



‘WoLLoW’ [World of Languages, Languages of the World]: A New Way Into the World of Languages

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Abstract

There is deep, long-term and growing concern in the United Kingdom about the teaching of languages and the decline in the take-up of languages, all the way from the education system. At the same time, however, the school population, which is increasingly diverse through migration, has never known so many languages. It is obvious that pupils’ first experience will have an impact on their attitude to languages, but that first experience, starting at the age of seven, is deeply flawed in two ways. The first is that the teaching of languages varies enormously in language chosen, in quality of teaching, in time allocated, so that, in almost all cases, pupils start their language study all over again at the age of eleven. The second is that the teaching of languages gives little or no regard to the rich pre-existing knowledge of so many of the pupils: it is as if the pupils’ home language didn’t exist or matter. ‘WoLLoW’, ‘World of Languages and Languages of the World’, provides an entirely different approach for pupils as they start to learn languages. It encourages pupils and teachers on a journey of shared exploration, to understand how languages work, where they come from and how they are related, to see the importance of languages in all other academic subjects, and in the wider world of empire and migration. This approach not only engenders a curiosity and dialectic but, above all, it allows pupils to share their own languages and histories and see why, in a changing world, they matter now more than ever.

Keywords: *primary languages, multilingualism, teaching.*

1. Socrates, JRR Tolkien and Herodotus

According to Plato, Socrates began his defence against the charges of ‘not believing in the city’s gods’ and ‘corrupting the young’ by saying that his speech wouldn’t be much good because he had not appeared in a law court before [1]. So, like Socrates, I admit that this won’t be much of an academic paper because I am not an academic and I have never written an academic paper before.

What I am is a teacher of Classics for forty years, who inadvertently wandered off into headship for 14 of those years. For ten years I was the Chief Master of King Edward’s School, Birmingham, where I had been a pupil in the early 1970s. Another perhaps more famous alumnus was JRR Tolkien, creator of hobbits and Gollum and the elvish language. This is something of a traveller’s tale, in the manner of my real hero, Herodotus, an account of the paradoxical nature of primary language teaching in the dark land that lies beyond the streams of Ocean. Herodotus believed that the understanding of other cultures enabled us to see our own in a new light [2], so I hope that this analysis will be something to think with, even for those who dwell in sunnier climes.

2. The teaching of primary languages in the UK: the problems.

The boys and girls who sit in primary school classrooms of the United Kingdom are, in their very nature, a conundrum. On the one hand, they speak and are taught in English, a language of global spread, so that there is an overwhelming sense that the learning of another language is of no great value. On the other hand, the number of pupils in primary schools who are categorised as EAL – English as an Additional Language – is 22.0% [3], and the number of EAL pupils in all schools is now 1.6m, a figure that has doubled since 2006 [4]. Of course, these EAL pupils are not spread equally across the country: there are inner-city primary schools in many major cities where the percentage of



EAL pupils is over 90% and schools where 30 or 40 different languages are spoken. And those numbers are, of course, growing all the time.

Hence the conundrum. The vast majority of pupils are quite content to be monolingual whereas a large and growing number are, or will soon be, bilingual, if not multilingual. So, what is taught in the midst of this conundrum? Since 2014 it has been compulsory for primary school pupils to study a language:

'Teaching may be of any modern or ancient foreign language and should focus on enabling pupils to make substantial progress in one language. The teaching should provide an appropriate balance of spoken and written language and should lay the foundations for further foreign language teaching at key stage 3 [i.e. pupils aged between 11 and 14].' [5]

There is no specification of which language is to be taught, nor any specific curriculum. Nor does the inspection regime, Ofsted, pay much attention to language provision, or EAL provision, in primary schools.

Of course, in this land without maps, there is a lot of wandering about by schools and teachers, lots of variety in the languages taught, in quality and quantity and method. When Heraclitus wrote 'all things are in flux' [6], he might as well have been writing about primary language teaching. Most of the language teaching is not done by specialist language teachers. So, French is the language taught in most primary schools precisely because that's the language primary school teachers themselves learnt at school.

In the face of this uncertainty and diversity, there have been initiatives to enhance what is being provided. For example, in the last decade, £16.4m has been spent by the Department for Education on the Mandarin Excellence Programme, which works with 75 schools [7]. The Swire Chinese Language Foundation has invested £25m since 2016, supporting 12 language hubs which work with 127 schools [8].

In this ecosystem, there is only one certainty. In almost every school the pupils who have a home language which is not English get little or no chance to use, develop or value the language, the culture or the history which they already have. As one teacher once said, *'We are turning bilingual pupils into monolingual pupils whilst failing to teach a new language to monolingual pupils.'* That is quite an achievement. And here is the same thought, presented by a pupil of Malaysian origin from Birmingham, now aged 16 but talking about his own experience in primary school:

'And then we get to Year 1. And I begin to lose my Malaysian accent as the years go by. I become less Malaysian, English -er. I managed to create a divide between the language I used at home and the language I used at school, and I learnt to switch off my school language whenever I got home, and my home language whenever I got to school. After all, I had no use for Malay at school, right? English was much more important to excelling in my studies, so obviously, that's what I had to focus on learning.'

And, as is widely agreed, what happens next isn't any better. In England, almost all pupils cross to secondary school at the age of 11 and those the new pupils at each secondary school come from a large number of different primary schools and hence different experience. So, secondary school language teachers have little choice but to start all over again from the beginning. As the British Council Languages Trends report puts it: *'[There is] a demonstrable lack of continuity between KS2 and KS3 language education.'* [9] It is hard to imagine that this does much for the morale or interest of the average pupil: he/she is quite soon asking one of two dispiriting questions: 'Why am I doing French all over again?' or 'What happens to all that French/Mandarin/Latin I learnt now that I am learning Spanish?' And pupils who have strong knowledge of their own family language might have another question: 'What will become of the Arabic/Chinese/Romanian/Farsi/Somali/Tagalog that I speak at home?'

And, after all this, it may be no surprise that there is no great enthusiasm for languages in secondary schools, why the numbers of candidates for the national exams, GCSE, at the age of 16, and A level, at the age of 18, and university entry are in decline: in 1997/1998 86% of pupils took a GCSE at the age of 16, whereas in 2020/2021 it was 46% [10]. In 2015, there were over 30,000 candidates for languages at A level. By 2022, that figure had declined by 21% to 23,660 [11]. The government's most recent response to these problems is to create language hubs and, in particular, to provide extra



funding for the teaching of German . However, it could be argued, that the damage has already been done before a pupil even sets foot in a secondary language lesson.

3. A new approach: 'WoLLoW'.

So, if those are the problems, is there a solution? I'd like to think so. Let's imagine that we can find a different place from which to start, an elsewhere. Let's imagine that, instead of teaching a single language to pupils at the age of seven, we, teachers and pupils, set out on a joint journey of exploration. That exploration can go in a variety of different directions. What languages do we all speak, and why? How do different languages convey meaning in different ways? Where do all these words in English come from? Why are French and Spanish alike but different from German? Why is it Thursday today in England but giovedì in Italy and Donnerstag in Germany? What does 'Punjab' mean, or why are the Philippines called the Philippines? How do languages relate to all other subjects, history, geography, Maths, science, empires, migration, even English, for heaven's sake? Can we break a code, or make a code? Can we read and write in a different script?

Of course, all of this becomes much, much richer when the pupils themselves bring their own languages into the classroom. In so doing, those pupils will be able to talk about and find out about their own history and culture, thereby gaining confidence in themselves and other pupils will listen and learn, too. And it's a lot more fun – and less stress – for the teachers because they are not teaching something badly or uncertainly but merely guiding the expedition.

And let's imagine, finally, that this means that pupils will leave primary school with an interest in, an enjoyment of languages, their own and those of others, and thereby start the study of individual languages in secondary school with a lighter and brighter heart.

So, what can be done with all these imaginings? Well, what can be done is 'WoLLoW' [<https://theworldoflanguages.co.uk/>]. It has been designed by language teachers, who have spent their lives trying to teach lessons that actually work. In the last three years, it has also been taught in a wide variety of contexts, in primary and secondary schools, in state and independent schools, in schools for children with special educational needs, in schools beyond the Channel. And, although, as yet, we have no academic research, nor measurement of outcomes, we do have feedback from a wide range of experienced teachers, not all of whom are language specialists.

There's this from a teacher in an inner-city state primary school in Birmingham where 47% of the pupils do not have English as their first language. Senior pupils from King Edward's School, Birmingham, are doing the teaching there:

'WOW! The pupils were bowled over by the workshops and were full of praise for the students and the materials they were delivering. They loved how the materials were wholly inclusive and how each child could relate to it personally through their own culture and heritage. The senior pupils are teaching about the Indo-European language family. The children enjoyed identifying cognates in French, Spanish and Italian sentences, and discussing similarities and differences between Romance languages. It's hugely valuable to get the pupils thinking about where languages come from, how languages are related, how languages have (or haven't) moved across the globe. 'WoLLoW' draws them on and encourages them and gives them the opportunity to share their knowledge of languages.'

And here is the Head of English at an international school in The Netherlands:

'Put simply – the students love it! We are teaching it to pupils aged from 11 to 14 and the fact that the EAL students are able to play such an important role in the lessons and feel completely 'heard' and understood is an important aspect of that.'

And here's my favourite, if research is allowed to have favourites, from a very experienced languages teacher, in Manchester:

'We have a wide diversity in our school and a large proportion of pupils who have suppressed their culture. And now - it sounds ridiculous - but it is like a spring flower opening. They love sharing their knowledge, their cultural background.'

But perhaps I should end with the words of the Malaysian pupil who was quoted earlier. That pupil is now teaching 'WoLLoW' to primary school pupils as part of the school's partnership programme:



‘WoLLoW’ has the potential to be immensely beneficial to the affirmation and validation of pupils in regards to their languages which might otherwise be overlooked and lost. I’d like to offer my endorsement of ‘WoLLoW’ as someone who, like, I suspect, a lot of the children we have taught, has felt disconnected from their language for a long time, and has been given the chance to once again put it front and centre and find their sense of self within it again.’

He may only be sixteen, but perhaps he is right. After all, one thing that ‘WoLLoW’ proves is that, at the moment, the pupils know more than we allow them to show.

References

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