

## Primary and Secondary Continuity in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

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### Abstract

*The transition from a rather more informal and holistic approach to more formal and conscious ways of language learning is often experienced as problematic by pupils and teachers alike. This is due to different learning cultures and a lack of communication and cooperation between the teachers of the two levels. Whereas language learning at the primary level tends to be communicative, content-based and multi-sensory, rule-oriented learning and written language prevail at the secondary level.*

*I was involved in an applied linguistic project which seeks to exchange experiences and gather models of good practice in the field of transition from primary to the secondary school level. Furthermore, strategies for teaching and for teacher training courses are developed to facilitate the transition from primary to secondary education.*

*In my presentation I will deal with the challenges resulting from learners' transition from primary to secondary education in foreign language learning and teaching. Although this presentation based on the general results of the project it pays particular attention for the Hungarian results. After giving an overview about the project – background, aims, steps, results - as a participator from Hungary I will focus on the situation of the transition in Hungary and on the bridging task developed in Hungary. In the main part of my presentation I will present some selected results of this applied linguistic projects: a report about the results of needs analyses, a video sample to illustrate the transition, examples of foreign language teaching at primary and secondary level and good practice material for diagnosis and assessment. Furthermore, I will allude to the concept of initial and in-service teacher training courses (e.g. a European teacher training course for foreign language teachers).*

*I thank all members of the international project „Primary and secondary continuity” (Pri-sec-co) for the good theoretical and methodical developing work, wich is very usefull for the language learning and teaching in all countries and many thanks for the excellent cooperation.*

### 1. Introduction

One of the main problems of language teaching and learning is the transition between the different levels. I introduce European project in the field of foreign language teaching and learning focused on developing strategies to promote continuity from the primary to secondary level.

### 2. The background of the project

The different learning cultures and a lack of communication and cooperation between teachers at the primary and secondary levels are often experienced as problematic by pupils and teachers alike. Whereas language learning at the primary level tends to be communicative, content-based and multi-sensory, rule-oriented learning and written language prevail at the secondary level.

The problem of transition between primary and secondary education has been a matter of concern for many years in the educational field. There is a need for research on this problem.

A group of universities and teacher training institutions from different European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland) have decided to work together to analyse the problem and try to design materials that can contribute to making the transition smoother.

### **3. The aims and objectives**

The project (Pri-Sec-Co - Primary and Secondary Continuity) has as its main aims and objectives raising awareness for the problem of transition among the teachers and teacher trainers, exchanging experiences, collecting models of good practice and designing bridging tasks in the field of FL, which could facilitate transition between the two educational levels. Furthermore, the project aims to design teacher training courses on the subject of transition. [1]

### **4. The first steps: overview and state of the art**

The first step taken in the project was to give an overview of the the foreign language teaching situation in PRI-SEC-CO partners' countries. The dates of the questionnaire are collected in a grid.

As the next step, partners described the state of the art of foreign language teaching and learning in the partner countries involved, with a particular focus on the transition issue between primary and secondary FL education. As stated above, this is a matter of concern, in different ways and for different reasons, in most European countries.

The national reports, organised according to three main headings: Key issues, Different perspectives, and Needs analysis, even if undertaking a similar reflection on the issues mentioned above, do not follow a rigid internal structure. They have been kept in the original formats so that they can reflect more directly the local realities researchers are involved in.

It is important to point out that although transition may have a common meaning for most of the countries involved in the project, the way in which it takes place differs substantially from one country to another. For instance, while German and Austrian pupils move from primary to secondary education at the age of nine or ten, French, Hungarian, Spanish and Swiss pupils change schools at the age of eleven or twelve, which implies that, from a psychological point of view, children are at a different stage of maturity. On the other hand, in Sweden the transition phase is not considered an issue of concern as children can attend the same school from seven until sixteen. Understanding the different ways transition takes place in each country can set the basis for a common definition and can lead to mutual learning.

#### **4. 1 Transition from primary to secondary foreign language teaching in**

##### **Hungary**

###### **4. 1. 1 Key issues**

Children in Hungary start school at the age of six and must attend school at least until the age of eighteen. The main institution for basic education in Hungary is the 8-grade general school, which comprises the 4-year lower primary and the 4-year upper primary or lower secondary level. Generally, pupils change after Year 8 to a secondary school (4-grade grammar school or vocational school). But there are further possibilities in Hungarian education: children can change after Year 4 to an 8-form grammar school or after Year 6 to a 6-form grammar school.[2]

The National Core Curriculum (1995) regulates the educational program for the first ten compulsory years of the twelve years of school education. It divides the content of education into areas of knowledge, one of which is the subject group called "Modern Foreign Languages". Its curriculum has been basically prepared on the basis of output-driven, functional criteria. Its content is intended to conform to both European expectations and Hungarian language teaching.

The Frame Curricula decree that the teaching of the first foreign language should start no later than Year 4, at the age of 9. But a lot of school starts earlier. [3] [4] A second language (including Latin) may be taught from the start to the end of compulsory schooling. The Frame Curricula make a second foreign language compulsory in secondary schools from Year 9 (age 14). Depending on the curriculum, 4-6-8-year secondary schools may begin the teaching of a compulsory second foreign language earlier. The Frame Curricula also determine the compulsory and optional number of lessons. At primary level foreign language is taught generally only in Year 4, 2 lessons a week. For an earlier start the number of lessons is the same. From Year 5, the number of lessons increases to 3-5 lessons per week.

Bilingual education may start at the age of 6-7. Bilingual courses may be part of a 4-6-8-year secondary school with a preparatory year. The 5-year version starts at the age of 13 or there is a preparatory year at 14, then teaching lasts until the age of 19.

Both general and bilingual school institutions decide freely on the compulsory languages and timetable they wish to offer. The most frequent languages taught in Hungarian schools are, first of all, English and German, followed by French, Italian and Spanish. Teachers can design the syllabus and select a course book according to the NCC.

#### **4. 1. 2 Different perspectives**

FLT in primary level is multisensory and action-oriented, focused on oral language and age-related activities (play, songs, story-telling). The transition from Year 4 to Year 5 is smooth if pupils continue their studies in the same school. In this case it does not imply too much change as the same teacher can continue the teaching in Year 5 and children can undertake the requirements of the new stage more easily. Furthermore, children can use the next level of the same foreign language book series.

The teaching methodology will change according to the age of children. FLT in upper-primary classes usually focuses on vocabulary and grammatical knowledge and teachers very often use role plays.

If schoolchildren transfer to an 8-grade-secondary general school or a 6-grade-secondary general school after Year 6 of the primary school, transition means a big change: the number of lessons increases, pupils have new teachers, methods and requirements and, in many cases, a new textbook.

Language learning is the most efficient if they continue the studies they have already begun. Depending on the group organisation, sometimes children are put into groups that are not at their level of FL competence. This can be a problem as the level of these groups can be very heterogeneous.

In Hungary primary school language teachers are trained in the teacher Training College for primary level (Years 1-4) are expected to teach also in Years 5 and 6 and can choose the method they think most suitable. Nevertheless, methodological freedom in language teaching is not always positive.

Many teachers use the modern communicative teaching approach in which intercultural knowledge is integrated but many others interpret this freedom as an opportunity to preserve the traditional grammar-translation method. In some schools, teachers use CLIL applied to the age of the students, but not all teachers are prepared to teach with this methodology.

In general, textbooks strongly influence teachers view of the target language as well as their methodological approach. Fortunately, the choice of language textbooks is increasing. Since at the



end of upper secondary school children will take a level B2 exam, FLT in this stage is exam-oriented. This fact influences greatly the choice of content and teaching requirements.

In Kecskemét a meeting for the children of the world is organised every second year. This meeting involves the participation of children from approximately 30 countries in a lot of cultural activities. The programme has a direct effect on the activities carried out in the foreign language classrooms as many children have their first experience with foreign children on this occasion.

#### **4.1.3 Needs analysis / Conclusion**

It is important for children to continue with the learning of the foreign language they started and not replace this foreign language with another one. If children change school in the transition from primary to secondary, children and parents need more information about the requirements and methods of FL teaching at the new level and school.

Primary teachers need more information about the FL language level required in secondary and secondary teachers need more information about the FL knowledge acquired by children in the primary school.

From the parents' perspectives it would be necessary to organise more open lessons. This is necessary because the parents learned with completely different methods. They are not aware of new methods. There is a generation gap between parents and children in this field. Furthermore, parents have high expectations from foreign language teaching.

It is very important to develop a greater choice of in-service training activities to train primary and secondary teachers efficiently, to provide updated teaching strategies more suitable for the age of the pupils, and to prepare teachers for working with European documents, i.e., the ELP.

## **5. The outcomes of the project**

### **5.1 Bridging tasks**

Bridging tasks are activities for school-based foreign language learning, which are used to facilitate the transition from primary to secondary school. They allow the learners to provide samples of their communicative competence and promote transparency of objectives and achievements for both primary and secondary teachers as well as parents. In addition, they fulfill a social function in that they promote co-operative learning and help learners get to know students and teachers in new classes.

Topics for Bridging tasks in the project are, for example: Contact with the new (secondary) teacher, building bridges, finding out about the new school building - scavenger hunt (*French*), finding out about secondary school life, introduction to the secondary English class, etc.

Some of the Bridging tasks are also available to watch as videos.

#### **5.1.1 Bridging task from Hungary: Buildings and activities in my town**

This tasks are for pupils learning German as a foreign language in the primary and the secondary level.

The objectives of the tasks are: Taking part in a cultural quiz about the pupils' town, connected to cultural activities and sports; getting to know names of cultural activities and interesting (historical) buildings; activating prior knowledge and expanding learning strategies.



Products of the tasks: Primary pupils have to be able to name the buildings of their hometown and to speak about activities in their town. Secondary pupils create a poster, booklet or Power Point show with the buildings of their hometown in order to speak about them, and they prepare to give directions to the places.

The both Hungarian videofilms („Buildings and activities in my town” and „Welcome to our town!”) show different ways of working with names and activities about the town to illustrate the teaching principles and practice used in the primary and in the secondary level and can help teachers in the transition.

## **5. 2 Assessment materials**

Since a continuity in foreign language learning is only possible if teachers know exactly what competencies to build on, the assessment of learning outcomes regarding all four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) is vital for a successful transition phase. A selection of existing assessment and diagnostic materials from our partner countries is presented on the homepage of the projects, aimed at the transition period of the end of primary school and the beginning of secondary school.

We have chosen to place a particular emphasis on assessment materials for the productive skills of speaking and writing, which are often perceived as difficult to assess. There are also some examples of the European Language Portfolio from the partner countries.

The Hungarian version of European Language Portfolio in the lower primary section was introduced in 2003 to assess language learning in lower primary classes.

## **5. 3 Concepts for initial and in service teacher training courses**

The Teacher Training Modules on Continuity incorporate the methodological concepts developed by the project: the Bridging Tasks, the Video Samples and their Study Tasks as well as the Assessment Materials. These modules can serve as the basis for developing teacher training courses and conferences adapted to the needs and contexts of individual European countries. Their aim is to facilitate communication between primary and secondary language teachers and to improve continuity in language teaching and learning between the two levels.

## **5. 4 The project homepage**

The project partners developed an interactive website on the transition issue as a platform for the exchange of information between teachers, student teachers and teacher trainers ([www.pri-sec-co.eu](http://www.pri-sec-co.eu)). [4]

## **6. Conclusion**

In the 21 months this project has been running, each partner has met up with many of the “actors” in foreign language teaching and learning in their countries and experienced the real desire for contact and cooperation that exists. The project offers a virtual meeting space through its website and forum with practical ideas through its bridging tasks, study tasks, assessment materials and films, whereby teachers, teacher trainers and pupils can enlarge the communication and start to bridge the gap.

## References

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5. Project homepage: <http://www.pri-sec-co.eu>