers themselves when they share, plan and learn from each other is immensely enriching and liberating. What I have just described is an example of a learning module which is complete in itself and reaches a conclusion. The model I would also wish to postulate is a permeation model which integrates foreign language learning across the whole curriculum on a more permanent basis. There are many fairly painless ways in which this can be developed, all of which should be led and co-ordinated by the foreign language teacher. I am involved in the planning of such a scheme for my local primary school. This is to be our plan of action:

A PROGRESSIVE CYCLICAL WHOLE-SCHOOL FOREIGN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM

French, our foreign language will be introduced in Year1 (it used to be called the Reception Class) where the children are aged 4_ to 5 years old. At this stage it will consist of no more than a simple foreign language greeting and French nursery rhyme songs. The children find this exciting and from our analytical point of view, it provides a very early aural sensitisation exercise. In Year2, additional songs are included in the repertoire along with simple numbers which serve to reinforce number work generally. In Year3 further rhymes, higher numbers and and the transaction of asking for and saying names are included. In Year4 we add asking and telling someone_s age, the weather (from a limited choice of expressions) and colours. In class 5 we shall revise French and do a taster course in German.

The reasons for this are both practical and ideological. Firstly, Years 5 and 6 are taught together and we do not wish to repeat the final Year French course proper. Secondly, this is our contribution to diversification of languages other than French and to a practical cultivation of the European dimension as opposed to a French dimension. Spanish is next on the cards! In Year 6 the pupils follow a fairly intensive French course based on well-established materials developed by teachers in the region.

This bold experiment will require proper resourcing and the appropriate professional development for the teachers, only one of whom

in this particular school is foreign language trained. The latter, supported by a Higher Education tutor, will train the teachers 'on the spot' for their particular contribution. Security comes from being able to cope with the 'tranche' allocated and negotiated and feeling comfortable with it. Using a foreign language can be just as intimidating to adults, indeed, if not more so.

FORGING OF LINKS

Starting from the premise that we do not undertake this project in isolation, we shall create and cultivate links with a wide range of people and institutions who can support us. The traffic will not be one-way but two-way, involving an exchange of materials and support. From the point of view of the English Primary School, this will include working with a link school in the Pas-de-Calais and we envisage an exchange of pictures and realia as well as teacher visits. It is to state the obvious to enumerate the many benefits of linked schools although these are prone to whether through lack of appropriately interesting and realistic activities for the children. Let us be honest, letter writing can be exceedingly tedious and perhaps not the contemporary medium of communication.

We shall also work exceedingly closely with our neighbouring secondary schools (who have supported the Primary French movement), learning from their expertise and planning, in collaboration with secondary colleagues, our place in the curriculum of foreign language learning. a continuum which best crosses the primary-secondary divide, providing a continuous, coherent and progressive learning experience.

Parents will be a primary focus, recognising, as mentioned in the introduction, the key role they play in their children's learning curve. They will be invited into school both to observe and experience foreign language learning for themselves and shown how to support their children e.g. through practice and extension work at home. The majority of parents do not know how to help their children unless shown how to. It is the school's responsibility to reach out to them. Many of them will have little or no knowledge of the foreign language in which case an additional responsibility on the pupil will be to model the language, an interesting, useful and motivating reversal of roles.

DEVELOPING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROFILE

In an increasing frontier-free world, the place of the foreign language is becoming more central. We must seek to develop a higher profile for our subject through shameless self-promotion. The visibility factor can be enhanced through placing foreign language notices around the school, and through regular and fresh displays of foreign language work. These should not be restricted to the written word. On the contrary, we intend to make presentations to the whole school; mini-dramas, for example, sing-songs and hold special occasions such as French Days. We shall call in the local press for photo-opportunities and celebrate our achievements, however modest. When one enters the classroom and the foreign language lesson is in progress, only the foreign language may be used! We shall expect the headteacher and other colleagues to come in to see, participate and enjoy. Such actions give potent messages to the pupils about the value of the activity. So much, then, for one school's ambitions, strongly supported by the headteacher. It has been shown that educational innovation requires the support of the head of school. Fullan for example, claims that "All major research on innovation and school effectiveness shows that the (headteacher) strongly influences the likelihood of change" since their "actions serve to legitimate whether a change is to be taken seriously ... and to support teachers both psychologically and with resources". The beneficiaries of integrated learning are not just the foreign language protagonists but the whole school as the endeavour becomes more acutely skilled and wide reaching. The curriculum is thus enhanced by a rich seam of linguistic, social and cultural learning, impacting on the personal growth of the pupils.

A very cogent argument for a permeation model of foreign language learning is the impact that the foreign language has on language learning and language development generally through the reinforcement of key language learning strategies, the contrastive and comparative study of languages and as a foundation for future language learning. Additionally an understanding of the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures is invaluable and, rather than being siphoned off in peripheral or isolated learning contexts, is best learned through a whole-school commitment.

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