An Exploration of how Children's Language Learning can be Transformed when Teachers Place Creativity and Stories at the Centre of the Curriculum and Experiment with Digital Storytelling in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how the teaching of languages can be transformed across the whole-school primary curriculum when teachers and researchers collaborate to make space for creativity and stories. The research presented here looks carefully at this process of transformation and how primary school teachers can become motivated to teach languages in more open-ended and creative ways. The researchers situate the debate within the fractured emergence of Primary Modern Foreign Languages as a subject in England and relate this to the lack of teachers' proficiency in languages beyond English. In many primary school contexts the teaching of languages is repetitive and highly formulaic, so the researchers wanted to find novel ways to motivate teachers and children to learn languages. This collaborative work on the curriculum by researchers and teachers became part of the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (2012–ongoing) where stories and digital technology are used to (re-)engage language learners. The children (7–8 year olds) in this case study created a digital story – *Wir gehen auf Drachenjagd* (*We're Going on a Dragon Hunt*) – for an international digital storytelling festival (June 2019). The research findings demonstrate how the power of stories combined with the digital dimension enabled children to use a new language productively and creatively.

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INTRODUCTION

The Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project (2012–ongoing) embraces a new pedagogical approach to language learning which seeks to develop children's language skills through critical and creative engagement with digital technology (Anderson and Macleroy). A collaborative research approach that harnesses the ideas and insights of lead project teachers in schools has led to the growth and sustainability of the project in over 50 schools in the UK and across the following countries: Algeria, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Palestine, Taiwan, USA (as well as new partnerships in Egypt, Germany and Turkey), establishing a digital community of multilingual storytellers: *https://goldsmithsmdst.com/*. This article focuses on a project school that has transformed its whole-school language curriculum and become part of the digital storytelling community. The collaborative research investigates the embedding of languages using stories to teach, and digital storytelling to motivate both teachers and children to engage with German in the primary classroom.

The research presented here as a case study examines the process of close collaboration between a lead Primary Languages teacher and a languages lecturer and their connection with the co-director of the digital storytelling project (co-authors of the article). The teacher–researcher partnership involved collaborative planning and team teaching of German to a class of thirty children (7–8 year olds) and participation in an international digital storytelling festival, 'Mythical Creatures and European Folk Tales', at the Curzon Cinema, Goldsmiths: *https://goldsmithsmdst.com/film-festival-2019-curzon-goldsmiths/*. The case study looks carefully at how an innovative approach to teaching and learning languages can be implemented and the ways in which children can learn to use digital technology creatively.

The primary school in question is a mainstream state school in South-East London where German is introduced as a new language (for the majority of children) from Year 1 (5–6 year olds). The primary school teacher and university lecturer were building on wide-ranging experience of teaching languages in primary schools and were keen to develop more innovative practices. Primary Languages became a statutory subject and part of the KS2 curriculum (7–11 year olds) in England in 2014. However, the first attempt to establish languages in primary schools was from 1964 to 1974. It was hoped that introducing languages for 7–11 year olds would lead to better language learning in secondary schools. A pilot project was launched and trialled by 35% of all primary schools in England and Wales. The project concluded that:

> Learning French in primary does not seem to confer a lasting advantage from the point of view of achievement in spoken French, but it does seem to exert a lasting influence on the pupils' attitudes towards speaking French. (Burstall et al., cited in Kirsch (a) 5)

This first attempt to introduce primary languages was not successful and the idea of embedding languages at KS2 did not emerge again until the early 2000s, nearly 30 years later. It then took nearly 15 years to embed languages into the primary curriculum. The Nuffield Languages Inquiry (2000) stated that, in a European context, the UK had a disadvantage in comparison with its European neighbours who were at least bilingual, but often also multilingual. The initial steer started in 2001 as part of the European Year of Languages:

> A Europe-wide information campaign is planned with the objectives of raising awareness of the wealth of linguistic diversity in Europe and of the need for lifelong learning of languages. (European Parliament)

This notion of the lifelong learning of languages was followed with further reports and finally a new framework for KS2 in 2005 which outlined, for the first time, clear guidance for teaching languages at this level. It was the aim of the government to establish KS2 language teaching in all primary schools in England by September 2011. Thus, extensive funding was provided to support training programmes for primary school teachers.

When it came to the introduction of Primary Modern Foreign Languages (PMFL), the languages teacher and languages lecturer in this case study had extensive training as well as experience of teaching primary languages in England and Germany. Building on their combined teaching experience, the heart of this research considers new ways to teach languages in primary school creatively using stories and digital technology.

PRIMARY LANGUAGES AS AN EMERGING SUBJECT

Primary Languages became part of the Primary National Curriculum in 2014, many years after the introduction of the National Curriculum for England in 1988. The Programme of Study (PoS) for Primary Languages defines the purpose of learning a language as offering a 'liberation from insularity and an opening to other cultures' (DfE 1). It also suggests that a high-quality languages education should 'foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world' (DfE 1). The PoS expects learners to have grasped the basics of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading and writing); grammar; and cultural understanding such as being able to 'appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language' (DfE 2). However, it does not prescribe how languages are taught, what particular content is required, or a list of vocabulary that needs to be covered. The focus is on language skills and knowledge about languages as well as the cultural context. The main challenge here is that the two-page PoS outlining skills that Year 6 children (10–11 year olds) are expected to attain has left primary school class teachers, who often have no experience of teaching foreign languages, wondering how to achieve these expectations.

The Modern Languages National Curriculum for KS3 (11–14 year olds) and KS4 (14–16 year olds) has been underpinned by the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach which has prevailed since the 1990s and is considered the 'best fit' for the National Curriculum (Wingate). Its overall method is based on the theory of 'communicative competence' (Hymes cited in Pachler) which considers that learning a language is not only based on understanding grammar; it must also promote use of the target language as a means of interacting in the classroom, and key themes are introduced through peer and group work and supported by the use of authentic materials (Lightbown). CLT fosters an intention to personalise the language and develop a purpose to use it in real contexts (Hood and Tobutt). While CLT has largely been regarded as 'an approach that motivates learners because it offers topic relevance and learner choice' (Wingate 444), there have been disagreements about the style and delivery of this method. Both a weak (more grammar focused) and a strong version (less explicit grammar teaching) of CLT have emerged from teaching languages in secondary schools. Colin Christie notes that the aim of teaching a target language is to 'provide a set of communication tools as a basis for interaction in the target language classroom' (6). Learners thus practise dialogues in set routines and the emphasis is on the pupils themselves to extend the dialogue. In secondary schools, this has led to teachers leaving pupils without much guidance and to an overreliance on textbooks, with pupils learning set phrases or formulaic speech (Kirsch (a)).

However, in contrast to secondary school pupils, primary school children are generally less self-conscious about learning a new language and being presented with a new way of communicating. The primary class teacher, who is familiar to the class, is able to facilitate a more 'holistic curriculum delivery' of the language within the whole-school curriculum (Jones 70). According to Krashen's affective filter hypothesis, 'learners need to be receptive to input' (Mitchell et al. 56). Therefore, it is important that the affective filter is low (anxiety is low) and the children can enjoy their language learning. While the pupils in primary schools tend to be enthusiastic about learning a new language, it is often the class teachers who experience anxiety around delivering the language lessons. The following issues have emerged as major concerns for primary school teachers and have been a hindrance to their motivation and positive experience when teaching languages:

> Time allocation, teacher subject knowledge and language proficiency, limited access to professional development and a lack of a shared and agreed understanding of pupil progress at the point of transfer from primary to secondary schools.
> (Holmes and Myles 9)

As a consequence, the embedding of languages into primary schools is a mixed picture and there is 'a huge variation between schools in terms of the language expertise existing among their staff' (Tinsley 6). This has led to low confidence when teaching languages and reliance on resources that are readily available. Although many classrooms in the UK already have bi- and multilingual practitioners in their classes (Sahmland), many other classroom practitioners are reliant on published schemes or external practitioners. There is a wealth of published schemes available for primary language teaching and the support these offer to non-specialists should not be devalued, but such schemes are overly prescriptive. Initially, they may prove engaging

through the introduction of characters, songs and clearly set out lesson plans that support the classroom practitioner. However, these schemes may be tricky to build into a busy school week, to relate to other subject areas and in terms of connecting the set content with the children's own interests. The rigour of the schemes also affords little room for creativity from either the teacher or the language learner. This contradicts the main premise of the Programme of Study (DfE), with its focus on skills and intercultural understanding, by dictating particular topics that need to be covered.

Additionally, teachers' beliefs about languages and about teaching and learning languages have a major influence on the way the subject is conceptualised; the planning and assessment of learning; the complexity of subject content; and the inclusion of cultural references. In the primary languages context, whole-class teaching prevails as a preferred approach and some skills remain underdeveloped, such as writing. As it is an individual task, writing is therefore a less practised skill (Driscoll). This has been a challenge for most primary schools that are teaching languages, with only 42% of schools who were part of the Language Trends Report (Tinsley) stating that they have a native speaker or graduate in the language they are teaching: 'one third (33%) have no qualification higher than a GCSE held by any of their teachers responsible for languages' (Tinsley 6). To address this issue, the 'White Paper – Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward' recommends that there should be a 'whole school policy and curriculum planning' (Holmes and Myles 13) for languages. This would raise the status of PMFL and embed languages as part of the curriculum.

CREATIVITY AND STORIES IN PMFL TEACHING

If, as stated by the National Curriculum, language teaching should 'enable pupils to express their ideas and thoughts' (DfE 1) then it ought to be recognised that pupil creativity as well as engagement must be promoted in a primary languages classroom. In order that children do not just learn tables of vocabulary in isolated thematic groupings, with no tangible connection to their own world and experience, Kristina Tobutt and Philip Hood reflect that effective language teaching requires an approach which does not centre on discrete 'topic' units alone and that pupil engagement, ownership, as well as creativity in language learning, are required. Stories can provide a 'rhythmic and intriguing' stimulus (Ambrossi and Constant-Shepherd 173) for pupil engagement and language use, with pupils joining in enthusiastically with group performances of songs and retellings of stories. In contrast to game-based activities often used in primary and secondary language learning which frequently require 'minimal – if any – target language production by the pupils' (Wingate 452), stories can provide opportunities for pupils to engage with tasks in a more meaningful, productive and independent way (Sahmland). If we consider Kirsch's statement that stories engage learners and help them acquire the target language 'unconsciously and almost effortlessly' (Kirsch (b) 33), why should we not as primary language teachers exploit this valuable resource?

Songs and rhymes can be used not only to garner pupil engagement effectively, but also to underpin and reinforce the topics and themes being covered (Tobutt and Hood). Songs have been described as offering three stages of progression for language learning: anticipation, examination and application (Chambers), and a similar structure could be applied to the use of stories in language teaching. Stories let children 'hear language, make sense of it and act on it' (Tobutt and Hood 111).

The structure of presentation, practice and production can also be seen as relating to exposing children to key vocabulary from a story, allowing for reinforcement and then implementation through pupils producing their own text or story using this vocabulary. As discussed by Claudine Kirsch, stories – whether well known or unfamiliar – can be a powerful tool in language teaching, developing proficiency in oral skills and knowledge across areas including vocabulary and syntax. This then enables pupils to 'narrate their own stories with greater success' (Kirsch (b) 34). Stories can thus be seen as a gateway to pupil engagement as well as a vehicle for progression in language learning.

Philip Hood refers to the importance of creative approaches in supporting grammatical understanding, and familiar stories frequently offer a repetitive structure, allowing children to 'learn from the language through using it' (6) by joining in with group retellings and repetitions, before building to a more self-guided and creative outcome. Stories and storytelling can have

a powerful impact on language development, whether through vocabulary learning and reinforcement, developing an almost subconscious recognition and understanding of syntax and grammatical features, or through the very act of giving learners a sense of autonomy and ownership over the target language.

If children and learners should feel a sense of ownership over language used (Hood), then educators must 'facilitate opportunities for purposeful communication in a meaningful context' (DfE). Yet language learners in some instances may not be involved in 'truly meaningful interaction on the topics that actually matter to them' (Klapper 34). By presenting learners with familiar texts or story models that they are able to relate to, teachers can provide 'a meaningful and structured context to support understanding of the narrative world as well as the content' (Ambrossi and Constant-Shepherd 172). This is often successfully achieved through cross-curricular teaching and by relating the languages curriculum and other specific subject areas (Minnet; Minnet and Jackson), yet can also be supported by the use of stories and story writing in the languages classroom.

Paula Ambrossi and Darnelle Constant-Shepherd raise another factor concerning teacher motivation, remarking that primary teaching in the state sector can be 'characterised by a long history of pupils being taught the whole range of the primary curriculum by one teacher' (xi). Yet teacher confidence in the target language is often lacking. If a condition for the successful embedding of primary languages within a curriculum is ensuring that teachers are 'able and *willing* to teach modern foreign languages' (Ambrossi and Constant-Shepherd 31; my emphasis), how is this to be best supported in order to stimulate creativity and a sense of ownership in the primary languages classroom? Primary learners and teachers can relate to the familiarity of well-known stories or picture books and their themes, while providing a connection to and sense of ownership of the target language as well as a written story as an endpoint also offer a tangible objective and a clear purpose to build towards (Sahmland and Shanks 14), in addition to the chance to develop pupils' creativity and understanding.

DIGITAL STORYTELLING IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

What happens when language learning through stories becomes linked to digital technology? Is there a shift in teachers' and children's confidence and engagement with languages when they can use digital media actively in the classroom and, if so, why are teachers reluctant to open their classrooms to digital ways of accessing, designing and producing texts? In reflecting on this reluctance to make creative digital technology an integral part of the curriculum, constraints about time and assessment are often voiced. Digital competence is another factor that can explain variations in teachers' pedagogical use of digital technologies (Pettersson). There is also mistrust of and concern about the way digital technology is changing how children access, read and construct texts. These new approaches to literacy are harder to control and prescribe as designing digital texts often becomes about collaboration, collective intelligence, open distribution and sharing with an audience (Hughes 167). A review of the literature on issues of digital competence suggested for 'researchers to become involved in the development of new approaches to enhance digital competence in educational contexts' (Pettersson 1017).

Our research into language learning through digital storytelling has revealed that 'in crafting collective narratives, young people learn the complexities of digital literacy but also the flexibility and potential for multiple perspectives and many voices' (Macleroy (a) 172). Digital storytelling is a type of technology that has been found to be engaging for both teachers and students (Dockter et al.). Although digital storytelling is viewed as a creative and engaging way to bring digital technology into the classroom, recent research demonstrates that 'teachers usually do not implement DST [digital storytelling] without prior training' (Vu et al. 261). Bringing new digital language pedagogies into the primary classroom takes time and commitment as well as a clear structure of support and guidance. Students also need to be clearly informed about the task required of them in creating a digital story (Smeda et al.). After the initial excitement of working with digital technology, there are also the 'considerable difficulties and frustrations that children (like adults) often experience in their dealings with new media' (Buckingham 178). However, digital storytelling allows children to make meaning in complex and dynamic ways through bringing together words and images, framing a narrative viewpoint, using space, controlling the pace of the narrative and beginning to understand how the moving image 'unfolds in time' (Bezemer and Kress 182).

In a review of recent research studies focusing on digital storytelling in different language learning contexts (Anderson and Macleroy), key findings were summarised about the value of using digital storytelling including:

> Engagement of learners particularly in facing the challenges involved in reading and writing, including literary texts, leading to greater confidence.

> Useful framework for scaffolding through contextualisation, linking of oracy and literacy, storyboarding and structuring of the writing process.

> Development of confidence and affirmation of identity through participation in authentic task aimed at a real audience.

> Integrating a process drama approach with digital storytelling can enhance a range of communication skills, support personal engagement and encourage experimentation and risk-taking.

> (Anderson 34).

The performative element combined with language learning and digital storytelling has proven particularly effective for primary-aged children and transforms the way teachers and students approach learning: 'we were constantly surprised by the deep level of engagement in the drama and digital storytelling process demonstrated by these 7-year-old children and how new spaces for language learning were opened up and transformed' (Stavrou et al. 18).

Nonetheless, primary school pupils still need more opportunities for engaging in meaningful project-based learning using digital technology and presenting to a wider audience. Research investigating the effectiveness of digital storytelling in classrooms in Australia found that through engagement with these tasks secondary school students had the ability to learn more and faster, to use the internet and computers more, and had more appetite to work on their stories both inside and outside the class (Smeda et al. 16). The findings of this research across age groups indicated that the process of digital storytelling increased students' levels of communication as they helped each other with technical or grammar issues, increased their collaborative skills, and improved their technical skills and information literacy. Critical co-learning is at the core of our research approach, and the research findings demonstrate how students learn to 'work co-operatively to learn new skills and knowledge' (Macleroy (b) 201). Terry Campbell, researching in an elementary school in Canada, looked at digital storytelling 'going beyond entertainment' and affecting engagement levels and achievement in student writing. He comments that 'there is evidence that digital story writing contributes to overall writing performance in the classroom' (393).

Digital storytelling brings together stories and digital technology in a powerful way that has proven engaging for both teachers and students. However, the latest research in California, where digital storytelling originated, found that 'despite its apparent promise, DST has been limited primarily to after-school programs or the classrooms of innovative teachers' (Vu et al. 257). These researchers encountered the usual challenges of access to technology and level of technological skill, but nearly 2,000 students were able to make a digital story in their class so the data suggested that the 'larger obstacle to wide-scale implementation might be connected to the curriculum' (Vu et al. 263).

In the next section, we look at how changes in the curriculum can be brought about and how this new approach to the curriculum became part of the wider Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling Project.

ACTION RESEARCH WITHIN A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHIC PARADIGM

The overarching approach adopted by the Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling researchers was critical ethnography. We conducted our study within a critical ethnographic paradigm as our project needed to be collaborative and to take a critical stance towards language pedagogy in schools (Anderson and Macleroy). Action research was a key part of the research design and, in common with critical ethnography, is based on the 'belief that teachers, as participants within an education system, have a right to question that system and

the values for which it stands and [to] develop alternative models' (137). Digital storytelling research has always been a collaborative and dialogic process involving lead teachers and researchers in shaping each stage of transformative practice. Critical ethnography is high in reflexivity (Cohen et al.).

Participatory action research involves new ways of researchers and teachers working together and this 'process is most empowering when undertaken collaboratively' (Bigum et al. 9). In the case study presented here, the researcher and teacher opened up new spaces for collaborative research and reflexivity. This sustained dialogue, negotiation and implementation of innovative language practices meant the research process became a dialogical performance (Madison). The research paradigm was responsive to the local context of researcher, teacher and students, and the researcher captured key moments of decision-making in her field notes and research journal. The researcher reflected on the process of working with stories in the classroom and the students' understanding of the story in German.

> *The lesson went well but children worked at a different pace. Next lesson we need to read the story together at the start of the lesson. Children might need clearer models.*

> *Next lesson: We read the story again and students were confident about word order.* (Sahmland, Field notes, 13 May 2019)

The researcher also remarked how the children engaged with the process of producing a story digitally.

> *ICT suite: They were enthusiastic about the work and were keen to make the story. We might need to think more about metacognition to get the children to understand what the purpose of the statement is in relation to the story as a whole.* (Sahmland, Field notes, 3 June 2019)

The following research question was investigated in this case study: What happens when teachers are supported to place creativity and stories at the centre of the languages curriculum and to experiment with digital storytelling? Data were collected in research journals and field notes; through researcher-teacher observations; collaborative teaching and reflective practice; reflections from children and their parents/carers; and the children's own digital story.

CREATING A NEW LANGUAGES CURRICULUM
BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

The school discussed in this case study is located in South-East London and has had a German focus since it opened in 2013. Pupils receive timetabled German lessons from Year 1 (5–6 year olds). There is also a strong emphasis on German being used outside of language lessons, with pupils encouraged to use German requests for practical purposes. German is usually taught by the class teacher, or in some cases by one teacher across both classes in a specific year group, and the school had previously used published resources and schemes of work to structure lessons, which are delivered primarily in the target language. Staff were using the schemes but the pre-planned lessons were not easy to fit in or adapt, as well as being seen by some as not allowing for creativity from pupils or the teacher – leading to a degree of enthusiasm for language teaching being lost.

The headteacher and German lead at the school wished to build on staff language expertise and to create a curriculum that was not only engaging for pupils and teachers but would also let them develop their skills in a relevant and meaningful context and allow pupils and teachers to express more creativity too. The languages curriculum should aim to link with well-established routines at the school to include work on intercultural understanding. The school already celebrated festivals such as Sankt Martin, Sankt Nikolaus and Karneval annually, as well as building in German links to celebrations such as Harvest Festival and Christmas carol concerts. Where possible, the languages curriculum should also seek to make cross-curricular links with other subject areas.

The school has well-established connections with Goldsmiths, University of London, in that several of the teachers are graduates of its Primary Languages PGCE programme. Several of the teachers are also Germanists or have connections and links with Germany. Since summer 2018, the German lead at the school has worked with Goldsmiths to develop the German

curriculum, building on an already successful literature unit that had previously formed the basis for a term's work in each year group. There was an existing literature unit built into each year group's German curriculum; by taking some of the familiar stories already being used at the school, the new languages curriculum expanded the literature focus across the school year, with the story providing the centre point of the year's work and building to a creative written or digital story outcome in the summer term. The curriculum developed aimed not only to promote pupil creativity and spontaneity in target language use, but also to enable teachers to build on their existing enthusiasm and engagement and consider a different approach to language learning and teaching.

As was the case for other year groups, with the Year 3 classes, the story book *Wir gehen auf Bärenjagd* (*We're Going on a Bear Hunt*) (Rosen and Oxenbury) gave the central focus for the middle terms of the year, following on from the Christmas holidays. Two half terms were spent closely working on the text itself, and the final two half terms were spent writing a digital story based on the text, to be presented at the international Digital Storytelling Festival.

The *Bear Hunt* book was chosen for its familiarity to the children, as well as the repetitive phrasal structure of the language used, providing context and a connection with their own experience and understanding of story patterns, sequencing and structure. The theme and plot of the story allowed pupils to employ and build on existing knowledge of adjectives and animal vocabulary. When the story writing unit was introduced, the majority of pupils were immediately engaged and enthusiastic.

IMPLEMENTATION AND THE BEGINNINGS OF STORY CREATION

Teachers began working on literature units midway through the school year, starting with vocabulary reinforcement work and building on section-by-section readings of the texts. During the course of this unit, the two Year 3 classes worked on the project, with children in both Year 3 classes (60 children in total) creating class stories as an outcome and with a small group of pupils presenting their class's digital story at the international digital storytelling festival. This meant Year 3 pupils at the school were able to work on a digital outcome for the final two terms of the school year, creating a class story based on *Wir gehen auf Bärenjagd*, which became *Wir gehen auf Drachenjagd* (*We're Going on a Dragon Hunt*).

By using the *Bear Hunt* story as a central point of the year, teachers were able to reinforce and build on vocabulary and thematic items that children had previously worked on. This was particularly seen in the Year 3 group when preparing ideas for the class digital story. Pupils were keen to suggest animal ideas already familiar from their learning during the previous year, and rather than devoting a lesson to teaching a more extended range of animal names, the children were eager to use bilingual dictionaries to find the German for their own choices. Pupils saw this as an opportunity to express their ideas and thoughts (DfE) and could begin to take ownership of the target language. By being presented with a creative outcome to work towards, children were able to see a wider purpose to language learning. Pupils knew that the end point of the unit's work would be writing their own digital story, which could certainly be considered a highly motivating factor in their engagement at the start of the work on the literature unit (Dockter et al.).

Lessons dedicated to teaching vocabulary themes such as adjectives often use games as a way to both engage pupils and reinforce learning. However, using stories to build on pupils' existing knowledge and to challenge them further develops their reflective and metacognitive strategies to understand more about the language being learned as well as their own learning strategies.

Children's engagement with the literature units quickly developed into keen class recitations of the stories themselves, which pupils and teachers both quickly engaged with not only in the year group in this case study, but across the school, with one teacher remarking that '[t]he children loved *Die kleine Raupe Nimmersatt* (*The Very Hungry Caterpillar*) and were able to recite almost the entire story by the end of the term's unit' (Hackney, Field notes, February 2019). As pupils grew more familiar with the sentence patterns and structures throughout the texts, they naturally began to join in, first with actions, then with key words and phrases and eventually with extended or complete sections of the text.

Referring back to Claudine Kirsch (b), using story books with familiar and repetitive structures and language patterns certainly helped pupils to unconsciously absorb sentence patterns and reflect on grammatical rules and patterns as well. As one teacher commented: 'It was really good to see how the children knew the building blocks in the sentence from previous learning and I was then able to help them connect these words together to create sentences' (Hackney, Field notes, February 2019).

This active engagement shown by pupils, not only in Year 3, but in other year groups was basis for them to be able to engage with the language in more extended chunks, allowing them to absorb these and use them as a vehicle for their own creativity later in the unit's work. Using familiar texts with repetitive sentence structures also gave pupils the chance to reflect on specific vocabulary items and revealed them also to be keen to apply to their language learning certain metacognitive strategies familiar from other curriculum areas. They recorded vocabulary notes in transfer points, as shown in *Figure 1*. Pupils used this work as a basis to gather new and useful vocabulary, as well as to understand the elements that make up the story and allow for effective descriptions, such as adjectives. Pupils were also able to employ their existing knowledge of the story, as well as drawing linguistic links to help them understand unfamiliar items of vocabulary. One example of this would be a Year 3 pupil's excited remark that, "Ich denke Höhle ist cave, weil... because it sounds like 'hole'!" (Hackney, Field notes, May 2019).
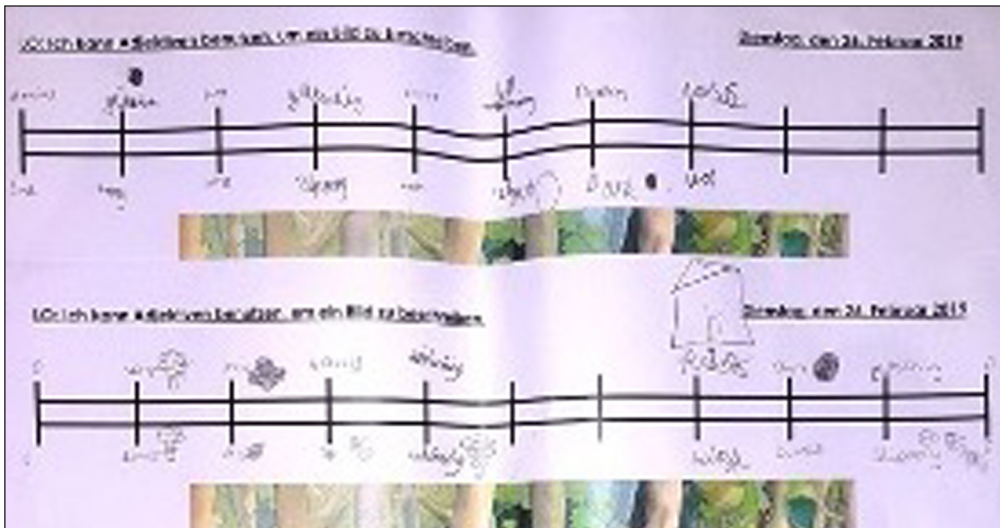

Figure 1 Transfer point for recording vocabulary in preparation for creating own settings for the digital story.

PRODUCTION AND DIGITAL STORY CREATION

One positive impact that the story writing unit had was the cooperation that developed between pupils when preparing their slides for the story itself. Originally, it had been planned for children to create their own individual stories; however, it soon became apparent that time constraints would prove an issue and it was therefore decided that the class would collaborate to produce a whole-class digital story. The class as a whole voted on the animal to be used, with many suggestions – both mythical and actual – being put forward. Pupils used their existing knowledge of animals from work in earlier year groups, but were also keen to find out new animal names in German, either challenging themselves to guess or work out animal names, or requesting dictionaries to help them find these for themselves.

Pupils then worked in table groups on specific sections and pages of the original story, creating short performances, before moving onto pair work to focus on vocabulary and generating their final story ideas. Each of these sections was then linked together by the familiar pattern of *Wir gehen auf Drachenjagd, wir fangen einen ganz Großen...* (*We're going on a dragon hunt, we're going to catch a big one...*), as shown in *Figure 2*, which also includes images to aid pupils when reciting their story aloud – the image of trousers proving a particularly effective way of reinforcing 'keine Angst in den Hosen' – literally, 'We have no fear in our trousers!'
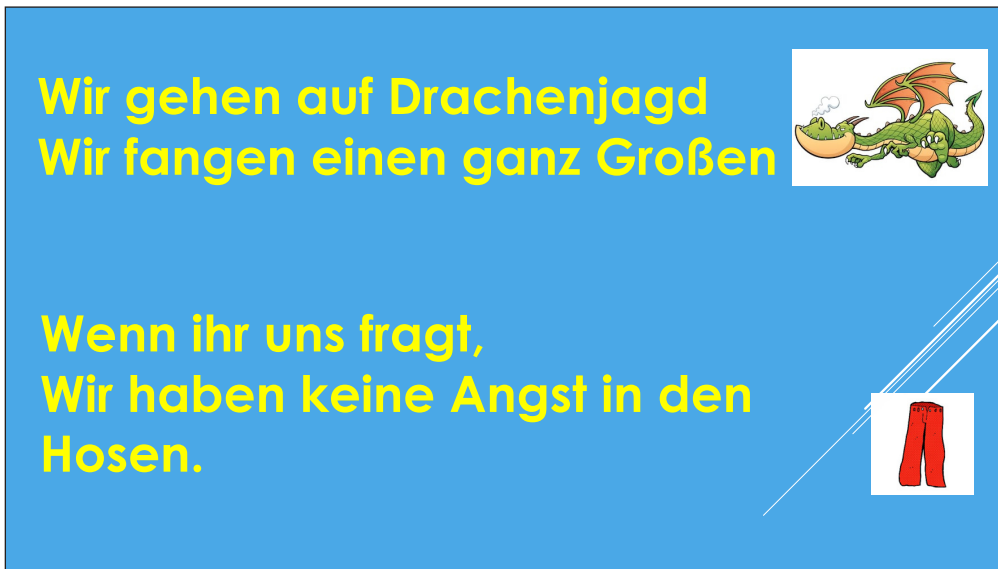
**Wir gehen auf Drachenjagd
Wir fangen einen ganz Großen**

**Wenn ihr uns fragt,
Wir haben keine Angst in den Hosen.**

Each table group then gathered ideas for the setting of their particular part of the story. By giving the children control over the setting decisions, a context and purpose that was meaningful to them was created, allowing pupils to see the relevance of the target language in the creation of their own narrative (Ambrossi and Constant-Shepherd). A clear enthusiasm and ownership over each story section was felt, which could also be seen as having a positive effect on motivation. Pupils were enthusiastic about using bilingual dictionaries and seeking out new vocabulary items, eager to relate similarities and differences between vocabulary items in English and German.

Moving forward from recognising and identifying vocabulary and building on children's existing knowledge, the sentence structure of the original text was used in order to help pupils' understanding of syntax and to increase familiarity with chunks of language that they would then be able to manipulate when creating their own story. By hearing and repeating the repetitive sentence structures, pupils were able to make sense of the building blocks of each sentence, finally acting on this by adapting the sentence structures to encompass their own ideas (Tobutt and Hood). This syntactic-level work was supported through resources such as those seen in *Figure 3*, where pupils were presented with jumbled-up sentences from the original text.

Figure 3 Jumbled sentence structures to reinforce word order prior to production of digital story.

Pupils worked enthusiastically to reorder the sentences correctly and were able to listen to relevant sections of the story again in order to support this. Regarding Philip Hood's reflections on the necessity of a creative approach to supporting grammatical and syntactical understanding, such a use of the story can be seen as providing this sort of creative stimulus as well as allowing pupils to 'learn from the language through using it' (6). By reordering the blocks, pupils were able to gain an implicit understanding of what can be seen as complex issues regarding a word order that differs from that of their first language.

Following on from this, pupils then used a second structured language support to aid them in building sentences to continue the story. Settings – including the desert, the ocean, a magical forest and Athens – had already been chosen by groups in the class, and pupils were encouraged to find their own adjectives to describe these, following the same structure of paired adjectives to describe each setting, such as 'Ein nasser, kalter Fluß' (a wet, cold river) that occurs in the original.

Once this preparatory work had been completed, pupils worked in pairs to create the slides for their section of the digital story. By this point in the project, pupils were fully engrossed in creating their own parts of the story, keen to seek out images that they could use for each section as well. Getting their ideas onto each slide and creating the story had become their key focus and the fact that the sentences they were creating were in German was almost forgotten. The class story was becoming an ever-present vehicle for pupils to convey their creativity and story ideas, and this could also be seen as limiting resistance and worry over using German to do this. The ease with which the pupils were able to use their knowledge of PowerPoint to implement and 'publish' their ideas meant that they could quickly see the results of their work, which were then put together to create a class digital story of *Wir gehen auf Drachenjagd*, a section of which was then presented at the multilingual digital storytelling festival held in June 2019.

Figure 4 shows examples of some of the slides created by two pairs. Each pair chose their setting, the adjectives used in the description and the image for the background. The adjective choices demonstrated them building on existing language knowledge, as well as using cognates to help expand their range of vocabulary choices. Pupils were already familiar with basic adjectives, such as *groß* for 'big', and were keen to extend their vocabulary, having now used dictionaries to find alternatives, such as *riesig* ('gigantic') (Hackney, Field notes, May 2019).
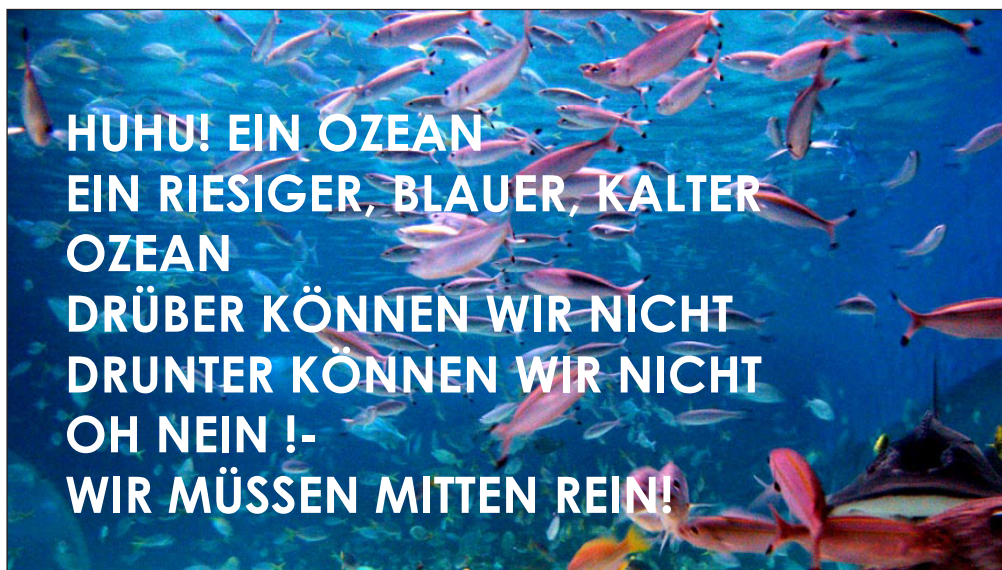

Figure 4 Slides from the class digital story, with setting, images and vocabulary chosen by pupils.

IMPACT, REACTION AND REFLECTION ON CREATING THE DIGITAL STORY

Reaction to using stories throughout the unit's work was positive from pupils and teachers alike:

> It has been great to see how enthusiastic the Year 3s have been about creating the *Drachenjagd* digital story and to see them using skills from other curriculum areas in their language use and development. Really positive to see how enthusiastic each year group has been about engaging with their stories. (Hackney, Field notes, June 2019)

Teachers were able to see the enthusiasm and garner this in order to extend language knowledge and build on pupils' language use, encouraging use of more expanded and extended sentences and phrases, rather than just focusing on repetition of learnt individual vocabulary items (Tobutt and Hood). Not only were pupils' oral language skills and confidence built on, but the tangible objective of the story (Sahmland and Shanks) provided a vehicle and motivation for pupils to develop their own creative ideas and also build on their written skills in the target language, expressing their ideas and thoughts in a meaningful context (DfE).

The digital aspect of the project allowed children another means of demonstrating their language knowledge, as well as their creativity, also giving those pupils who might initially be less confident in expressing ideas orally the chance to work as a team before presenting. Parents who attended the digital storytelling festival commented on their children's enthusiasm, as well as on their creativity and knowledge of German as they confidently performed the story with little or no need of prompts. As remarked by one parent who accompanied the group to the final festival performance: 'It was a great event and my child was absolutely thrilled to be a part of it. I was amazed at the group's creativity and knowledge of German' (Parent, June 2019).

The children's pride and sense of ownership was only boosted by the author of the original *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* story, Michael Rosen, joining in enthusiastically with the German reading of their digital story. He reflected on the versatility and creativity of such stories to be adapted and (re)created:

> The origins of *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* lie in the folk tradition so it offers a template or springboard for new versions, whether that be in English or any other language as with this wonderful dragon hunt in German. (Rosen, June 2019)

Developing a digital story in German to be shared with an international audience made the children think differently about the power of stories and languages too:

> The occasion was so wonderful and it was so special for the children to meet the author of the original story. Overall, it gave the children a real purpose in learning the language. It is so important to let the children know *why* they are doing it. (Sahmland, Field notes, 7 June 2019)

Perhaps the overall impact of the project can be seen in a comment from one of the pupils involved: 'We get to read our favourite stories in new ways' (Year 3 pupil, June 2019).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING AND DIGITAL LEARNING

Recognising the crucial role that pedagogy plays in language education, Lid King has highlighted the major impact of technology on teaching and learning and cited this project as making significant advances in language pedagogy using digital technology to improve learner involvement, communication and creativity: 'One very striking recent example of the use of technology to support learners' creativity is the Critical Connections multilingual storytelling project coordinated by Goldsmiths College' (King). The children in this case study became part of a digital community of multilingual storytellers taking pride in their multilingual repertoires. Through participating in the international digital storytelling festival 'Mythical Creatures and European Folk Tales' (2019), these children also gained from watching older children's films in Bulgarian, Croatian, French, German and Greek (with English subtitles).

However, PMFL in England continues to face huge challenges: 'almost 40% of schools state that, in practice, pupils do not always receive language teaching according to the time allocated each week throughout the year' (Collen 6), and only '25% of respondents provided comments on good practice which has helped them to overcome issues in language learning in their school' (8). The latter comment reveals that 75% of schools in the survey might be struggling to design an effective whole-school language curriculum. The research presented here has looked at what happened when a researcher and teacher worked collaboratively to transform the whole-school PMFL curriculum. What made their approach a success? And what are the implications of the research findings for future practice and recommendations to other schools? Although Primary Languages is a new curriculum subject, the methods for teaching languages at primary school have been debated for decades. Researchers and teachers recognise the need for a more creative and purposeful approach which also makes critical and creative use of digital technology.

The case study demonstrates how reading and writing stories in German allowed the children, as well as their teacher, to focus on context and content and to learn new ways of thinking 'in the original language' (DfE). Lack of teacher confidence in PMFLs can hinder the implementation and teaching of languages (Ambrossi and Constant-Shepard); however, when the focus of teacher expertise is placed on teaching stories and making use of digital technology rather

than solely on teaching the target language, this allows teachers and students more ownership over the lesson and to use language to support the content. At the start of the school year, the children in this case study were given a clear purpose for their language learning with the endpoint of creating a digital story for the international storytelling festival. Writing and producing a digital story reinforced their language learning, as pupils were encouraged to bring in new words and imagine the story together. Thus, they were framing their ideas in a medium that added to their creativity in the new language. This approach fostered the 'pupils' curiosity' (DfE 1) about the language, the story and using digital technology to express their ideas. The digital story, its content and structure became their primary goal and the language learning gained urgency as German became the tool to write the story.

In summary, this approach to language pedagogy has opened doors to move away from the perceived traditional structure of teaching a series of topics; moreover, it provides teachers with opportunities to be creative, to use stories to give language teaching a meaningful purpose, and to employ digital technology to structure and stretch their creativity. This approach works as it builds on primary school teachers' strengths and their knowledge of teaching literacy.

PROJECT WEBSITE

Critical Connections Multilingual Digital Storytelling: *https://goldsmithsmdst.com/*.

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