

## Issues for language teachers and pupils at the primary to secondary transition: talking about learning

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### Abstract

There are many transitions during a pupil's school career; the one that seems to have the most impact is at the transfer from primary to secondary school. The research on which this article is based aims to explore the misunderstandings and misconceptions of both primary and secondary language teachers around the transition period and consider to what extent secondary teachers are aware of pupils' prior knowledge and have strategies in place to build on these. 26 primary schools in one Local Authority (LA) and its 8 secondary schools are covered in this research. Pupils and teachers were interviewed in each of the schools, language lessons observed and samples of work examined. A noteworthy feature was that the primary school pupils had benefited from a well embedded formative assessment and had developed effective learning skills to help them manage their transition to some degree. In this research, prominence is given to the pupils' perceptions because of their important insights into the learning process.

It was found that secondary teachers rarely took the pupils' prior knowledge into consideration; they preferred a 'fresh start', often for purely logistical reasons. The majority of the primary and secondary teachers had no or little knowledge of the languages provision on 'the other side' and harboured a great many misconceptions. It became clear that a cross-phase teacher conversation was needed to discuss include how to build on pupils' learning skills and engage the pupils as active agents in the process of progressing their own learning. Whilst this research was carried out in England, the issues raised have resonance in a great many cultural contexts. Only on the basis of a shared understanding can teachers from both levels ensure a coherent cross-phase learning experience and be agents of change as well as subject leaders in the transition process in whichever cultural context this takes place.

### Resumen

Entre las muchas transiciones en el proceso educativo de un alumno la más impactante es el paso de la Educación Primaria a la Enseñanza Secundaria. Este artículo se basa en la investigación de las incomprensiones y falsas concepciones que los profesores de lenguas tanto en Primaria como en Secundaria tienen y en la consideración de hasta dónde son conscientes del conocimiento previo del alumnado y de las estrategias para trabajar a partir de dicho conocimiento. Se han investigado 26 escuelas de Primaria y 8 institutos en un área de *Local Authority*. Se realizaron entrevistas a alumnos y profesores en cada centro, se observaron clases y se examinaron muestras de trabajo. Una característica destacada fue que el alumnado de Primaria había tenido una evaluación formativa muy asentada y había desarrollado destrezas de aprendizaje que hasta cierto punto podían ayudarles en la transición. En esta investigación se destacan las percepciones del alumnado por su importante comprensión del proceso educativo.

Los profesores de Secundaria rara vez tienen en cuenta los conocimientos previos de su alumnado y prefieren comenzar de nuevo, a menudo por meras razones logísticas. La mayoría de los profesores de Primaria y Secundaria desconocen casi o totalmente las nociones lingüísticas de los alumnos del "otro nivel" y albergan una idea equivocada del mismo. Es evidente que es necesaria una fase en la que los docentes de ambos niveles puedan intercambiar impresiones para construir a partir de lo que sabe el alumnado y ayudarles a progresar en su aprendizaje. Los problemas originados por la transición no sólo son propios de Inglaterra sino también de muchos otros contextos culturales. Sólo sobre la base de un entendimiento mutuo podrá asegurar el profesorado una transición coherente además de ser los agentes del cambio en cualquier contexto cultural en el que tenga lugar la transición.

## Introduction

Pupils experience many transitions during their school careers, from home to school, nursery provision to infant then junior classes, a focus on play to formal learning, teacher evaluation to national assessment to name a few (Jones and Coffey, 2006). When referring to transition, the focus is usually on the transition from primary to secondary phase, seen, rightly as a critical transition. At the heart of transition concerns is the need to ensure progression in learning from the primary phase to the secondary stage. This is especially important in the first few years at secondary school where the impetus needs to be maintained and good learning habits that were developed in the primary school deepened. The primary–secondary transition is a period of uncertainty for pupils and there has long been an awareness of the anxieties of pupils at this stage (Hargreaves and Galton, 2002, Measor and Woods, 1984, Tabor, 1993). Research indicates that even where pupils settle well, progress is far from assured, two out of five pupils failing to make expected progress according to Galton, Gray and Rudduck (1999). They found that not only was there a hiatus in progress for some students but a decline in motivation with pupils saying they no longer enjoyed school. They also observed that pupils were visibly disengaged in lessons. Similar findings can be found in other cultural contexts (Antuñez et al., (2007), Audin et al.(2005), Mayer (2006).

Crucially for languages which have particular teaching and learning challenges, as well as a very variable provision in some countries, transition needs to be carefully planned to ensure continuing motivation and progression as part of a successful cross-phase learning experience. That there is frequently repetition and discontinuity in teaching and learning from the previous year’s work serves to de-motivate pupils as they often feel that ‘the the new work underestimates what they are capable of doing and achieving’ as Galton et al. (1999:2) write. They identified many ‘discontinuities’ in pupil learning as many teachers failed to build on what pupils already knew and clung to the belief that a fresh start was the most appropriate beginning point in secondary school language learning. The researchers identified approaches or ‘bridges’ that need to be crossed to ensure a smooth transition as follows:

1. *Bureaucratic* -the formal liaison between schools, usually at Senior Leadership level
2. *Social and personal* -the creation of social links prior to and after transfer, and at induction
3. *Curriculum* -the sharing of content to be taught
4. *Pedagogic* -the development of an understanding of how pupils are taught
5. *Managing learning* -a consideration of how each pupil can be helped to manage the transition in the light of achievement and needs and how to move forward

Welcoming, settling in and induction for pupils in transition are usually and universally well planned. In language learning, however, the curriculum, pedagogic and managing learning bridges are currently underdeveloped because teachers do not always have the time or will to discuss pedagogical issues collaboratively. Where primary pupils have experienced embedded formative assessment and effective language teaching in the primary school the pupils take, as one primary Head called it, ‘suitcases of learning skills’ to secondary school that can be exploited by secondary teachers in order to progress learning. Even when such continuity is missing, there is evidence (Jones, 2010; Jones and Webb, 2008) that pupils have the capability for transferring their learning skills to the new secondary context and can ‘figure things out’ for themselves. We want the young languages learner to develop these capabilities and be autonomous, and to operate as effective

strategic language learners and as active agents in their progress, but in a scaffolded environment within a good transition.

Whilst children benefit from continuity in all subjects at this crucial transition stage from the primary to the secondary school, continuity is essential for children's motivation and progression in their language learning. In the secondary school, students can become disenchanted with their language study especially if the subject is perceived as repetitive, non-progressive and difficult. Secondary language teachers may feel disadvantaged (Jones and Coffey, 2006) because of their perception that their primary colleagues have all the 'fun bits' and teach pupils at a stage when they are very receptive to new language. This is partly based on a misconception and a lack of understanding of the primary context. One primary teacher opined:

*'A lot of secondary teachers seem to perceive what we do as just playing, they don't see a lot of the grammar we put in and also what levels the children come out at, some children are really extremely gifted and we're really getting them to a good standard, and you want them to carry on with that sort of progression, and you just hope that it continues but you know that in languages it's not happening, you're sort of almost wiping the slate clean'.*

Conversely, a secondary teacher emphasised why she felt it necessary to 'wipe the slate clean' in some respect: *'I often have to unteach incorrect French that has been taught incorrectly at primary school'.*

In one study that tracked pupils from the last year of primary school to the end of the first year at secondary school, Bolster et al. (2004:39) reported a 'complex and somewhat contradictory picture'. The researchers concluded that 'opportunities which exist for building on primary language learning are largely wasted' which appears to have 'contributed to the somewhat disillusioned attitude of a certain number of secondary school pupils'. These findings are mirrored in the later research of Jones (2010).

There is an equal lack of understanding of the secondary context on the part of primary practitioners. This emphasises the need for primary and secondary teachers to engage in ongoing dialogue about learning and teaching and to work together to develop a shared understanding of learners' needs and capabilities and to plan their language teaching accordingly. On the basis of this collaboration, pupils' learning progression could be increasingly assured. Where there is a more structured approach to assessment embedded into primary languages practice, this can facilitate the communication of individual pupil progress. In which ways language teachers collaborated and communicated was an important focus of this research, which sought the views of headteachers, teachers and pupils.

### **The context of the research**

Primary language provision for pupils in the upper stages of the primary school has come late to the English context (2010 being the point when schools had to provide learning opportunities for all pupils aged 8-10), considering that early language learning has long been a feature of education systems in almost every other European country for some time. French was, in fact, an established part of the primary curriculum in this LA in which the research was undertaken. The provision however, was extremely variable in nature, ranging from incorporation into the school curriculum, to a mere half hour a week for just some pupils in other schools. The LA provided materials in the form of a series of work books based on topics and schools invariably

supplemented these with their own resources. In addition, the LA offered training in pedagogy and support for teachers to improve their French.

Being located in the Southern part of England, it was relatively easy to visit France and indeed many schools had links with partner schools in France. In spite of the existence of close contacts between the schools and a relatively cohesive provision at primary level, feelings of mistrust and misconception between the primary and secondary school language teachers were felt. In short, primary colleagues felt their work was undervalued and the children's efforts not progressed at secondary level; secondary colleagues felt their primary colleagues did not provide adequate transfer information nor prepare the pupils adequately for the secondary stage. This finding is of some concern in the English system in which languages generally are under-supported and under-represented in the curriculum and where pupils can drop language learning at the age of 14 and, indeed, do so in ever-increasing numbers. The arguments regarding the lack of urgency for language learning in a context where English is the mother tongue are well known but are untenable in a world in which communication 'in many tongues', as Wilga Rivers (1976) wrote many years ago, is of the essence. Teachers in their classrooms alone cannot solve the problems inherent in foreign language learning, but good communication between practitioners and coherent provision can provide a useful foundation for successful lifelong learning (Driscoll, Jones and McRory, 2004).

To this end, the purpose of the research was to make a thorough investigation of the nature of the teaching, learning and assessment at both upper junior and lower secondary levels in order to establish the extent of the shared understanding. The research questions were:

*To what extent do primary and secondary teachers have a shared understanding about how their provision relates to the previous or next step in learning?*

*In which ways do secondary teachers respond to and progress the children's previous language learning?*

## **The research**

Designed as a research project to engage the whole languages community of practice in the Local Authority, the research took place over the 2008-9 school year. I headed a team that included four primary Head teachers selected for their championing of languages in the primary school and who felt an urgent need for secondary schools to respond more effectively to primary provision. The Heads shared a leading role in setting the agenda, collecting and interpreting data and, especially, in deciding strategies for a way forward in the post-research period. It was important in this research to hear 'the voices of teachers themselves, the questions teachers ask and the interpretive frames that teachers use to understand and to improve their practice' as Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993:7) urge. Meetings were held once a term between primary heads and all secondary Heads of Languages Department with LA officers who also gave full ethical clearance, supporting and monitoring the project. At these meetings, there were very frank exchanges in what was obviously the first opportunity the teachers had had to confront issues and express their needs.

## *Methods*

At the beginning of the project, a questionnaire under the auspices of the LA was sent to every school to obtain base-line data about language provision and transition arrangements. It also asked for teachers' views on transition. There was a 100% return and data were processed to provide statistical evidence about aspects of provision and qualitative data about the teachers' views. Significant aspects of data are referred to in this article since the foci are the observations and the views of the teachers and those of pupils. On the basis of views expressed in the returns, research priorities were decided to be based mainly on observation and interview. Observations were aimed at getting an overview of teaching approach, 'listening, looking and recording' as Silverman writes (2009: 67) with the aim of 'noticing' in Mason's sense of 'being awake to situations'(2006:38) of interest and of personal significance potentially to our own practice. Interviews, as Punch writes are: 'a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality' (2005:168).

The primary Heads visited primary schools other than their own, whilst I visited the team Heads' schools. I also visited all the secondary schools. In each school a member of the team observed a language lesson, the points of observation being threefold, namely teaching approach, assessment and transition issues. We discussed the teaching approach and issues of transition with the teacher responsible for language provision, and crucially, held a group discussion with a group of pupils. The pupils' voice was privileged in this research since they are the ones who, in many ways, have to cope with the transition in learning terms for themselves.

Our research can be considered what Mitchell (1984) calls a small-scale 'telling case'. The study sheds light on key issues in the ongoing research on transition and 'tells about' the teachers' concerns as well as the pupils' perceptions about how they felt they had been enabled to progress their learning in the secondary school. The pupils expressed themselves forcefully and colourfully, resonating with Flutter and Rudduck's view that 'pupils of all ages can show a remarkable capacity to discuss their learning in a considered and insightful way, although they may not always be able to articulate their ideas in the formal language of education' (2004:7).

We chose group discussions as the means to engage pupils in interactive discussion based on a semi-structured interview format, probing as potentially illuminative issues arose, for as Morgan writes: 'In essence, it is the researcher's interest that provides the focus, whereas the data themselves come from the group interaction' (1999: 6). Interviews were transcribed and analysed in terms of the pupils' understanding of their learning and their reflections about transition from their perspective. Teachers were interviewed on a one-to one basis and given time to show materials and resources, to talk about teaching approach and assessment as well as issues of transition. All interviews were transcribed and coded according to the aforementioned themes. Utterances were analysed in terms of the extent to which they showed shared understanding or tension and disagreement about pedagogy. Examples of working to support transitional learning or of missed opportunities were also identified. With data from observations, interviews and access to associated documentation such as teachers' planners, schemes of work, materials, pupils' books, we were able to obtain a rich picture of what teachers did in their teaching around the transitional period and their views on transitional learning.

In the first instance, we observed lessons with a view to capturing the various subjectivities of teaching and trying to relate this to the teachers' claims, to what the pupils said and to the 'declarations' about language

teaching in school documentation. The lessons were scripted to give descriptions of what took place and included verbatim quotes of teacher and pupils.

## **Findings**

### *Observing primary language lessons*

Lessons at this level included a rich mixture of teacher input with whole class, pair work, group work and occasional bursts of individual work such as filling in a work sheet. There was an emphasis on revision and consolidation before any new items were introduced, with much going over of routines such as days of the week and items of food with flashcards, all practised within songs, games or quick-fire question formats. There was almost exclusive use of the target language and a predominance of oral and aural activities. Interestingly the skill of reading was assumed and there was the occasional gap-filling, copying or simple writing of phrases to practise writing skills. There was a homogeneity about the primary lessons, with lots of physical movement and always an element of cultural input. Whilst the LA primary course materials were in evidence, these were always supplemented with other visuals, puppets, realia and the Interactive Whiteboard (IWB) for games in particular and to show the written word. Teachers were inventive with materials and did not rely on the course materials alone. Children unanimously enjoyed their lessons and identified games and working in groups as their favourite activities. They thought French was a very important skill in their lives.

It was of concern to note some imperfect pronunciation of the target language with some teachers, resulting in poor pupil pronunciation ('wheat hers' for 'huit heures', for example) and a preponderance of focus on vocabulary, as well as a rather limited advancement on the word-sentence-text continuum in most lessons. The pupils were often tongue-tied when trying to make an extended utterance.

There was extensive evidence of formative assessment in the form of the identification of learning intentions and success criteria, peer assessment and self-assessment and traffic-lighting (green, amber and red cards to indicate levels of understanding). Teachers used stickers and class points for motivational purposes to which the pupils responded well. Formative assessment was an embedded feature of the schools' assessment cultures. Summative assessment was only in evidence in 20% of the schools which led to limited recording and reporting of progress and achievement and a dearth of information to be transferred to the secondary school. Teachers often claimed secondary schools did not request assessment data.

### *Secondary language lessons*

There was some homogeneity about the secondary lessons as there was with the primary lessons. Learning objectives were routinely made clear at the beginning of lessons and a fairly recognisable format of input, practice and consolidation of learning with listening, reading and writing activities ensued. There was explicit attention paid to pronunciation and to establishing grammatical patterns in the repetition of short sentences. Target language was used extensively by most teachers, although not so much by the pupils other than in group work tasks. Teachers frequently used the IWB, often with Powerpoint materials as a way to script the lesson and to show examples of the language but sometimes with authentic materials taken from the internet. A variety of course books was in evidence, which showed considerable overlap with materials and topics covered at primary

school, an average of 70% in terms of topic and vocabulary on a content analysis. Whilst books were used at some point in all lessons, additional material was used, in particular the IWB mainly purpose –designed by the teacher or taken from existing programmes. The pupils’ exercise book was a main recording instrument of learning in the lesson. There was a noticeable tendency to rely on translation – (‘What does that mean in English?’), a great deal of whole class activity and some poor pronunciation, in spite of practice, because of reliance on and distortion from the written word.

Formative assessment was in evidence with some self- assessment and use of the thumb tool (thumbs up, across or down) by the teacher and pupils to indicate comprehension. One teacher noticeably used well-known primary formative assessment techniques ( WALT- ‘what we are learning today’ and WILF- ‘what I am looking for’) with which she was familiar; she had moved from primary teaching into secondary language teaching and was aware of the pupils’ need for aspects of familiarity. Mini-tests and the setting and returning of homework tasks with effort and achievement grades showed summative assessment. Teachers also made use of end of unit tests or their own periodic summative assessments. Secondary teachers said they had no transfer information other than from one primary school and even in this case, the secondary teachers said that ‘the levels are inaccurate’. The pupils claimed to enjoy their language learning but were noticeably less enthusiastic and commented on the repetition of work.

In sum, not only were there different cultures of teaching and expectations of the learners in the two settings, but many teachers had little knowledge of what was covered at the other stage, or of the espoused pedagogy, and seemingly afforded a low priority to the task of talking transition. A lack of time and funding were frequently mentioned and, even when colleagues had planned meetings to discuss issues, these were often cancelled or disrupted due to difficulties of staff cover of lessons. Where there was some contact, this was, crucially, part of an arrangement supported and enabled by the Head teachers.

#### *Teacher interviews*

An observer has a very privileged eye and an overview that the teachers do not have. Lesson observations indicated clearly different cultures of teaching in the primary and the secondary settings although with some overlap about which the teachers seemed unaware, other than the one teacher who had moved from primary to secondary teaching. This is hardly surprising given that 90% of the secondary schools indicated no links with the primary schools. In no case did primary school teachers know the content or course book used by their secondary colleagues and only one secondary school had seen a primary scheme of work. Two secondary schools made modest modifications to their scheme of work, assuming pupils had knowledge of very basic functions based on their knowledge of the primary materials. Whilst there was 100% dissatisfaction with transition arrangements and knowledge, 50 percent of all respondents said they didn’t know how the situation could be improved. The other 50% said details of what pupils learnt would avoid duplication.

A similar split in opinion could be seen regarding the perceived impact on pupil motivation. Although secondary teachers were unanimous that pupils began their secondary language learning as ‘enthusiastic/motivated/keen’, 60% claimed that pupils lose interest when their work repeats their primary teaching.

With regard to teaching approach, teachers commented on their perception of how they thought their colleagues in the other phase had taught. Primary teachers opined that secondary teachers went over the same ground, immersed their young learners in writing and grammar and generally took the joy out of learning. Typical teacher comments were:

*'The secondary schools ignore all the work we have done with the children, some of them don't even acknowledge it'*

*'As Head, I visit my pupils when they go on to their secondary schools and I see what I, as the French teacher in my school, have done being rehashed without any extension. In their first year, the children are really very patient'*

*'I obviously talk to my son who has gone on to secondary school about his work and he seems to do mainly writing in French.'*

Secondary teachers were equally negative in their perceptions of what they thought primary colleagues did in their language teaching:

*'They don't seem to believe that writing could be helpful and only focus on speaking activity. The children come to us with very little idea about how what they have learnt relates to the written form. We have to quickly deal with that.'*

*'It is a huge challenge for us to be able to set the pupils. The teaching in the primary schools is inconsistent and although oral and comprehension is generally good, reading and writing are poor.'*

*'Very few primary pupils have had experience of doing homework and it is very difficult to get the pupils used to doing regular homework which for us in languages often means learning and practising.'*

Unfortunately, the teachers did not make much positive comment on each other's contribution although there was general acknowledgement that contact and discussion across the phases were inadequate. Teachers raised issues of:

- Lack of time and funding to be able to make visits and find time to discuss
- The unavailability of data about pupils' prior learning in a measurable form
- Absence of hard evidence about pupils' previous work and their achievement
- Difficulties in making contact with their colleagues and requests for information or meetings ignored- *'I wrote to the Head of Languages at the nearest secondary school suggesting we meet but he never got back to me'*.

The overall impression was one of resentment and of blame for the other side, with little evidence of understanding of issues pertinent to each case. Primary teachers felt that the language learning time was more about exploring language and enjoyment; for secondary teachers, there were issues of content coverage, addressing the four skills and examinations, and trying to make the lessons enjoyable. It was under this cloud that we explored the pupil response.

#### *Pupil group discussions*

When talking to pupils, we have found them to be articulate and confident. Primary pupils were excited about continuing their language learning. Secondary pupils were, in the early part of their first year, enthusiastic and enjoying 'grown up' learning, cheerful and very tolerant of what they clearly perceived as repetition of work. It is important to listen to pupils' views, ideas and concerns because for transition is more than an abstraction or something that just happens at the end of primary school. Transition is a very real break in pupils' lives and a prospect that inspires feelings of anxiety as well as excitement. Primary pupils revealed mixed feelings about the imminent move to secondary schools as reflected in the following comment from one pupil: 'Yes and no, yes it will be a challenge, no I am not comfortable about the idea'. Asked about whether they were looking forward to language learning at secondary school, other replies reflected these mixed feelings:



- Yes, because I have learnt a language at primary school so I think it won't be very hard
- Yes, I am looking forward to it because I enjoy learning a new language
- No, because I think you have to learn how to write in a foreign language
- No, the homework would do my head in.

In response to a question about whether they thought their primary language learning would help them with languages at secondary school, there was more consensus:

- Yes, because if we learn a language at primary school it makes us aware of what we have to do at secondary school
- Yes, I think it will help because we have learnt how to remember to pronounce words
- Maybe yes because we have learnt the basics and got the flow, no because we will be learning more difficult words and have to write them down rather than say the words aloud.

Showing an awareness of the usefulness of their previous experience, when asked further about whether they expected to make progress, the children answered:

- Yes, I think we will make progress because we will have more than one lesson a week
- Yes, because I am making very good progress at primary school and from what I have heard the teaching at secondary school is very good
- Yes, because then I will be able to have a conversation with foreign people
- Yes, because I enjoy learning languages
- Perhaps, I hope so

Discussing their concerns, there was concern about reports they had heard about 'strict' teachers as well as 'harder work' and 'more writing'. When asked, primary pupils had sensible ideas about what teachers could do to help them with the learning transition when they began at secondary school:

- Give me some time to take it all in
- Revise some things we have done to make sure we are steady on it
- Maybe occasionally repeat things in the new subject but not the whole old subject again
- Do things to help you how to write and memorise things clearly
- Could you talk about my progress?
- I would like a bit of help when I get stuck
- Could the children do more than learning just things and names of objects!
- I hope we don't have to keep colouring flags in and drawing pictures of animals and things. We've been doing that over and over again and it's so boring, I'm beginning to hate French
- I like singing songs and things, but not all the time. I'd like to be able to say and understand more things.

That some pupils were already disenchanted with their language learning at age 11 is of considerable concern. It was an important point to follow up when the pupils had moved to secondary school.

### *The new secondary pupils*

The pupils at this level told us that they were enjoying their secondary school experiences of language learning even though it was apparent they were covering many topics they had done in the primary school. An analysis of

secondary stage text books and the topics covered at the primary stage revealed a large amount of common ground. The pupils felt they had progressed from primary to secondary level in the following ways:

*'French is easier, we speak better, we understand more French, we read better and we know more words'*

*'We do better conversations, we can spell, the more you learn, the better you get. We know more generally than in primary school. The teacher helps us and we revise. We do the same but different'*

*'We have done so much, we do a lot in a lesson. It was hard at the start as we didn't understand the teacher but she kept pecking away'*

Interestingly, pupils, whilst aware of the considerable repetition of work, gave a balanced view on how a certain amount of repetition could give them confidence in pointing out what they knew and in providing a basis for progression. The teachers were more defensive and dismissive in their views as can be seen in the following examples:

*'I know that they simply repeat what we have done for the past two years in French when they go to secondary school. The pupils come back and tell me'* (primary teacher)

*'Their experience is mainly oral with lots of colouring and no grammar or explicit instruction of spelling convention. That's why we have to do over the same things but teach the written form and introduce grammar'* (secondary teacher)

### **Towards a learning conversation between teachers**

Such examples show the degree of mistrust and misunderstanding that existed between these primary and secondary language teachers. Each side was locked into its own way of doing things, based on, undoubtedly, sincere teacher belief about, for example, best teaching approach, learner needs and curriculum demands. The teachers were nonetheless united about their shared belief in the value of the language learning experience for the pupils. In the light of this, planning transition in terms of the learning and pedagogic 'bridges' would be very much to the pupils' advantage and to the development of a shared understanding. Transition talk has been restricted too often to procedural issues and yet, as the following language teachers' comments show, there are crucial issues to discuss in order to deal with misconception and to find a way to ensure consolidation as well as increasingly cognitively challenging work that the pupils need (and which the pupils themselves identify as important) in order to progress.

One secondary school had recently started to implement a transition year in the first year of secondary schooling. Teachers had begun to visit primary schools to talk and had invited primary colleagues to visit them. On the basis of these experiences, a primary languages teacher identifies the following issues that need to be discussed in a transition conversation:

1 What kind of contact does there need to be between the primary and the secondary school?

*The primary teacher should be in regular contact with the secondary school throughout the year and not just in the summer term. There should be discussions on the way languages are taught, how secondary school can support the primaries and even the sharing of resources. Information needs to be passed on at the transition stage but this needs to be practical, useful information and not just the general 'portfolio/passport' that has been completed by pupils.*

*They need to discuss which languages are being taught at the primary and how the secondary schools will help pupils to progress once they start. I also think it is important for primary schools to be honest, and if they don't have any language specialists on the staff, they should ask for help to ensure correct pronunciation and vocabulary so that children don't learn things 'wrong' from the beginning. It is also a feeling of mistrust, each side thinking they know best. This means that even when information is passed on, it isn't always appreciated or used effectively.*

2 Have you observed secondary language lessons and if so, what did you learn?

*I have observed a secondary school lesson and saw the secondary school teacher's skills. I realised how enthusiastic younger pupils are and therefore why it is so important for primary aged pupils to learn a foreign language. We have to work out how to sustain that enthusiasm. It is equally important for the secondary teachers to see how we approach the teaching and learning of foreign languages in the primary school and in particular, the importance of oral work.*

The same question about contact was put to a secondary teacher who replied thus:

*Our secondary liaison teacher has been liaising with primary schools to gather information about prior primary learning, items taught etc. The information should be given to secondary schools as a matter of normal procedure in languages (just like English, Maths and Science). Data/achievement/attainment needs to be passed on. The role of the secondary schools needs to be redefined as the initial teaching comes from primary schools rather than secondary schools. We need to discuss continuity in terms of languages offered or studied and of methodology and content. We are currently working out a timetable which will also result in some team teaching and are also planning to run weekly language sessions and teaching methodology. Again, this is to develop primary autonomy.*

With respect to lesson observation and teaching primary language lessons and experiences gained, she replied:

*Yes, I have observed an infants' class and taught a junior French class. In the infants, it was very different in their learning. The writing skill was kept to a minimum whereas the French was basically like a secondary school lesson. Colleagues who teach in primary schools have confirmed this and feel that primary students are capable (and in many respects find it easier than at secondary school) to retain vocabulary and structures normally offered in secondary school. Thus, progress in primary school can be achieved. Primary teachers could learn from us about language teaching strategy, the language itself.*

### **Issues and tensions**

These teachers show a welcome willingness to talk and to find ways to confront the perennial problems of e.g. time, logistics, funding, different needs and pressures and, with a new mindset, to engage in mutual learning (Middlewood, 1999). When they observe each other, they 'notice' aspects of significance to improve their own practice and identify areas of potential dispute. In this research, none of the primary school teachers had visited any of the secondary schools nor observed secondary language lessons, other than the one school with a special and very recently developed transition year. Just two teachers in one secondary school had visited a primary school.

Big challenges that need some agreement are the thorny issues of the place of writing and spelling and assessment opportunities and transfer data. Secondary teachers felt strongly that primary pupils need some introduction to the written word and spelling conventions, accents and connectives and that this meshes well with the work primary pupils do as part of general language development and literacy. Similarly, it was thought that some aspects of grammar could be introduced in a way that sensitizes pupils to pattern and structure as well as to sentence and text levels. This can be done, as one teacher suggested, in a fun but challenging way with song words or in reading stories or poems.

Secondary teachers felt that in some respects primary pupils were not challenged enough in their learning. Since the onus falls on secondary colleagues to respond to previous provision, with an appropriate sensitisation, secondary teachers would be able to better build on the ground covered in primary school and progress pupils' learning. All teachers were aware of the crucial issue of motivation and the challenge to sustain it. On this issue, there is complete agreement and this provides the impetus for a learning conversation. The results of the talking,

sharing and learning can then become the basis of a transition plan which schools need in order to ensure progression and for sustainability. Such a plan provides an incentive for primary and secondary subject leaders to work to secure a framework for continuous and progressive learning and to contribute to the sustainability of cross-phase language provision in school. A plan keeps transition on the discussion agenda, makes expectations explicit and provides a concrete platform for making effective transition a reality. This plan, proposed as part of the languages learning policy was one of the project outcomes of the teacher discussion:

### **A transition plan**

- 1 A mission statement that values cooperation and collaboration between primary and secondary colleagues and a belief in the language learning journey
- 2 A commitment to arrange for primary pupils visits to secondary pupils in their language lessons and secondary pupils to take part in primary language lessons
- 3 Arrangements for primary teachers to visit secondary colleagues and for secondary teachers to visit primary colleagues to observe and discuss teaching and learning
- 4 Sharing details of coverage of topics, vocabulary, structures and skills at primary and secondary level and an agreement on core coverage
- 5 Decisions about assessment arrangements and agreement about transfer of useful data. Pupils should always take with them some kind of portfolio as a record of achievement
- 6 Baseline expectations of pupils at the end of the primary stage
- 7 Ideas for transitional learning activities running through the end of primary school into the beginning of secondary school.

### **Transitional learning**

These ideas are not new although not many schools have the resources to prioritise time for such an undertaking on a sustained basis. Where schools do have the time and resources, there are examples of excellent transitional learning activities that are very creative if rather ambitious. Yet, sometimes the simplest ideas can be very effective, as in the modest suggestions made by pupils in this research. Primary learners suggested the following ideas for primary pupils:

- Sampling a lesson from a secondary text book in the primary school
- Enjoying simple stories, reciting and acting as the words are looked at to establish phoneme-grapheme correspondence ( ‘to get an idea of the spelling’)
- Organising simple spelling and basic grammar ‘challenges’ such as competitions and quizzes
- Learning to write a few sentences
- Writing notices in the foreign language around the classroom and school
- Writing short emails to pen pals in link schools

- Reading aloud or memorisation competitions such as simple poems, rhymes and playlets

Secondary pupils suggested the following ideas for beginning secondary school pupils

- Devising challenge activities based on the initial secondary text book that clearly identifies items covered at primary school, such as an interview scenario, a poem, a song
- Formative integrated assessments in the form of quizzes in the early weeks to build up a picture of what the pupils know/do not know/ do not know well, as part of the auditing procedure
- Topic work that enables pupils to use what they know e.g. create a brochure on their town or about a French town,
- Creating mini-plays in groups that require pupils to use previous and new learning
- Skills lessons e.g. vocabulary builders and pattern/ grammar mind maps
- Finding ways such as display, quizzes and revision sheets to help remember old and new language

Grandiose transitional learning activities may be beyond the scope or practicality of many schools and teachers, but the pupils' suggestions are based on common sense ideas that would be part of what the language community of practice would accept as normal good practice and thus part of a repertoire for all teachers to be able to engage with.

### **Responding to the research questions**

Returning now to the research questions, it is timely to respond to them in the light of the analysis and discussion of the research findings explored in this article:

*1 To what extent do primary and secondary teachers have a shared understanding about how their provision relates to the previous or next step in learning?*

This research indicated a lack of shared understanding and misconception based on not knowing about the other's practice or on hearsay or stereotyped images of what teachers believed took place in other language classrooms. The image of the primary classroom on behalf of the secondary teachers was premised on an ethic based on fun, a preponderance of oral work, little attention paid to the written form and a lack of readiness for secondary language learning. Primary teachers thought that at secondary school much of the joy had gone out of learning, that it was all about writing and that their efforts in the primary school were ignored. In short, teachers of both sides felt undervalued and misunderstood.

There are elements of truth in both positions but were teachers to engage in discussion, they would start to understand the apparently divergent practices and see what beliefs and pressures frame teacher choices and practices. There is a unanimous sharing of belief in the language learning enterprise and in the need to keep children motivated and to progress. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the teachers are perhaps less apart than they think in what they value and in practices where there is some overlap such as use of target language and aspects of formative assessment.

## *2 In which ways do secondary teachers respond to and progress the children's previous language learning?*

From their respective entrenched positions, primary teachers are adamant that secondary teachers invalidate the pupils' primary learning, starting all over again and repeating topics covered. Secondary teachers confirm the 'fresh start' and justify it in terms of needing to rationalise varied primary experiences and sometimes having to 'unlearn' what they see as inadequate primary teaching.

The lack of transfer data on pupil achievement that is useful and valid poses immense problems and even when assessment data are available, these are mistrusted. A portfolio approach may well be a solution in providing an ongoing record of effort and achievement that can be sustained throughout the whole learning journey. This is a crucial feature of the learning conversation that teachers need to have in understanding each other's interpretation of their subject sub-culture and indeed the whole school cultures of both primary and secondary schools. Teachers need to ask themselves what they want and need to make transition a success.

The pupils also make an important contribution to managing aspects of transitional learning for themselves. Their capacity to self-manage their learning needs has been identified by Jones (2010) and Kolb (2007). Jones found that when pupils had developed effective 'learning to learn' strategies and had been well schooled in formative assessment practices in the primary school, they were often able to 'figure things out' for themselves in their language lessons at secondary school. A strong case can be made for teachers to unite and to talk as a cross-phase community of practice and strengthen its pedagogical base. It would also be useful for teachers to listen to pupils and take on board their views. Pupils see and experience their learning consecutively at primary and then at secondary level and are able to take a cross-phase perspective. As Rudduck and McIntyre (2007:84) assert and as was evident in the data:

*'When pupils speak about teaching, they do so in terms of their own experiences, including their learning. The kinds of insight that they offer are to do with the learning opportunities available, about how positive they are about these opportunities and how they might be improved'.*

Furthermore, pupils when asked to do so can take a lead and 'offer their own constructive ways about what teachers might helpfully do' (ibid.)

### **Leadership and agency**

Leadership of a distributed kind consists of a group of leaders of the school community (Harris and Lambert, 2003) including the languages subject leader. The role of the subject leaders in the research schools focused on drawing up a scheme of work, organising school trips, assuring appropriate materials and ensuring some basic assessment of learning. Transition did not appear in any of the primary subject leaders' role specification and only in one of the secondary subject leaders was it identified as a leadership function. Usually, transition was the generic responsibility of another teacher and languages were never prioritised. Teachers made it very clear that effective transition could not happen without the support of the Head. The headteacher, with her resource and position power, has a key role to play in ensuring that transition arrangements are not jettisoned because of practical considerations such as time and funding, important though these are. As well as securing practical arrangements, Heads of both primary and secondary school need to take an active and very visible role in

transition and champion the cause of languages. As one primary Head said: 'I put in enthusiasm and I get it back' and one secondary Head said: 'I ask the pupils about their French and I speak to them in French'. The very tangible support provided by the Heads above is empowering for the subject leader and gives a potent message to pupils about agency in their learning, both their previous learning and the learning opportunities awaiting them at the next stage. Crucially for transition in languages, school leadership at all levels is needed to prioritise transition so that it is seen as an investment in more effective teaching and more productive learning (Jones and McLachlan, 2009).

## Conclusion

Pupils frequently go from primary schools with a firm basis of language learning to build upon and strong motivation. Both primary and secondary teachers must commit themselves to certain agreed expectations and build on the experiences, insights, needs and enthusiasm of the pupils to ensure an effective learning bridge. Primary and secondary teachers, as well as their pupils, benefit from transitional planning and, when they do visit each other, always enjoy being 'on the other side of the fence' and find it instructive. The support of the headteacher in enabling this to take place is crucial as is the commitment of the subject leader/coordinator. A degree of success in a child's cross-phase learning is dependent on successful transition so time must be found for an ongoing conversation about learning. Currently too many teachers are locked into their own cultures and discourses are not shared. In this research project, teachers confronted misconception and started to learn from each other. They thus extended their expertise beyond the known and familiar.

A 'conversation about learning' would give impetus for fresh learning and teaching and avoid the situation that Megias Rosa warns us of that 'primary language learners' enthusiasm may be in danger when facing a new learning reality which should be the continuation of a learning process not the break up' (2008:3). In the words of one headteacher: '*If language learning is a learning journey and I happen to think that it is a very exciting journey, then we need a clearer route and closer links*'.

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