

The Power of the Primary Voice

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“Language learning” begins at the beginning of human life. The natural desire to communicate and to find ways to develop communication skills is within us all, and first language acquisition begins very early on. It has therefore always seemed incredibly strange to me that, in this country, for so long, and for so many language learners, beginning to develop language learning skills only started formally at secondary school.

In my opinion we need to start early, and we need to listen to the ‘primary voice’ and create purposeful and appropriate primary language learning.

I must say right now, I do think that we need to ensure the progress in basic language content, skills and sentence structure but

I believe in the power of the ‘primary voice’ in language learning. What do I mean by this?

I mean primary-led language learning that is appropriate for the age and the stage of the learner, and that reflects the world of these young inquisitive language learners.

Why? Well, put simply, because when it works, it really works ... it becomes an integral and memorable part of a young child’s learning journey. When a primary school sees how primary language learning can be a powerful integral part of the school’s curriculum, and when staff are able to take ownership of the learning, then there is no turning back. The learning journey for both children and staff is memorable and the pride in the teaching and learning is palpable.

What is the “primary voice”? It’s primary school led learning, which takes into consideration the children, the wider school community and the potential within the school to deliver languages as a subject area. It will most possibly draw on teachers’ previous experiences (good and not so good) and where support from outside the school is sought, then this is valuable so long as the “primary” learning environment is at the forefront of everyone’s minds, when planning the implementation.

It might be that one primary teacher leads, or that class teachers deliver for themselves, or that the whole school requires the support of language specialists, or a language learning primary-focused programme, to feel confident enough not only to “give it a go” but actually to build an effective learning programme across KS2 and potentially across KS1.

There are many different models of what it is but ... what it is not is secondary-led languages in a primary learning environment.

We need to recognise that primary teachers are “specialists” in education and in working with young children. They are also specialists in developing communication skills. What they may not be is fluent in another language, but given the correct tools they are able to facilitate excellent primary language learning.

Let’s consider this: listening, speaking, reading and writing (the 4 core skills of MFL) are central to developing communication skills in primary education. So, when teachers are identifying types of activity, and ways of introducing them in a foreign language, the relevant expertise, and often the physical resources, are already in the primary school. Take a visit to EYFS and observe how those teachers help all the children to access language, both spoken and written. Observe KS2 teachers building children’s knowledge of sentence structure and see those obvious links between Literacy

and primary foreign language learning. The class teacher has the skills, the ready-made opportunities to make links across the week's learning, and the transferable skills to unpack basic, simple sentence structure in a target language.

Indeed the primary learning environment allows more easily for physical movement, crossover between subject areas, a song then a game then a story and perhaps some Art or Drama with language learning linked in. A PE game to revisit basic commands followed by dance to show understanding of the commands, and maybe photos outside as we use the commands in our target language yoga sequences.

Perhaps where secondary linguists can help is guidance in target language and the structure of sentences. This can be gained through CPD and careful support, and it does not always have to be secondary supporting primary; indeed it often works best when it's mutual teaching, learning and discussion. Over time secondary language teachers can learn so much from good primary practice.

Primary children love making links and they love exploring. Primary education and the class teachers encourage children to be problem solvers, and so they love being language and culture detectives.

They want to look for those links between languages and cultures, and want to go further and find out more about how other children and their families' live their daily lives. Opportunities in primary school mean that links are easily made between language, culture, and children in target language countries and beyond. Here are just a few examples from the school calendar: from the obvious festivals and international celebrations to Sports Day, religious festivals, World Book Day, an author's birthday (e.g. Roald Dahl), International Literacy Day, Mother Tongue Day, or the release of a brand-new Disney film and its trailers in different languages.

To achieve truly effective and memorable primary language learning we need to celebrate the primary teachers' and teaching assistants' roles in this learning. Watch the so called 'non-specialist' linguist class teacher unpack the language with children who are finding a sound pattern, the position of an adjective in a target language sentence, the skills of recall and memory, and see how they interact with their learners at a suitable pace, with the rigour and confidence to revisit and ensure learning.

The primary voice allows us to be aspirational in what we can achieve later in the language learning journey. Consider some of the core content we begin again in secondary languages: number, colours, days of the week, nouns such as animals, clothes, foods or simple sentences to express likes and dislikes, and then think why we switch off learners, who are at an age and stage where they want to be more sophisticated. It's not that I suggest primary is where the basics are covered as just simple content coverage, but I do suggest that primary schools and primary staff will bring this content to life for children who are of the age and stage to want to explore and begin to master a target language through song, games, drama, performance, story.....

Let's harness the voice of primary practitioners, who have expertise, but maybe limited language knowledge. Let's bring them to the table with specialist linguists and work together to shape a curriculum for young language learners that sets up exciting opportunities from the moment they start learning, all the way through to KS4, KS5 and beyond.