The review “Foreign languages in Primary and Pre-School Education: Context and Outcomes” has been produced, in English, French and German, by means of a project funded through the LINGUA element of the European Union’s SOCRATES programme. The work was undertaken by the following group of six researchers:

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The main conclusions drawn from the research were that early language learning can have a very positive effect on pupils, in terms of language skills, positive attitudes to other languages and cultures and self-confidence. Nevertheless an early start doesn't in itself guarantee better results than a later one. For success to be possible, certain conditions in terms both of pedagogy and of resources must be created. In order to achieve those conditions, the group made the following recommendations.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

1/ Research

Sufficient funding must be made available for research and innovation, throughout the development of early language learning initiatives, from the planning stage to the post-implementation stage. This research should focus on the results achieved, taking account of the context, and on direct observation of classroom situations.

2/ Parental involvement

Parents should be involved during the introduction of language learning into a primary school, and the choice of languages to be learnt should be explained to them, especially if those languages are not widely used ones. Parents should have a clear understanding of the objectives, so that they can establish for pupils a supportive atmosphere outside the classroom.

3/ Continuity

It is crucial, given how fragile children’s language acquisition can be and how difficult it is to transfer it between different contexts that pedagogical continuity is provided between pre-primary, primary and secondary sectors.

4/ Time

The overall amount of time devoted to early language learning (and especially to speaking) should be increased, wherever possible. There should preferably be short, daily lessons instead of one or two longer lessons per week. However, improved timetabling is not enough to guarantee results. Lessons must also be of consistently high quality.
5/ Teacher training

Teachers need all of the following attributes: proficiency in the target language; ability to analyse and describe that language; knowledge of the principles of language acquisition; pedagogical skills specifically adapted for teaching foreign languages to young children. Primary teachers without training in foreign language teaching, and secondary school language teachers without primary training, tend not to have all of the necessary abilities. For both, substantial “induction” courses are necessary. Training must also be put in place during initial teacher education.

6/ Opportunities for all pupils

Research is necessary in order to develop early language learning methods which will encourage successful learning by those pupils who generally have difficulty at school and/or who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The motivation of boys must be enhanced. Children whose first language is not that generally used in the school should also participate in the early learning of foreign languages.

7/ Appropriate methodologies for different age groups

Innovation in foreign language teaching should not be reduced simply to lowering the age at which children begin. Suitable methods must be developed and used for each age group concerned.

8/ Linguistic diversity

It has been shown that if certain precautions are not taken, an early start to foreign language learning can reduce diversity. While it is desirable to provide parents or schools with a choice of languages at primary level, this does not guarantee diversity especially if continuity in the chosen language is to be maintained in secondary school. Teachers of less widely used languages may not be easily available at both primary and secondary level. In any case, schools and/or parents may insist on “international” languages. One solution may be to concentrate on raising young children’s awareness of the diversity of foreign languages, rather than on teaching one language. It is appropriate to favour foreign languages widely spoken locally or in neighbouring regions.

9/ Co-ordination of research

Research into early language learning must be effectively co-ordinated to ensure that all of the relevant aspects are covered. There must be enough flexibility to allow scope for implementing and evaluating alternative solutions to those currently existing.

10/ Potential dangers

Early language learning is an educationally invaluable enterprise. However, if it is implemented generally in primary and pre-primary education without providing sufficient resources and without sufficient planning to fulfil the conditions set out above, this could be counter-productive. Disappointing results could lead to widespread disenchantment with the very concept of early language learning.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The “early” learning of languages in primary and pre-primary education is a rapidly expanding activity. Certain EU countries have a long tradition in it, while others are seeking a new beginning after disappointing experiments in the sixties and seventies.

The group sought to establish what results are obtainable from early language learning, both in terms of direct improvements in pupils’ foreign language ability and in the status accorded to language
learning within schools and society more generally. It then looked at the conditions in which early language learning should take place if the maximum benefits are to be attained. It concentrated on early language learning taking place within the context of a limited timetable, rather than bilingual or immersion learning, where the foreign language is also used to teach other subjects.

The group undertook a process of comprehensive research into existing publications dealing principally with:

- comparisons of the language ability of secondary school pupils having learnt languages in primary school with those not having done so;
- evaluation of the progress of early learners against pre-established criteria;
- comparisons between the results obtained by different approaches to early language learning; and
- the processes of teaching and learning.

These publications were analysed with the help of a detailed grid drawn up by the group and divided into the following main sections; the context in which the early learning analysed by the publication in question took place; the results of that early learning exercise, in terms of ability in the language taught and of improvement in children’s wider educational and social ability; and the description of the research techniques used.

For a full text of the review, please contact the publishers:

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