



This paper is taken from

*Developing Identities in Europe:
Citizenship education and higher education
Proceedings of the second Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2000

Edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 3239

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Gaudin, N. Hillman, C. and Neukirchner, A. (2000), TRANSFER – Training native speakers for early language teaching, in Ross, A. (ed) Developing Identities in Europe: Citizenship education and higher education. London: CiCe, pp 433 - 435

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe Central Coordination Unit for both the organisation of the conference and this collection, and in particular Martin Sundram and Cass Mitchell-Riddle for seeing this book through revisions, layout and to press
- The University of North London, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of DGXXII for their support and encouragement.

TRANSFER – Training native speakers for early language teaching

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Transfer

This paper describes a European Commission Lingua A project which was first designed for teaching a European language by native speakers in primary schools. As it is aimed both at teachers involved in teaching language and culture and young children, this project has become linked with cultural identity and European citizenship.

TRANSFER - TRAIning Native Speakers For EaRly language teaching - is disseminated through a collection of handbooks for native speakers intending to teach their mother tongue in primary schools across Europe. Those involved in designing this collection are teachers in Higher Education Institutions who are specialists either in early language teaching or in teaching their mother tongue as a foreign language. Eight institutions from eight different European countries are involved - Austria, France, Greece, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal and Spain.

The current situation is that many students are sent abroad, either through their Ministry of Education or through the Lingua C programme, for a whole school year to secondary and now to primary schools. They are sent to help to teach generally, but more often to directly teach their mother tongue as a foreign language, generally without being trained to do so.

It is generally agreed that one should start a new language at primary school level, on the principle of 'the sooner, the better'. However, a native speaker of a language is not able to teach the language simply by virtue of being a native speaker, although this may seem contrary to what many people - those not involved in language teaching - think and believe. Teaching a child a foreign language is much more than just teaching the language itself. Firstly, while discovering a new language, the child will at the same time learn about inter-cultural differences. Secondly, the way a child learns is different from the way teenagers or adults learn.

A child learns through his or her senses as well as through intellect, and his/her memory works in an impressionistic way. It is important, therefore, to provide authentic language situations that are easy to memorise. Language learning must be an enjoyable experience, similar to playing a game or playing 'make-believe' (that is, pretending to be somebody else, somebody from a different country in this case). This experience should create such a deep impression on the child that s/he retains the language involved and will wish to use it again.

The language situation offered should therefore have a meaningful impact, be appealing to the ear, be easy to understand and should relate to the child's range of interests. TRANSFER is therefore based on the child's way of learning, is holistic in nature, and also stresses culture as it is conveyed by language.

In the particular context we are dealing with in this project - that of being able to 'use' a native speaker, the language assistant, for this teaching experience - the first contact with a different culture will be through a real person, and it is likely to be the first time that the

child has had contact with a foreign country other than through the media. It is important that such a first contact is a favourable one. We all know how closely language and culture are intermingled, and culture here will be expressed naturally through the assistant's very being, in the way s/he speaks and thinks and acts. This very first contact will determine the child's attitude to the language and culture that s/he is about to discover. At the same time as a child is discovering a foreign language through the lessons in TRANSFER, s/he will discover how the same age group in the language assistant's own country think, behave and act. This will facilitate, at an early age, acceptance of what is different to his or her own background.

Many activities in primary schools in all countries, for purposes other than language acquisition alone, rely on songs, poems, rhymes, tales, dances and celebrating festivities. All these are to be found in the TRANSFER handbooks, so the child does in a foreign language what s/he is used to doing in his or her own. Songs, poems and rhymes might be considered as being part of culture and of art. The role played by art in all its forms, as a means of opening people's minds and developing a respect for others, has long been acknowledged, especially by young people.

While using TRANSFER, a language assistant will teach a European language and make his or her pupils aware of intercultural differences that they will be able to accept. Most of the time these students, going abroad to teach their mother tongue, are not fully aware of the potential they possess in transmitting their mother tongue and their cultural identity. Very often just by listening to the CD which accompanies the handbook, that is listening to traditional songs and rhymes that they were exposed to during their own childhood, the students experienced an emotional flashback and became more aware of their cultural identity.

Moreover, these students are not used to considering their mother tongue as a foreign language, and therefore do not know how to approach such a task. As they are undergraduates (or sometimes have just recently graduated), they have not been trained pedagogically. The second feature of the TRANSFER project is therefore to offer both outgoing and incoming language assistants a training session covering these topics at the beginning of the school year. During this training period we also help them to realise that while they live abroad they will get to know more about another culture, another way of living and thinking, and another way of teaching.

Most of the assistants are teachers-to-be themselves, and often in their own countries they will encounter an increasing number of pupils from different cultures in their classrooms. This training period abroad should therefore be seen as an opportunity to experience other cultural perspectives and to examine the teaching methods specific to the assistant's home country and to the host country.

Familiarity with European educational systems and confronting the methods and didactics specific to other European countries will be part of the TRANSFER training sessions.

We are in our final year of this project. The Anglo-Irish handbook is prepared, and the French, Spanish and Portuguese handbooks are forthcoming. The Dutch, German, Greek and Norwegian handbooks should be published by the beginning of 2001, and all of them are about to be used in training sessions.

We would like to end by quoting Yeats and Montaigne, as we do in the English and French handbooks:

Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.

Eduquer, ce n'est pas emplir un vase, mais c'est allumer un feu.