

Current trends in teaching English as a foreign language. The case of French primary schools

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During his speech announcing the gradual introduction of compulsory language teaching in French primary schools from September, 2002, Jack Lang, then Minister of Education, described himself as an ‘activist’ for the renovation of the teaching of foreign languages and of linguistic diversity. Lang was, of course, alluding to the reputation of the French as not being inclined to learn foreign tongues. Since then, various reforms have been introduced, the most recent one being the compulsory teaching of a foreign language from age six, which was introduced in September, 2015. Furthermore, despite Lang’s call for linguistic diversity, English has been predominantly taught in primary education and this situation is unlikely to change. This paper will be particularly concerned with the current situation of the teaching of English in primary schools in France, focusing primarily on the training of future primary teachers.

Keywords: primary education; teacher training; EFL

1. Introduction

Each child of this country is a child of Europe and a citizen of the World.¹

In 1957, the Treaty of Rome advocated the freedom of movement of its citizens within the European Community, the prerequisite being to learn the languages of their European partners. However, one can wonder at the extent to which all the nations of the now enlarged European Union have done their utmost to promote the learning of the languages of the member states. In fact, it was not until 2005 that, for the first time, the portfolio of a European Commissioner explicitly included responsibility for multilingualism to member states (A new framework strategy for multilingualism 2005).² Although the teaching of at least one foreign language in secondary education around Europe has been the norm for many years, a notable evolution in the recent past in language teaching has been the generalized introduction of compulsory language teaching in primary schools. France is far from an exception as the history of foreign language teaching in primary schools in France is relatively recent.

¹ ‘Chaque enfant de ce pays est un enfant de l’Europe et un citoyen du monde.’ Jack Lang (2001).

² “This document is the first Commission Communication to explore this policy area. It complements the Commission’s current initiative to improve communication between European citizens and the institutions that serve them. It also: reaffirms the Commission’s commitment to multilingualism in the European Union; sets out the Commission’s strategy for promoting multilingualism in European society, in the economy and in the Commission itself; and proposes a number of specific actions stemming from this strategic framework.”

Teacher training institutions in France are entering a period of turmoil with probable reorganization in the near future. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine and assess the current situation of the teaching of English as a foreign language in French primary schools in order to prepare for this shift in policy and pave the way for improvement. I posit that the training provided currently is insufficient for the reforms that are being proposed. In order to better comprehend the current situation, I will expose the main turning points of foreign language teaching in primary education since the turn of the century, laying particular focus on the training of future primary school teachers.

I will be analyzing the official frameworks defining the curricula of foreign language teaching for primary education in France since 2002. Unfortunately, except for three issues of the French foreign language teaching journal *Les Langues Modernes* (Kevran & Deyrich, 2007; Kevran, 2011; Dahm et al., 2017) very little academic research has been carried out on this subject, a gap in literature that this article attempts to fill. I will also be particularly interested in the experiences of primary school teachers and trainees and teacher trainers of foreign languages in primary education.

2. Background to the teaching of foreign languages in primary education

From 1989 there was a project of controlled experimentation in the teaching of a modern foreign language in primary schools in France, yet this was not compulsory and only involved certain schools. Rather like in the United Kingdom, there was always a great amount of resistance to language learning in France (Duverger, 2009), with the traditions of Jacobinism and the centralism of the French Ministry of Education and the notion of national monolingualism and even linguistic protectionism. However, this was increasingly seen as a handicap for various reasons, not least economic. However, this situation came to an end with the then socialist Minister of Education for France, Jack Lang.

2.1 *The revolution in foreign language teaching*

In January, 2001, Jack Lang gave a famous speech on the teaching of foreign languages in primary education (Lang, 2001):

“In the future, our objective is for each child to learn two modern languages, at an age when the quality of his/her musical ear is at its peak. The teaching of a second foreign language will begin in Year 6”.³

This was an extremely forceful, focused, personal speech. Lang speaks of being ‘a militant’. He reiterates ‘my will’ four times along with ‘my determination’, ‘my

³ «Notre objectif est que tout enfant apprenne à l'avenir deux langues vivantes à l'âge où son oreille musicale est à son sommet. L'enseignement de la deuxième langue commencera en 6e.»

conviction’, ‘my engagement’ and ‘I have made a commitment’. He describes himself as being ‘obstinate’ and does not fear using the first person pronoun ‘I’ seventeen times to further illustrate his personal implication in the project. Furthermore, he was prepared to finance his ambitious project to the best of his abilities.

2.2 *Reasons for the reform*

Lang gave two main reasons behind the introduction of foreign languages in primary classrooms. The first was the belief that ‘the younger the better’ the idea that young children are intrinsically better language learners, and will therefore become more proficient more quickly. This view is of course questionable. The Critical Period Hypothesis, first proposed by Penfield and Roberts (1959)⁴ highlights the importance of age in foreign language proficiency, however other factors, such as environment and motivation also play a major role (Larson-Hall, 2007; Myles, 2017). The second was his wish to preserve the French language in multilingual Europe. He was convinced that learning a foreign language helps in developing language skills in one’s native language by better comprehending its singularities and its similarities with other languages. For the first time in the institutional history of France, the official education framework of 2002 published by the Ministry of Education (*Bulletin Officiel N°4, 2002*), formulated curricula concerning foreign and regional languages in primary schools. These texts were applicable to everyone. They were mandatory. Gone were the days when teaching a foreign language was optional or elitist, a time when certain researchers claimed that the introduction of another language could perturb pupils’ learning of their native language, prevent them from learning to read or provoke dyslexia or other cognitive disorders (Duverger, 2009).

2.3 *The new measures*

Lang subsequently introduced a series of new measures regarding the teaching of a foreign language in primary education. Foreign languages now became a bona fide subject in primary education with the curriculum straddling primary school and the first year of middle school.⁵ As far as the training of teachers was concerned, there would be professional development in foreign languages for primary school teachers with a system of accreditation. From 2003, future primary school teachers were to be trained to become proficient enough in a foreign language in order to teach it as a subject. This was to be validated by an examination. However, in order to counterbalance the lack of qualified language specialists during the transition period, there was to be a massive

⁴ Penfield, W., & Roberts, L. (1959). *Speech and brain-mechanisms*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

⁵ Primary education is compulsory from the age of 6 in France.

recruitment of foreign language assistants and native speakers living locally⁶. Secondary school teachers of foreign languages would also be used to bridge the gap.

Logistically, local authorities (who finance the running costs of primary school education in France) were to equip classrooms for this new subject. Furthermore, pedagogic material such as text books and adapted multi-media was to be created, along with a government website (EDUSCOL) with suggestions for lesson plans and activities.⁷ A platform of cyber correspondence was also to be established so that pupils could correspond with pupils from two other European countries. A system now entitled ‘e-twinning’.

2.4 The choice of languages

Although Lang was convinced that English should be learnt at some stage in a child’s schooling, he also promoted other European languages and also regional languages of France, thus promoting the country’s linguistic diversity. These were: Breton (Celtic), Basque (Vasconic), Occitan (Romance), Alsatian (Germanic). He lamented the fact that in 2001, only 24% of pupils studying a foreign language in primary school, were studying a language other than English. A more alarming fact was that only 10% of pupils were learning a foreign language other than in English in Year 1 of lower secondary school (Lang, 2001).

2.5 Consequences of the reform

Lang’s reform was initially concerned with Year 5 (CM2), then Year 4 (CM1) the next year, etc. The consequence was that older generation teachers felt compelled to take lower level classes in favour of newly appointed teachers freshly out of training college and certified in teaching a foreign language, generally English. This was the first drawback of what was announced as a pedagogical revolution (Ribierre-Dubile, 2017). Older teachers generally did not speak a foreign language and waited with dread for the day they would have to teach English, when it became the turn of the Cours Préparatoire – Year 1 (cf. Table 1). However, the framework act of 8th July, 2013 governing education made the teaching of a foreign or regional language compulsory from year 1 upwards from September, 2016.

⁶ These native speakers would be under the supervision of foreign language tutors who would give guidance on content and teaching methods. However, the use of the native speaker in foreign language teaching is a complex question (Andreou & Galantomos, 2009). Certain researchers (e.g., Cook, 1999) even question the appropriateness of using native speakers in foreign language teaching.

⁷ The main Éduscol website is aimed primarily to help teachers, as well as educational professionals, by providing information, official texts, and resources available to support teachers and educational professionals in their work within schools (Éduscol, the Ministry of Education website).

Table 1 Classes in French primary schools

<i>Cours préparatoire</i>	(CP) Year 1	age 6 to 7
<i>Cours élémentaire 1</i>	(CE1) Year 2	age 7 to 8
<i>Cours élémentaire 2</i>	(CE2) Year 3	age 8 to 9
<i>Cours moyen 1</i>	(CM1) Year 4	age 9 to 10
<i>Cours moyen 2</i>	(CM2) Year 5	age 10 to 11

2.6 Subsequent reforms

Subsequent Ministers of Education did not lay such great importance on foreign language learning in primary education and the budget originally put in place by Lang was reduced drastically over the years. Furthermore, the constant changes of curriculum with each new Minister of Education, even within the same majority party, along with a lack of clear objectives (Duverger, 2009) and coherent progression, has greatly jeopardized foreign language teaching in primary education, despite ambitious curricula with obvious consequences on teacher training programmes.

3. Teacher training in France

From September, 2010, the training of primary school teachers started to take place in specialized Masters through Instituts Universitaires de Formation des Maîtres (IUFM)⁸. This was to answer ministerial demands that all Masters should prepare students for employment (Catroux & Gruson, 2011). In 2015, the IUFMs were replaced by Écoles supérieures du professorat et de l'éducation (ESPE)⁹. These specialized institutes now integrate both university instruction and teacher training with vocational work experience. Currently, to qualify as a primary school teacher in France, one must already hold a Bachelor degree and be enrolled in the first year of the Master MEEF (Teaching, Education and Training)¹⁰ programme (or already hold a Masters degree). At the end of the first year, students must sit a competitive examination¹¹, and if successful, they continue into the second year of the Masters programme. During this second year, students work part time in a primary school while completing their Masters degree. Furthermore, reaching level B2 in a foreign language has become a prerequisite for obtaining the diploma allowing students to become a qualified primary school teacher, thus gaining tenure.

⁸ University Institute of Teacher Training.

⁹ Advanced School of Teaching, Training and Education.

¹⁰ (Métiers de l'Enseignement, de l'Éducation et de la Formation)

¹¹ "concours"

3.1 Assessment of language skills

The competitive exam for entry into primary school teaching no longer includes foreign language assessment as this was felt to be a financial burden for the French Ministry of Education (Duverger, 2009). Indeed, there has been much debate over the years as to the requirements and level of foreign language teaching. In 2006, the guidance and planning law for the future of schools (the Fillon Act) introduced mandatory oral assessment in the competitive exam. Future teachers were to have reached the B2 level on the CEFR scale. There was a choice of six possible languages: Arabic, English, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. This oral assessment was abolished in 2009, with the introduction of the Masters MEEF degree in teaching. With the introduction of the new framework in 2014 the Ministerial Decree (*arrêté du 27 août 2013*) stipulates that henceforth, the training of future primary teachers should integrate the teaching of at least one foreign language in order to obtain a B2 level on the CEFR framework.

3.2 Overcoming the deficiencies in foreign language skills of primary teachers

Since the reform implemented by Lang in 2002, one of the underlying issues has been overcoming the deficiencies in foreign language proficiency/skills of primary school teachers. Although a CEFR level of B2 in a first foreign language is required for the baccalauréat examination at the end of secondary school, only 24.74% of pupils actually attain this level. Furthermore, despite the fact that a foreign language is compulsory throughout Bachelor degree courses, only 37.44% of students at the end of their degree obtain a B2 level (Observatoire TOEIC – 2009). Therefore, many students do not have the required language proficiency before entering the Masters programme (MEEF). For Cambridge (Cambridge Assessment English, 2018) “[i]t takes approximately 200 guided learning hours for a language learner to progress from one level of the Common European Framework of Reference to the next”. A report by the General Inspector (Manès-Bonnisseau & Taylor, 2018, p. 2) states that France comes last in the European league tables for foreign language proficiency, and advocates a major reform of language teaching and learning.

The present situation is thus far from logical as the foreign language skills of future primary teachers are not assessed before entering the Masters programme even though they will be required to teach this compulsory subject. The number of hours allocated to each subject during the two years Master programme (MEEF) differs greatly from one ESPE (teaching training college) to the next (Manès-Bonnisseau & Taylor, 2018, p. 33), and foreign language instruction is no exception. Nevertheless, most of them offer between twenty and forty hours of English language teaching and English teaching methods. For those who enter the Masters programme having reached only an A2 or B1 level of foreign language proficiency, they would require more than

two hundred hours of instruction to acquire a B2 level of the CEFR and become an independent user.

In the teacher training institute (ESPE) of Limoges, in which I teach English and English teaching methods, teaching hours have been constantly reduced. Since September, students in the first and second years of the Masters programme only receive twenty-four hours of English tuition per academic year. Additionally, year one students receive fourteen hours of English teaching methods, with nine hours for the second year students. For primary school teachers to feel confident in their teaching of English, they need a thorough preparation in both the language and teaching methods, which for the moment, is not the case. Besides, only English is offered as a foreign language at both the ESPE and in primary schools.

To improve the language skills of first year Masters students, the ESPE of Limoges offers a three week work placement in primary schools in the UK. This is made possible thanks to its partnership with the Keele and Staffordshire Teacher Education Department of Keele University, Staffordshire. At the end of the internship, students are required to teach the class of the English primary teacher they have been shadowing. This can be on any subject on the curriculum. Subsequently, students are encouraged to correspond with their English counterparts.

3.3 Teacher training in English and English teaching methods: the dilemma

As seen above, since 2015, student teachers now work part time in a school and are required to teach a foreign language right from the beginning of the second year of their Master programme. The difficult task is to train these students to obtain a level of B2 but also to prepare them to teach and work with young learners (Stunell, 2017). The dilemma is to conciliate the two objectives in the time allotted and to ensure the continuity between their training in college and that in primary schools. According to Stunell (Stunell, 2017) even if a student teacher with a B2 level in foreign language skills is better able to teach that language than one who only has a B1 level, teaching young learners efficiently demands more skills than just language proficiency. Teaching a foreign language class to young learners differs to teaching young adults (the use of gestures and other aides to facilitate comprehension, space management in the classroom, the use of graded language for young learners in order to give instructions, getting pupils to repeat, etc). She questions whether future primary school teachers can be taught the specific competences of teaching a foreign language to young learners especially if their own level of language use is not as proficient as it should be. She evokes the notion of self efficacy as exemplified by Bandura (1997). For MA and Cavanagh, (2018, p. 134) “teacher self-efficacy [...] is the extent to which teachers, including pre-service teachers [...], believe they are capable of achieving certain specific teaching goals”. Indeed, student teachers are fully aware of their lack of skills as far as foreign language teaching is concerned.

3.4 Foreign language “insecurity”

As part of their Masters degree, students are required to research a topic concerning an aspect of primary school teaching. A former Masters student carried out a survey for her Masters dissertation, entitled *Difficulties of Teaching a Foreign Language at Primary School Level* (Manach, 2017). These are some of the replies to the question ‘Is English a difficult language to teach?’

“Yes, I’m embarrassed and I haven’t got a good accent.”

“Yes, because of the pronunciation.”

“Yes, because I haven’t got the necessary skills, especially in pronunciation.”

“I haven’t got enough vocabulary and I don’t master the syntax and grammar sufficiently.”¹²

It is worth noticing that students are more concerned with the imperfection of their language skills than the actual aspect of teaching. Overall, 40.9% of students replied that they felt motivated at the idea of teaching English and/or considered it a challenge. Conversely, 36.4% affirmed that they felt ill at ease teaching English and 22.7% actually claimed they dreaded having to do so.

Even experienced teachers have problems teaching a language even when guided by mentors. They feel badly prepared to implement the curriculum, especially using the action-oriented approach¹³ advocated by the education authorities. The apprehension felt by teachers reflects the specificity of this subject, which differentiates itself from other subjects due to the skills it requires (Marchois & Delmote, 2015, p. 6). Foreign languages are the object of study and the medium in which they are studied (although some elements of the lessons may be explained in French to aid comprehension). This explains why so many primary school teachers feel little equipped to teach a foreign language. Their concern relates to the following aspects: their proficiency in language use, but especially the belief they have in their own capabilities; the aptitudes necessary to teach a language at primary level. It is thus vital to convince them that they do not need to be highly proficient to teach a foreign language at primary school (Marchois & Delmote, 2015, p. 6). There is a desperate need of training to set up a graded curriculum for foreign languages as the official texts/curriculum offer more of a list of objectives to reach in order to attain the A1 level, rather than a programming and progression of the contents over the cycles.

¹² Translated from French by the author.

¹³ With this approach, learners become ‘social agents’ (CEFR, 2001: 9), learning in a social learning environment, developing not only linguistic skills, but pragmatic and communicative skills as well. (Council of Europe, 2001a: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment. <https://rm.coe.int/16802fc1bf>. Last accessed 7/01/2019).

According to the General Inspector for English, Chantal Manès-Bonnisseau, the current situation of the teaching of foreign languages in primary schools is unsatisfactory. She posits that the training in foreign languages received at teacher training college does not equip future primary teachers with the necessary skills to teach a language at primary level. In a recent report (Manès-Bonnisseau & Taylor, 2018), one of her recommendations is the reintroduction of compulsory foreign language assessment before entering the Master MEEF programme, which would take the form of an oral examination. This should ensure the necessary foreign language proficiency of students undertaking a career in primary education.

The report underlines the uncomfortable situation in which many primary school teachers find themselves when forced to teach a foreign language and advocates more precise curricula guidelines in foreign language, with annual benchmarks. Only between 10 to 15% of primary teachers have majored in a foreign language up to at least Bachelor level. Moreover, foreign languages are not or very rarely included in the compulsory eighteen hours of annual professional development for primary school teachers. Besides, primary education inspectors seldom inspect foreign language classes, mainly due to their own lack of competence in foreign language skills and pedagogy. Moreover, as the teaching of Maths and French are all important in the French education system, many teachers do not welcome being forced to teach a foreign language, which, for them, uses up precious class time. Consequently, the passage from primary to lower secondary school is unsatisfactory as far as foreign language teaching is concerned.

3.5 Transitioning between primary and secondary education

Education in primary and lower secondary school is divided into cycles¹⁴ (rather like the key stages in British education), initially introduced in 2002 by Lang. Since 2016, stage 3 now straddles both primary school and the first year of middle/lower secondary school in order to reinforce pedagogic coherence and consistency (*Programmes pour l'école primaire*, BO n°11, 26 novembre 2015). The continuity and the progressivity of learning between the 3 levels of primary and year 1 of lower secondary education are now a priority of the new curriculum in France.

However, the transition from primary to secondary schools causes concern. Many primary schools filter into the same lower secondary school. In order to establish a coherent curriculum, it is necessary to coordinate the foreign language teaching aims between the two levels. However, this takes time and organized planning. Some secondary school foreign language teachers actually start language teaching from scratch, which may affect learners' long-term motivation (Graham, 2016, p. 682). Locally, small groups of teachers from both primary and lower secondary schools are

¹⁴ Cycle 1 (ages 3 – 6), Cycle 2 (ages 6-9) and Cycle 3 (ages 9 – 12).

working together to coordinate progression. In Brive, a town in the Education district of Limoges, a group of such teachers are working on a project using authentic English story books right from nursery school level (age 3) through to Year 1 of lower secondary school. Their objective is to produce ready to use lessons for their colleagues in both primary and lower secondary school, based on storybooks. Their ultimate aim is to render the language skills of pupils entering secondary school more homogeneous.

4. Conclusion

During a speech at the Sorbonne, on 26th September, 2017, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, clearly underlined the direct relationship between mastering foreign languages and the construction of a united and democratic sovereign Europe (cited in Manès-Bonnisseau & Taylor, 2018, p. 22). Encouraging the learning of two foreign languages has been a priority in language policy since 2002, as seen above, yet the reality has been somewhat different. Officially, the range of languages is wide, however, in reality, the hegemony of English is still omnipresent. A recent European Commission report, published on 25th May, 2018, strongly urges member states to reinforce the development of pupils' multilingual competences by preferring a multidisciplinary approach to teaching (Council of Europe, 2018). Nevertheless, even though researchers and European officials concur that member states should encourage multilingualism, the situation differs from one state to another. English has become the lingua franca and is predominantly taught all over Europe. The predicament of which languages to teach still causes some debate in France. Despite political commitment to multilingualism, English remains the first foreign language taught in school, and often the only choice in primary and lower secondary schools.

The path has been long and sinuous since Lang's ambitious speech in 2001, however one can call into question the progress that has been accomplished. The report recently published by the General Inspector for English, Chantal Manès-Bonnisseau (Manès-Bonnisseau & Taylor, 2018) advocates a series of measures to improve teacher training as far as foreign languages are concerned. Unsurprisingly, these closely echo those implemented back in 2001 by Lang. The route therefore seems to have been a circular one. As a final note, Emmanuel Macron has decided to lower the age of compulsory schooling from the age of six to three from September, 2019, a measure which may affect foreign language teaching. Nevertheless, unless motivated and qualified teaching staff are recruited, the foreign language skills of French primary school children are unlikely to improve.

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