



### Learning a foreign language

"Gives them more of a choice and more opportunities"

## by Neil Jeffery, Teacher of Modern Foreign Languages The Minster College, Herefordshire

### Summarised Points:

- The teaching of foreign languages is due to be introduced in primary schools, which should benefit our language learning.
- Very small children learn their mother tongue purely through saturation - they have no formal lessons in how to communicate their wants and needs.
- When children develop an awareness of languages and other cultures, this will enable them to become aware of their position as 'world citizens' later on in life, as well as giving them more of a choice and more opportunities when it comes to choosing a career.
- As well as going on foreign holidays, there are many other things that you can do to raise children's awareness of foreign languages and the culture of different countries.
- Encourage your children to be aware of languages and other countries as early as possible in their lives.
- There are a number of programmes on CBeebies that allow children to experience the culture of other countries - eg. some Teletubbies episodes, Tots TV.

The teaching of foreign languages is due to be introduced in primary schools, which should benefit our language learning. Very small children learn their mother tongue purely through saturation - they have no formal lessons in how to communicate their wants and needs. This is because, as their brains develop, they are in a perpetual search for knowledge and the more they can learn the better. This, as well as a small child's penchant for mimicking and copying, helps them learn language structures very quickly. They may not exactly know why they are saying what they are saying, but they can say it.

Think of it like singing along with a tune on the radio, and after a while you can't get the words out of your head. This is an ideal basis, and later on a child can take part in formal schooling in a language with a reasonable amount of background knowledge already there, and will consequently perform better because it will be revisiting material it is familiar with already.

I am a teacher of foreign languages but I also have a much more personal interest in language learning. I have two daughters, four year-old Eleanor and nineteen month-old Rosie. I love it when my girls develop an awareness of languages and other cultures, as this will enable them to become aware of their position as 'world citizens' later on in life, as well as giving them more of a choice and more opportunities when it comes to choosing a career.

### **What you can do**

There are a number of 'easy' ways in which parents can raise their children's awareness of foreign languages and the culture of different countries - taking more holidays abroad, for instance. Of course there is the problem that not everyone is in the position, be it financial or geographical (we ourselves live 200 miles from Dover), that they can easily have holidays in France. So what other ways are there in which we can help our children to become aware of languages and culture?

Sometimes parents ask me what it is that they can do to encourage their young people to embrace the language and culture of another country, and I think that this is great, as they could in theory be questioning the relevance of language skills in this rural community. I tell those who ask me that the most important thing that we can all do, whether as teachers or parents (and in this instance I am thinking as a parent), is to encourage our children to be aware of languages and other countries as early as possible in their lives.

### **What's around**

There are a number of language schemes available to teach little ones languages, principally French, and these are available in certain areas and generally cost at least a nominal fee for each lesson. However it is not vital to live in an area where such a scheme exists.

My two daughters love watching 'CBeebies', from dawn until dusk if they get the chance, and there are a number of programmes in the schedule that allow them to experience a little of the culture of other countries. 'Teletubbies Everywhere' and 'Open a Door' show children snippets of life for young children in different countries. Eleanor sometimes asks me why things are so different.

I try to be honest and tell her that different children in other parts of the world have different attitudes and beliefs and do things in different ways. Not everybody goes to playgroup, sometimes children work in the field with their parents, and this is accepted by my eldest daughter as a fact of life, and an important one at that - everybody is different.

### **Tots TV**

My absolute favourite, however, has got to be 'Tots TV'. I remember it from the early 1990s. My cousin's daughter had a Tots TV Magazine, and I was reading snippets of the French spoken by Tilly to her, saying "Can you say that, Anna?" She was excellent, and after a while she reversed the roles, getting me to practise my French! This was my first encounter with the programme. As an educationalist, and specifically as a teacher of languages, and more importantly as daddy to two daughters, I love the gentle and simple approach, an approach that allows children and parents to see the structure:

- Tiny or Tom says something in English
- Tilly says the same thing in French
- Tiny or Tom repeats the phrase in English

A prime example of this is in the opening titles:

- What will we see?
- Qu'est-ce qu'on va voir?
- What will we see? This encircles the unfamiliar language with a simple repeated translation, and thus facilitates immediate interpreting. The glory of it is that it is so subtle that the educational aspect is hidden in the programme. My view is that this is wonderful, as we are not deliberately steeping our children in language. They are becoming aware of new linguistic structures as part of their daily entertainment, and may not see it as an overt learning opportunity, which could, in theory, make them switch off.

### **Awareness of Other Cultures and Languages**

So what would my advice be about getting your small person to become aware of cultures and new languages?

Well, it's simple really. These children are small - some of them, like my youngest, Rosie, have got a year or so to go before they reach playgroup, so we should let them immerse themselves at their own pace. They will soak up a great deal, and will surprise you with what they have learned in such a short space of time. Try it, you'll be amazed.

### **Learn when young!**

Learning language at primary school will, hopefully, make real inroads into our current poor performance. It would be still more beneficial to all involved if we kept the compulsory element for the older students, so that we could tackle the languages skills shortage head-on.

Rosie doesn't speak English as such yet but I actually hear her imitating Tilly with her 'un, deux, trois' already. Such is the power of the media and, more importantly, such is the capacity of the young mind!