

Why Start Language Learning in Primary School?

From a lifetime largely spent in teaching second languages in the schools of various countries across the face of the globe, O'Byrne is convinced from practical experience that the arguments for learning them at an early age are not all covered by the theoretical and research approaches. A second language, because it has to be learned through much the same childlike enjoyment of repetition of simple sounds and phrases as the first, is not an easy undertaking for adolescents and adults; nor can they expect quite the same attention from a teacher as they once had from mother and family.

At a recent discussion on whether the teaching of French to adults was a failure,¹ two of the members of the panel stated that in the case of language learning there is a certain resistance among adults and adolescents. This is also the view of many language teachers.

One panel-member stated: "*Il faut une sorte d'apprivoisement*", in the case of adults. Another named three specific fields in which this resistance made itself felt. First, it showed in errors which were committed because of mother-tongue interference: these were "*façons de raisonner erronnées*". Then, there was constant mental translation with adults and adolescents, and they themselves admitted this. Finally, there was "*résistance mentale, psychologique, globale, sociale.*" All this refers to the learning of a second language, though it is not necessarily the case for a third or subsequent language.

Perhaps the right question to ask is: what do we lose if we do not start learning a second language early enough? None of the resistance found in the case of adolescents and adults is felt in the young child. Those who have taught them, or have observed young children learning their second language, are well aware of this. Obviously this affects that all-important factor, motivation; that is not, however, the whole story. By the age of five, many children have acquired amazing mastery in handling the structures of their own language, to an extent reached by few

people who have learnt second languages in a traditional way from the secondary school years onwards and often through to tertiary levels.²

Perhaps one of the paradoxes of second language learning is that what appears normal and acceptable at one age becomes a bone of contention later. In the early stages of second language learning, reasoning has little role to play. Somehow, by imitation and creative re-use rather than by formal grammatical analysis, by analogy rather than by logical “rightness”,³ by acceptance rather than by questioning, the pupil must learn to use different structures and vocabularies. It is possible that unless some of the type of learning which goes on in the first language is re-produced in the second language classroom, the learner finds it hard to accept or to use the second language in a relaxed, natural way. He will continue to think in his own language and to translate.

There has been a tendency to deny that there is a learning process involved in the acquisition of the first language. We are told that children have “innate knowledge” of deep grammatical structures which, moreover, are universally applicable to all languages. There is also an assertion that the models which the young child has for his learning are inadequate, and that he must in some way “create” language from within himself. These theories notwithstanding, all those who have observed young children can see the learning process at work; the “models” are numerous! In no area of studies will there ever be again the same favourable pupil-teacher ratio. The principal teacher is the mother, and much of the time the child has her undivided attention. An army of teacher’s aides — father, grandparents, uncles, aunts, radio and TV, other children — help the learning process along; all sorts of “casual teachers” put in their contribution — all those who talk in front of or to the child. Nor will so many hours of learning — some formal, some informal — ever be devoted to any subject again. Some of the models may not be ideal, but there is plenty of time for trial and error, since in all waking hours, 14 or so a day, the learner has some language contact. This is close to 100 hours per week, or 5200 hours per year. The child of course has the innate *ability to learn* — which is very different from innate *knowledge* in any reasonable sense of the words.

Here we must ask the aim of our language course. Most secondary teachers set it out conscientiously in their syllabus — it is to learn the various aspects of language skill, productive and receptive, oral and written; and to get to know, through the language, the country and its civilization.⁴ Secondary teachers are the first to admit that these aims remain pious hopes for the great majority. This is not merely a question of more language contact time in the course of schooling.⁵

Second language learning has to be far more structured, and more purposeful as well, than first language learning, precisely because less time is available over all. Younger children can accept this structuring more easily. Where structuring of the second language learning process is lax, errors in a second language appear to be far more persistent than

in the first, and harder to unlearn.

Also, many errors are of a different kind in the second language. In the first language, many come from over-generalization (*catched* for *caught*). This is a productive error; the child is learning actively, but has taken the application of the particular rule (of adding *ed*) too far. In the second language, errors often come on the one hand from first-language interference, and on the other from an attempt to do too much too soon in the new language, at a time when his linguistic competence is nowhere near the pupil's level of maturity in other fields. These errors are non-productive, do not lead to accurate language learning, and become firmly rooted through repetition. Often they are induced by the teacher's anxiety because he feels a need to "cover the ground". Teachers ought to structure courses in such a way that this is avoided. Again, this is easier to do with younger learners.

Because the trial and error process is seen to operate in the first language, we must not think that it is similar to an experimental learning process in mathematics or science. There is no inherent logical need for saying "ils vont" rather than "*ils allent". There are historical, phonetic, and linguistic *explanations*, which is a different matter. In a first language, because there is plenty of time to experiment and to correct, the errors do not matter so much; in the course of repeated situational practice, the child's utterances conform more and more to adult models. But if there is no time for this corrective process — and this is the case in a second language — the result may be inaccuracy, bewilderment, and many errors, leading to discouragement.

The adult and the adolescent live in a much wider world than the young child, whose interests are centred around far simpler, more concrete situations. Adults and adolescents cannot simply "plunge" into a new language. The learning process is accompanied, in their case, by far more ratiocination, far more cerebration. They are not prepared to submit to having their thoughts curtailed, their interests circumscribed. The learner has long taken for granted his ability to express himself in his own language. He is used to being understood, and to understanding others — whether live or in books — at least adequately. Now, unless he confines himself to keeping within immediate concrete life situations — and he is long past the stage where a shopping expedition is a thrill, in any language — he finds himself floundering in a sea of linguistic errors, in an almost infinite range of complicated situations, which moreover often require the ability to handle abstract concepts as well as concrete situations in the language.

The older a person, the greater his range of interests. If he is to use the language to speak about things that interest him, he has a frustrating period to face during which he is not able to talk about anything that is really at his own intellectual level. When he tries, he runs into difficulties — lack of vocabulary, lack of knowledge of structures — and this is where he often starts to make numerous errors and has more

recourse than ever to his mother tongue, thinking in it and then trying to translate. When he finds this does not work, he feels silly. This is demotivating.

A teacher of a second language to adults and adolescents has to possess, in addition to the qualities which all teachers need, the ability to be a good public relations person. He must overcome resistance to understand it, sympathizing with it and at the same time insisting firmly that the way to learn a language is not by dissecting it but by using it (unless the learning has some very limited aim, such as the ability to decode professional or technical texts in one's specialty).

It is not that adults and adolescents are not interested in learning a second language. Interest, and therefore motivation, are often very great at the outset, but frustration may soon wipe these out. Those who have taught adults as well as young children find that the translation tendency grows with age. One way to counteract it — and this is not always possible, since adult education language lessons are usually long — is to conduct the lesson at such a spanking pace that people are so pressured that they have no time to translate. This can, though, create confusion and resentment too, and only a few adult learners can accept this. It is also very stressful for the teacher.

It is not easy “to become like little children”

Most young children take a new language in their stride. They are still at the stage when they enjoy playing with language — they have not yet begun to question it. They like to repeat, to experiment, to sing, to recite, to accompany words by gesturing, acting and doing, and to use nursery rhymes, tongue-twisters and songs. Many of the motherly strategies that normally accompany first language teaching can still be used with them, and they are effective.

To feel really at home in a second language, one must have reasonable fluency and correctness, otherwise one will use it unwillingly, reluctantly, and with a feeling of embarrassment. For the same reason, one must have a pronunciation that, although not necessarily perfect, does not grate too much on native ears — otherwise, one is fighting a losing battle with self-consciousness every time one speaks. Even the Burstall Report⁶ admits unequivocally that children who started French in primary school were superior in pronunciation, fluency, and motivation to those who began in secondary school. Nor should the ability to perform well in these areas be undervalued. It must not be forgotten that fluency involves reasonable mastery of many correct grammatical structures. A skillful teacher can build on these aspects in the teaching of reading and writing.⁷

On pronunciation and intonation and stress, the children who have an early start score much better. One well-known course for anglophone primary school children introduces some “animal sounds” on tape at the

early stages.⁸ Children enjoy practising these. They also happen to be sounds which cause endless difficulties to adult anglophones, and which "*correction phonétique*" never really manages to overcome. Or take a structure, taught as a game. In the early stages of the same course a guessing game is introduced. In this game, we can see the hand of the comparative linguist: the game drills *penser à*. We all know that *penser à* and *penser de* present difficulties to the anglophone. How wonderful to have one usage well established and settled without ratiocination and verbalized rules at an age when no questioning occurs.

There is more to an early start still. To feel really at home in a second language, one must have some knowledge of the world of children in that language. If English is one's second language, and references to Humpty Dumpty, the cow that jumped over the moon, Peter Pan, good King Wenceslas (who "looked fourth although he was first"), and many others of the sort produce complete bewilderment rather than understanding, something is lost. While at primary school age, nursery rhymes, counting out rhymes, cumulative stories ("this is the house that Jack built"), with the repetition of structures which young children enjoy and demand in stories, are normal and natural; but such fare is likely to meet considerable resistance from adolescents and adults. Repetition — which in one form or another is necessary for remembering — meets resistance even when the themes are adult ones. The linguistic content of all this childish lore plays a considerable part in the early learning of any language. Few adolescents and adults are prepared to put in the time needed to memorise structures and vocabularies. This again leads to excessive and repeated errors, and consequent discouragement.

This brings us to the question of whether in fact there is a similarity between first and second language learning. Penfield's doctrine about the "plasticity of the brain" for language learning in younger children has been attacked on the grounds that his findings deal with the *re-learning* of the *first* language after brain damage, and not the learning of a second language. However, unless it can be proved that there is no similarity whatsoever between the effective learning or re-learning of a first and the learning of a second language; and that completely different brain mechanisms are involved, and completely different strategies; and that whatever made us learn our first language disappears after that task has been accomplished and can never be re-used — then we must assume that there is some similarity. The truth may well be that, just as Penfield has said, this plasticity which can be activated before the age of 9 for the re-learning of the first language can also be used for second language learning.

In any case, Penfield does not say that age 9 is a deadline, or a cut-off point. He speaks of the human brain becoming *progressively* more rigid. The process may well be slow and gradual, as such natural processes often are. In fact, speaking of adults who are in their twenties and beyond, he says they "*may never recover normal speech*" after brain damage (my italics). Being a natural process, this "plasticity" and

its diminution must also be subject to wide individual variations.

To summarise: rigour and a structured approach are needed in second language teaching as there is not always time for the more lengthy and leisurely method of trial and error learning which is seen to occur in the first language. Although — because it is a natural process, one of maturation — no rigid “best” chronological age for starting the learning of a second language can be laid down for all individuals, a feeling of being at home in it, of accepting it without trying to translate, and a readiness to accept in the classroom learning strategies which are similar to those experienced in the mother tongue, are easier for a younger child than for an adult or adolescent.

Many aspects of effective initial second language learning need to make use of strategies which are more easily accepted by — and are more appropriate for — learners who have not yet reached adolescence or adulthood. Young children normally show little evidence of the psychological resistance and the ratiocinating, translation-oriented learning strategies of older individuals. They also accept playful repetition, which helps memorisation of structures and vocabularies, far more easily. They achieve greater “feeling at home”, better fluency, better pronunciation, than adults or adolescents. This is both an important motivational factor and a basis for further development.

NOTES

1. A “colloque” organized by “Participation Québec” at Maisonneuve CEGEP on 18th March, 1978. Details are from notes taken by the writer, as the conference reports were not available at the time of writing.
2. The writer’s favourite true story is that of a small boy under five, over-hearing the following sentence addressed to his sister of seven by his mother: “I just happened to see this in the shop and I thought it was something you might like for your doll’s house.” He came back with: “You didn’t happen to see something you thought I might like?” All parents, and all teachers of young children, have similar stories of their own.
3. “La grammaire d’une langue n’est ni ‘bonne’ ni ‘mauvaise’, ni ‘logique’ ni ‘illogique’: elle existe tout simplement.” André Rigault in *Le français dans le monde* 57 (June 1968).
4. If the study is through the pupil’s first language, then it is not language learning, but history, geography, art, social studies. All very worthwhile disciplines, of course; but only those who have a good command of language and can approach some other civilizations through them, know how much they lose in depth of understanding when they study aspects of a country whose language they do not know.

5. Doubts have recently (March 1978) been cast in the daily press in Montreal on extra contact time leading to increased efficiency in language learning. Where better or equal results are obtained in less time, this is probably due to the quality of the teaching. More time can only help when the quality of what happens in the classroom is held constant. With longer hours, with more teachers involved, among them possibly a few not-so-efficient or not-so-well-qualified, "more" could at times mean more boredom, more repetitiveness, more happy-go-lucky courses of an unstructured nature. Under the banner of teaching language through other subjects, there may be cases where children are being taught the unknown through another unknown, and where longer courses are less integrated than shorter ones.
6. For some criticisms of this report, see Michael Buckley, "Is Primary French really in the balance?" *Modern Language Journal* 7 (1976): 340. There are other strong criticisms.
7. When the writer was responsible for primary French in Tasmania, we found that the reading (look and say, from flashcards) and writing of those structures which had been well mastered orally presented few difficulties.
8. *Bé, bé — ouah, ouah — coin — hi-han, hi-han, — mi-a-ou — cot cot cot codette — kokorico — meu, meu.* Can you, though, think of any adults and adolescents who would be prepared to imitate these sounds from a tape, in a classroom situation?