



Thinking about languages in a new way

It is a paradox of planning the new curriculum that the emphasis on innovation, skills and dimensions requires a profound understanding of subject disciplines. Getting it right means that subjects can become flexible, creative, exciting and relevant to the 21st century; getting it wrong may lead to a loss of depth and challenge in the curriculum and a narrowing of pupils' opportunities.

Language learning, like drama, can be a vehicle for engaging with any theme or subject, as well as possessing its own cultural dimension. It lends itself superbly to multimedia and web-based technologies. Curriculum design for language learning can draw on a wealth of pedagogical research, excellent support from a range of national agencies and a vibrant subject community that shares ideas and inspiration through blogs, forums and networks.

But, despite many examples of outstanding practice, languages overall are not yet sitting comfortably in the new curriculum. We need to begin to think differently and work towards languages taking a broader, more embedded and more flexible role.

How should curriculum designers think about language learning? Here are a few guidelines that reflect proven practice and the spirit of the revised programme of study:

1. Break down the walls

When planning themed activities, involve languages fully and make the most of their natural links with citizenship, humanities and the arts. Break down the barriers between different languages as well. If pupils experience more than one language other than English, that is even more effective in developing overall linguistic ability. The EU's policy on multilingualism reflects this view and provides food for thought - http://ec.europa.eu/education/languages/index_en.htm.

In key stage 4, integrate language learning with the practical aspects of vocational courses. Languages were made for 'learning by doing'.

2. Don't water it down

Language learning means just that, even when part of a cross curriculum activity. If English is used to support learning, it should be subordinate to the time spent communicating in the language. A parallel might be pupils' discussing the rules and techniques of a sport as distinct from the time spent practising and playing it.

Pupils rapidly become confident in using a language actively if they have regular opportunities to do so. Just as they are allowed to be less than perfect artists and musicians, they can be less than perfect language users and still communicate effectively and with enjoyment.

3. Build from the roots up

Be very clear about the 'why' of language learning: the central role of languages in pupils' understanding of their own culture and identity; raising pupils' awareness that they are world citizens; teaching empathy; widening opportunities for careers and travel; encountering a different culture; developing more articulate and effective users of language across the curriculum. Build a flexible, imaginative role for languages based on these roots.

4. Access support

It is a big jump from using a text book to creating an integrated curriculum. Listen to the views of the languages team about what will work, ensure they have time to manage change, and that they are taking advantage of support from local or regional networks. There are superb ready-made resources available and more being developed all the time.

5. Adhere to the basic rules

There are some essential requirements for the organisation of language learning, just as for other subjects. The most important of these are:

- Regular and frequent engagement with the language - three times a week is better than twice, and once a week is not enough.
- Real language use - repetition and other exercises should be preliminaries to real communication
- Meaningful contexts – linking languages with other subjects or grown-up topics can revolutionise pupil engagement
- Cultural understanding and experience – a key concept of the revised programme of study and at the emotional heart of language learning
- Finally, as for other subjects, activities that are active, engaging and enjoyable will lead to the best outcomes.

6. Establish language pathways for all pupils

This approach balances flexibility with a languages entitlement and creates a readily understandable policy for languages. The idea is that every pupil engages with languages in some form throughout their education. For some pupils in key stage 4, this might take the form of preparation for a visit abroad, a drama performance, or an after school club rather than a formal qualification. But by establishing the concept of the pathway you are expressing the school's commitment to an international outlook and ensuring a baseline entitlement to international experience and communication. There is now a wide choice of different forms of accreditation for languages in key stages 4 and 5 which contribute to performance tables – see <http://www.cilt.org.uk/14to19/>.

These ways of thinking about language learning have been shown to work, and are the norm in many primary schools. There are also growing numbers of secondary schools developing exciting and innovative approaches. If you are involved in or know of interesting examples, please get in touch. Sharing ideas will be crucial in helping schools to take their next steps.

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