

LANGUAGE

All L2 taught in primary and secondary schools

TARGET

Primary and secondary school

AIMS

- > Facilitate transitioning from primary to secondary school
- > Adapt learning to assessment and vice-versa
- > Select learning activities suitable for both primary and secondary levels

TRANSITION FROM PRIMARY TO SECONDARY LANGUAGE LEARNING: USING AN ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING APPROACH TO UNPACK PUPILS' 'SUITCASES OF SKILLS AND ABILITIES'

Il passaggio dal livello primario al livello secondario può essere problematico dal punto di vista della valutazione e della sua comprensione da parte degli allievi. A Londra, l'utilizzo del metodo *Assessment for Learning*, usato nelle scuole del primario così come del livello secondario, permette una transizione facilitata: gli insegnanti del primario usano certi elementi del secondario, come per esempio certi esercizi del libro di testo del livello secondario oppure il fatto di concentrarsi maggiormente sulla produzione scritta. In questo contributo didattico, allievi, insegnanti e ricercatori propongono delle soluzioni valide per un apprendimento continuo.

Continuity and discontinuities

Research has indicated that transition from primary to secondary, an administrative arrangement, is generally problematic across all subjects causing 'discontinuity' of learning and other adjustment problems in many cultural contexts (Audin *et al.*, 2005; Evangelou *et al.*, 2008; Mayer, 2006). The breaks or transitions are not always easy for pupils to understand or manage and require preparation and support for the pupils from teachers in order to ensure a smooth transition in the learning journey. This is especially important in language learning given the need for continuity and consolidation as well as planned progression to follow the contours of the natural language learning curve. There are many transitions in a child's education that include 'home to starting school' and 'infants to junior' before the major 'primary to secondary' break. These are followed by other transitions from 'beginning' to 'middle' secondary education before another major transition to 'advanced stages of learning'. These breaks do not respect fully a child's holistic development and natural

learning curve. The large scale research of Werlen (2005) in primary schools in Germany highlighted the need for strategies that take a long term view of a child's school life in its entirety. Such strategies would involve both the careful management of transition points for the benefit and welfare of the pupil (not just satisfying administrative arrangements) as well as the planning of cohesive learning that reflects the child's world in terms of meaningful content and a pedagogy that promotes personalised, pupil-centred progress in learning.

'Assessment for Learning' to 'bridge the gap'

There is a need for both primary and secondary teachers to have a sustained dialogue about children, appropriate pedagogies and learning skills and to be able to articulate their role and expertise to each other. On the basis of such a dialogue and collaborative planning, then pupils' learning continuity and progression could be assured via a pedagogic learning bridge, the weakest link according to Galton *et al.* (1999). Indeed, the capabilities of what

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primary children can do and the richness of their primary language learning experiences are frequently ignored, as are the many strategic skills in which the primary children have become adept (Jones, 2010). Many primary teachers in particular are expert in the use of Assessment for Learning (AfL) strategies that focus on pupils having considerable ownership of their learning. AfL is the practical implementation of assessment that is formative and 'for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting pupils' learning' (Black & Wiliam, 1998: 2). Key aspects of a language teaching approach that incorporate Assessment for Learning relevant for transition include:

- > Clarity about learning objectives and the success criteria- here the teacher shares a sense of orientation of the lesson and its aims, and pupils have a good idea about how they will know when they have achieved these objectives.
- > Peer assessment- pupils being able to engage with one another to undertake peer support, teaching and assessment.
- > Self- assessment- an awareness on the part of pupils of their own progress and being able to reflect and specify the next steps in their learning.
- > Feedback- the languages classroom provides ample opportunities for a constant flow of feedback from pupils to teacher, teacher to pupils and pupil to pupil.
- > Good questioning is essential in effective teaching and pupil talk would be central in the lessons enabling the pupils to learn interactively and the teacher to have evidence of the pupils' understanding.

AfL has been proven to be of immense benefit to the learners as well as improving teaching practices (Black *et al.*, 2003). As mentioned, many primary teachers make extensive use of such techniques as a natural part of their pedagogy and are often well trained in the techniques. Some secondary languages teachers have also embraced AfL practices enthusiastically and skilfully but less extensively than their primary colleagues. This means that the pupils are well practised in AfL techniques and capable of directing their own learning to a considerable degree. In research by Jones (2010), both primary and secondary pupils made it clear, with regard to their language learning and teaching experiences, that they understood AfL and felt comfortable

with, for example, peer and self- assessing as I will detail in the next section.

What pupils say about transition and AfL

It is important to ask for and listen to the views of pupils in all that affects them directly. Children are, it has been found, well able to give revealing and honest views about their learning as Flutter & Rudduck (2004: 7) found in their extensive research with children about teaching and learning: Our research with primary and secondary pupils across the UK has demonstrated that pupils of all ages can show a remarkable capacity to discuss their learning in a considered and insightful way, although they might not always be able to articulate their ideas in the formal language of learning.

Researching over the years with children, when primary pupils are asked a question about whether they thought their primary language learning would help them with languages at secondary school, the pupils show their own strategic awareness of how one stage of learning can underpin the next one, for example:

- > 'Yes I think it will help because we have learnt how to remember to pronounce words'
- > 'Maybe, yes because we have learnt the basics and got the flow, no because we will be learning more difficult words and have to write them down rather than say the words aloud.'

In a discussion about AfL in their learning, sample responses from primary pupils included:

- > 'We have lots of AfL in our lessons. Sometimes the teacher forgets the learning objectives so we have to remind the teacher or she sometimes asks one of us to do the learning objectives. Sometimes the learning objective is a question'
- > 'We do peer assessment every lesson. It used to worry me but now I have got used to it, I learn a lot from my friends and get ideas from them'
- > 'Our teacher asks us to traffic light our work [use green/amber/red according to level of understanding] so we can do this in our exercise books with coloured sticky dots and we traffic light other groups when we are doing group work plays'.

Secondary pupils mostly claimed to have enjoyed and profited from their early ex-

periences of language learning yet there was always widespread comment on apparent repetition by secondary teachers of work already covered in primary schools, as shown by this pupil's comment:

> 'I couldn't believe it when the teacher started teaching us 1 to 10 in French as we had done 1 -100 in primary school'.

New secondary pupils who were interviewed, being the same pupils interviewed when they were at primary school made reference to AfL at secondary school in these ways:

- > 'Some teachers do AfL all the time. The French teacher always starts with the learning objectives. Some teachers don't so we ask them'
- > 'We do peer marking in French but it's not always clear what we have to mark so we get worried'
- > 'The teacher tells us to do self- assessment on our homework before we hand it in'
- > 'Some teachers just tell us to write stuff down and don't tell us what we are doing but we can usually figure out what is going on'

These insightful comments from the pupils provide evidence of their understanding of the different ways in which they are taught and the indelible impact of AfL on their learning so that even in the absence of clarity about learning aims with some teachers, they have been able to develop strategies to 'figure it out' for themselves.

How teachers can respond constructively

To move forwards in learning rather than going over old ground, and in order to build and extend learning skills in a sustaining way, it is essential that primary and secondary teachers find a way to have a dialogue about learning during the transition period. There are still many misconceptions and a lack of trust that exist between primary and secondary teachers, for example, :

'A lot of secondary teachers seem to perceive what we primary teachers do as just playing, they don't see a lot of the grammar we put in and also what levels the children come out at, some children are really extremely gifted and we're really getting them to a good standard but the secondary teachers just wipe the slate clean.'

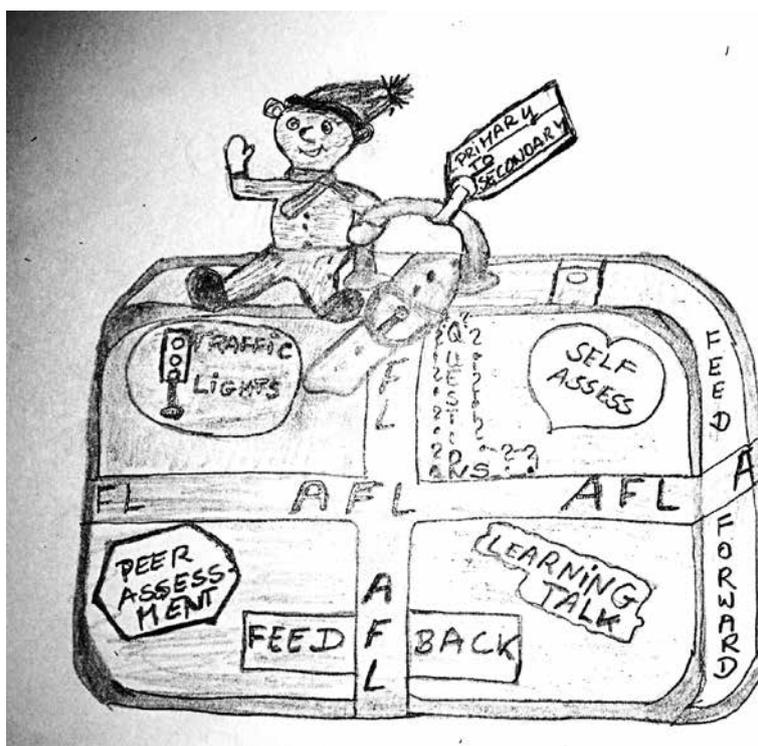
Conversely, a secondary teacher emphasised why she felt it necessary to 'wipe

the slate clean' in some respect: 'I often have to unteach incorrect French that has been taught incorrectly at primary school and start some grammar that hasn't been done at all'.

However, I want to draw attention to this devastating comment from a primary Headteacher who said:

'My pupils have been learning French since they started school. They have learnt a lot and learnt to be very independent learners. We have a whole school approach to AfL in this school. They take suitcases of skills and abilities with them to secondary school but these are simply ignored.'

This strongly- worded statement highlights the importance of primary teachers providing a sustainable language learning grounding and of secondary teachers validating and building on what children have learnt to ensure pedagogical continuity.



Drawing by Michaela Thomas

There was an acknowledgement by both primary and secondary teachers that dialogues about teaching and learning for successful transition across the phases were inadequate. A useful dialogue would establish the importance of collaboration and affirm a belief in the whole pupil language learning journey, through the drawing up of a kind of 'road map' (Black & Jones, 2007). The 'road map' would ideally include mutually useful visits to

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each other's schools, sharing of topics, vocabulary, structures and skills taught and a discussion about assessment and AfL. Pupils would have a voice in this discussion. This would lead to some sharing of ideas on transitional learning activities that would draw on AfL some of which I discuss in the next section.

Transitional learning and AfL: ideas from the pupils and student teachers

These ideas are not all new but are examples of excellent creative transitional learning activities. The learners themselves had ideas about this, primary learners suggesting the following ideas for primary school:

- > Having a go at a lesson from a secondary text book, doing this in groups
- > Reading simple stories, poems or rhymes to establish phoneme-grapheme link
- > Doing spelling and grammar 'challenges' such as competitions and quizzes
- > Learning to write longer texts such as text messages to a friend or short letters.

It can be seen that such activities proposed by the learners respond to AfL principles through building on prior knowledge, and creating challenge for learning to move it forwards. Student teachers who are secondary specialists at King's College London recently shared their ideas for the first few weeks of learning in the secondary school:

- > The pupils can make posters of what they have done in their primary schools. They can do individual ones or do this in pairs or groups to start a learning dialogue and create rubrics for their work together
- > How about the pupils create a large learning tree for the wall and the pupils add on 'leaves' to show what they have learned and can remember? They can keep adding to this as they remember items
- > I saw them do little quizzes in the primary school so we could do lots of little quizzes with groups taking part to see what they already know

> My idea is a kind of Languages Show where the pupils present in groups to their peers what they feel confident about

> Pair up the pupils with learning buddies so that they can support each other

> Plan the teaching around a series of dialogues/conversations so that the pupils can use the vocabulary and phrases they have learnt

> Peer assessment – 2 stars and a wish-every opportunity as the pupils are good at this and they really learn from each other. It's a perfect opportunity for the teacher to see and hear what the pupils can do and what their misconceptions are'.

> The children can make passports containing as much information as they can about themselves. They could then use these in pair work to ask questions of each other and where the teacher sees how fluent and how many structures they can use

> Ask the pupils in groups to create plays using a list of items given by the teacher that relate to work previously covered and that include some new but guessable items.

> Get the classroom organized by labelling items and creating classroom rules

> Groups of pupils could prepare vocabulary/sentence mind maps based on topics that they covered in primary that will be useful in secondary

> Start the lessons with simple games (simple Maths games in the target language to practise numbers) so to make an explicit link to something the children will be working on in more complexity.

> Write a simple story with pictures. They could even contain a couple of simple activities such as 'Find the word for ...'. All the stories could then create a library and the children read each other's.

The student teachers stressed the need for revision and consolidation in early lessons in the secondary school to give confidence and to ascertain what the pupils already knew, essential to know how to plan the next stages of learning. Their

suggestions also emphasise collaborative learning as central with lots of pair and group work. Such activities would allow the teacher to become aware of where the children were in terms of their knowledge, and identify the pupils' strengths and the weak areas and allow for a dialogue between the teacher and the pupils in order to enable the pupils to create the goals themselves and take ownership of them. These activities would also reflect the extensive peer work that is embedded in the primary stage and would 'keep it warm' even in the more formal setting of the secondary school.

The suggestions above are based on common sense, practical conceptions of effective teaching. These practical ideas can be part of a repertoire that all teachers can adapt very easily on the basis of a shared understanding and implementation of an AFL approach to provide a strategic pedagogical bridge and cohesion in pupil learning as they transition from primary to secondary or from teacher to teacher.

Conclusion

All teachers on both sides of the transition bridge need to assess and value the 'suitcases of skills and capabilities' that the children prepare and take with them on their learning journeys. On the basis of the contents of those suitcases, teachers can develop their teaching in a way that provides a pedagogic bridge that is enabling and validating for the pupils, recognising previous learning and devising ways to build on this. It is a huge disappointment for learners to be told that their previous learning counts for nothing, a bit like losing a suitcase or other valued item on a journey that becomes lost forever. In the words of a Head teacher: *'If language learning is a learning journey and I happen to think that it is a very exciting journey, then we need a clearer route and closer links'*. AFL provides a strategy for teachers to frame their teaching to provide continuity and for the pupils to be able 'to figure' out, on a confident basis, the next steps in their language learning journey, re-packing their 'suitcases' with new skills and abilities.

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