



Primary Languages Policy: Step-change or stumbling block?

RiPL webinar panellists: [Florence Myles](#) (Chair of RiPL), [Bernardette Holmes](#) (co-Chair of RiPL), and [Clare Seccombe](#) (Representative of ALL). Hosted: [Hannah Gibson](#) (University of Essex)

RiPL's first webinar on 2nd July 2019 at 7.00pm, attended by 100+ participants - some from as far afield as the USA and Kenya - has had very positive feedback. The webinar saw presentations from research, policy and practice and highlighted the importance of modern foreign language learning at and early stage in a child's development. Unfortunately, gremlins in the technology meant that we could not see Bernardette Holmes when she delivered her speech; apologies for that!



[Bernardette Holmes](#) discussed the policy landscape, particularly the extraordinary language paradox, as she called it, of finding ourselves in an increasingly multilingual society that for Anglophones is nevertheless becoming increasingly monolingual. She reminded us that the statutory requirement to teach all children a language from age 7 was about offering every child 'liberation from insularity', but that the greater degree of autonomy given to schools and the reduction of central and local government support have meant that provision across the country instead of being equitable has become patchy. Bernardette asked where we should have been after four years of equitable statutory requirement if it had been implemented as intended: What would we have expected to see in terms of local agreements primary-secondary with regard to choice of language and time allocation, what should we have expected to see with regard to children's progress, and assessment, and what kinds of arrangements should there have been at points of transfer and transition?

[Florence Myles](#) spoke to the research position, discussing two aspects of the large body of research that has investigated teaching and learning of languages in primary school children: how younger children learn differently to older children, and the importance of motivation, in particular sustaining motivation across transfer. Florence explained that young children rely primarily on implicit learning mechanisms in middle childhood (ages 6 to 12), especially in the earlier phase, which means that for them to be able to learn effectively they need to have rich and plentiful input and to be able to actively engage with that input. The generally short amount of curriculum time allocated to languages in English primary schools makes it difficult for children to be able to do this. Florence pointed out that young children enjoy learning languages, and find it fun and motivating. In the second part of middle childhood, though, children develop more awareness about what they are learning and the progress they make. They begin to appreciate the intrinsic value of languages and why they might be important - or otherwise - to them as an individual. Ensuring that children remain positively motivated across transition through a continued sense of progress is crucial, as it can have grave implications for uptake at GCSE and beyond.



[Clare Seccombe](#), a primary languages teacher representing ALL, also a language consultant and owner of 'Light Bulb Languages' began by explaining how the situation had changed since 2012 when there was much more funding and support available, for example with teacher training and up-skilling. Since 2014 there have been some grants to fund large projects but large-scale funding has not been available either nationally or locally, which has meant, for example, that primary schools who previously employed a specialist language teacher were not able to continue to afford their services. She listed considerations that need to be addressed: regular scheduling of lessons, assistance in choosing schemes of work and in developing progress levels, quality CPD, and improvement in transition arrangements: primaries try to make children secondary ready but are secondaries primary aware? Clare explained the importance of unity, and described the work of ALL and its hubs supporting teachers across all sectors.

There was a fantastic selection of questions from attendees which focussed on transition, CPD provision and training, motivation and time allocation (selected summaries of questions and participant interaction below). Unfortunately, due to time constraints, panellists could only answer a few, and we look forward to discussing many of them during future webinars, events, and on our blog in the coming months.

Question: Are there any efforts to connect up SPAG with primary language learning?

There is currently a discrepancy between use of terminology in English and other language lessons, e.g. articles and determiners, possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns. Currently not enough of a shared vocabulary to be able to make shared links.

Question: Is CPD funding required for languages to be successful?

Primary languages pedagogy is very different to teaching other subjects and we must make sure non-specialist teachers are prepared, not put in difficult situations, having to teach with little preparation. There is very little CPD available and what is available is ad hoc. There should certainly be more funded provision.

Question: Can children make meaningful progress if they only receive 20mins a week?

Children at the start of middle childhood learn implicitly and need a lot of input to learn effectively. 20 mins isn't much and we recommend at least one-hour per week, which compared to other countries is not much time. We need to convince school leaders and society at large of the importance of language learning, that it contributes to a rounded individual and children's cognitive development. A lot of spoken language can be covered in only 20 mins, but it doesn't really allow time to establish reading and writing in the language. It will help establish positive motivation about languages and language learning which is always a good thing.

Question: transition?

Preparing a statement to send to secondary schools on children's language progress, grammatical structures covered, topics, cultural studies etc is a good thing to send whether or not secondaries ask for it, which they generally do not. Clare recommended sending a summative piece of writing which her children are aware is being sent to their secondary school. Ideally, secondary and primary teachers would agree locally on languages taught and on transition arrangements, but until that comes around it appears to fall on primaries to be proactive.

Question: Any tips to persuade leaders to encourage primary languages?

Establishing links with L1 language and other curriculum subjects is very valuable; languages can be an integral part of a lot of primary curriculum subjects, such as geography and history. Primary languages can have a very positive impact in lots of subjects; Clare pointed out a problem she has encountered as a specialist primary languages teacher covering PPA, that it is often difficult to find out what children are doing or have done in other subjects to be able to make links.

White Paper: Primary Languages Policy in England – The Way Forward

Florence outlined the ten recommendations from the [RiPL White Paper](#):

1. Time allocation at least one hour per week, a non-statutory minimum of 140 hours over KS2;
2. Government-funded professional development for primary teachers to strengthen primary language subject knowledge, pedagogical understanding and language proficiency;
3. Curriculum planning: commission non-statutory guidance on minimum core content defining what children should know/be able to do in pronunciation, phonics, grammatical structures, vocabulary and knowledge about language;
4. Transition: strengthen primary-secondary collaboration; provide receiving schools with a clear statement of what pupils have been taught and what they should know and be able to do at the point of transfer;
5. Assessment and reporting: agree a nationally recognized benchmark by the age of transfer from KS2 to KS3;
6. Develop effective use of digital technology to support learning, training and reporting, including the development and piloting of an e-folio;
7. School accountability: Ofsted should include a focus on primary languages, gathering evidence of intent, implementation and impact related to curriculum planning;
8. School leadership: Develop effective partnerships between senior leadership and governors to strengthen accountability and improve coherent and structured progression in primary languages in the school development plan;
9. Strategic role of research: The DfE to include a focus on the implementation of primary languages policy in the next round of social research aims, to garner high quality evidence to inform policy development and KS2 delivery.
10. Create a National Taskforce for Primary Languages (NTPL) to support school-led improvement in the teaching of primary languages, to build the foundation of future language learning at KS3 and increase uptake at KS4 and beyond.



In sum, our priorities are to spread the word to everyone, to hard-to-reach schools still not engaged with primary languages, and to convince policy makers that language learning in primary schools needs investment. Through lack of investment we remain primary language inefficient and our children miss out on enjoyment and career opportunities and as a nation we miss business opportunities. There is a real sense now that the situation needs to be urgently addressed and that funding should not be exclusively concentrated on KS3 and GCSE uptake which it is at the moment. Primary languages at KS2 as the foundation for KS3 needs to be sorted first, if we are to address low motivation and poor take up at KS3 and KS4.

[Watch the webinar!](#)

Hands up for primary languages!

[Read the White Paper](#)

[Get in touch and tell us your views on the White Paper](#)



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