

INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: AIMS, CONSTRAINTS, AND ONE WAY FORWARD

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ABSTRACT

The present policy of the Ministry of Education is that all schools should offer instruction in an additional language from Year 7 to Year 10. The additional languages may be te reo Māori, a Pacific language, or one of several international languages. This paper focuses on the latter, and suggests that, at the present time, it would be unwise in many schools to introduce foreign language instruction in Year 7, and instead a focus should be placed on the development of students' intercultural awareness.

This paper begins with a brief review of the present policy and the benefits which are assumed to accrue from learning languages. It then discusses the existing constraints affecting language teaching in our primary schools, many of which are also faced in other countries which have introduced foreign language instruction in their primary schools. The most important of these constraints in New Zealand, as elsewhere, is the shortage of linguistically competent and appropriately trained second language teachers. A brief consideration is paid to the limited amount of professional development available to primary teachers in this country, many of whom have little, or even no, knowledge of the target language. The multimedia packs, which have been produced for the teaching and learning of international languages in schools, assume that teachers can learn the target language at the same time as teaching it to their students.

It is suggested that, until teachers are professionally prepared for the teaching of an international language, actual language instruction should be deferred. The focus of instruction in Year 7 could instead be directed towards an understanding of the culture of the target language. This possibility is then explored by considering the syllabus and type of classroom activities which might allow teachers to promote their students' intercultural awareness, key competencies of which are outlined. At the same time, the designated teachers could take steps to develop at least a basic competence in the target language and can receive professional development in appropriate strategies and techniques of second language teaching.

INTRODUCTION: THE AIMS OF THE PRESENT POLICY

As have many other countries, the Ministry of Education in New Zealand has decided to introduce the teaching of additional languages in its primary schools. According to the 2002 *Curriculum Stocktake Report*:

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The essential learning area *Language and Languages/Te Korero me nga Reo* should be two separate learning areas – *English/Te Reo Māori* and *Languages*. This separate area would include heritage, community and foreign languages and the learning of English and te reo Maori as second languages. Schools should be required to provide instruction in an additional language for students in years 7 - 10 (except for Māori immersion settings) but it should not be mandatory for all year 7-10 students to learn another language (Ministry of Education, 2002a, p. 4).

Thus it is the Ministry's current policy that all schools will provide instruction in another language to students in years 7 to 10 by 2008. Eventually, such programmes will be fully integrated as the eighth essential learning area of the national curriculum. In addition to the achievement of communicative competence in the target language specified in the curriculum statements for each language (for example, Ministry of Education, 1995), it is argued (Ministry of Education, 2002b, pp. 8-13) that the acquisition of a foreign language has diverse aims and benefits, among them:

- Intellectual challenge
- Exploration of different social/cultural environments
- Increased understanding of one's own culture and tolerance for others
- Improvement of first language skills
- Promotion of intercultural communication
- Improvement of student self-esteem
- Enhanced cognitive and social development
- Deepening of students' understanding of human experience
- Facilitation of students' participation in other cultures and societies
- Increase in students' employability (especially in tourism and international business)
- The general enrichment of New Zealand society.

Any of these desired goals may be achievable, but it is exceedingly unlikely that all of them are feasible in the light of the constraints to the effective teaching of international languages in our schools at the present time. Moreover, those which pertain to cognitive development and cultural awareness are not likely to be achieved through the medium of the target language – at least not until a higher degree of linguistic proficiency is attained than is likely in most school contexts. The question arises as to what should be the focus of attention in the primary sector?

With regard to international languages, at the present time the Ministry encourages the implementation of one or more 'taster' courses in either or both Years 7 and 8 in French, German, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese, each of which is supported by a multimedia resource pack. (Te reo Māori, Pacific Languages and New Zealand Sign Language are being supported in other ways to help them gain a presence and improve their quality.) It is assumed that students would take a taster course in another international language in the following year; in some schools, all four taster courses have been introduced in Year 7. The courses are mostly taught by primary teachers, sometimes with the assistance of native speakers of the target language, with various but limited forms of professional development, often provided by a Regional Language Learning Adviser (as described, for example, in School Support Services, 2006).

CONSTRAINTS TO EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

There are several reasons why the introduction of international languages in primary schools may not be altogether effective, either at the present time or in the foreseeable future:

- The (present) lack of obligation to study a second language (Ministry of Education, 2002a)
- The perceived and actual difficulty of learning an international language in schools (Holt, Maeda, Sasai, Shaw, Walker & Young, 2001);
- The lack of adequate class time for language instruction in the curriculum (Gibbs & Holt, 2003)
- Lack of clarity about objectives (Gibbs & Holt, 2003) and proficiency benchmarks (Barnard, 2004)
- Negative student motivation reported and consequent low take-up and retention rates (Peddie, 2003; McLaughlin, forthcoming)
- The scarcity of linguistically competent and/or methodologically qualified teachers in primary schools (Gibbs & Holt, 2003) and secondary schools (Guthrie, 2005)
- Poor efforts in secondary schools to promote continuity of language instruction in primary schools (Gibbs & Holt, 2003)
- The failure of the tertiary education system to support departments specialising in international languages and cultures (Johnson, 2000).

In many of these respects (excluding the first and possibly the last), the constraints facing New Zealand are the same as those in the countries around the world where an international language (usually English as a foreign language) has been introduced in primary schools. For over thirty years, it has been consistently argued (Girard, 1974; Singleton, 1989; Singleton & Lengyel, 1995; Blondin et al., 1998; Kubanek-German, 1998; Brewster, 2001; Gibbs & Holt, 2003) that a policy to introduce foreign languages in primary schools needs adequate financial resources, high-quality learning and teaching materials, positive and well-informed parental attitudes, and - above all - appropriately trained and linguistically competent teachers:

Programme delivery quality is generally viewed as mainly attributable to one key factor: teacher proficiency in both the IL (international language) and in IL methodology (Gibbs & Holt, 2003, # 2.7).

Without such support, the experience may be negative and the effect counter-productive – and yet governments have consistently failed to provide adequate financial resources, or prepare competent language teachers.

After an extensive literature review, Gibbs and Holt (2003, #2.7) suggest that starting foreign language teaching in Years 7-8 in New Zealand schools is a reasonable compromise in relation to research findings on optimal starting age, and that the prime aim should be the acquisition of everyday interactional skills appropriate to learners' age and interests. However, they also point out (2003, #5.5) that among the primary teachers who took part in their survey:

- 33-50% rate themselves as orally not competent in the international language they were teaching;
- 33% had no prior learning of a foreign language;
- 20% had engaged in some formal study;
- 33% had not participated in any type of language teaching methods course; of those who had, the majority had participated in courses lasting less than 10 hours.

The lack of adequate professional development reflects a general situation reported elsewhere: even in the government-funded *Second Language Learning Project* reported by Peddie, Gunn and Lewis (1998, p. 52) almost 60% reported that no professional development took place in their schools to facilitate the project. They also pointed out that the limited time available for learning languages, and a lack of understanding by teachers of communicative methodology, reduced the effectiveness of the teaching.

The present situation may now be somewhat less pessimistic than that reported just a few years ago by Gibbs and Holt (2003). Some primary teachers are taking the initiative for self-development. A few teachers are taking advantage of various scholarships to undertake language learning and/or methodology courses, and even visits to relevant countries. In their evaluation of the effectiveness of the *Second Language Funding Pool* to which 290 schools had successfully applied for funds, Ellis, Loewen and Hacker (2005, #Teacher Capability) state that, in the thirteen primary and secondary schools sampled, up to 30% of the allocated funds was spent on professional development, most of which was allocated to attendance at conferences, meetings and courses, with substantial amounts spent on teacher relief/release time – presumably to allow for such attendance. They report (Ellis et al., 2005, # Research Question 7) that “[i]n the case of the primary schools, there was a recognized need to develop the existing teachers’ proficiency in both a language and language teaching methodology”. Relatively little was spent on other professional development. Across the country, teachers may attend short (usually-one-day) sessions run by the Regional Language Learning Advisers (RLAs). A number of schools have contracted to have in-depth consultancy; where this is the case, the above sessions are combined with a series of visits by the RLA to the teachers’ schools for observation, demonstration and discussion. This consultancy service is extremely valuable (Ellis et al., 2005, # Research Question 8) , but it needs to be borne in mind that there are very few regional advisers contracted to carry out this work; for example, in 2006 there are only 1.6 equivalent full time staff in Waikato and 1.2 based at Palmerston North. This means that they can actually service only a few schools in their region, and of course they have additional responsibilities. The limited amount of professional development provided by the Ministry of Education here may be contrasted with that in Australia. The state of Victoria, for example, has offered free methods training during vacations and, in many cases, highly subsidised periods in a linguistically relevant country. It might be pointed out that these facilities were provided for trained primary teachers who already spoke one or more of the relevant languages.

Thus, many schools in New Zealand – and their teachers – are left largely on their own, and the problem of introducing an international language in Years 7 or 8 is particularly acute in the remoter and smaller schools. Many Year 7 or 8 teachers will be expected to offer taster courses, but their competence in the target language may be minimal and with little or no professional training in the teaching of languages. The Ministry’s intention for such teachers appears to be firmly based on the principle of *docens discimus* – we learn by teaching:

The design of the course acknowledges the fact that for many teachers this may be the first association they have had with an international language. It encourages teachers to adopt the role of facilitator in the classroom, learning along with the students and potentially learning from them as their own individual areas of interest spark them to further investigation (O’Hallahan, 1998, p. 5)

The Teacher’s Guides in the multimedia packs produced for these courses – *Hai, Oui, Si, Ja*, and *Hao* (O’Hallahan, 1998a; Smith, 1998; O’Hallahan, 1998ab; Stone, 2002; George & Yee, 2003) - may be the only on-the-job professional development available to them.

The following is a brief outline of the contents of the multimedia *Hai* pack, the first to be produced in 1998, and which has subsequently been revised. The twenty units (each with three 30-minute lessons) are based on Levels 1 and 2 of the Japanese curriculum statement,

and are intended primarily for use in Years 7 and 8. The print materials include the Teacher's Guide intended to enable teachers to learn the language with their students), a multiplicity of handouts, OHTs and worksheets (with answers) for each lesson, and a cultural supplement, which provides details of a number of Japanese festivals and holidays. There are CDs or audiotapes for each of the twenty units, and video support consists of an introductory guide for the teacher and examples of some useful classroom activities. In addition, for each of the 20 units, the video contains a short dramatised episode with explanations of key language points, and an additional vignette of Japanese life and culture.

The attractively-designed packs have been very carefully produced with clearly-stated unit and lesson objectives. These are supported by a wide range of practical activities and worksheets appropriate for the designated age-range. While the language goals may be realisable given enough time, the Teacher's Guide acknowledges that it "may take longer than 20 weeks to complete the course" (p. 5). The Teacher's Guide itself is a step-by-step manual providing detailed information and advice for every unit, lesson and activity. Despite its assumptions about the intention for the teacher to learn the language along with their students, my own firm belief – based on over twenty years of working with language teachers, extensive study of the issues related to second language teaching, and recent interviews with teachers working with these materials - is that it does require both a degree of linguistic fluency and accuracy on the part of the teacher and awareness of language teaching skills. The *Hai* pack includes two evaluation forms to be completed by teachers during, or after, their use of the materials. So far, there has been no published report of the findings of this survey, and to the best of my knowledge there has been no wide-scale evaluation of the effectiveness of *Hai* and the other packs as language learning and teaching resources. As Ellis et al. (2005, # Executive Summary) have pointed out, the evaluation of the effectiveness of student learning is impossible as "there is no standardised method of assessing language achievement in the schools".

PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS

In these circumstances, it may well be questioned whether many primary school teachers will actually be able to teach their students the 'everyday interactional skills' recommended by Gibbs and Holt (2003). To expect them to do so seems unreasonable without considerably more professional development than is currently available. To ask most teachers to teach something that is beyond their competence is likely to set them – and their students – up for failure. In time, we may hope, adequate resources for professional development will be provided in order to systematically develop the skills of primary school teachers, both linguistic and methodological, to enable them to be effective teachers of foreign languages.

In the meantime, what is suggested here is that before a 'taster' course in language skills is introduced in Year 7 or 8 in schools which do not have appropriate language teaching staff, teachers could more profitably attend to the development among their students of intercultural awareness (Corbett, 2003). (It may not need to be said that in schools which do have competent language teachers, such development could be started in earlier years – as indeed is happening in a number of schools.) By deferring the introduction of actual language teaching in primary schools, teachers would have the opportunity to prepare themselves linguistically and methodologically to teach a language more effectively. A programme with a clear intercultural, rather than linguistic, focus could develop the students' cognitive and affective readiness for subsequent language learning. Teachers could focus much of the social studies timetable on one particular country (such as Japan), or speech community (for example, French Polynesia). But the development of cultural awareness need not be restricted to social studies; it may extend to the arts, technology, health and physical education, and so on. Primary teachers are already experienced in the content and techniques of the key learning areas of the curriculum, and the necessary additional planning

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and preparation would be marginal, and largely based on relatively new content - in-depth knowledge of a particular culture - rather than radically new pedagogic and linguistic skills.

Too often, the early stages of language learning are cognitively undemanding – especially when there is a strict enforcement of the exclusive use of the target language, and an emphasis on listening and repeating words, language structures or mini-dialogues. In these circumstances, active young minds may be stunted, their curiosity stifled, and boredom soon sets in. By contrast, because an intercultural programme does not require the use of the target language programme - by teacher or students - it can be adjusted to meet the cognitive abilities of the learners, as a group and as individuals. The syllabus would include a range of topics relevant to the students' interests pitched at an appropriate maturational level (sport, art, technology, clothing, food, lifestyles, hobbies, etc.). Accurate, up-to-date information can be derived from many sources, among them books, magazines, films, videos, realia, animations, DVDs and CDs. Increasingly, the internet can provide cultural content – the 'information superhighway' – and, more importantly, open opportunities for students to interact with members of the target culture.

To achieve a measure of intercultural awareness - as well as knowledge - the programme should focus on experiential learning. A wide variety of activities can be applied to enable the students to actively engage with the social, psychological and material artefacts of the target culture. For example:

- Discussions based on input (for example, video footage or adverts)
- Practical demonstrations by visitors and/or the teacher
- Hands-on tasks (cooking, materials design, artwork)
- Game playing
- Visits to relevant cultural sites or events
- Individual or group projects
- On-line interaction.

Such activities should lead to valuable cross-cultural comparison and contrast.

More important than the acquisition of new content and interesting activities, an intercultural programme should aim to encourage students to "grow out of the shell of their mother tongue and their own culture" (Kaikonnen, 2001, p. 64). Although such shells may afford protection from the shock of the culturally unfamiliar, they tend to constrict learners' intercultural and cognitive development. Growing out of the 'cultural shell' means not only the ability to appreciate the culture of other people but also to view one's own cultural beliefs, values and practices through the prism of other points of view and develop a more objective view of their own customs and ways of thinking (Byram, 1997). In this way, students could learn to identify with, and respect, the experience and perspective of people in the countries and communities where the target language is spoken (Lustig & Koester, 1993). Eventually, it may be hoped that they can reach a 'third place' (Kramsch, 1993) - a vantage point for them to actively mediate between first and target cultures. In other words, an intercultural programme would systematically serve to meet several of the Ministry's (2002b, pp. 8-13) aims cited above and, as suggested, appropriately prepare both students and teachers for language learning and teaching.

CONCLUSION

As the teacher also becomes more culturally aware and sensitive, opportunities can arise for systematic professional development both in learning the target language and in the pedagogic skills needed to teach it. As Ellis et al. (2005, #Issues) conclude in their report, there is a need for:

guidance to schools in the appropriate use of funding for professional development, in particular regarding the allocation of funds for developing teachers' proficiency in a second language as opposed to helping teachers to a better understanding of the methodology of language teaching.

Both are essentially skills-based activities, and while much necessary and valuable background knowledge can be gained by reading and study, there is also a need for experiential and social learning. If teachers are to teach a language to fairly large classes, it seems appropriate that they, too, should learn the new language in a similar context (rather than through, for example, private study or one-on-one tuition). In this way, they will get a keen sense of the opportunities and frustrations that language learning in groups presents. They may also absorb, or be directed to consider, the techniques used by their language teacher and how they might be adapted to suit younger learners. Teachers can best learn the pedagogic skills through focussed lesson observation, sequenced practice of those skills with young learners, and guided reflection on their observation of other teachers and their own practice. The effective transfer of their existing pedagogical skills could be considered in discussions with other teachers, with each phase mentored by the regional adviser or other teacher educator responsible for the professional development programme.

None of the above suggestions comes easily, quickly or cheaply. For example, in my experience it needs at least four hundred contact hours to attain to the 'Threshold' of language competence, at which level "users should be able to cope linguistically in a range of everyday situations which require a largely predictable use of language" (Association of Language Testers in Europe, 2006). The fifth, and final, level of the ALTE framework specifies that "the learner is approaching the linguistic competence of an educated native speaker, and is able to use the language in a range of culturally appropriate ways".

And, just as it is evident that not every primary teacher who is expected to teach Physical Education is a skilled soccer player or swimmer, so it needs to be acknowledged that some teachers have a greater aptitude for languages than others. The length of time needed to develop the pedagogic skills is much more difficult to gauge, as much depends on the existing and potential levels of generic classroom ability and experience. One measure might be to consider programmes such as Trinity College London's Certificate in TESOL (Trinity College, 2006) where usually between 100 and 130 contact hours are considered appropriate to initiate an unqualified newcomer to teaching into a novice teacher with a basic awareness of, and ability to apply, the knowledge and skills of teaching a foreign language. Such introductory programmes also include extensive pre-course assignments and a considerable amount of out-of-class study and preparation. Evidently, experienced primary school teachers might need less time – but it is not certain how much less would be needed to enable them to transfer their pedagogic skills and to acquire the necessary background linguistic knowledge and understanding.

In conclusion, in my opinion it is unwise to rush into teaching foreign languages in our primary schools. I have suggested that it would be appropriate to delay the introduction of 'taster' language courses until at least Year 8 unless there are teachers competent to teach the language. In Year 7, and of course before that, students could more usefully spend their time acquiring an intercultural awareness as valuable preparation for subsequent language learning. Most teachers would not find it too great an additional burden to shape the

curriculum of some of the learning areas to this end. At the same time, teachers could undertake appropriate and adequate professional development in terms of their own learning of the target language and of ways in which that language could most effectively be taught to their students.

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