

Could it be magic?

- How could THE LANGUAGE MAGICIAN support the teaching of Languages in the UK's primary sector?

The case for language learning from the primary years onwards has been made across Europe in recent years, and yet there remains considerable diversity in approach between legislations.

The United Kingdom, as an example, within the space of its islands, has four different curricular arrangements – one for each of its four nations. For primary language learning the situation is uneven:

- A primary language is not statutory in Wales or in Northern Ireland
- In Scotland from 2021 every child is entitled to learn a first additional language from primary one (age 5) and a second by primary five. This entitlement continues until the end of S3 (age 15).
- In England a language is, since 2013 only, a statutory national curriculum requirement in key stage 2 (7-11 year-olds) as well as in key stage 3 (11-14 year-olds) but not beyond; there are also categories of school which do not need to follow the national curriculum.

Policy around language learning has been adversely affected over time by changes in government and in educational priorities: the last UK Labour Government encouraged the development of a 'National Languages Strategy' which included a lot of coordinated support for the training and professional development of primary teachers and the establishment of guidelines for curriculum and assessment expectations, using National Curriculum Levels, with a view that primary languages would become statutory within the next parliament.

The arrival of the coalition government (2010) then suspended those plans, stopped the development of the Strategy, and removed a lot of the support that was in place and funded centrally. What is more, subsequent developments around assessment and progression issues have resulted in the removal of the NC levels themselves, leaving schools with no national system of comparing achievement (until the GCSE examinations at age 16.)

All that the latest version of the National Curriculum says about the expectations for children's achievement in primary is: *Teaching may be of any modern or ancient foreign language and should focus on enabling pupils to **make substantial progress** in one language.*

and

*The teaching should provide an appropriate balance of spoken and written language and should **lay the foundations** for further foreign language teaching at key stage 3.*

There is no guidance on how much time should be allocated to the teaching of a language, no exemplification beyond the brief Programme of Study above, and no support provided by national government (local government support has also been very largely dismantled): the rhetoric is that teachers/schools are best placed to establish such things for themselves.

As the national Subject Association, ALL (Association for Language Learning) aims to support teachers and encourage language learning, so is keen to ensure that the **foundations** are strong, and that teachers and learners are motivated by the experience of language learning, rather than stressed by it. ALL and our volunteers around the country work hard to offer practical advice to this end within the limited budget of a membership charity.

This year ALL has created a brief resource intended to help teachers in groups focus on a rationale for assessment, and achievable steps that could be taken to reach a professional view on progress. The resource is based on a document produced by the non-statutory Expert Subject Advisory Group ESAG, from which it quotes to stimulate reflection and sharing of strategies, for instance:

<p>What is the role of language learning in the primary school?</p>
<p>Views will vary between professionals on the detail of focus points, but they are likely to include</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoyment • Developing positive attitudes towards other people and cultures • Developing general language awareness, spotting connections and differences between literacies • Expanding experience of texts • Making connections • Communication and self-efficacy • Developing the language skills of speaking with a good accent, pronunciation and intonation, and recognizing familiar spoken language • Focusing at appropriate developmental points on the skills of reading for different purposes and of writing in another language

<p>What can a primary teacher look for to assess languages effectively?</p>
<p>Primary teachers are experienced in assessing across the curriculum, and the skills involved are the same, so they already have considerable expertise.</p>

The teacher would be looking for increasing confidence in speaking and listening, and a growing willingness to explore new language in reading and writing when appropriate.

In the primary context this sense of progress and achievement may be exemplified through pupils' involvement:

- in group or individual performance (e.g. teachers observe: pronunciation, recall, response to familiar classroom language)
- in a display of work (e.g. teachers observe accuracy and recall in written work)
- in the work of older or younger pupils in whole school assemblies (e.g. teachers observe children understanding and joining in with language in a different context)
- as well as in more formal contexts if these are in use in schools such as a vocabulary test, dictation, listening exercises.

The ALL Primary Steering Group colleagues who worked on this are planning a further document which gives practical classroom illustrations of observing progression, and other professional development resources are already available on the ALL Connect blog: notably in the 'key stage 2 coordinator's handbook' and the module and wiki called 'Progression'.

However, one of the many issues for primary teachers is that their schools are increasingly what some term 'data-driven' and are in the habit of asking for statistical information to illustrate the progress that children are making.

- So where can busy primary generalist teachers locate robust data?
- Where might they find something which indicates progression in Language skills?
- How can they even find time for any sort of assessment within a time provision of (on average) c.30 minutes a week?
- And how can they avoid the risk of such data-gathering becoming a demotivating factor for children?

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THE LANGUAGE MAGICIAN is an Erasmus+ funded project to create an online game for Primary pupils which will give them Language challenges, some to test knowledge and others to test flexibility and skills. The game (which lasts under 40 minutes) will be available free of charge in Summer 2018 at two levels, probably most useful when pupils are working at sentence level.

Further information here : [TLM website](#) / [teaser video](#), [demo game](#)