

Teaching Modern European Languages in the Primary Classroom

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THE EUROLANGUAGES PROJECT

“It is important for foreign languages to be given as much importance as other subjects”

This article and others in this issue of the journal report on Eurolanguages, a project which investigated the teaching and learning of Modern European languages (namely Italian, German, French and Spanish) in Maltese Primary schools. The Eurolanguages team consisted of a number of Faculty of Education students co-ordinated by Dr. Charles Mifsud.



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In the Maltese educational system, foreign languages are introduced as soon as children enter secondary schools, that is at eleven years of age. However, research has shown that including foreign languages in primary education has various advantages, especially due to the fact that at an early age children are usually more enthusiastic and find it easier to grasp new grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation.

It is important for foreign languages to be given as much importance as other subjects so that both teachers and children feel committed to the teaching and learning of the language. Although learning a new language should be as enjoyable as possible, a balance between fun and commitment should be developed.

At the initial stages of the implementation of the programme, the acquisition of speaking and listening skills should be emphasised. The language used throughout the activities should be the foreign language and not the children's mother language - children must gain the ability and confidence to listen intently and talk and pronounce well. Once the children have secured the basic skills in listening and speaking, and acquired a relatively good amount of vocabulary, reading and writing can be introduced. However teachers must make sure that speaking and listening skills continue to be the focus of all lessons/activities.

Foreign language work should be integrated with the rest of the curriculum. For example in a physical education lesson, the use of the foreign language to give instructions will provide an extra element of fun to the activities. Or else, as a remote preparation for a drama session in the foreign language, the children could be asked to make the props during an Arts and Crafts lesson, here again giving the instructions in the foreign language.

Children need to be actively involved through a variety of activities such as songs and rhymes, drama, role-play, puppet shows, question-and-answer sessions, handicrafts, story-telling, colouring, cutting-out, pasting, physical activities, games, and quizzes. The use of audio-visual aids is imperative in an interactive language programme.

The content of the course should revolve around familiar everyday language.

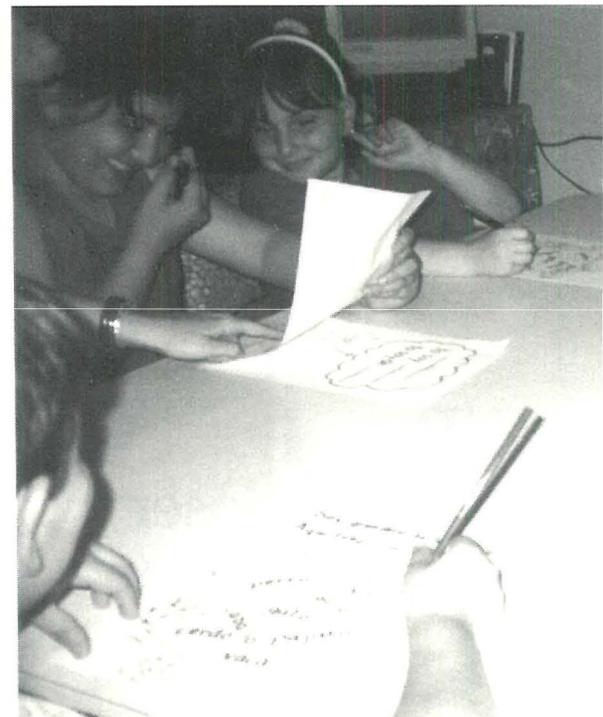
Some of the topics which could constitute part of the language learning programme are greetings, numbers and colours, birthdays and other special occasions, naming things, your body, your family and so on.

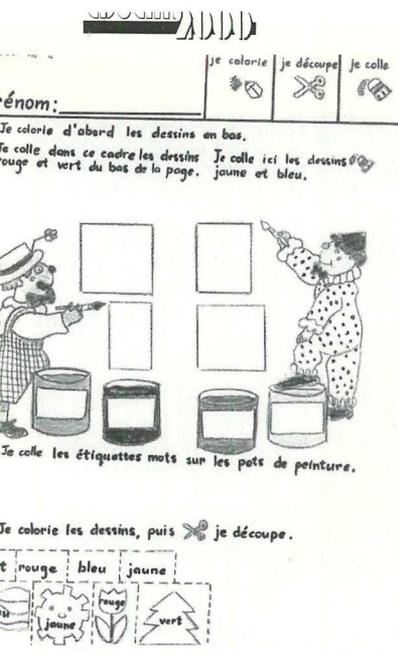
There is no reason why learning a modern

European language should be delayed until secondary schooling, if the enthusiasm and commitment to teach it, at a certain level of expertise and the will to learn basic language teaching techniques are present in the primary school. An early introduction to foreign language learning, if well planned out, can only help to motivate children, give them confidence, and help them along the road to the acquisition of linguistic competence and a greater awareness of the world around them.

Teaching French to eight-year olds

On the basis of the above considerations, I have planned out a number of activities which provide a sample of what I believe should constitute a foreign language learning programme. They cover some of the skills to be taught during the programme. After trying out some of the activities with a group of eight-year olds, I





concluded that the children's response to the teaching of the French language will certainly be positive if a friendly atmosphere is created and if the sessions motivate the children.

The activities must be planned in such a way as to give the children the satisfaction of being able to communicate in the foreign language, that is, at the end of the session the children should feel that they have achieved something worthwhile. The content should be relevant to the children's own knowledge and experiences so that they are able to identify themselves with these activities.

The following activities provide an example of how to develop a particular topic throughout a number of French language sessions.

Activity 1: Oral Comprehension

Topic: Colours

Aims: To revise vocabulary for clothes.

To introduce colours orally

Resources: Pictures; cards; handout.

What to do:

A This activity is aimed at introducing the children to colours. The teacher sticks pictures on the board illustrating people dressed up in different colours.

Tchr: (*pointing to the boy's top*) Qu'est-ce que c'est?

Chd A: (*response*) C'est un pull.

Tchr: (S/he points to the different clothing and asks the same question as above.

S/he then introduces the colours). Jerome porte une casquette **verte**, un pull **violet**, un jean **bleu**, et des bottes **orange**s.

At this point the teacher takes out the cards coloured in the four colours mentioned above. S/he sticks each card to the board whilst naming it. S/he then asks questions to revise these four colours.

This exercise is repeated for the introduction of other colours. A number of pictures are displayed to illustrate the different colours. The teacher and the children talk about the pictures. The description of these pictures should be focused on colours.

B Oral Comprehension: Every child is given a sheet of paper illustrating a girl and a boy. The children are asked to listen attentively. The teacher starts giving the following instructions in French: Colour the boy's hair yellow. Colour the girl's skirt blue./ etc... The children colour the pictures according to what the teacher is saying.

Activity 2: Colours in words

Topic: Colours

Aims: To introduce five colours in words.

Resources: Cards and flashcards; handout.

What to do: Flashcards are used to introduce colours in print. The teacher shows the yellow card to the children and asks for the name of the colour. S/he takes out the corresponding flashcard and sticks both the card and the flashcard on the board. This procedure is followed for the rest of the colours. Every now and then individual children are asked to read the flashcards which have already been introduced.

Handout: Read, colour, cut, and stick.

Follow up: The rest of the colours are to be introduced in the next session. The same procedure can be followed.

Activity 3: Washing Line Race

Topic: Colours

Aims: To revise vocabulary for colours

Resources: 2 washing lines and pegs; cards and flashcards; handouts

What to do: The class is divided into two groups. A child is to represent his/ her group. There should be two tables and two washing lines arranged in a line. The cards (illustrating all colours) are hung onto the washing line. Each table should have the same number of flashcards displayed on it. As soon as the music is turned on, two children (one at each table, representing the two groups) start to match flashcards to the cards on the washing line.

The children in each group can help their representative - however, in order to avoid any confusion or unnecessary noise, the children

are only allowed to nod if the answer is correct. As soon as the music stops, the teacher counts the number of correct pairs for each group.

The game can be repeated several times, changing the representatives each time.

Handout: The handout should reinforce what has been learnt throughout the sessions dedicated to colours.

Example of an activity:

The following is an example of an activity which may be used in the classroom during a foreign language session:

Activity: Washing Line Race

Aims: To revise vocabulary for colours.

Resources: 2 washing lines and pegs; cards and flashcards; handouts.

What to do: The class is divided into two groups. A child is to represent his/ her group. There should be two tables and two washing lines arranged in a line. The cards (illustrating all colours) are hung onto the washing line. Each table should have the same number of flashcards displayed on it. As soon as the music is turned on, two children (one at each table, representing the two groups) start to match flashcards to the cards on the washing line. The children in each group can help their representative - however, in order to avoid any confusion or unnecessary noise, the children are only allowed to nod if the answer is correct. As soon as the music stops, the teacher counts the number of correct pairs for each group. The game can be repeated several times, changing the representatives each time.

Handouts: The handouts should reinforce what has been learnt throughout the sessions dedicated to colours.

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