

## Primary Foreign Languages: School Practice

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This second bulletin will examine foreign language (FL) practice within English primary schools: the National Curriculum requirements, Ofsted guidance and how schools approach meeting these.

### **Building Blocks of Language:**

According to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) and Ofsted (2021) the building blocks of language are phonology, grammatical structures and vocabulary. Knowledge of these “should enable pupils to understand and communicate ideas, facts and feelings in speech and writing” (DfE, 2013). Therefore, schools are expected to carefully plan these blocks into their curriculums, ensuring the sequence results in all pupils making progress. Equality in access to FL education (e.g. disadvantaged and SEND children) is also an expectation (Ofsted, 2021).

The requirements of the National Curriculum across the four modalities of language may be surprising, particularly in the area of writing. For example, pupils should be taught to “write at varying length, for different purposes and audiences, using the variety of grammatical structures that



they have learnt”. Historically, oracy (speaking and listening) has tended to take precedent over reading and writing (Cable et al., 2010, 2012). However, this does not mean the same amount of curriculum time needs to be dedicated to each skill, as “different levels may be required in the four skills” Nikolov and Djigunovi (2006:241).

General and subject specific pedagogy needs careful consideration. It is known that younger learners generally make slow progress in FL learning (Nikolov, 2009), an issue which

can be exacerbated by limited lesson time (Ofsted, 2021). The challenge, therefore, is how to ensure that the learning is ‘sticky’ to maximise limited time. Language lessons may borrow practice from general primary pedagogies such as interleaving or spaced learning (Weinstein, Sumeracki and Caviglioli, 2018) or use more subject specific pedagogies such as singing or rhymes, using total physical response (TPR). Finally, assessment, both formative (error correction included) and summative (transition documents to KS3) should not be overlooked in the primary phase, and again

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practice can be 'borrowed'/adapted from general primary pedagogies.

While Ofsted provide much guidance about how to approach the teaching of the 'building blocks of language' (Research Review Series: Languages (2021), Wardle (2021), and the twenty-four languages inspections were carried out between November 2019 and March 2020) they omit to scaffold schools in the area of teaching intercultural understanding (ICU). In fact, this term is not used at all in any key policy documents after 2013, instead Ofsted refer to a myriad of terms such as, "intercultural activities" or "discovering more about other cultures and peoples", "fully explore[ing] cultures" and "cultural awareness". This could be described as a missed opportunity as this is and always has been a poorly understood and taught area of the languages curriculum, and is simply 'just expected to happen' (Wade and Marshall, 2009; Cable et al., 2010).

Primary school children are ideally placed to develop their ICU (Byram, 1997). However, ICU needs to be explicitly planned to avoid the reaffirming of stereotypes, through what Kramersch refers to as the 4 Fs (food, fairs, folklore and facts). Meaningful cultural exploration links seamlessly to SMSC, human geography and PSHE. It is not simply learning cultural facts, instead children should be taught intercultural skills and knowledge. Many teachers may not fully understand what is encompassed by the term ICU thus misuse the term to mean a standalone cultural event, or 'cultural anecdotes' (Driscoll, 2000) or facts about the country being studied (Kramersch, 1991). This should not be

*Primary Languages Network (PLN), who teach foreign languages to 800 schools across the UK, shared how they delivered meaningful ICU. Set against the backdrop of Amal's Walk, (July to November 2021), 'an international arts festival meets endurance event' ([www.walkwithamal.org](http://www.walkwithamal.org)) in support of refugees, the network created lessons based around the book, *Réfugié n'Est Pas Mon Nom*. Using the book and the walk as a stimuli the children considered the lives of refugee children, reflecting on how they might feel and what they might think. They used empathy and imagination to try to better understand refugees' experiences, and the target language to express these thoughts.*



Example of children's ICU work



a surprise as initial teacher training rarely provides in-depth coverage of this area for trainee teachers. It is a source of regret that while ICU is important enough to form the National Curriculum's 'purpose of study': "Learning a foreign language is a liberation from insularity and provides an opening to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world." *DfE (2013: 1)* it is excluded from the subject content entirely, omitted from the Research Review Series: Languages (Ofsted, 2021), and has token descriptive coverage in the 24 language subject Ofsted reports. Without being explicitly covered by these documents, where teachers look for support and guidance, it is likely that the fragmented approach to teaching ICU will continue (Driscoll et al., 2013).

### Primary schools teaching phonics

Teaching phonics enables children to visualise, decode and record new vocabulary and provides an additional language learning strategy rather than just whole word memorisation. An overreliance on memorisation can be demotivational for young learners (Martin, 2012) and without the explicit teaching of grapheme-phoneme-correspondence children's FL or target language literacy development can be limited. Children may make incorrect assumptions, particularly children who may struggle with reading and writing in English (Courtney et al., 2015) and so the intentional teaching of target language rather than incidental may yield better results for pupils at the start of their language learning journey. Curriculum plans are expected to demonstrate this phonics progression (inc. where the target language and English differ) and how subtle sound differences can alter meaning.



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### Primary schools teaching vocabulary

Teaching of vocabulary should be progressive in nature, rather than siloed. A spiral approach to the curriculum can aid children as they can reuse vocabulary (and grammar) throughout the terms and years, allowing for increasingly complex language construction, and semantic networks to develop across contexts. Making links between English and the target language (e.g., through cognates or etymology) can benefit the learners with their second language study, but also their English too. If learners revisit language in different contexts and modalities it helps long term memory storage.

Ofsted (2021), state that consideration should be given to how frequently words are encountered and to introduce children to these more frequent words earlier. At primary school, the vocabulary taught should be relevant, interesting and appropriate for the age of the learner, otherwise, teachers run the risk of alienating their students by demotivating them. It is worth noting, that within reason, young learners are motivated by what motivates their teacher (Nikolv, 1999). This is important, because some teachers will not enjoy teaching languages, perhaps because of their own experiences or lack of confidence.

Exposure to the target language can help to increase children's vocabulary. In addition to the teacher's FL production the children could also be exposed to other voices and accents. However, care should be taken not to overwhelm or confuse. A great way to introduce children to the sounds, rhythms and new vocabulary of the

Primary Languages Network teaches phonics in a variety of fun approaches, drawing on general primary pedagogy. They French phonics charts for the classroom which operate like 'working walls', these are added to as the children encounter new sounds. This means that the children can refer to these in lessons. Another way of presenting the same information is through using lego. Children add bricks (sounds) to build 'a wall of phonics' as they encounter specific sounds. At the start of lessons, tongue twisters are used as a way of introducing and practising a specific sound. PLN have created videos using the written word, of which the sounds are highlighted, and native speakers performing these.

#### Bricks (sounds) to build 'a wall of phonics'

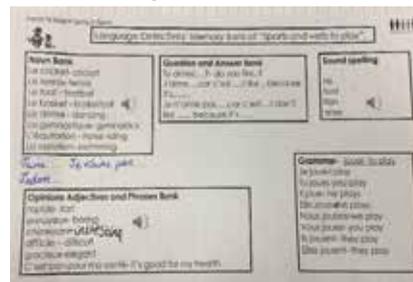
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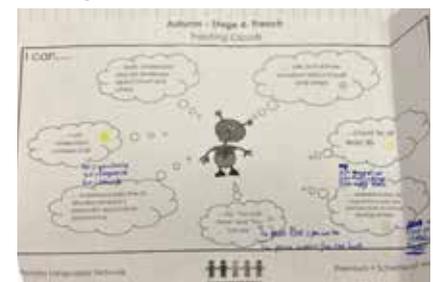
At Broomfields Junior School, the pupils have a foreign languages book, which follows them across the key stage. This enables the pupils to make notes, and refer back to previous vocabulary to build sentences. New vocabulary is taught using a variety of strategies to enable the children to listen to and produce the new language as much as possible, without becoming bored. Primary language pedagogies for this include TPR, games and songs, such as using the vocabulary to answer the register so that the children hear it thirty times.

At the start of units, the pupils have a knowledge organiser, complete with sound files for the teacher and tracking cloud. The tracking clouds are an assessment tool which is used at the start of a block, so that the children know where they are going, they are then revisited at the end of the block. A single sheet of A4, in the form of a puzzle, (puzzle it out) acts as the unit summative assessment. These come with QR codes, which link to sound files of the pupils speaking, and photographs of work.

#### Phonics working wall



#### Tracking cloud



target language is the use of familiar stories. By using texts, with which the children are familiar, supported by illustrations and repetitive language the children can enjoy hearing the target language without worrying about plot.

### Primary schools teaching grammar

The explicit teaching of grammar should be planned for in FL lessons. However, the level of detail and technicalities may surprise some schools and is perhaps best illuminated with some comments from the twenty-four language Ofsted inspections:

*"5 pupils understood the use of 'à' and how it changes with some definite articles. They could explain the concept of masculine and feminine words. However, pupils do not have a clear understanding of basic grammatical features such as pronouns other than 'je', the connection between French words for 'the' and 'a', and high-frequency verbs. This limits their ability to build sentences independently and hinders their understanding of patterns in the language"*

And

*"They knew the difference between 'mon', 'ma' and 'mes' and older pupils knew that there are three genders for nouns in German. However, pupils could not apply this to other contexts, such as the difference between 'un/une'. The disjointed approach to teaching basic grammar does not support pupils' understanding of how each language works."*

Other feedback included that there were gaps in teachers' knowledge of grammar, and pupils who understood basic grammar, but because this has been taught as a 'set-piece', they were unable to manipulate sentences and their progress, over time, stalled.

*At Broomfields Junior School, grammar is taught in a visual way. For example, using large colour coded flashcards which the children can physically move to create sentences. By introducing new grammar in this way, it is easier for the children to physically move to correct themselves than if they started by writing sentences. Such a low stakes*

*approach helps to engage children in the grammar aspect, rather than worrying about the writing.*

### Conclusion

The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) requires high standards of teaching and learning in foreign languages. However, since FL became a statutory, it has been difficult for most primary schools to develop their curriculums given the well documented issues of staffing, funding, time and high-stakes testing in the core subjects. More recently, the challenges of Covid-19 has placed even more demands on schools: from feeding pupils, providing mental health support for children and families and delivering a 'catch-up' curriculum. Structural support for foreign language education in England needs to be addressed simply expecting more from primary schools without investing in foreign language infrastructure is unrealistic and unfair.

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## Pen Portrait

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