

## **MODERN FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS: A COMPARISON OF FOUR NATIONAL SCHEMES**

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### **Introduction**

This article is based on research data gathered for the purposes of the ECP-Oxymoron Project carried out in primary schools in Italy, Spain, England and Greece. The Oxymoron Project explores aspects of early modern foreign language work with respect to language (& linguistic awareness) and culture (& intercultural aspects, Green, 1996) teaching and learning. Thus this article intends to inform all the interested parties of - and also analyse comparatively - developments occurring in the countries involved as regards their policies and their practices concerning modern foreign language teaching (MFLT) in primary schools.

The methodology of the research strategy went through three stages (Green & Gika, 1997a) of empirical and analytical procedure: a. Information gathered in each participant country from documentary evidence on the national policy context for early MFLT, b. Interviews, questionnaires (from teachers and pupils), observations and teaching logs (from teachers only) collected for each scheme, and c. Participants' reports on focal issues of common interest within the aims and the framework of the project.

The data discussion presented here focuses on a comparative study of the policy contexts for implementing early MFLT in the four countries in terms of their respective educational aims, syllabus objectives, curriculum design foci, including the recognition - or lack - of intercultural work. It also looks at the teachers' educational

backgrounds and experience of early MFLT, their profiles and the entry qualifications required in each scheme, some of the concerns that they have raised regarding the policy, and their in-service teaching opportunities. It briefly explores the integrated teaching approaches, together with aspects of 'good practice' and discusses the positive features of MFLT. The last part examines the impact of the schemes on the pupils and their attitudes towards the implementation of MFLT and its practices.

### **OFFICIAL CURRICULUM AIMS IN THE FOUR CONTEXTS**

In studying the early MFL situation in the four states, what is clearly observed is an interesting and contradictory variety of focus of the prescribed and perceived aims and objectives as far as legislation and its accompanying explanatory specifications are concerned in the respective Official Gazettes of each country (Gika, 1995). This diversity is due to directives which in some cases focus on child development and cognition processes, in others on linguistic competence and future utilitarian functions, and still in others on global education and humanistic objectives at times tied to the fostering of intercultural awareness. Variety is also identified in the perspectives derived from the spontaneous views expressed by the teaching body employed to implement the policy.

The aims and objectives, as presented in the respective Presidential and Ministerial Decrees in each country, are found (except for the English case) in the legislation under which the Education Ministers initially announced and subsequently introduced the implementation of MFL in the primary curricula in Italy, Spain and Greece.

#### **The Italian Case**

Italian legislation gives equal priority to the importance of the cognitive, social and cultural aims of MFLT in primary schools. According to the 'Programmi Didattici per la Scuola Primaria' (1985: 27), as translated and reported by partners (1994: 7/1994: 6), the indicated purposes are:

“ to aid and enrich cognitive development, offering another skill for organising knowledge, to allow the child to communicate with others through a language different from his own, and to begin the child's process of understanding other cultures and peoples through linguistic skills”.

### **The Spanish Case**

Spanish decision-makers do not seem to give the same priority to cognitive objectives as the Italians. They appear to be more concerned with the practical and social benefits of early MFL acquisition. According to 'Las Cajas Rojas' (1992), the Official Curriculum for Foreign Languages in Primary Education and Cerezal's report (1994: 8):

“The possibility to be able to communicate in a foreign language constitutes a basic need [...] a growing need in a united Europe, in the movement of professional and manual workers from one European country to another, but also as regards trips abroad, and in cultural and information exchange”.

The Spanish policy statement also stresses the impact of linguistic awareness on other areas of a pupil's education. Learning a second language can improve facility in the mother tongue. It can also broaden cultural perspectives through an 'understanding and respect towards other ways of thinking and feeling [...], it should be a model of how to interpret reality' (ibid.).

### **The Greek Case**

At the start of our research in 1994, it was evident that purely functional objectives for developing linguistic competence through early MFLT were considered the key aim for the introduction of the subject into the Greek primary schools according to the Presidential Decree No 493 (1989: 4484):

“The aim for the teaching of the English language in the primary school is to enable the child to understand and produce authentic oral and written language within the frame of his needs for communication and his interests, so that he will be able to participate actively in situations of real communication”.

Later in the document (next paragraph) one could see a rather weak acknowledgement of the value attributed to educational aims with cognitive focus: “Through the foreign language the pupils will develop their mental abilities and will achieve a more thorough knowledge of the world.” (ibid.). We should also note that no reference was made to the possibility of cultural enrichment through early MFLT (Gika, 1996).

However, since 1996 there has been a major shift in Greek legislation which provides for a more progressive approach to MFLT in Greece. Although this new approach cannot be reflected in our data, which was collected in the pre-reform period, it is useful to give a brief outline here. New legislation now gives recognition to the wider benefits of MFLT, both in terms of cultural enrichment as well as the pedagogical, cognitive, intellectual, affective, socio-linguistic, communicative and even autonomous learning development of the child. In comparison to the Spanish and Italian cases, these are clearly ambitious objectives designed to persuade teachers (and parents) that MFLT is the fulcrum of primary education.

### **The English Case**

In contrast to Italy, Spain and Greece, MFLs education is not yet an official requirement in English primary schools (Hornsey & Jones, 1994). Given the multi-cultural and multi-racial nature of English society, the absence of policies for an early start in the acquisition of MFL skills is something of a paradox. As Gika (1997) pointed out “there appears to be no immediate urgency in education policy-making circles for an early start, as a result of the NFER/Burstall’s unsuccessful experiments (1968, 1970, 1974).” This reality though suggests a lack of sensitivity to multi-cultural and multi-lingual issues on the part of policy-makers. It is also notable to

stress here that the languages which are distinctively out of favour are the European. One can see some interest shown for languages such as Gujerati, Panjabi, Urdu, Hindi, various Chinese dialects, etc., due to the relating origin of the pupils' population in the occasional school. At the same time, the position of English as a world language can basically account for this lack of general interest and want of motivation.

### ***The Predominance of the English Language***

The hegemony of the English language is evident all over the world and has been taken for granted by British society - though less so in Scotland and Wales than in England. Therefore, on the one hand it seems to justify the preference for and finally the choice of language for an early start in most European countries. On the other hand this world dominance has created perplexity in language choice, staffing and resourcing for an early start in Britain. In addition, the perhaps justifiable but still disappointing lack of genuine motivation regarding any MFLs in many social sectors of British society, has had a powerful impact on the MFLT implementation in primary schools.

Thus, although in all other European countries English is the most likely language that youngsters will need in order to secure employment, to travel abroad easily, etc., in this specific context it is very difficult to predict which language/s will be needed and for what purposes - especially regarding functional and vocational concerns - British youngsters will need them later on in their lives or careers. All these factors have militated against an early introduction of MFLT; they are also used as negative arguments frequently brought forward in the context of aims for MFLs in secondary education. They apparently have even stronger force when applied to primary education since the age of the children is even younger and any predictions for their future and their careers would sound rather risky, if not irresponsible. However, one would find a possibly justified place for MFLs in primary schooling if the aims for MFLT were to be focused upon cultural awareness and intercultural reflexivity. Given

the context of multi-culturalism that Britain has experienced has been longer, deeper and more extensive than the other three countries involved in the project, the idea of an early start to MFLs education specifically for intercultural reasons makes more sense here than in any other case, especially because - according to Hopfkens (1995) - “primary children are in danger of developing a narrow view of national culture, which could lead to racist attitudes...”.

Although there are no nationally approved objectives for MFLT at primary level, a number of Local Educational Authorities (LEAs) promote early MFL classes (usually French) and have established their own objectives. Many schools have also introduced early MFLs independently. Both the LEAs' and the schools' objectives have been influenced by the requirements of the National Curriculum for secondary schools. These focus largely on the pupils' acquisition of practical skills together with those skills needed to pass the public examinations at age sixteen. There is no formal assessment nor any emphasis given to language and cultural awareness, probably because they are both notoriously difficult to test.

In line with secondary school aims, primary schools have focused primarily on the acquisition of language skills. However, as evidenced in our data from the Teaching Diaries, teachers in Kent have initiated early MFLT for language awareness, cultural enrichment, development of self-confidence, and to provide opportunities for enjoyable learning. Much of this is motivated by the need to develop 'European Awareness'. These teachers are making strides well ahead of national policy, although they receive some encouragement from non-statutory guidelines issued by the central government.

### ***Non-Statutory Guidance***

Here, the objectives for MFLT, recommended by modern foreign language HM inspectors, are more globally conceived. Their aims are less utilitarian and more humanistic than those in the national policy statements for Italy, Spain and Greece.

They suggest that "learning a foreign language should:

a/ develop the ability to communicate for practical purposes

b/ provide a basis for further study, work and leisure

c/ offer insights into another culture

d/ develop an awareness of language

e/ provide enjoyment

f/ encourage positive attitudes to learning foreign languages and empathising with foreign people

g/ promote skills of memorising and analysing

h/ develop self-awareness".

### **Discussion**

Three states - Italy, Spain and Greece - have official and nation-wide implementation of MFLT in primary schools. Money, time and energy have gone into setting some very ambitious objectives. These will require refining if they are to be effectively realised as at present it appears that they are overly ambitious. Apart from the concern as to whether these objectives are viable in their current form, there are two other principal issues raised in our study. One is the choice of language/s for early MFL. The second is the range and focus of the different objectives set for MFLT across the four states.

In the context of Italy, Spain and Greece the hegemony of the English language on the world stage encourages a preference for English for MFLT. However, in the British context, it is not easy to predict which European language/s the British youngsters will need later on in their lives. This argument is frequently brought up in the formulation of policies for MFL even in secondary schools. When applied to the context of primary schools, it assumes stronger proportions as children are even further away from planning career goals.

However, it is possible to argue for the inclusion of MFLs in English primary schools for intercultural reasons. Given that multi-culturalism is more prominent in Britain than in any of the other countries in our project, the aims could justifiably be the cultivation of cultural and intercultural awareness. This does not solve the problem of which language/s to choose, however.

In terms of objectives, multi-culturalism is less extensive in these countries than in Britain, at least at the moment. This might appear to reduce the need for intercultural awareness as a primary objective. On the other hand, the European market and globalisation make it imperative for pupils to begin to develop cross-cultural awareness through MFL acquisition. Nevertheless, it is significant to note that the Italians have indeed indicated from the very beginning a particular sensitivity to socio-cultural aims within early MFLT, which are seen as preparatory for educational pursuits that are to be met later in children's lives. Early MFLT's role is considered to "begin the child's process of understanding other cultures...." (ibid.).

### **TEACHERS' EDUCATION & ENTRY QUALIFICATIONS FOR EARLY MFLT SCHEMES**

This section gives a brief account of the teachers' education and the criteria for the early MFLT schemes in the four countries. From our data review, it would appear that the Spanish and Greek teachers have similar educational backgrounds. Therefore this



section will discuss them as a group followed by the Italian and the English teachers before finally bringing the analysis together.

### **The Spanish and the Greek Teachers**

These teachers are trained as MFL specialists, with university degrees in foreign languages acquired (Eurydice, 1996) before taking up posts in primary education. In addition to having acquired a high standard of linguistic competence in their language of specialization, they are also experts in the history and literature of that language as well as in teaching and learning methods (Gika, 1994a: 20). In addition to this - particularly in the case of the Greek teachers - they would also have reached a fairly advanced level in the science of linguistics.

Compared to the Greeks, however, the Spanish teachers have had more practical pre-service training, as they have to participate in the 'Practicum' for each of their three years of university studies. The 'Practicum' is made up of three hundred and twenty hours of teaching practice in primary schools. Primary teachers in Spain spend three weeks at schools during their first year of studies. During this time, they observe teaching sessions and write assignments on them. During the next two years of their studies, they are expected to spend five weeks in schools in each academic year. During this time, they teach under the supervision of the class teacher and their training tutor. This is called 'guided teaching' and has proved to be of essential significance for the trainees' professional orientation.

### **The Italian & the English Teachers**

In order to qualify to teach MFL in Italy, teachers have first to become certified primary teachers. This translates into a teacher training upper secondary school diploma together with success in all the relevant public examinations. Compared to the teaching requirements in Spain and Greece, the Italian pre-service training is less rigorous with regard to their general educational and academic backgrounds. They can also begin teaching earlier as soon as they terminate their higher secondary schooling. The level of language competence in their area of specialization varies from teacher to

teacher and depends entirely on individual interest. However, they are experienced and generally effective primary school teachers with the ability to cope with a range of concerns that primary school pupils might encounter.

The English case is less specific with regard to professional qualifications and training for primary level MFLT. There are no national curriculum requirements at primary level. Furthermore, when the need for MFLT is identified in a school, arrangements for teachers are made at the level of the LEAs in many cases. Alternatively, some of the schools may make their premises available to private commercial ventures. These organisations will then make all the necessary arrangements - including the hiring of teachers - to teach outside normal school hours. The fees are normally met by the parents of children taking the language tuition. In many cases, MFL is left to the initiative of individual teachers and parents who may organise MFL activities as extra-curricular provision, in the shape of clubs and recreational pursuits. So, with the sanction of school governors and parents, anyone with some kind of educational credentials and commercial know-how can set up MFLT in English primary schools.

Much the same situations applies to training for MFLT. There is no systematic national provision or forms of certification for prospective MFL teachers at primary level although of course all primary teachers have to complete an extensive professional training period either as part of a first degree or as a post graduate qualification. Such training however is not specialised with regard to MFLT in primary schools. The teachers' position is very weak, since apart from the bitterness of isolation they have to cope with the lack of specific foreign language training as well. The British state has yet to promote early MFLT and, in the words of a National Curriculum MFL report (DES, 1990), "very few teachers in primary schools are equipped to teach it". The 'it', for reasons of geographical proximity and history, is usually French, despite parental wishes and expectations nowadays for more diversified language provision (Rumley,

1993 / Dore, 1994). Because the English speak the current 'lingua franca', they feel no pressure to encourage pupils to learn another language. As a result, the government sees no reason to invest in MFLT, especially at primary school level.

### **Discussion**

The Spanish and Greek systems of teacher education and professional training for early MFLT place emphasis on competence in the relevant MFLs. The Spanish also have a strong system for developing classroom level management and delivery skills which is absent from the Greek training system. The Italian system allows recruitment of primary level teachers from secondary school graduates who are as young as eighteen or nineteen. Their classroom skills and FL competence are then developed during in-service provision which is discussed below.

However, in England there is no formal national provision for teacher education or professional development for early MFLT. Whatever provision is available is arranged on an informal basis at local level. Compared to the Greek teachers, the Italians and the English are less competent linguistically. The Spanish have strong linguistic training which includes practical teaching experience through their Practicum. It is through these professional training conditions that all have to meet their states' formal objectives (informal and local in the British case) and satisfy the demands emanating from various social groups - parents, pupils, head teachers, school inspectors, administrators, and the local community.

## **IN-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING & DEVELOPMENT**

### **The Situation in the Four Contexts**

Apart from some short courses - including some in England which are run by the LEAs under the supervision of area education advisers and inspectors - there appear to be no long-term accredited in-service teacher training opportunities to assist teachers in updating and improving their language skills and teaching approaches.

Teachers have expressed a need for such courses. From a Spanish teacher, M. Lopez: *“It would enable me to learn more about new methods and techniques of teaching to attend such courses”*. Another Spanish teacher, A. Diaz, said she would like further training in the use of audio-visual materials and also *“to attend other teachers’ lessons, as an observer, both at home and abroad”*. Her colleague, J. Salinas, suggested an in-service training programme which focused on: *“maintaining and making better use of material and didactic resources for teaching English.. development of didactic, pedagogical, social and administrative tasks and activities [.....] specifically related to pupils, teachers, management, parents and administrative personnel”*. Finally, an English teacher, S. Ward, stressed that in-service teacher training was essential particularly in the English case where no formal training scheme was available. Such training would provide: *“a framework - some clear ideas of where we are going and what we are going to be doing at the next stage”*.

### **Discussion**

The teachers' views suggest that there is a strong demand in all four states for more and better focused in-service teacher training in MFLT for the primary sector. It is more than obvious that primary language teachers would very much appreciate systematic training opportunities on a regular basis, especially in view of what they have already said even about sporadic training activities on various occasions: in Richmond / UK (where teachers *“...were very well served”*), in Serres / Greece (where they *“...had an interesting experience”*) and in Bergamo / Italy (where they *“...absorbed an innovative spirit”*).

## TEACHERS' CONCERNS

Teachers in our study raised numerous concerns about MFLT. The following highlights the three most commonly referred to by respondents in all four participating countries.

### Linguistic Competence

As regards the teachers' own linguistic competence, it was difficult to ascertain their levels from the information we collated from their formal education and pre-service training. However, what was evident from our interviews was their own perceptions of lack of competence in the MFL they were teaching.

Apart from the Greek teachers, for whom it is a pre-requisite to have an excellent command of MFL prior to entering university, the ability to speak the target language fluently was a desire expressed by most of the teachers. Underlining the value of language proficiency, E. Kyriakou, a Greek teacher, stated: *"It is very important to be able to speak as fluently as possible"*. A. Diaz, a Spanish teacher, said there was an urgent need *"to improve my own English"*. R. Gianni, an Italian teacher, said she valued *"the possibility of always improving my own linguistic ability [.....]; I experience a great limitation in this area"*.

When asked what would help her to improve her teaching, another Italian teacher, C. Corsi, replied: *"a better knowledge of the language [...], if I spoke better English"*. From P. Wallis, an English teacher: *"I didn't have any training at college. My training has therefore been since I have become a teacher. It took place last year and involved an hour and a half a week. During that time, I had to improve my French to the standard of the next level. There were people of similar ability and it provided a base to give us more confidence in speaking the language"*.

From these quotations it is evident that, apart from the Greek case, the majority of the teachers in our study lacked confidence in their MFL skills. They therefore need more intensive tuition and practice to become competent and self-confident in MFL usage.

### Teaching Methods

We now turn to classroom practice. The majority of our respondents were advocates of the 'communicative' approach to language learning. This emphasises practical, everyday usage of the language and stresses speaking and listening skills over reading and writing. In a primary school context, this approach was made even more accessible to the children through the use of mime, fairy tales, short stories, games, rhymes and songs. Describing her classroom practices, C. Corsi, an Italian teacher said she used "*a method principally based on game playing, and through the games, getting the pupils involved*". S. Ward, an English teacher, said she advocated "*lots more games*".

While fun forms of learning are a motivating, relaxing and rewarding (Philips, 1993: 85) factor in primary classrooms, they have to be carefully structured so as to ensure that learning objectives are met. Some professionals are critical of the 'fun' approach to language learning, fearing that the element of enjoyment has reduced MFL to "a low-status" (Hornsey & Jones, 1994) subject rather than a serious educational pursuit. There is also a concern that children with a very limited command of the MFL cannot participate fully in the games without falling back into their mother tongue.

Games do have a place in early MFL provided the learning objectives are clear. For example, they are a useful activity at the end of the class when children are tired and their concentration is at a low ebb. They are also useful to consolidate learning and therefore work well in the production stage of the learning process. The way to overcome the problem of inadequate language competence preventing learners from participating fully in the activities is to ensure that they have sufficient knowledge to be

able to understand the instructions, rules, and procedures of the game and are able to respond using the target language.

Part of what lies behind the teachers' choice of teaching methods relates to their own language learning experiences, many of which were largely negative. As mentioned earlier in Part One, one of the Italian teachers (L. Pavio) told us that she considered the way she had been taught MFL as "barbarous". Because of this aversion, some of them have improvised their own methods. Said an Italian teacher, A. Lurrio: *"I consider the principle reason is that of being able to give the pupil the possibility of learning through a methodology which is rich in strategies which allow each one to find their own best level according to their way of learning"*.

Thus, in classroom practice, our respondents applied a modified version of the communicative approach, with particular adjustments made to meet the individual needs of young learners. It was not clear whether the teachers had formulated these approaches as a result of pre-service or in-service training, or whether they had put their imaginations to work to devise their own learning schemes which incorporated elements of play.

### **Discipline**

A significant number of teachers in our study expressed concern over classroom discipline and some of the pupils' short attention span. The Italian teachers frequently alluded to the issue of discipline and the noise level in early MFL classes but justified it by suggesting that it was an expected response to their teaching methods. According to Spallanzani (1995): *"What seems to concern (teachers) is classroom management. Discipline is sometimes difficult to maintain ever because of the typology of the approach itself"*. And from A. Gonzalez, a Spanish teacher: *"More and more frequently in the classroom there is less discipline and respect for the teacher. The pupils have a very short attention span and a lack of study habits. In my opinion, this prevents me from teaching every thing that I would like to"*.

Most primary MFL training courses address the issues of limited memory and attention span, low level of concentration and a lack of interest and motivation among

some of the pupils, as part of the training. The question then is whether these teachers would have expressed these concerns if they had received adequate training.

### **Discussion**

It seems essential for the teachers to improve their linguistic and didactic competences through systematic training. This will add to their confidence and ease in performing their task more effectively. The policy-makers have not fully addressed these issues of pedagogy and such a situation has given a lot of leeway for teachers to apply their own methodology to a realisation of the national objectives at school and classroom level. This leads us to question whether the policies are being correctly interpreted and applied in classroom practice or whether in fact this lack of pedagogical direction has led to contradictions and confusion amongst the teachers.

### **TEACHERS' GOOD PRACTICE IN EARLY MFLT**

This section examines what in the opinion, of teachers, constitutes 'good practice'. The concept is complex as it incorporates a range of factors which are open to different interpretation depending on the context to which they are applied. An accurate reflection of the teachers' perspectives was made more difficult by the fact that the data collected from the interviews and diaries was not specifically designed to explore this issue.

### **Definitions**

Some interesting examples of teaching resources emerged from the data. Unfortunately, these do not throw light on the way in which they were used in the classes. We were given considerable detail for lesson plan design and content. However, the teachers' intentions were not always expressed coherently. For example, it was not clear whether their aim was to teach only recognition through practising the receptive skills, or whether they also intended to teach productive skills. We also did not know whether the aim was long term or only for the duration of a particular unit.



Some teachers did not define what they meant by 'traditional grammar'. They gave no indication as to the way in which this could be taught or whether, in fact, it was taught at all. We were also uncertain as to whether classes were conducted entirely in the target language or not, and if not, what the relative proportion was between MFL and the mother tongue use in the classroom.

'Good practice' incorporates an amalgam of teaching features, methods, approaches, techniques, aids, and materials. In 1995-96, this mixture appeared to be popular and effective in all four of the participating countries. This statement is not a value judgement. Neither was the teachers' effective good practice the object of our research. Rather, their elaboration of this amalgam was an outcome of individual experience and expertise in the field and also enjoyed widespread consensus across all four countries.

### **Good Practice Features**

Everyday classroom realizations have given teachers a good sense of what constitutes good practice. In their view, it depends on an appropriate, well-balanced proportion of the following teaching features:

- a) child-centred approach, reduced teacher's role as focal point,
- b) correct and considerable use of the target language in the class, as teacher should be the 'ideal' model,
- c) speaking and listening focused work,
- d) engagement of fun activities,
- e) teaching methods based on lexis and functions practice, not structures as they seem very complicated at this stage,
- f) incorporation of pair, group and team work,
- g) simplicity and child-friendliness of activities,
- h) integration of teaching culture,
- i) work to encourage continuity and primary-secondary teachers' co-operation.

The actual combination elected from the above reflects the teachers' grasp of a pupil's needs and learning styles and their ability to show flexibility in order to retain the pupil's interest in the topic. The teachers have to encourage and motivate their pupils to participate actively in various activities which must be relevant to their preferences and appropriate for their learning pace. The MFL teachers in our study had implemented the principles contained in their good practice amalgam, both separately and in combination and ensured that these were also child-focused and child-friendly.

This is how two of the Italian teachers have tried to make their teaching child-centred. C. Corsi stressed that it was important to “*get the pupils involved in this way, ... (pupils) are more relaxed and more inclined to learn. I try to help their learning by creating an atmosphere of involvement*”. L.. Bazzio supported this approach: “*I try to play with them and to find from their experiences the things I can transfer into a foreign language. It's a case of offering something new, through the experiences ... they are already familiar with.*” She continued by emphasizing the role of “*... trying to involve them from an emotional point of view and through playing*”. A Greek teacher said: “*My classroom is a learner-centred classroom. I create a situation and set an activity in motion but it is the learners themselves who are responsible for conducting the interaction*”. She also suggested that participation in the learning process was important and should be encouraged “*I am ultimately concerned with developing the learners' ability to take part in the process of communication through language*”. (E. Ambariotou).

The teachers placed greater emphasis on teaching speaking and listening skills than on reading and writing. The introduction of writing was therefore considerably delayed. The teachers said that they concentrated on oral work “.. *with writing only sometimes*’ (M. Lopez / Spain), and that they gave ‘less value’ (A. Gonzalez / Spain) to writing. However, other teachers claimed that they were able to combine almost everything in their teaching. An English teacher said she introduced all four skills: “.. *listening, speaking, reading and writing, integrated with games and songs and worksheets*” (L. Williams / Eastwood). This teacher's comments also highlighted the frequent use of 'fun' activities such as games, songs, etc. There was general consensus that the 'fun' element was one of the rationales for offering MFL at primary level said a Spanish teacher “*I try to centre my way of teaching in games, songs, mimes, etc.*” (M. Lopez), and from a Greek colleague: “... *I use songs, games and poems in my lessons. I try to make children learn through fun*” (Z. Iliadou).

The British teachers in particular, were advocates of the use of 'fun' activities in the teaching of MFL. One reported in the Teaching Diaries: 'Learning French with Pilote is meant to be fun' (J. Jones). This was supported by S. Ward: “*It's fun I just love it because the children find it tremendous fun. I don't know why, but they do and they're very, very, as I say, they're very keen*”.

### **Discussion**

It is indicative of the quality of the work done - based mainly on the teachers' goodwill, enthusiasm and intuition - that the features of 'good practice', as defined by respondents across the four participating countries, correspond to widely accepted professional theory and teaching approaches and models.

However, these approaches put pressure on the use of the target language. Many respondents expressed their concerns about their own linguistic competence. They wanted to be able to maximise the use of the target language in class in order to help their pupils improve their speaking and listening skills. This objective was clearly presented by Varkez / Spain: *“I try to speak English all the time”*.

### **THE IMPACT OF EARLY MFLT SCHEMES ON CHILDREN**

One of most significant concerns in this research is the pupils' needs, their preferences and learning styles. We have investigated their reflections upon the impact of their teachers' practices at each stage of the language learning process. Focusing in this section on pupils and their attitudes we discuss to what extent their learning needs are identified and met in the MFLT teaching at primary schools.

Children have shown great interest in MFLs. Their motivations fell into two main categories. Firstly, languages were seen as an important means of communication. Primary pupils tend to appreciate MFLs as a way of helping them communicate with others. Secondly the appropriacy of MFLT approaches was greatly valued. Pupils seemed to enjoy the techniques used by the MFL teachers as they thought they reflected their interests and motivated them to learn.

#### **Language as a Means of Communication**

Most pupils in the four countries underlined the importance of a MFL as a necessary tool that would allow them to communicate with people who could not speak their own language. Their main concern appeared to be “the exchange of information in a context of real involvement related to the oral skills”, as reported by P. Spallanzani. Very few pupils mentioned the possibility of communication through writing, which is understandable since written work is not as frequently employed as reading and oral work at very early age.

Thus research shows that the context in which MFLs can be exploited is, according to the pupils' viewpoints, limited. They thought that MFL competence was basically

useful for travel: visit a foreign country and find your way around when abroad. There was little reference (except from the Greeks) to how useful a MFL could be for their pupils' immediate or long-term future, their secondary schooling and other studies, their jobs and careers. However, these reasons for learning a MFL were considered important to parents, families and society in general. This was evident from both teachers' and pupils' responses about parents' views. An Italian youngster said that his parents thought that: "*...it's useful because in middle school I will be ahead*" (Adriano).

The Greek pupils occasionally put stress upon a MFL, and particularly English as a qualification that future employers would be looking for. As reported by the Greek team, the pupils' perceptions accurately reflected the concerns of the wider Greek community. The Greek parents' cultural priorities include inculcating an early awareness of what is required of their children as future members of society. Unlike the other participants, the Greek pupils appeared to know what qualifications they would be expected to have in order to comply with the 'pre-set requirements' for the competitive world they would face soon. They said: "*...it can help me to find a job...*" (Kostas & Teta); and also: "*...I'll need it when I grow up*" (Manos).

### **The Appeal of the MFL Teaching Methods**

The second theme engages with the pupils' perspectives on teaching approaches. Pupils seemed very motivated by the methods implemented by their MFL teachers and suggested that their practices made MFLs 'easy' and 'interesting' to learn. MFLT methodology has borrowed techniques from young pupils' learning styles. Early MFL teachers interviewed, frequently referred to their approach as communicative and pupil-friendly. This flexible communicative approach - comprising variations in implementation across the four countries (with less or more grammar, with fewer or more exercises) - encourages pupils to acquire the target language by using it as a tool of communication in an exciting way.

### **Discussion**

Children from the four different backgrounds shared the same kind of appreciation for MFLs learning. They all liked it, not only because they believed it catered to their communication needs, but also because they had an opportunity to enjoy learning in a "*lucid and meaningful context...*" (P. Spallanzani / Italy).

### **CHILDREN'S CONCERNS**

It is important for MFL teachers to be in a position to foresee and identify the pupils' needs in terms of their likes and dislikes. Whenever pupils expressed their dissatisfaction with classroom techniques, activities, or other teaching strategies, it was because they had failed to satisfy one of their basic needs. These could include their needs for encouragement and fulfilment, for confirmation and stimulation, or for raising their self-esteem, their need for active participation and reinforcement in what they had learnt to date; even their need to share experiences and exchange new ideas. All these needs are primarily linked with the psychology of learning. The concerns brought up in this section have arisen from pupils' responses to question 9: "Are there any things you don't like?" and identified a few areas of learning difficulty, discomfort and dislike.

#### **The Need for Confidence-building**

Some pupils pointed out different activities in which their common problem was frustration at the lack of success. It is an expression of dissatisfaction over a feeling of incompetence. A Spanish pupil said: "*Sometimes when I listen to something in the cassette and I don't understand. I like nearly everything.*" (Sofia). Talking about what she disliked an Italian pupil said: "*I don't like Bingo very much, it's a little... I lag back, I don't go ahead, then I'm always left with some cards. It's not difficult, but I don't like it. I like all the rest a lot.*" (Alessandro). A Greek boy was quite worried when MFLT involved grammar and pronunciation. He considered them very difficult, being afraid of a possible failure in these activities: "*I don't like the grammar and pronunciation. They are too difficult..*" (Yiannis).

### **The Need for full Involvement**

Active involvement allows the teaching methods to be more effective and engaging as they motivate youngsters in creative and productive ways. An Italian girl complained about the lack of space for active participation in the learning processes while practising reading in class. She said that she disliked "*...reading books. I would like it if the teacher acted the parts of the characters, letting us read and repeating in our own words...*" (Giovanna). It was encouraging to find children of this age with the capacity to make such positive suggestions with a highly developed concept of what teaching should, or should not, be about!

The information collected suggests that the pupils were not regularly asked to do homework. A Spanish pupil said: "*...not homework from school but English videos...*" (Juliana). Where the pupils were given some homework, most could do it without much difficulty. But there is also some evidence that a few did not like the idea of homework at all. A Greek girl said: "*I don't like homework. I prefer practising in classroom...*" (Katia).

### **EMERGING ISSUES**

1. A framework for the teaching of early MFLs has been devised and implemented nationally in three of the four participating countries. There is, as yet, no officially established policy for MFLs in England, although initiatives have been taken by several LEAs. Our overall assessment of the present situation is that sometimes diverse priority has been given to certain perspectives as regards the national curricula and

their objectives. In each of the countries there are clearly efforts to conform to statutory requirements. What still makes our discussion interesting, though, is not only the contradictions amongst prescribed aims, but also the variety of the teachers' interpretations of the objectives on both international and intranational level.

2. The diversity of the initial training and the variety of the teachers' profiles involved in early MFL teaching in the four countries are evident. Each group consequently tends to concentrate on elements they feel more comfortable about, more confident in. They might be successful, they might not. We are not in a position to make a definitive judgement. Nevertheless, what seems to be quite clear is that there is a widely felt need amongst teachers for in-service training on all the aspects of foreign language teaching. The teachers urgently require, if not demand, systematic training. They clearly appreciate its importance and how much strength and confidence it would give them. For some teachers the training would focus on pedagogy and child development, for others on methodology and teaching techniques, for another group on linguistic competence, for others on both cultural and intercultural awareness.

3. The fact that the teachers seem to cope quite well so far relates to their goodwill and intuition and does not imply that certain issues should not be properly addressed by the policy-makers. The states should provide for the necessary systematic training and the necessary resources. Goodwill cannot be expected to last for ever. Neither can it be expected to be sufficient for effective teaching. Reforms on policies in education, like the ones they have discussed in this chapter, cannot be implemented without well organized teacher training. This has to be systematic, focused, ongoing and long term as teachers should be given extensive opportunities to achieve the following: to be aware of new ideas; to practise and develop competence; to appreciate learners' needs and learning styles; to reflect individually; to understand the mechanics of their tasks; to integrate pre-existing knowledge and experiences; to feel confident in what they are doing; to develop frames of references; to evaluate and give feedback on the progress of the policy; to commit themselves, to find enjoyment and fulfilment in their job; to be active agents of the policy and not merely recipients; and finally to become life-long learners themselves.

4. In terms of teaching methods, the 'communicative' approach (focusing on listening and speaking) was most favoured. 'Fun' activities were also devised to keep the



primary school children interested and highly motivated. However, the use of such activities has to be carefully controlled and regulated, especially in the early stages where the language scope is limited to some basic lexis. All these activities (ie. games) depend for their success on good class organization (Lee, 1986: 4). Placing them in the production stage was recommended together with ensuring that the potential for authentic language usage was always the principal focus.

5. From our interviews with some of the pupils it was clear that many of them responded well to the early MFL teaching methods adopted by the teachers. However, they had only a limited idea of the advantages of MFL education. It is of considerable concern that many of the teachers, parents and pupils, 'blinded' by the obvious benefits to careers and communication, did not view the cultivation of intercultural awareness as a primary objective for early MFL (Green & Gika, 1997b).

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