

Primary Innovations Seminar, Vietnam, March 2007

Working Paper: **Primary languages-in-education policies: planning for engagement and sustainability**

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Through the late twentieth and early twenty-first century economic activity has operated in an increasingly global space. This unprecedented degree of interconnectedness has led to a rising value being placed on the acquisition of foreign language skills, which are now viewed by many as essential cultural capital for future economic success. In this context, politicians worldwide seek to ensure that their national education systems can provide a flexible mobile labour force, equipped with the linguistic skills to fully participate in this global enterprise. Increasingly, the political response is a decision to begin foreign/second language teaching from the very earliest phases of compulsory schooling.

In this paper I will interrogate such decisions, drawing on both linguistic and broader educational evidence to highlight the factors to be considered if we are to provide a context for learning that will enable young children to engage fully in taking those first, tentative steps towards feeling comfortable and confident in the language, whilst also ensuring the school system is able to fully implement a robust, sustainable model for delivery capable of full integration within a state school framework.

**Politics and linguistics**

In many parts of the world today there exists a great deal of rhetoric proclaiming the advantage of an early start to language learning. For example, in just the last four years or so in Europe, the Italian president claimed that an early start would allow Italy to enter fully into the global marketplace, the British prime minister announced that languages are easier to learn if you start early, whilst the Polish prime minister made the unexpected statement that English would be taught from grade 1 throughout the country within the next two years whilst speaking at the inaugural speech of the new government. In contrast, much of the evidence from linguists is rather less certain. Singleton & Ryan (2004: 227) in a major review of research in the field of second language acquisition confirm that evidence from school settings for language learning is insufficient and contradictory. They point out that opinions regarding the advantages of early language learning have been much-influenced by studies from naturalistic settings where individual children have acquired an additional language as a result of daily exposure in the home context, or from immersion settings where children have come to live in a region where a second/foreign language is all around them – both in the school and the wider societal context. Studies emanating from the bi-lingual contexts of Canada have been very influential here (Genesee 1978/9). Over-generalising the potential for early language learning in schooled contexts on the basis of evidence from other settings is clearly unwise. The consequence is likely to be unrealistic expectations with the potential for blaming teachers when rapid progress fails to take place.

## **Policy drivers**

Accounting for this trend from another perspective, it appears that globally much of the impetus to introduce the teaching of a second or foreign language at a younger age seems to be set in motion by one of three drivers (none of them related to language, per se):

- A desired shift in political alliances
- A trend towards economic globalisation
- A perceived increase in global interconnectedness

Taking Europe as a regional illustration of the above analysis, I will comment on how these drivers have operated there. Firstly, Europe (and particularly the European Union) has increasingly sought to build alliances which might develop greater understanding and thus aid both trade and cultural stability. A major platform on which this construct rests is the notion of plurilingualism as a goal for every European citizen. It is argued that this will prove an essential tool with which to conduct business both across Europe and globally. Most recently, the EU rhetoric has, somewhat belatedly, also acknowledged the importance of non-European languages (particularly Chinese (Putonghua) and Arabic), hence its briefings no longer refer to the importance of learning 'the language of our neighbours' alone.

The argument concerning early language learning (and particularly English) proposes that the Euro-region now operates as one of three supra-national economic regions (the other two being North America and Asia), each of which relies on the others in maintaining a competitive balance to survive (Dale 2005). In this context, Europe identifies English as the only possible language for such supra-national transactions and hence is likely to promote as strongly as the North American economic region already does. Linked to this point is the notion of increased global interconnectedness, which itself is predicated on the essential facilitator of digital technologies. Whilst the phenomenal growth in the accessibility of such technologies in the metropolitan centres of the Euro-region is all too evident, nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that access to computers (and hence to the internet) is currently only enjoyed by some 12% of the world's population (Robertson 2006). With this awareness, surely the rhetoric of inter-connectedness and hence the importance of English in Europe should perhaps be linked with discussions of elites and of exclusion.

## **The role of further research**

In contextualising my discussion of early English language learning, within the intensely political framework, my aim is exercise a note of caution in the ready acceptance of current policy trends and to encourage an acknowledgement of the realities of what can be achieved in schooled contexts, particularly those where teachers have only quite limited training or where pupils have only a limited amount of curriculum time available for English language learning. As indicated previously, there is an urgent need for further research in this field; research that moves beyond the purely linguistic, to build our understanding of motivation, of how it might vary over time and of how we might influence it with early language learners (Edelenbos et al 2007). Also particularly needed is greater understanding of the central role of the teacher and of what constitutes a 'good' teacher of early language learners. At present

there exists many expressed opinions on such issues, but insufficient empirical evidence to inform our future planning.

### **Policy solutions from Europe to China**

Despite this substantial gap in our current knowledge, professionals in the field of early language learning have an immediate responsibility to guide and assist in the planning and implementation of early language-in-education policies increasingly frequently in many parts of the world today. In this section I will draw on examples from both Europe and China to illustrate many of the contemporary debates and discuss some of the solutions so far identified.

An initial summative view of European early language policy appears to present a quite uniform pattern. Figure 1 below (as at March 2007) indicates a strong preference for a start age of approximately 6 years, with a secondary preference for 8-9 years. This trend towards an earlier start has escalated in recent years, with 19 countries having further lowered their start age since 2000, of which some 13 now introduce a second/foreign language in the first year of schooling.

**Figure 1: Current mandatory start age policies for foreign language learning in Europe: a summary**

	Mandatory start age						
	5 yrs	6 yrs	7 yrs	8 yrs	9 yrs	10 yrs	11 yrs
Number of countries	2	12	2	6	4	2	1

Note: the above data includes the current 27 EU member states, plus the 2 candidate countries. Figures relating to children aged 6 includes both Portugal and the Czech Republic which have recently announced their intention to lower the start age in 2008.

Sources: data from personal communication with in-country experts.

Interrogating the detail of this data, however, reveals some curiously varied decisions, often reflecting some very different pre-histories and localised political perspectives. The following sample gives an indicative flavour of the variety of viewpoints reflected in the above data:

i. Which start age? The neighbouring countries of Hungary and Austria have reached quite different decisions on this. In 2003 Austria introduced a compulsory start age of six years, whilst Hungary has maintained a compulsory start age of ten years since 1998. In accounting for this later start age Hungarian ministry officials and senior academics considered it a necessity owing to the scarcity of suitable teachers in the rural districts of the country. Nonetheless, no national training scheme has been launched since that time to overcome this skills gap, suggesting that there exists no political will to address this issue at present. The result is one of varied provision and the inevitable exclusion of the economically less affluent.

ii. Which language(s)? For those countries with a history of teaching the language of their neighbours there has been much debate as to whether this should continue or whether English should be the first language, with other languages introduced later. Austria solved this dilemma by devolving the decision of language choice to a local level, stating that it could be any from a choice of 5 languages. In the event, 97% of primary schools chose English first. Empowerment and ownership resulted from this

opportunity to make a clear choice. In contrast, in Italy this decision was made at Ministry level. Here, it was decided that all schools would be required to introduce English first. The consequence was that, in those regions of the country where other languages had previously been the preferred choice, teachers and parents were dismayed with the decision. Ministry officials defended it on the grounds that English had greater global currency and that the choice of one national policy would be more economically cost-effective.

iii. Specialist or generalist teacher? Decisions on this question generally relate to the traditions of primary education in each country. In some countries, children experience a different teacher for each subject from the very start of schooling, whilst in others the tendency is for there to be a generalist class teacher for most or all curriculum subjects. For example, in most Scandinavian countries, where a generalist teacher system exists, these primary teachers tend to also teach English. In Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary, with a strong tradition of specialist language teachers, this system has tended to continue as a practice even with the very youngest learners. This debate relates also to the question of training priorities.

iv. Pre-service teacher education/continuing professional development: in the early stages of policy implementation the tendency has been firstly to focus on providing professional development for the existing labour force. For example, a number of regions of Germany are currently engaged in providing extensive courses of both language improvement and primary language methodology. Such courses are generally made available to existing primary teachers who already have an understanding of the needs and abilities of primary school pupils. More recently, a few teacher education colleges/universities in Germany have developed specialist pre-service courses for primary language teachers. However, this is not yet a common feature of the German system. In England a similar pattern has evolved. In-service provision is now quite substantial, whereas pre-service provision has been slower to emerge. If sustainability is to be established at national levels the realities of staff turnover require that both structures should become a fixture in the very near future.

v. Frequency, duration and class size: Here again, patterns across Europe are very varied. Decisions may well be made on the basis of budgets rather than on the desirable ideal. The most common pattern appears to be anything from one to three lessons per week, generally lasting for 30-45 minutes. Evidence from a pilot study in Croatia is valuable to reflect on in relation to this question. In a study conducted during the 1990s in the capital of Zagreb (Mihaljevic Djigunovic 2001), daily classes of 45 minutes were conducted by experienced teachers with classes of 15 pupils over a period of some years. It was found that this intensive pattern enabled all children to make rapid progress to the point where, after four years of lessons (aged 10 years) they were quite able to have a varied (if not fully accurate) conversation on a range of topics with a native speaker of English. Some years after the closure of this pilot study English has now been introduced throughout Croatia from year 1 (6 years). Patterns of frequency, duration and class size have been reduced to 3 lessons per week of 45 minutes, with classes of 25+ children. The resultant language progress is substantially reduced as a result.

Interestingly, as a tradition, class size for the provision of foreign language teaching varies across Europe. In much of the former central/eastern Europe the style has been

(and often continues to be) a division of the class into two groups, resulting in approximately 15 pupils as the norm for a language lesson. In contrast, most of western Europe tends not to provide such ideal contexts, generally resulting in language classes comprising 20-30 pupils.

One further dimension of provision in this area relates to those classrooms where the foreign language (FL) is taught by the class teacher. Here, the possibility exists for frequent, small inputs of language to be integrated throughout the school day. For example, in some primary schools in England the register is now taken in the FL, the daily lunch menu is displayed on the notice board in the FL and the teacher gives many of the routine classroom instructions in the FL. This increased exposure may well help learners in the process of becoming familiar and comfortable with the language, thus easing them through that first phase of the new experience.

The above focus on European evidence illustrates some of the dilemmas currently and continuously under debate. Mainly, solutions reflect some kind of compromise and are less than satisfactory for all sectors of the population. However, the challenge of introducing early start policies in Europe are minor when compared with a country operating on the scale that China currently attempts in its efforts to create English provision in primary schools across the country. Planning for the scale of provision required has wisely been divided into steps. Currently, pilot projects are under way in most of the urban regions of the country for the introduction of English from the start of compulsory schooling (6 years). In-service training has been on a huge scale and still has a long way to go before coverage of the urban areas is achieved. The focus of this training is to develop a model of classroom interactions appropriate to the cultural context of the Chinese classroom. At present, the classroom context most strongly in evidence as operating against the achievement of this goal appears to be class size. As in example of Croatia, larger classes result in reduced interactions. At present, the typical primary class size in China is in the region of 40-50 pupils. Such learning contexts are extremely likely to lead to an over-emphasis on choral work and a lack of opportunity for teacher/pupil and pupil/pupil interactions, critical contexts for the early language learner to focus on developing accurate pronunciation and confidence in articulating their own meanings in the FL. It is difficult to see how this limitation can be overcome in the immediate future.

As indicated above, in this pilot phase of early language provision, China is concentrating attention on the urban regions of the country. However, there is increasing concern about the risks of the rural areas getting left behind as a result. This increasing urban/rural divide is a feature not only to be found in china (though the divide may well be much greater here, given the very recent and very rapid urban drift that has occurred). For a number of countries in Europe also, it has proved difficult to find FL teachers able and willing to teach in rural areas. With the current introduction of an early start programme in Poland this challenge is now uppermost in the planning of local area provision, though no satisfactory solution has yet emerged. One possible solution may rest with the centralised approach of France to teacher employment. There, the national system appoints teachers as civil servants. This system results in teachers being appointed to a school, rather than being given the opportunity to select their school. Through this mechanism it becomes possible for newly qualified teachers to be appointed to rural areas, to a greater extent than is the

practice elsewhere. Inevitably, there is some resistance to this system, but at least some provision is assured.

This section has raised many concerns and tentatively identified some possible solutions. Mostly however, these can only be regarded as interim solutions. Much further research is needed if we are to identify realistic, sustainable models of implementation capable of supporting early language learners in both their linguistic and broader educational development. Nonetheless, given the imperative to appropriately to both the expectations of parents (who, quite naturally, want the best for their children) and the requirements of politicians (who may well be seeking short-term solutions for re-election), there is much to be said for the proposals of Michael Fullan in addressing the challenges of introducing innovation. Fullan proposes that, in some contexts, it may well be appropriate to adopt the mandate of: "Fire first, aim later" (Fullan 1999).

### **Recent research and some preliminary conclusions**

In the context of the introduction of early FL learning in England, Fullan's mandate offers a quite accurate analysis of what has happened. In this final section I will briefly summarise the nature of both the firing and the aiming process during the recent implementation and draw on initial research evidence as an illustration of the real challenges that exist in the introduction and embedding of a major educational reform within a system where no such provision existed previously. I draw specifically on this research as an indicator of the substantial gap that still exists in our understandings of this field and as a trigger to encourage more research that may help to inform our understandings more fully of what can be achieved, and how best it might be achieved.

The first phase of early FL introduction commenced with two-year exploratory pilot studies in 19 regions of England. During this period schools were encouraged to experiment with their own ideas on what to teach, how to teach it, when to teach it and who should teach it. This period provoked much debate, much uncertainty and much insecurity, but finally resulted in the identification of some very practical ways forward. During the subsequent five-year period (2005-2010) all schools are expected to move towards implementation commencing at seven years (year 3). A substantial programme of support and in-service training is now available in most regions of the country, with national, regional and local networks of trainers, school-based consultants and increasingly strong links with local secondary schools/specialist secondary language colleges. In addition, nationally-funded opportunities for language improvement courses, overseas intensive language classes and links with schools elsewhere in Europe are available. Whilst the programme is impressively comprehensive, inevitably there remain some gaps which may have resulted in limited accessibility for some teachers. Further work is still needed to address these issues.

It is within this context that recent data has been collected in one region of southern England, as a part of a wider comparative, longitudinal European study which aims to identify what can realistically be achieved in the schooled contexts of six countries (Early Language Learning in Europe study). Drawing on a data set of 150 children from six schools, across a broad socio-economic and geographical sample, I will report on some of the most relevant findings during the first half-year of the study.

Interviews with school principals and teachers indicated a great deal of enthusiasm about the initiative.

All interviewees proposed that an early start would achieve a higher competency level in the long-term.

They also anticipated that the positive attitudes already evident would be sufficiently well-embedded by the time children reached the age of transfer to secondary school that such enthusiasm would be more likely to be continued.

Despite these positive opinions from both teachers and school principals, the early data from children's and classroom observations suggested some concerns. These included the following:

1 Children were not unanimously positive in their perceptions of FL learning. In particular, boys tended to comment less positively than girls on these early experiences.

2 Some teachers had not yet managed to take up any available in-service training.

3 Some teachers had extremely low levels of language competency.

4 Mainly, FL lessons were being delivered by specialist FL teachers. These teachers were sometimes secondary-trained and had limited experience/expertise in teaching such young children. In addition, their semi 'visitor status' in the classroom sometimes resulted in a position of less authority than the class teacher was able to command.

These very early findings should be regarded as extremely tentative at this point. They are presented here simply as an illustration of how demanding the process of implementation can be during the early phases. It is expected that the longitudinal and comparative nature of this study will enable a substantially more nuanced picture of both the achievements and the challenges to emerge, over time. The ultimate test will rest on the extent to which these early learners become confident users of their FLs in their future lives. The research team hope to contribute some initially valid findings in the rather shorter period of five years however.

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