



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

**Education and Culture
Culture and Communication
Multilingualism Policy**

The main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching of languages to very young learners

Languages for the children of Europe

Published Research, Good Practice & Main Principles

SUMMARY

Final Report of the EAC 89/04, Lot 1 study



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. **The present report arises from the Lot 1 tender of the European Commission (EAC 89/04, April 2005)** in respect of the teaching and learning of modern languages in the case of very young children across Europe. Four main outputs were specified:
 - i) a review of research,
 - ii) a practical description of good practice;
 - iii) a description of the main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching and learning of languages;
 - iv) an assessment of the consequences of these pedagogical principles.

2. **The initiative is set against the background of the *Action Plan for the promotion of language learning and linguistic diversity (2003)*** and other documentation of the European Commission which strongly recommends the teaching of modern languages to young children. This serves not only to develop their proficiency in languages but also to help them acquire a wider sense of belonging, citizenship and community, and to develop a clearer understanding of their opportunities, rights and responsibilities as mobile citizens of a multilingual Europe.

3. **The main focus is on teaching of languages for fairly brief periods of time per week** beginning at varying points in children's pre-primary or primary school education. At the same time other models of the languages curriculum for young learners were taken into account, such as initiatives based on developing a broad awareness of language, languages and cultures and also initiatives incorporating bilingual or partial immersion through the medium of an additional language.

4. **The report sets out a selection of key background information on early languages learning across Europe.** This includes variables such as the spread of the initiative, official or unofficial starting age, extent to which it begins, teaching of two additional languages, number of years given to early languages learning, extent of participation, languages choice, the rise of English as dominant language of choice, profile of teachers (e.g. generalists or specialists), parental

involvement, critical voices. The picture emerging is one of enormous variability across the EU as a whole.

5. **The information on research was collected** by the project team with strong support from a small group of experienced and expert researchers drawn from various parts of Europe who met with the project team and also prepared and submitted a large amount of evidence in the form of summaries of research reports considered to be potentially useful. It was found that some areas of potential interest were covered but others less so, and consequently it was decided to draw on research conducted elsewhere in the world if this added some new insight which might be appropriate to European circumstances.

The information on good practice was based on an initial literature search which led to the development of a general questionnaire and a description sheet for recording instances of good practice. With strong support from existing networks, the instruments were disseminated to experts in each member state. When the information had been analysed, a validation meeting took place involving the project team and four experts.

The information on pedagogical principles arose from an initial map which was constructed from the initial data on research and good practice. Pedagogical principles in early language learning are difficult to grasp because they are underlying or stated as kind of formula at the beginning of curricula. The task therefore consisted in making them explicit and assess their importance – what are the main principles? Following the drawing up of a first map there was then a further identification of evidence from policy documents in a number of different countries, leading to a pre-final set of principles. Experts on research and good practice were consulted and over thirty educationalists. Finally, a two-day seminar took place attended by five leading educationalists which assisted with the eventual elaboration.

6. **Key messages from the published research are:**

- i) advantage of an early start;
- ii) provided there is a supportive environment and continuity from one year to the next and into secondary schooling;
- iii) initial motivation seems mainly to be intrinsic, with some initial ideas found on how this might be developed and extended;

- iv) value of taking account of languages which children access in their own locality;
- v) children considered to progress through a sequence of stages in their internalised language development, at differing rates;
- vi) key learner characteristics associated with eventual proficiency seem to be motivation and aptitude, the latter to be viewed not as fixed but as capable of development through primary school education, especially in the area of meta-linguistic awareness and sensitivity to sound;
- vii) value of helping children progress beyond prefabricated utterances, and some initial evidence on how this might be achieved;
- viii) importance of providing feedback to children which may be positive (encouragement) or may be corrective, to help them further refine their underlying language system;
- ix) value of introducing reading and writing at an early stage, rather than concentrating solely on listening and speaking;
- x) value of helping children to think strategically in order to monitor and regulate their learning, with strategy-training desirably being recurrent rather than one-off;
- xi) recognition that in their spontaneous play young children show a tendency to notice and play with and practise features of linguistic form as well as meaning,
- xii) suggesting the onset of implicit meta-linguistic knowledge – something on which classroom pedagogy at primary school should desirably build; value of stories not only because of appeal to children’s imagination but also because they help children acquire a narrative discourse structure;
- xiii) potential value of technology-mediated learning and –use, though at present relatively little evidence of this on the ground;
- xiv) importance of finding ways of countering negative effects of low socio-economic status;
- xv) language-related outcomes are strongly dependent on the particular model of languages education curriculum which is adopted;
- xvi) the evidence strongly suggests that the desirable early languages learning initiatives across Europe could not prevail if left only or mainly to schools and individual teachers.

7. **The findings on good practice show clearly** that a large and invaluable amount of activity is taking place in respect of i) creating the conditions for good practice at transnational, national, local and individual levels; ii) preparing

students and teachers for good practice in teacher education; iii) supporting and exemplifying good practice through the creation of a languages-friendly environment at school and through a range of teaching techniques and materials; iv) disseminating ideas on good practice and language teaching to a wider audience. These include ideas for raising the profile of early languages learning in the public and political mind. From the widely varying evidence, it is clear that good practice does not by itself constitute one conceptual methodology, but is better viewed as a repertoire of measures on which teachers can draw as appropriate.

8. **The pedagogical principles reflect the findings on good practice and research but also reflects underlying philosophical values** such as citizenship and respect for others. Of the interpretations of pedagogical principles mentioned earlier, two proved useful in making sense of the evidence which had been obtained. These were: i) pedagogical principles in the sense of 'aims for' or 'reasons behind' the early learning of languages, e.g. 'to help develop the multilingual potential of every child by activating the language acquisition mechanisms that young children still possess'; ii) pedagogical principles in the sense of 'maxims for action'. These maxims tend to be expressed at a greater level of abstraction than the more specific ideas on good practice and probably reflect underlying assumptions, e.g. 'take into account children's learning strategies and learning styles'. It has to be kept in mind that, referring to the main principles underlying early language learning, it is always about the proportion of which a principle is related to early language learning. The main underlying principles are in a few cases different from general language learning, in most cases not. For the very young learners it should be very important to learn with all their senses. In language learning for all the learners or even adults the multi-sensory aspect is important, but is not as important as for the very young ones. Early language learning is driven by focussing on and putting in a bigger proportion of for example holistic learning or multi sensory learning.
9. **Four main models of languages education which seem to be in operation:** i) roughly one hour per week for teaching a particular language, mainly based on given course-book and other material; ii) as for i) but with a more flexible syllabus based to some extent on relating the modern language to other aspects of the curriculum, e.g. science and geography, but still within limited time provision; iii) a language awareness model, not dealing with one additional language alone but instead giving access to a number of languages and

cultures, in order to develop underlying qualities such as meta-linguistic awareness and intercultural sensitivity; iv) provision of increased time and intensity in the form of bilingual or partial immersion education. Model iv) yields the highest level of target language proficiency but is unlikely to be generally applicable. It seems highly desirable that ways should be found of combining the unique advantages of models ii) and iii) in particular.

10. From the above analysis of research, good practice and principles, the following positive features seem evident: i) enormous variety of worthwhile activity; ii) continuing evidence that generally pupils' attitudes and motivation are strongly positive; iii) in many cases, substantial involvement at national level in early languages learning; iv) central role of the teacher, with many inspiring examples.

11. At the same time, a number of areas have been identified in which further development seems essential, if the highly commendable policy of early languages learning is really to work successfully at a general level. These are: i) need for much better balance between variety and coherence, with at present variety being dominant; ii) only limited evidence is available as to the precise nature and eventual outcomes of different models of the languages education curricula that are actually being implemented, and as such great difficulty in making judgments as to effectiveness and improvement; iii) very little strong evidence on how children's internalised language development actually takes place; iv) strong need for more information on actual processes of teaching and learning rather than simply on good practice tasks and activities; v) more evidence needed on how the benefits of 'language awareness' and 'language learning' may be combined rather than viewed as being in competition; vi) desirability of knowledge on increased collaborative contacts for children, in order to stimulate new forms of motivation and hence raise levels of proficiency; vii) need to collect more information on teacher education, particularly at the pre-service stage, and to support this more strongly in order to ensure an adequate and continuing supply of teachers; viii) need to learn more about children's motivation for learning and using languages, in order to find ways of ensuring that this grows and becomes more multifaceted as they progress through their primary school education; ix) need to publicise further examples of good practice in ensuring continuity between primary and secondary education, in order to elaborate a variety of models which might be applied successfully in different contexts.