

Then and Now: foreign language teaching in schools from Plowden to the present

LESLIE CARRICK

ABSTRACT The author looks at what the Plowden Report recommended concerning the introduction and teaching of foreign languages in primary schools, and assesses the extent to which, 40 years on, its suggestions have been implemented.

The Need Today

There is a growing need for foreign language skills in today's global marketplace: as an English language teacher working in Germany I hear and see this first hand from students on a daily basis. As the majority of them are business students, English, and sometimes a second foreign language, are often part and parcel of their job requirements.

In Germany, English has long been taught as the first foreign language when children start secondary education. However, in 2003 a new scheme for teaching English in primary schools was put into practice for children in their third year of primary education. The aim of this was to provide an introduction to the basics of the language. As with most new projects, there were problems, and a number of those highlighted were quite similar to those mentioned in Plowden, for example, a lack of suitably qualified teachers and lessons having to be cancelled at short notice. None of these problems helped the children as they were still graded and given marks on their half-term and end of term report cards.

In Britain, the teaching of foreign languages is an area in need of attention, since the British are not generally noted for their foreign language skills, a point made by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2002.

Sadly, Britain is often typified by the British tourist abroad who asks 'why doesn't anybody here speak English?', or 'what do you call somebody who speaks three languages? Trilingual. Two languages? Bilingual. Only one? British!'

The view that Britain is monolingual is not helped by the fact that, whereas our neighbours in Europe are nearly all learning English at school, there seems to be no agreement about which foreign language(s) should be taught in British schools.

There are of course the traditional languages such as French and German, but there is also a need today, especially in business, for others such as Italian, Spanish and Eastern European languages.

The 1960s

The Plowden Report highlighted a number of the problem areas associated with teaching a modern foreign language in primary schools, and in particular the reliance on French. As our nearest European neighbour, Britain has had links with France dating back to the time of William the Conqueror, but this should not give French any special preference when it comes to foreign language selection.

Nevertheless, throughout the Plowden Report the language of choice mentioned is French. It refers, for example, to a 1962 Nuffield Foundation-sponsored experiment for the production of materials for teaching French. Regarding this experiment, the Department of Education and Science said that 'we must regret that the experiment is perpetuating the dominance of one language' and 'we hope that if the present experiment is successful, the possibilities of including another language will be explored' (Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967, para. 617: iii).

Some of the problems raised by Plowden, such as the availability of suitably qualified teachers and appropriate teaching materials, would inevitably take time to resolve.

The 1990s

But Plowden probably didn't expect it to take quite so long. A profile of language education carried out by the National Foundation for Educational Research in 1996 reported that in England 'there is no statutory provision for foreign language teaching in the primary sector' and that in the small number of primary schools which provide some form of language tuition, this is 'usually oral skills, and nearly always French' (Dickson & Cumming, 1996, p. 26).

Thirty years after the Plowden Report, the introduction of foreign language tuition in primary education had had very limited success, and the ongoing dominance of French continued, at the expense of other languages.

The Situation Today

The need for a foreign languages strategy and various issues regarding foreign language training were considered again in a wide-ranging report by the DfES in 2002.

The report highlighted shortfalls and problems in the current system such as the continuing shortage of modern foreign language teachers for secondary schools and the limited number of primary school teachers trained in teaching foreign languages. It noted the disadvantage caused to businesses by a lack of employees with foreign language skills and emphasised the importance of these skills in today's global economy.

With regard to primary education, the report noted that a lack of suitably qualified teachers had been highlighted in 1967, so it was hardly a new problem and more needed to be done to rectify the situation.

It warned that foreign language tuition in primary education was very much a 'hit and miss' affair and that this must change. Primary schools must deliver an entitlement to language learning so that 'by the end of the decade every child at Key Stage 2 is offered the opportunity to study at least one foreign language' (2002, p. 15). Furthermore, this entitlement to language learning 'must include one of the working languages of the European Union and be delivered at least in part in class time' (2002, p. 15).

There had been a shift away from French to other languages in the primary school, and the DfES cited a number of projects that were already underway, such as primary education teacher training in Spanish and German, and a school which was using e-learning, where pupils communicated via email with their counterparts in Italy and France.

The proposals put forward by the DfES were hard-hitting and maybe to some controversial, but if Britain is to move forward as a global player in the twenty-first century, plans for a major overhaul of foreign language teaching are long overdue.

Having an appropriate teaching system in place encompassing primary and secondary education as well as specialist and further education centres will provide Britain with a more multilingual workforce and enable it to become a more culturally aware society. It may also, in time, help to remove Britain's image as 'the lazy man of language learning'.

The Future

It has taken a long time since the Plowden Report was published in 1967 for significant changes to have been made regarding foreign language teaching in primary education. But the problems caused by shortages of qualified teachers, teaching materials and funding are now being addressed, and introducing other languages as well as French is also a step in the right direction.

All these changes will take time, and will require commitment and motivation to meet the various challenges, but they are goals that have to be met to benefit Britain, perhaps not now, but certainly in the future.

References

- Central Advisory Council for Education (1967) *Children and their Primary Schools*. The Plowden Report. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office.
- Dickson, P. & Cumming, A. (Eds) (1996) *Profiles of Language Education in 25 Countries*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- Department for Education and Skills (2002) *Languages for All: languages for life: a strategy for England*. Nottingham: DfES Publications.
-

LESLIE CARRICK spent 23 years in HM Forces. Living in Germany, he developed an interest in English language teaching, and after successfully completing a Trinity College TESOL Certificate course in 2001, he gained experience working for a local language school. In 2005 he graduated with an MA in ELT and Applied Linguistics. He is currently living and working in Iserlohn, Germany, where, with his wife and father-in-law, he runs a private language school, teaching English to children, adults and companies in the local area. *Correspondence:* Leslie Carrick, English für alle, Baarstrasse 160, D-58636 Iserlohn, Germany (lescat33c@aol.com).