At what age should foreign language learning begin?

Keith Sharpe and Patricia Driscoll

Introduction
Like Shakespeare's enumeration of the ages of man the possible answers to this question are seven-fold:

1. Never
2. In adulthood, at the point of need/desire/interest
3. During adolescence as an option or under compulsion
4. At the beginning of the secondary cycle
5. During the later primary years
6. Throughout the years of primary schooling
7. As early as possible

We consider the implications of each of these in turn.

Never
This answer need not delay us for long. It is essentially grounded in the view that either there is no particular educational or other value in learning a foreign language or that there is no need to learn another language perhaps because one's mother tongue happens to be widely spoken and understood. Either way there is no point in foreign language learning at any age, and the arguments about when and how it should be done are of no consequence. This view is of course fundamentally mistaken. The learning of foreign languages carries immense value both intrinsically and instrumentally for anyone engaged in the process, as indicated in other chapters of this book; and to argue that there is no need to learn other languages, even for speakers of 'world' languages, is to betray massive ignorance of the realities of the globalising world that, for good or ill, we now inhabit.

In adulthood, at the point of need/desire/interest
This position tends to be based on the view that teaching foreign languages in schools is full of problems, mainly surrounding some notion of unwilling, disaffected pupils being forced to learn something they do not like and do not see the point of, and that it would therefore be better to wait until children grow into adults and develop a real life interest in learning a foreign language, perhaps associated with employment or with actual travel plans. Confining the teaching of foreign languages to adults in this way would mean that teachers would only ever have to face motivated and committed learners who would have the advantage also of having acquired a range of learning skills already. Painful encounters in school classrooms could be avoided, the overcrowded school curriculum could be relieved of an element to which considerable time is given, and the general levels of success enjoyed by foreign language teachers would rise. This approach is however based upon a number of assumptions which need to be challenged. We would want to question for example the assumption that foreign language learning in schools is necessarily always problematic as well as the assumption that adults are actually better learners of foreign languages. We suggest that there are valid educational arguments for obliging children to learn foreign languages irrespective of the difficulties involved. These issues will be discussed later in this chapter.

During adolescence, as an option or under compulsion
At this point we begin to enter the argument about critical age, i.e. that in some sense it is better if foreign language learning begins before adulthood, whether through the provision of teaching in the subject as an option or as a requirement. What is generally meant by better is that: (a) young learners have advantages in learning foreign languages which are lost if the process is delayed until adulthood (these may be to do with both specific linguistic skills as well as more general capacities to assimilate and process new information and ideas); (b) language learning has a broader value such as promoting tolerance and cross-cultural understanding, and is of such importance that children should be exposed to it during their schooling; (c) in the case of the United Kingdom and other member countries of the European Union, it is important that other European languages are encountered by children during their education as part of their preparation for future life and citizenship. And of course the same argument can be used to make a similar case for all nations and the importance of global citizenship in the twenty-first century.

At the beginning of the secondary cycle
This answer takes all the principles in the section above, but lowers the critical age specifically to 11 years. There are two basic ideas behind this position: first, foreign language learning is of comparable importance to other core subjects such as mathematics or science and should be treated in the same way. Second, for a variety of reasons, it is nevertheless appropriate to make a distinction between foreign languages and other core subjects as far as the primary curriculum is concerned and exclude it on a number of possible grounds, including the belief that young children cannot learn foreign languages as effectively as
adolescents; the fact that there are insufficient appropriately qualified primary teachers of MFL; and the conviction that primary schooling should concentrate on basic skills in literacy and numeracy.

**During the later primary years**

In the final decades of the twentieth century there has been an increasing tendency to raise doubts about the wisdom of the orthodoxy set out in the above section, which has generally held in the education systems of most developed countries. A key argument has been that young children have advantages of linguistic and cognitive flexibility which facilitate success in terms of language learning, and the age of 11 is purely an administrative ‘cut off point’ for which there is no inherent justification. Another key argument has been that, to the extent that the purpose of teaching foreign languages is to do with impacting upon attitudes, this is better done in the primary years when children are more malleable. It has also been claimed that it is possible to incorporate modern languages into the primary curriculum in such a way that the essential objectives of primary education are still achieved, and by starting earlier, levels of attainment in foreign language learning at the point of assessment in secondary schooling will be raised.

**Throughout the years of primary schooling**

For the most part, attempts to introduce modern languages into the primary curriculum have been focused on the upper junior years with pupils between the ages of 9 and 11. Many advocates of primary MFL teaching maintain, however, that the arguments in favour of including MFL in primary schools apply to the whole age range, and that 9 is just as much an arbitrary cut off point as 11. Their contention is that modern foreign languages should in some form or other constitute a consistent part of the primary curriculum offered to children between the ages of 5 and 11 in the first 6 years of compulsory schooling.

**As early as possible**

Real enthusiasts for the teaching of modern foreign languages to young children take the view that exposure should begin as soon as possible. There are a number of projects in different countries designed to introduce a foreign language to nursery age children. There are for example in France some instances of pupils as young as 3 involved in learning English in the École Maternelle. Amongst these enthusiasts there is a conviction that the sooner the learning begins the better will be the quality of that learning, not only in relation to measures of linguistic performance but also in relation to the motivational and attitudinal gains claimed for MFL teaching in primary schools.

These seven positions thus span the complete spectrum of opinion in relation to the worthwhileness of teaching MFL. It is possible to view developments during the twentieth century broadly in terms of an overall shift of general opinion, both in England and elsewhere, from position one towards position seven. This drift has not been smooth and progressive; there have been lurches and U-turns, but on the whole the pattern is fairly clear. At the beginning of the century, MFL were not considered suitable curriculum content for inclusion in schooling; at the close of the century they are well established in secondary schools and increasingly being taught in primary schools.

**The present situation in England**

As far as England is concerned there has been rapid growth of interest in the teaching and learning of foreign languages in primary schools since the mid-1980s (Sharpe, 1991). The Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research reported that approximately 20 per cent of the state primary schools in at least 40 LEAs (CILT, 1995) in England and Wales and Northern Ireland offer some foreign language provision (CILT, 1995) and following a successful pilot phase, Scotland has embarked on an extension programme to introduce MFL to all primary schools.

The move towards a single market has forged closer links between countries in the European Union thereby creating potentially greater prospects for the workforce. Languages are seen as a key factor in accessing those potential prospects. This recent development of commitment to interdependence in the European marketplace is an important factor lying behind the tendency of parents who want ‘the best’ for their children increasingly to exert pressure on primary schools to include a foreign language in their curriculum provision (CILT, 1995).

Extending modern languages ‘downward’ into the primary school has received some official attention. Dearing (1993), SCAA (1997), DEEE (1998). Although there are no national guidelines of what constitutes good practice, a broad framework of expectations can be found in the Handbook for the Inspection of Primary Schools issued as Guidance for Inspectors (Ofsted, 1998), despite the fact that MFL is not a statutory requirement as part of the National Curriculum for primary schools. This would appear, prima facie, to constitute significant evidence of increasing official interest in, and recognition of, the activity.

**The underlying rationale for the growth in primary MFL teaching**

As suggested above, this growing interest in the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school is underpinned and sustained by some key ideas. Broadly speaking there are two central strands to the argument advanced by those in favour of teaching MFL in the primary school. The first strand is concerned with increasing pupils’ linguistic proficiency at some future date. It is claimed that, by starting earlier, eventual standards of achievement will be raised. The second strand is concerned with offering a broader education for
pupils. It is contended that learning at a formative age about a foreign language and the culture in which it is embedded will enhance the overall quality of pupils' educational experience, specifically developing knowledge, skills and understanding in the areas of socio-cultural empathy, interpersonal skills and language awareness.

The increased linguistic proficiency argument rests on two assumptions. The first is that pupils possess age-specific attributes which allow them to learn languages more efficiently than older pupils, and an 'early start' will profit from this resource and result in raised levels of linguistic attainment later in schooling. We shall call this the age factor assumption.

The second assumption is that by extending the learning time of MFL by a year or more in the primary school, pupils will be able to spend more time practising and learning the language, with the result that they will have achieved higher standards by the time they take public examinations. We shall call this the time factor assumption.

For the sake of clarity, the argument of the age factor will be discussed separately from the time factor, although it is important to emphasise they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

The age factor assumption

A critical issue at the heart of the primary MFL debate is whether 'young is best' in relation to foreign language acquisition on the basis that before puberty children possess natural abilities to learn languages efficiently. The idea of there being an optimum age to learn languages was first argued by Penfield and Roberts in 1939, and later supported by Lenneberg's theory of optimal age (1967). The 'critical period hypothesis' suggests that in the years before puberty a child's brain is particularly adaptable for acquiring languages and that language acquisition that takes place after puberty will be different in nature and potentially less successful (Lenneberg, 1967). However, although there has been an abundance of research concerning the 'critical period' the findings are rather complex and as yet there is little conclusive research evidence to support the proposition that there exists a specific critical age for foreign language learning.

Singleton (1989) discusses the evidence and the issues using an analytic framework of four distinct propositions:

1. that young is best in overall attainment
2. that young is best with particular skills such as the oral and aural skills
3. that older is best in general terms
4. that young is best 'in the long run'

No very clear single proposition could be seen to be clearly apparent from the research evidence. The popular general notion that 'catching them young' leads to overall language proficiency, is simply not supported by research findings except in a number of studies in naturalistic settings. For example, the Canadian immersion study by Lapkin et al. (1991) found that pupils who started an immersion programme in pre-school showed superiority across the four skills in comparison with pupils who had started an immersion course at the age of 10. Snow and Hofnagel-Hohle (1978), who conducted an extensive study into maturational factors in naturalistic conditions, concluded that younger learners may eventually surpass older beginners in these circumstances. Their findings showed that 12–15-year-old pupils achieved higher scores in all the skills but that the younger group, the 6–10-year-olds caught up and performed better than the older learner on 'story comprehension' and 'spontaneous speech fluency'.

Given, however, the huge differences which exist between a naturalist language learning environment and the teaching of a foreign language to pupils in a school classroom setting, it is not possible to use these findings as a valid basis for justifying the earlier teaching of MFL generally.

Research into the effectiveness of The Primary French Pilot Scheme which ran in England between 1964 and 1974 (The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) study reported in Burstall, 1974) concluded that there were no overall advantages to be gained from teaching modern languages in the primary school. It was found that the scheme pupils who had been taught French from the age of 8, did not reveal any substantial gain in mastery at the secondary stage over those pupils who started at the age of 11 except in listening comprehension.

Buckley (1976), however, highlighted certain testing discrepancies in the NFER evaluation: for example, the ‘experimental pupils’ were not tested either for pronunciation or fluency in conversation, both of which had been identified as major advantages for starting French in the primary school. The study was further challenged by Gamble and Smalley, who criticised the ‘inadequate questionable, statistical data’ (1975: 94). They pointed out that the sample numbers during the nine year study dwindled to untestable levels; in 1964 there were 11,302 ‘experimental’ pupils and in 1973 the whereabouts of only 1,227 ‘experimental’ pupils were known, yet these small numbers were used as if they could produce reliable and valid results. Above all, the NFER evaluation was seriously weakened by its failure to consider the impact of what the secondary schools did. In most cases they grouped ‘experimental’ and non-experimental pupils together, ignoring the fact that the former had already studied French for three years. The demotivating effect on these pupils of starting again from scratch was never raised as an issue by the researchers.

Some later researchers have reported evidence indicating a superiority on the part of younger pupils in both oral and aural performance (see Singleton, 1989) where younger children appear to possess a superior ‘sound’ system (Krashen et al., 1982; Long, 1990). There is also some evidence that as children get older a decline in the quality of native-like pronunciation is evident (Vilke (1988)).

A recent review of European research on early learning in MFL (Blondin et al., 1998), suggests that where primary beginners’ attainment is compared in secondary school with the attainment of pupils who have had no primary
experience, the primary beginners tend to show an advantage in certain competences such as listening comprehension, although this advantage may be limited to certain pupils such as the faster learners. In the studies reviewed, the outcomes were mostly measured in the early stages of secondary schooling, and therefore the results do not give an indication of long-term effects or advantages. The studies do also show an advantage in reading comprehension in the early stages of secondary schooling (Karl and Knebler, 1996), a slight advantage in broad listening, reading and writing skills, but only in the case of the most able pupils, and the advantage appeared to last only about a year (Genelot, 1996). The teachers perceived an advantage in active listening but not in linguistic knowledge or performance (Favard, 1992). The evaluation of the national pilot scheme in Scotland (Low et al., 1993, 1995) showed that the 'Project pupils' (those pupils who had been taught in the primary school as part of the national scheme) displayed a clear advantage over non-Project pupils in pronunciation and intonation, complexity of structure, length of utterance, ability to sustain interaction, a good level of comprehension and a greater readiness to answer in class. In addition they showed fewer signs of stress and were prepared to use risk-taking strategies in order to sustain interaction.

In terms of the rate of acquisition some studies indicate that older learners tend to be more efficient and effective language learners, and that they generally achieve higher scores on performance tests with an equivalent exposure time (Ausubel, 1964; Asher and Price, 1967; Oller and Nagato, 1974; Snow and Hofnagel-Hohle, 1978). The findings from the NFER report (Burstall et al., 1974) showed that, after 3 years extra tuition, the younger learners displayed virtually no superiority in reading and writing, in comparison with the older beginners, again suggesting that older pupils learn more effectively and quickly 'catch up', although the methodological weaknesses of this study referred to above have always to be borne in mind. The 'experimental' pupils (who had experienced primary French) were also tested at the age of 13 along with pupils who were 2 years older but who had received the same amount of instruction time. It was found that the 15-year-old 'control' pupils' performance on each level of the French tests was consistently superior to that of the 13-year-old 'experimental' pupils (Burstall et al., 1974).

Krashen et al. (1982) examined the evidence of child/adult differences by distinguishing between long-term and short-term studies both in informal natural environments and in classroom situations. They suggested that, in light of the research literature, three generalisations can be made in terms of the relationship between age, rate, and eventual attainment in a second language.

1 Adults proceed through early stages of syntactic and morphological development faster than children (where time and exposure are held constant).

2 Older children acquire faster than younger children (again, in early stages of syntactic and morphological development where time and exposure are held constant).

3 Acquirers who begin natural exposure to second languages during childhood generally achieve higher second language proficiency than those beginning as adults.

(Krashen et al., 1982: 161)

or as Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) put it, 'older is faster, but younger is better' (1991: 155).

There are a number of possible reasons as to why older learners appear to outperform younger learners in the rate of language acquisition. They have a better knowledge of language patterns, are better at more cognitively demanding tasks, have more developed general learning strategies and skills, and they have more experience of acquiring facts and concepts (McLaughlin, 1985; Collier, 1989; Johnstone, 1994). Also, the majority of research evidence concerning the comparative rate of acquisition between younger and older learners relates to outcomes as measured by tests, which arguably favour older learners, either because the tests are cognitively too demanding for younger age groups or because the testing techniques are unfamiliar to younger pupils. Johnstone (1994) notes that, in order to control the variables, some research projects use the same teaching methods for all age groups, but he suggests that this is probably an inappropriate practice for any single age group and that studies based on this approach may not in fact be 'fair' tests.

The time factor

It is sometimes claimed that the amount of time actively spent learning the foreign language is a significant factor in achieving high levels of proficiency (see Radnai, 1996 for example). Advocates of an earlier start would contend that primary provision can promote specific competences which are then able to be developed at a more sophisticated level in the secondary school as well as offering to the young child a rich holistic learning experience which is qualitatively different in kind to the secondary provision. However, if the argument is simply that, by increasing the number of hours of exposure to MFL teaching better results overall can be obtained, it might well be the case that the increase would be better made during secondary schooling, and that this argument has little of substance that is relevant to primary MFL per se. Indeed some would maintain that, by using up precious time in primary education on MFL, young children would not be spending as much time on acquiring basic skills in numeracy, literacy and an understanding of their mother tongue as they should, and indeed that, without a secure grounding in these areas, their capacity to learn anything effectively at the secondary stage, including MFL is impaired.

With respect to the time factor, there is little conclusive evidence to show that the extra early years yield better results in linguistic proficiency later in schooling; however other variables should perhaps be examined before firm conclusions are drawn. The lack of linguistic superiority could also be a result of
inappropriate teaching methods for young pupils within the primary school, a lack of relevant subject knowledge on behalf of primary teachers, or a lack of differentiation in the materials and methods to suit pupils of varying abilities. The lack of liaison between the primary and secondary schools, may inhibit pupils' progression, and therefore could mask the advantages of the time factor. As has already been pointed out, in the Primary French Project (1964–73) the 'experimental' pupils who had studied French for 3 years were grouped in the same class and taught alongside the 11-year-old beginners. As Buckby observed at the time that 'in this situation one would expect initial gains to be quickly lost' (Buckby, 1976: 16). It would consequently be quite invalid to deduce from this experience that additional years of teaching make no difference.

Does an early start carry benefits?

So then what can be concluded about the benefits of an early start for future linguistic proficiency? Studies have failed to show any clear long-lasting benefit for the young learner except in naturalistic settings. It may be that there is a level of 'actual' overall learning time that needs to be spent in naturalistic contexts before younger beginners show their superiority to older beginners, and if this be the case then it cannot be replicated in formal classroom settings (Singleton, 1987). In general the findings are confusing, sometimes appear contradictory, and do not reveal discernable consistent patterns. Where in some studies there is evidence to support apparent gains in oral and aural skills, other studies show advantages only in listening or in reading and writing. As Singleton suggested in 1987 'Second language acquisition research which, because of its relatively recent beginnings, is not in any case an abundant provider of answers' (1989: 250). In the subsequent decade this position has not substantially changed.

The real issue

It is certainly advantageous for young children to learn another language early when there is something approximating to a 'naturalistic' setting. For example, the child may have a parent who speaks another language, or may be living in a country where more than one language is widely spoken. However, the hard benefits specifically in terms of improved foreign language competence from formalised teaching in primary schools appear to be much more elusive. The arguments in favour of teaching foreign languages in the primary school therefore cannot with certainty be built upon the claim that better levels of foreign language competence will necessarily be the automatic result. They have instead to be framed by what is referred to in the beginning of this chapter as the second strand in the debate, which refers more generally to the contribution of MFL to the educational experience of young children.

Foreign language provision makes a valuable contribution to the primary child's overall personal development and should not be seen purely as a foundation for future MFL learning. It cultivates children's communication skills and their understanding of human cultures. It plays a significant role in introducing children to new discoveries and the 'world of sound' (Vivet, 1995). A key aspect of primary schooling is the provision of opportunities for children to learn about language, and particularly the opportunity to understand that their mother tongue is only one human language and not the only human language, however widely it happens to be spoken (Driscol, 1999). As sugested at the beginning of this chapter, we would wish to argue that primary MFL learning promotes tolerance and cross-cultural understanding. It helps children to understand that they live in a multilingual and multicultural society and that the country they live in is a member state of the European Union which is itself multilingual and multicultural (Sharpe, 1992). In this way the broader educational value of primary MFL at such a formative time of schooling is a crucial element in the case for 'starting them young'. We now explore some of these benefits in more detail.

Cultural awareness and intercultural awareness

The cultural aims of language teaching encompass the development of pupils' interest in and understanding of cultures, an appreciation of ways of life in other countries as well as within the multicultural society of their home nation. Fennes and Happogood (1997), set out a view of what they call 'the iceberg concept of culture' where only a small part of it is visible but where the major part is beyond our consciousness. Above the waterline are cultural elements such as eating customs, national costumes, music and lifestyle, and below the waterline are aspects of culture such as taken-for-granted notions of correct behaviour, social expectations, modesty, the concept of personal space, body language, appropriate relationships to persons, animals and objects, etc. By learning about the concept of culture, the learner can recognise the importance of culture on people's lives and reflect on their own identity in a more detailed way. Intercultural awareness implies an openness towards others, where the pupil's own critical perspective of their own cultural conventions, attitudes and values is developed, through a process of change and self-development (Byram, 1989).

The development of cultural understanding is a complex process of acquiring multidimensional knowledge, skills and attitudes, some of which undoubtedly can be beneficially pursued in the primary phase of schooling through the work of MFL learning. Professor Michael Byram's work on the concept of intercultural competence is helpful here (Byram, 1997). Byram and colleagues put forward the idea of a series of 'savaors' as a useful framework for considering the attitudes, knowledge and skills involved in teaching and assessing the cultural dimension. The savoir être is concerned with the cultivation of attitudes such as curiosity, openness and a willingness to accept the other person's perspective as normal. Second, there is a concern with the acquisition of knowledge of different social groups, social classes, customs and norms in one's own and other societies and includes such concepts as national culture and ethnic identity. Third, savoir comprendre is crucial to the skills of interpretation
of documents which have to be understood in their context. Fourth, savoir apprendre is concerned with the skills of discovery and interaction which enable the learner to acquire new knowledge as well as an understanding of the beliefs, meanings and behaviours of any interlocutor. Finally, savoir s’engager is concerned with the way learners evaluate foreign behaviours, beliefs and meanings by contrast with their own. Although some of these concepts, skills and attitudes go beyond the cognitive and developmental maturity of a novice learner in the primary school (Byram and Morgan et al., 1994; Morgan, 1995), young learners can be provided with opportunities to perceive the world differently so that they are less likely to accept surface appearance and more likely to see beyond the cultural stereotype. MFL can develop a greater capacity in younger learners to see the world from someone else’s point of view and to develop an openness and acceptance of differences in others. Gangl (1997) found that by learning foreign language through an interactive approach in the primary school children developed more open attitudes to other cultures. This element of cultural awareness contributes towards pupils’ own personal and social development; it therefore might influence their own sense of identity, as well as influence their perceptions of the people they are learning about. Cultural understanding is a long-term goal and primary schools can begin the process by developing pupils’ curiosity, tolerance and appreciation towards other cultures, ways of life and people, as well as developing pupils’ insight into the roots of their own culture.

Language awareness

To develop an awareness of the nature of language and a greater sense of the roots of words is part of developing that general overall literacy which is such a key element in primary schooling. There is some evidence that pupils who experienced foreign languages in primary school develop an interest in the differences between languages, and greater metalinguistic awareness (see Bally and Luc, 1992; Pinto et al., 1995), as well as positive attitudes and skills in reading (Charneux, 1992), although it has to be acknowledged that this is not reflected in all research (Genelot, 1996). Johnstone (1999) points out that although the research shows no clear connection between the development of metalinguistic and intercultural awareness at the primary stage and increased success in learning a foreign language in secondary schooling, this does not mean that a connection does not exist, only that as yet one has not been established. Language awareness can also influence pupils’ attitudes to language as well as their knowledge about it and skill in using it. Hawkins (1984) argues that linguistic parochialism is deep within our society and that through the study and experience of a foreign language a greater linguistic tolerance can be developed that may help prevent narrowness and prejudice prevalent in some homes. The primary school is well placed to set the learning of a foreign language into the wider curriculum and to make a valuable contribution to the general education of primary children.

At what age should foreign language learning begin?

The development of social attitudes and motivation to learn languages

In order to learn a language effectively motivation is essential: this is par excellence the subject where ‘you can take the horse to water but you can not make it drink’. As a general principle we would suggest that by and large young children can be more easily inspired to want to communicate in a foreign tongue than can adolescents, and they can thus acquire an early confidence in language learning as a result which can make teaching them later as adolescents easier. The findings of the NFER study (Burstell et al., 1974) showed that children who started French in primary school showed a consistently more favourable attitude towards speaking French in comparison with secondary starters, the only substantial advantage identified by this study. A number of studies reflect these findings and show evidence of positive attitudes among pupils at primary school to learning a foreign language (see the review of research in Blondin et al., 1998).

Curiosity is such a strong motivator (Seelye, 1994) which can be used by the primary MFL teacher to inspire an interest that leads to discovery and understanding about the ways of life in another country thereby laying the foundations for tolerance and empathy towards its people. The development of positive attitudes towards foreigners is revealed by some studies to be associated with the development of positive attitudes towards learning the language (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Schumann, 1978; Mitchell et al., 1992). Hawkins (1987) suggests that the capacity for empathy declines with the onset of adolescence particularly among boys, it can therefore be argued that this essential work has to be achieved before the age of 11, after which insularity and prejudices tend to be more firmly established and consequently more difficult to challenge.

Conclusion

We would therefore wish to assert that it is in these areas of attitudes, values, and socio-cultural understanding that the rationale for the early teaching of MFL is most securely based. In the English context it can be argued that MFL learning makes a significant contribution to personal, social, moral and spiritual education which are statutory requirements of the primary stage of education. On this basis our contention is that the age at which foreign language should begin is at the start of compulsory primary schooling. This is not to say that 4 and 5 year olds in England or elsewhere should be taught formal foreign language structures. It is however most definitely to argue that there should be a properly structured progression of foreign language awareness and linguistic competence development across the primary years as a statutory requirement alongside other statutory curricular provision in primary schools. We would agree with the final report of the Council of Europe’s report on language learning for European citizenship which identifies a growing consensus across the Union that ‘language learning is now seen as a normal part of education.
from the child’s first socialisation. The question is no longer “whether?” or even “when?” but “how?” (Council of Europe, 1997: 48).

Editor’s note

Sharpe and Driscoll examine the values and purposes of teaching and learning MFLs at an early age. They cite research evidence which suggests that the age pupils begin studying a foreign language has little discernible impact on linguistic proficiency. They note, however, the fallibility of such research, and also recognise the influence of learning in naturalistic settings. The true value of learning MFLs from an early age they claim, is more attitudinal. Sharpe and Driscoll point out the willingness of young children to accept cultural differences, and indeed, they present a process of acculturation which is facilitated by both the age factor and the exposure factor. Similarly, Sharpe and Driscoll recognise the value of language awareness, as a goal in itself, and suggest that experience and expertise gained through an early start to MFL learning does have a positive impact on pupils as learners of a broad curriculum, and as future citizens.

Implicit throughout their chapter is an assumption that language teaching methodologies should be adaptable to suit the maturation stage of learners’ development. One key criticism of research which has failed to note the benefits of an early start is that the teaching and learning methods have been based upon established secondary education principles. Sharpe and Driscoll promote ‘primary languages’ as a means of improving the education of young people, and not exclusively as a way of improving foreign language skills.

Linked chapters

Chapter 2, Chapter 6, Chapter 18.

References


SCAA (Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority) (1997) Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary Curriculum, London: SCAA.