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## **A holistic perspective to English language teaching in Europe: Language, culture and identity project**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper presents the findings of a project that developed alternative pedagogic approaches to English language teaching in Early Years contexts (ages 3-6) in an independent school in Istanbul-Turkey. The school provides education for children from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds in addition to those from mainly Turkish speaking homes. English language teaching is central to all learning and forms the basis of a whole school ethos taught from nursery to college level. The school was keen to develop their existing English language teaching further. This was based on lessons delivered in Turkish in Homeroom in the mornings and timetabled input by language teachers in the afternoons in English class. Although there were good pedagogic approaches used by both groups of teachers, lack of commonality in focus, content and approach was observed between them. The project incorporated an inclusive approach to teaching (using children's own linguistic and cultural experiences as a starting point) that developed English Language learning within a holistic/ thematic approach used by all teachers.*

*Our findings showed that holistic approach to English language learning, supported through (a jointly planned) thematic work contributed to more active participation and collaboration between the children with positive outcomes in English language tasks. Parallel to this we have observed a marked difference in children's own perceptions of their linguistic and cultural identities and those around them, creating a more inclusive environment as future citizens of Europe.*

### **Introduction**

This paper explores the findings of a two year Early Years project that focuses on developing alternative pedagogic approaches to English language teaching in an independent school in Istanbul-Turkey. The school provides education for children from a variety of cultural and linguistic backgrounds in addition to those from mainly Turkish speaking homes e.g. There are children from different ethnic groups as well as from homes of European French, Italian Dutch and German) and Asian (Mandarin, Farsi and Arabic) backgrounds. English language teaching is central to all learning and form the basis of a whole school ethos taught from nursery to college level. As a result the school is very popular with parents and has a long waiting list. In the pre-school phase the teaching is organised alongside instruction in Turkish (called the 'homeroom') and English lessons are usually delivered by a team of two English speaking teachers. The day is structured with instruction in Turkish/English, allowing children to have a morning session with activities organised and delivered in Turkish followed by sessions in English in the afternoons or vice-versa.

In this paper we explore the emerging trends at the end of the first year of the project particularly relating to strategies for inclusive approaches to teaching (using children's own linguistic and cultural experiences as a starting point) that will develop English Language learning within an thematic approach.

### **Rationale for the project**

There is a need to develop current methods of English Language teaching in line with the theories of child centred education. Current practice in Europe on language teaching has shown that starting language teaching at the foundation stage (Pre-school) positively affects language learning during children's later school life (Graves, 2009; Burwood et.al., 1999). Relevant research in this field has shown that using children's 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1991) has a positive impact on learners' self esteem and consequently on learning. Similarly, theories of second language acquisition support a closer link between the child's first and second languages (Cummins, 1996). We feel that developing a holistic method for English language teaching as outlined in this proposal will contribute to the development of theory, policy and practice at early years contexts. We also feel that by investigating pre-school and primary phases the project will provide a useful framework for other transitional programmes.

### **Our project had the following aims:**

1. To create an *inclusive ethos* in the classroom that will strengthen pupils' sense of cultural identity and self esteem by providing pupils with opportunities to share their home experiences with each other in the school settings.
2. To implement a common thematic ( inquiry based ) framework to be used collectively by teachers of the Homegroup and the English classes incorporating the topics already covered in English language teaching as well as those relating to point 1 above.
3. To implement an English language training programme for Homeroom (Turkish teachers) to support their English language skills and subject knowledge to enable them to support children's English language development in line with the project objectives.

### **Policy and theoretical frameworks**

We adopt the five principles of the Department for Children, Families and Schools (DCFS) Every Child Matters (2003) Agenda as an underlying principle for child centred education.

Government policies on education strategy document *Languages for All: Languages for Life* (2002) and KS2 Framework for Languages (2005) make a positive argument for language learning and bilingualism. The present study contributes to the debates of multilingual practices through the analysis of social, emotional and cultural variables and explores innovative strategies in English Language teaching.

The theoretical underpinning of this project is drawn from a range of disciplines including applied linguistics, education and social studies and anthropology. Of key importance are studies of bilingual learners and their needs, current theories of second language acquisition and social and ethnographic studies relating to issues of identity and social interaction in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

### **L1 and L2 Language and Literacy Development**

For a number of years, a range of studies within the discipline of Applied Linguistics have demonstrated the positive benefits of bilingualism for children's cognitive development, communicative sensitivity and flexibility of conceptualization, for example Peal and Lambert (1962), Ben-Zeev (1977), Bialystok (2001), Pavlenko (2005). Many studies have relied on Lambert's (1974) original distinction between 'additive bilingualism' (bilingualism as an enrichment) and 'subtractive bilingualism' (learning of the L2 to replace the L1). The arguments for additive bilingualism were developed subsequently by Cummins (1989, 2000), who argued for the empowerment of bilingual learners to access the cognitive and social benefits of additive bilingualism. In recent studies of bilingual literacy development, the role and importance of metalinguistic understanding derived from early language learning experiences in the L1 has been gaining prominence (see, for example, Datta, 2000). Additionally Cummins' (1980, 1981) notion of a common underlying language proficiency allows for continuity and progression of language and literacy development through learning of and in the L1 as well as L2. At the same time second language acquisition studies have come in recent years to recognise the importance of making connections between communicative use of language and analysis of formal language structures (see, for example, Ellis 1986, Lightbown and Spada 2006). This has had the effect of easing previously hardened positions on learning the L2 exclusively through communicative use of the target language and allowed for consideration of and comparisons between language forms and structures in the L1 as well as the L2. One way in which this has been achieved in recent years is through the use of CLIL (Content Learning in a Language), which has developed following extensive experience of L2 immersion programmes in Canada and elsewhere in the world (see Ruiz de Zarobe and Jimenez Catalan 2009 for an account of CLIL in Europe).

All of these studies provide a strong argument for investigating bilingual learning experiences which make cross-curricular links between learning languages and learning in other subjects and between the learning of the L1 and the L2.

### **Language and identity in multicultural contexts**

A further important theoretical consideration relates to the construction of identity through interaction with other language speakers (Blackledge and Pavlenko, 2001; Cummins' (2000) notion of 'identity investment' is an important ingredient of successful learning for additive bilingualism

Language practices are subject to their social, political and historical contexts (May, 2001), that is language practices are linked to ideologies of language, which are not necessarily stable or unchanging. Rather, they are multiple and influenced by changes at local, national, state and global levels (Gal, 1998; Woolard 1998). There is often a dynamic tension between identities asserted and chosen by the self and identities asserted and chosen for the individual by states, nations or institutions. We understand multilingual young people and children's identities as emergent, multiple and dynamic and linked to relations of power in society and we therefore recognize the importance of teachers engaging with learners' own perceptions of identity. The assumption that one language equals one national or cultural identity ignores the complexity of multilingual societies. Schools are the institutional representations of society. If they wish to acknowledge and promote the emergent, dynamic multilingual and multicultural nature of current society, schools need to embed and engage learners and teachers in institutional practices which draw on, celebrate and develop linguistic and cultural diversity. Our interest in this study is to explore these relationships, in the context of early years /Primary phase of an independent school in Turkey.

### **Methodological Framework**

Approaches from linguistic ethnography provide theoretical and analytical frameworks which unite around a view of language use as contingent on context and implicated in power relations. We draw on ethnographic case study (Hammersley, 1992; Harland, 1996; Scott and Usher, 1999) as means of theory development and analysis:

‘Methods of data collection are used that attempt to capture the ‘lived reality’ of such settings and though these methods are usually referred as qualitative i.e. semi structured interviews, observations of processes and documentary analysis, they are not exclusively so.’ (Scott and Usher, 1999:87)

Ethnographers, according to Scott and Usher (1999) argue that the detailed description of the case that emerges can be complemented by examination of other cases that seem to have similar properties, i.e. other schools of a similar nature. Theory development is either cumulative in that as more cases are studied the database becomes more extensive and rich and the findings more reliable, enabling the researcher to generalize to larger populations, or theory developed from one or more cases can be tested as to its validity and reliability by examining further cases. We hope that our study will serve as basis for formulating other similar studies in the field. Below we describe how our research aim and objectives will be addressed by existing theoretical and analytical frameworks and the particular processes created in the study that will contribute to their development.

Our methodology is child centred, (Mayall, 1993) that is to say, we are basing our research on the principles of children's rights (Alderson, 2000b) which include their right to be heard as individuals. In this research we take seriously the notion that children can demonstrate both empathy and sophisticated methods of communicating their viewpoints. This may include both verbal and non-verbal communications.

The duration of the project is two years. We have chosen two groups of pre-school children (aged 4-5 years) and one group of first graders (aged 6-7 years old). A total of 15 children and 9 teachers (both from the homeroom and the English department) will be involved in the project.

The study consisted of setting up and evaluating a number of practice interventions in order to improve teaching and learning of English in a school in Turkey. Teachers in the school planned and delivered these interventions with support via communications between the University and the school personnel.

These interventions were designed to enable the following:

1. Greater integration of approaches to language teaching in English and Turkish in order to allow children to talk about language and make comparisons between the two languages (developing metalinguistic understanding)
2. Thematic planning and delivery across the curriculum using Content Learning in a Language (CLIL) approaches in English sessions

Data included children's and teachers' voices including recordings of lessons and planning meetings as well as written data in the form of teacher journals.

### **Data collection**

- Data collection covered a period of two academic years (Sep-July). Trial recordings to commence in June 2010.
- Activities were recorded twice a week. Each activity to run for approximately 30 minutes. This may vary according to the unit and some activities may be developed and extended over more lessons.
- Teachers used journals, recordings of student voices and video recordings. The recordings were done on key planned activities (featuring the project children wherever possible). These were transcribed jointly by teachers in appropriate teams.
- Children's voices were the most important element of data collected.

### **Data Analysis**

Our key research Question is:

*“To what extent adopting a thematic/holistic approach (using CLIL) to English language teaching support children's learning of English in Early Years contexts?”*

We adapt Halliday's (2002) *Thematic Evidence +Literature= Informed Discussion and Analysis*

### **Key findings**

We categorised our findings for the first year of the project under two main themes:

- Utilising children's home experiences
- Developing children's language awareness

Below we present short extracts from a selection of activities we have planned relating to both themes.

### **Theme 1: Utilising children's home experiences**

#### **Activity 1/2 : I'm Special**

We have developed a rota system where every week one child brings from home, things particularly personal and special to them to share with others such as their favourite toys, books, family and holiday photos, baby clothes, etc. Throughout the week the child shows and talks about his-her personal belongings and we try to make them feel very special. It is great to see how children talk about himself-herself with great pride and how the audience listens with great interest and respect. It also allows his-her friends to ask further questions and get to know more about our special friend.

#### **Interaction between the teacher and students (in English):**

Student: (showing his photo) I'm .....a.....a 3-years old. I'm playing piano. And I'm in here.....a house.....I don't remember.

Teacher: I think you're wearing a costume.

Student: Yes, superman.....no.

Teacher: Does anyone have any questions?

Student 2: Are you outside or inside?

Student: I said.....Piano is not outside.

Student 3: Inside.

Student 4: Outside.

Student: No, there's a tree.

(There was a little debate as to whether this particular photo was taken inside or outside.

The student was trying to convince them that it was taken inside)

Teacher: OK-it's inside because he said this is in a house but I don't remember which house it was but there was a plant inside.

(The teacher's explanation helped to end the debate)

Student 5: Why do you laughing like this? (Pointing to the picture and trying to imitate the facial expression in the photo) He's very funny-why are you funny?

Student: I cannot see the picture....I look the photograph.....I cannot see.

Student 6: Why did you wear that costume?

Student: (thinking deeply) This is not a costume. I don't think this is a costume. This is a pyjama. (everyone started to giggle)

This student travels a lot with his family. He brought to school many photos of the places he had visited. However, this led to some confusion about the cultures. In one particular incident he talked about going to New York and visiting a French Restaurant where he ate Chinese food. Although his English is quite good, he still feels very hesitant in using the language. However, I'm Special presentation allowed him to talk about himself and his family which made him less hesitant and more relaxed.

**Theme 2: Developing children language awareness****Activity 2/2: Languages Week**

During “Languages Week” which we celebrated in mid-March we had the opportunity to explore many different languages. We invited the Preschool students from the German school to visit us. We invited our French and German teachers from the Modern Languages Department to read to us a story in French and German. One of our teachers joined us with her kimono and talked to us in Japanese and shared her experiences in Japan. Another one of our teachers presented Spain in a similar way. Throughout this week the students were exposed to different languages. They had the opportunity to say “hello” in different languages, to count up to 10 and to sing a simple song. This allowed some of the students who were speaking a third language at home to become excited and to speak up. They realized that there was another person who was also speaking their language. This opportunity allowed these children to become known, to stand out and for them to feel proud of knowing another language. As a follow-up activity we have started inviting to school the parents of these children so that they can read a story, do a cooking activity or a craft activity with the whole class.

**One of the French teachers visited the class and read a story in French. This led to a follow-up discussion.**

One of the children was asked if he liked/understood the story he said “no”...because “I don’t know any French.” He said he didn’t understand any words but he knew ‘Bonjour’. When asked if he would like to learn French he was ‘indifferent’ in his answers (appeared not bothered one way or the other). When asked if he liked the sound of French he stated “Yeah”...with little enthusiasm. When asked if French sounded like English or Italian he said...”not like English.”

This particular child is very able to hold a fluent conversation. The questions were mainly asked about what books/stories he has at home and who reads them and what languages people speak at home. He wasn’t interested at all in talking about the French story or French. He is very respondent when talking about Italian and his life but when questions were asked about French he wasn’t so interested

His Nanny Susana is Italian, ‘she is from Italy’. At home his Nanny reads stories to him at home in Italian. She only reads in Italian...and he stated that he understands all that she says. He stated that his mummy and daddy don’t read stories to him. He says he has no Turkish books at home just English and Italian...more Italian than English and he likes Italian books the best. He speaks Italian to all the people at home about from the old ladies...asked who the old ladies are he said “Grandpa, Grandma, my reall, really old Grandpa...they speak Turkish.”

**Some Emerging trends from our findings so far**

Our findings showed that holistic approach to English language learning, supported through (a jointly planned) thematic work contributed to more active participation and collaboration between the children with positive outcomes in English language tasks. Children’s began to show a more active interest in their own languages as well as others



around them. Using children's cultural and linguistic experiences embedded in their home environments appears to have made a positive impact on children's participation as the topics evolved around them as individuals. What we have presented here is emerging trends during the first year of the project. We still need to explore the impact of a holistic programme reflected in thematic scheme on children's linguistic development in general and English language development in particular. We hope to do this at the second year of the project.

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