

Lessons from abroad: International review of primary languages (CfBT, 2012)

<http://bit.ly/Mk0doS>

Key points

Research evidence on early language learning

- Although researchers have not been able to reach any firm conclusion concerning the existence of a critical age, they agree that young children learn languages differently from older learners and have some advantages over those who start later.
- Early learners tend to be more intuitive, less anxious and better at acquiring the sounds and rhythms of the new language.
- Starting early allows for more time for language learning overall and a sustained experience with the potential to lead to higher levels of proficiency at the end of secondary school.
- An early start is not a guarantee of success - the amount and quality of teaching are important determinants as well as continuity of learning in secondary school.

International policy developments

- The two most common models of language learning in primary education we have seen are:
 - to introduce the new language at the beginning of compulsory education
 - (slightly less frequently) to start after just two years, commonly at age eight.
- It is slightly less common to start in Year 4 at around age nine, or later in primary education.
- Even when countries do not have a formal start until later it is often common practice for schools to begin earlier.
- Rationales for early language learning are strongly linked to a country's international aspirations and the desire to prepare children to engage successfully in international environments.
- In non-English-speaking countries, English is seen as essential for this purpose. Other foreign languages are given a much lower priority and sometimes even ignored altogether.
- The English-speaking countries studied here offer a more diverse range of languages in primary education but at the same time they are less successful at achieving widespread coverage:
in both the US and Australia the trend is towards shrinkage of primary languages provision, in contrast to expansion elsewhere

Curriculum content and time allocation

- Language awareness programmes can add to children's appreciation of different languages, including those present in their local areas, and help them to see differences and similarities between them.

The quality of the teaching force

- The introduction of languages in primary schools is frequently inadequately planned for in terms of teacher supply and training.
- A clear picture is required at the outset of who is going to teach the new language, and their training needs in both age-appropriate pedagogy and competence in the language being taught.
- The level of language competence needed by teachers is dependent on the teaching goals and approaches used, but it is good practice to specify it.
- A relatively low level of competence can, in some circumstances, be compensated for by excellent language teaching methodology.
- There are ongoing needs in terms of both teacher supply and continuing professional development which are often overlooked once the initial push for implementation has been completed.
- Primary teachers, particularly those without a degree in the language they are teaching, stand to benefit from a period of residence abroad during initial or in-service training. International collaboration is an effective way of providing this.

Management of transition between phases

- Unequal or inconsistent provision for primary languages presents a problem for continuity in secondary schools.
- A clear national statement covering language teaching from primary through to secondary, setting out expectations on what pupils are expected to achieve at each stage, is a prerequisite for avoiding wastage and frustration in the system.
- National or state-wide guidance is essential in providing a framework for continuity but there is also a need for shared understanding and liaison at school and local level.

Age-appropriate pedagogy

- There is an easy fit between primary language teaching methodology and good primary pedagogy.
- The primary curriculum provides many opportunities which can be exploited for language learning
 - this is one of the particular benefits of starting early. However, as learners progress, the activities and content must keep pace to remain age-appropriate.
- In some countries, reading and writing in the foreign language are delayed in order to concentrate on oral skills; however the early introduction of literacy in the new language can provide an important focus as well as support for learning.
- Assessment of learning needs to reflect the methods used and the goals set. It should not be based on a system designed for older learners.