

Why does it all seem so random?

Nicole Malloy writes here about her puzzlement with aspects of language teaching and policy in the English school system (*in blue below*). She now teaches languages to adults.

If you share Nicole's concerns, or have other views, please send your own thoughts for posting on this webpage to info@ALL-Languages.org.uk with title 'Blog post'.

Over the past twenty years, teaching in this country, I have often reflected on the language teaching and learning offered in England. Sometimes aspects have left me puzzled, and even frustrated, and this begs the question: *Am I right to be puzzled, or am I missing something – an insight, a way of understanding?*

I started teaching modern foreign languages as a secondary school teacher in 2002. My first post in 12-18 education was at a language college (a designation of DfE funded Specialist secondary schools in England around the millennium.) At the time, it seemed trendy for a high school to become a specialist college, mainly due to the extra funding available for establishments with a specialism.

Holding language college status required the high school to offer a broader range of languages than other schools (and the school I worked at covered French, German and Italian) with the study of two languages at GCSE level being mandatory certainly for the middle to higher ability students. Secondly, there was a requirement to make language provision to feeder primary schools; our language college staff delivered short lessons at regular intervals to upper key stage 2 classes. At the time, we delivered a slimmed-down and simplified year 7 curriculum in KS2, which covered the requirement and could be seen as good preparation for the forthcoming progression to high school. *It did make me wonder though how the learners would feel, in particular those who enjoyed languages in primary school and had made good progress, if, at the beginning of their time in high school, would repeat topics they had covered at primary school.*

In the early 2000s, it was still mandatory to study at least one language to GCSE level. Of course, this stipulation has since been removed, while language learning at primary school has become statutory..... statutory but not prescriptive. Primary schools were given scope to choose the language they offered. Now this of course offered flexibility, and increased the chance of a school being able to fulfil the requirement with a confident teacher, but, *from my point of view, there was no coherency, making it very difficult for solid, comparable language learning to occur across all primary establishments, and so possibly impacting negatively on progression at secondary level.*

Primary Languages does have its own National Curriculum Programme of Study. Although some might see it as a 'slimmed-down' key stage 3 rather than a distinctive offering, others see it as the beginning of a progression of experiences. There is still though, to my mind, *no clear expectation to support that progression.*

Learners might continue with the language studied at primary school, making repetitions very likely as they will most likely be in a class with learners who will not have learnt that language before.

They might also start a new language, which would offer of course a second foreign language, but might limit the proficiency achieved in the first-learnt foreign language.

A similar breadth of provision can be observed at secondary level with some high schools offering one, others two or more languages, the latter possibly representing more of a rarity. Those who provide teaching in two or more foreign languages seem to facilitate this in a number of ways: equal numbers of sessions between the languages per week, as a carousel etc. At some schools, studying a language at GCSE level is mandatory, at others it is not. Some schools give learners the opportunity to learn a new language at A-Level, others not. It all seems rather arbitrary.

The approach to delivery also seems to have changed. In the early 2000s, it consisted of a mixture of studying vocabulary and grammar. At the moment, it seems to be based (at least at my child's school) on rote-learning of phrases, with grammar not necessarily being explained. The new GCSE will be advocating the teaching and learning of high-frequency words.

Whilst all approaches will be valuable in their own right, the constant changing from one to another could make you question the benefit of any of them. Are they being discontinued as they were not suitable?

The changes as outlined above, I feel, raise many questions.

Above all, what would serve the future generation best?

What changes are really necessary and beneficial for the good of the learners and ultimately of society?

I hope that I am voicing the hopes and wishes of other language teachers when I say that I just want a solid, high-quality language provision.

We all know that it is possible to offer such a thing, as other countries clearly manage to do so.

In addition, it would be nice if this solid, high-quality provision would be backed by an equally solid, high-quality language education policy featuring clear long-, medium- and short-term visions supported by suitable funding, used in the most suitable and economical manner.