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*L'apprentissage précoce d'une langue vivante : quelle formation pour les maîtres
chargés de cette spécialité ?*

Catherine Hillman-Steven



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Early teaching of a foreign language: what training for teachers responsible for this specialty?

*L'apprentissage précoce d'une langue vivante : quelle formation pour les maîtres
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- 1 With great sounding of trumpets 1989 saw the dawning of a new age in France: the then Minister of Education, Mr Jospin, introduced the experiment of teaching a foreign language in *cours moyen* (CM). The experiment was to be conducted over a period of three years before it was generally introduced in all primary schools.
- 2 Twenty-two per cent of children in CM are initiated to English, which is the main foreign language taught. Ninety per cent of the children who get the opportunity to actually begin do English. German is taught mainly in the Alsace region. There are few signs of the others. Parents are the motivating body, and the biggest voting lobby. They are obviously anxious to ensure a good place in the Euro rat-race for their children and they have been convinced, perhaps rightly so, that having them start learning English earlier is the right way to go about it.
- 3 The financing of the project is a ministerial headache. The S.N.I. is to be recorded as having said "Through lack of funding the Éducation nationale (EN) has passed the baby to the town councils without really admitting it".
- 4 The programme is very different according to the district councils. In Paris, English is offered in 81 schools and it costs the city 1,4 million FF. In many district councils in Yvelines, Noisy and St Germain-en-Laye, they have backed the English classes, sometimes sacrificing other activities like skiing or music.
- 5 When questioned about the extension of the project to all schools, Mr Jospin was prudent and reluctant to expand " There are 1,5 million children in CM " he said. "The cost would be exorbitant. We cannot force the councils to follow us and finance the experiment."

- 6 Deeply involved in the project, second only to the children themselves, are the teachers.
- 7 Invited to work on the scheme are the following:
- 8 1. Teachers, i.e., all those who are employed to teach by the EN in colleges throughout the country who take on the job as overtime.
 - 9 2. Primary teachers who know the language, who are “allowed” to participate by the local IDEN (these are few and far between.)
 - 10 3. People from elsewhere. Anybody who has been taken on by the district or the town council to do the job. The range is literally unlimited from helpful mums who are qualified or otherwise, to the unemployed. This category comprises of course the good, the bad and the indifferent. And yet there still aren’t enough people to do it. Students come over from the U.K and the U.S.A. There are ads put in the local papers for “*enseignants d’anglais*”.
 - 11 The training of these people ranges from nil to three days training where people compare notes, listen to readings of *Bulletins officiels*, about the matter in hand and try to pick up hints and ideas from each other. Sometimes publishing houses send their sales person along who, apparently knows a lot more about teaching youngsters than we ever did or ever will. They have fabulous verve and undying energy. They are so peppy and cheer us up so much that we even forget they are there to sell. They blind us with their shine and we appear in each others’ eyes as a crowd of blithering dullards. (This is like a holiday: the world of commerce is glitzy and glamorous, and light-years away from the classroom.)
 - 12 After this course we return to our schools and try to spread the word as best we can to those who were not lucky enough to be sent there. But there are no answers for the schools who have no language teaching in primary... Does the project stop in mid flight or before it has properly got off the ground at all? We are a far cry from equal opportunity for primary school children.
 - 13 Let us now spare a pious thought for that raw material, this too solid flesh which is our children. The criteria for early language teaching laid down by the Girard Report in 1974 still hold good today.
 - 14 To guarantee success we require:
 - Trained teachers: skilled in the language and skilled at the teaching of same.
 - Ideally five weekly lessons of 30 minutes.
 - Methods adapted to children’s needs.
 - Continuity into the secondary school system.
 - Constant teaching backing, (supposedly by the same teacher or the class’s regular teacher.)
 - Monitoring and assessment integrated into the teaching.

In Normandy reality is as follows:

 - 60 % of the C.M benefit from the experiment.
 - The choice of teachers is mentioned above.
 - Two 45 min. sessions are conducted weekly.
 - 15 Methods are decided upon what the town council can afford, and according to what the teacher imposes. If any, *Stepping Stones*, *Flash*, *Muzzy in Gondoland*, *Early Bird*, there are many. Following a method is very strongly advised by the co-ordinators, as a progress guide for both teachers and pupils, especially for pre-6^e pupils, but teachers will do as they will.

- 16 Assessment of the pupils' work and progress remains a very delicate issue, as does assessment of the teachers' work. All attempts at assessment have proved unsatisfactory. However, most of the teachers who meet these same children in secondary are almost unanimous in their opinion that the children have an edge over those who have never done any English at all.
- 17 We are inclined to believe that the experience would be more beneficial to those who had already been involved in the project if they could be grouped homogenously. This was the big problem in the U.K. in the 1970's when they developed French in primary experiment. According to Clare Burstall's report (1974), when there was no regrouping, the benefits were soon shed through boredom at being too far ahead, the fastidious beginners "donkey work", or lack of skilful management of these early starters in the classroom. To avoid this obvious pitfall, in some parts of France and particularly in the college Boris Vian in Mezidon where we work, all the rural primaries of the area have been involved in the experiment and will send their children to this same college and therefore no pupil will begin English at zero point. This scheme itself requires much engineering and coordination by the Head and the staff involved. The results will be followed through by ourselves as from September 1992.
- 18 So the results of the experiment have given rise to the widest range of opinions. It would seem as always, and this is no surprise to anyone in the academic world that it all depends on who is performing and how, and also with whom. Must we plunge into the ancient clichés of the socio-economically over or under privileged? The enlightened or the culturally impoverished or over-endowed? I think not.
- 19 No matter what we do in CM2 we feel the results will be the same as they always have been. After six or seven years of learning English in secondary schools 60% of our children will close up like clams when questioned spontaneously in English, outside of a classroom situation, and probably as many inside. Seventy-five per cent will understand literally nothing of BBC broadcast on a first hearing. And this in spite of constant use of machines of all shapes and sizes and varieties which deliver authentic utterances from native speakers. Teachers battle with the Conseil d'Administration to have the best new machines on the market, including super video and T.V sets without forgetting satellite dishes... Language labs the prices of houses are set up to ensure fluency and linguistic skills in the bigger and senior houses of learning. This is all to no avail.
- 20 By the time the pupils who are the top 6 % of our nation's young, the cream of the crop, actually sit the competitive exams, they are so brainwashed into examination techniques, that they have lost the level of fluency they have taken pains to acquire up until the terminal class. The teacher in the prep schools, who has reached the pinnacle of his secondary school career finds himself stuck with the job of using any possible technique which will enable the cramming system to work. It is in contradiction to what the code of a living environment is. In lycée, anything goes, in Prepa nothing goes. The students are weighed down by mental topheaviness quite dislocated with any other human experience. The approach to English is the same as to that of a "dead" language.
- 21 In the name of speaking English for Europe we are lost in a quagmire of machines and caught up in a hysterical and massive spending spree. Everybody has been jumping on the bandwagon.
- 22 At Expolangues in February 1992, more than half the space was occupied by stands selling courses right left and centre with watertight guarantees of fluency within a week, etc.

English is big business, but we have got it all wrong or at least the wrong end of the stick. The lonely traveller we are concerned with is the child who starts on the long road to adulthood, not the future yuppy who's born with a telephone stuck to his ear. What we are offering him today is the monstrosity of technology and too late to do him any good.

- 23 Technology should be no more or no less than a teaching aid and in no way replace the teacher. As far as English teaching is concerned let us consider the present situation. From baby-hood to nursery school we teach the child how to think (hopefully). Then we teach him how to learn. But his skills are of no use in language learning.
- 24 In the 70 's we used to have them listen to tapes of rigmarole over again and mine until we were blue in the face to express the meaning of what was being said. The bright ones understood immediately and the slower, never. Generation of children were lost. We have let story telling and explication take a back seat to **"visual literalism"**.
- 25 Most children today think Walt Disney wrote *Peter Pan*, *Robin Hood* and the *Sleeping Beauty*, Mel Gibson is Hamlet and dying is what happens on T.V, etc. That is visual literalism. "The story is subordinated to spectacle, drama to design, and our own fantasies usurped to archaeological realism."
- 26 The emotional effects matter less than the special effects, and the children's imaginations are so bound by T.V baseball and fun park images that they will only respond to the known...

We live in an age where the eye dominates the ear.

- 27 Imagination and exploration are well nigh redundant.
- 28 Unless you are a superb actor and you have a class of dumb angels you can have in seconds the chaotic situation of the kids yelling at you or each other in French. A swift sketch on the board or a frown will give rise to the most inevitably uncouth but comprehensive interpretations.
- 29 They are not prepared to listen to the news when they can see the riots in L.A. on T.V. It's much more spectacular. Video games are held responsible for classroom chaos, said one doctor on B.B.C. Radio 4 programme broadcast in FEB 92. Thanks to those vicious engines wielding death or success at the press of a button they have immediate gratification or despair at their fingertips. Equally perturbing, you have the triteness of the morals of Miss Goody Two Shoes and the sickening soap opera sentimentality of the happy nuclear family which has no place in reality and is paramount in child oriented cinema and T.V.
- 30 Maurice Sendak of *Where the Wild Things Are* fame, one of American's most esteemed illustrators was strongly criticised for his cruelty towards children in his stories. Max gets sent to bed without supper for being naughty. In *Higglety Pigglety Pop*, the baby is abandoned by his parents; but he believes that his story children master their terrors and emerge exalted. Sendak is caustic about what visual literalism does to children and holds adults responsible. On the theme of the recent great box office hit *Home Alone*. (A child is left behind at home while his parents go on a Christmas skiing trip. Far fetched enough, but the place is attacked and robbed by murderous thieves and the boy ends up by killing them all). It's an updated *Babes in the Wood* or *Hansel and Gretel*. He says: "It was crude and vulgar and disgusting, but not surprising in a culture which takes children to watch Rambo films where the audience laughs as heads are shot off..."
- 31 If those films are popular with children it is because kids "are really congenital garbage cans. They just eat everything. It is up to adults to guide their taste." Our children are not

equipped mentally to wait, guess or expect or even listen, never mind cope with a new code which a foreign language is to them.

We have to reach the children far sooner than CM2 age 10.

- 32 We have to train our primary teachers to introduce the new code much sooner than this. Here, modern technology has its place, and it is in fact this technology which will enable us to equip the teacher with direct and systematic access to authentic utterances when he is introducing the children to the new language.
- 33 C.f. Use of the C.D player in the classroom, Claude Henry, maître de conférences in Rennes,¹ demonstrates clearly how a teacher who is not a specialist can train the tiny tots, ideally for 10 minutes a day, by using his remote control button and its index to introduce and study new sounds and sequences². Can we not combine hi tech with traditional values and a holistic approach to learning language simply, in the nursery school?
- 34 Here we combine the general excellence of the skills set out in the storytelling handbook for primary teachers, and the magic of narration of tales, and Claude Henry's very human use of super hi-tech equipment. It is a holistic approach to language both teachers and taught have to adopt.
- 35 We should use this technique to back up what is to be introduced as an introduction to universal codes through movement and gesture and sound, harmonising head, body and soul. Getting it all together.
- 36 According to Alfred Tomatis (1963) the whole body is a receptacle. We learn through all the senses, it is not yet an intellectual process. We simply never ever use this period to its full potential. By the time a child is eight he has literally closed his ears to sound outside his accustomed range and in particular to foreign phonemes.
- 37 When he starts his first foreign language, he therefore has to cope with a learning process which is both laborious and fastidious, because he is deprived of the very skills he has already acquired to learn, and even more dramatically, he has already learned not to rely on his instinct. And there's the rub... What about this great undying hand me down, the collective unconscious? Is there not something to be drawn from the child cradling an imaginary baby and rocking it?
- 38 Following experiment March 92 Maizières School.
- 39 The baby sleeps on and he is attentive to its wellbeing. It is more than child play or make believe, his body language is at one with his perception and his speech and thus, effortlessly the code fits, is understood and retained.
- 40 We have to re-attribute the child his traditionally rightful cosmic place, **that of the carrier of potential wisdom and all that is noble and worthwhile in mankind.**
- 41 This is what we erroneously call innocence, but it is in fact fertile ground and it is then at 4,5 or 6 that we must begin. The child of 5 has still the cerebral suppleness and adaptability which fades and goes on fading throughout his school career as the emphasis on learning correctly and competing is more and more heavily applied.
- 42 **We must introduce our language when the child is learning to think, and make it naturally an asset**, not a stumbling block or a barrier to his career or even a mighty weapon to clinch multi-million pound deals. It has to be a consciousness expansion process.

- 43 We believe that if the basic universal elements of the language are introduced at this very early age we will reach a higher point of understanding of our neighbour. This would be a very solid foundation for our teachers to work on. They are the ideal initiators because they occupy that privileged position second only to the mother's.
- 44 If the future body of young primary teachers is brought to full awareness while still at college, and well prepared to take on the initiation, the country will arrive at the semi bilingual stage the Swedes have managed to reach.
- 45 After a ten year experiment conducted in Sweden, L.S.E Holmstrand (1982), in his final report, formally rejected the undying myth that surrounds early language teaching, namely that it was bad for their reading and the learning of their mother tongue and secondly, which is a debatable point that they were better at language learning at that age than at many other skills.
- 46 But what we want to achieve along with the linguistic skills is the rightful position of a language that is not only the vehicle of a few privileged businessmen negotiating with the Japanese. Without the teaching of its code for beauty as well as for negotiating no matter how naive and romantic that sounds we will make our language redundant. Of course what good does poetry and literature do, one hears. We are victims of visual literalism remember. We have to fight its enormous tidal wave. We have to begin now. Danger lights are flashing. English at five is not utopia, it is simply a question of new organisation and the pooling of enthusiasm and talent.
- It's better to light one candle than curse the darkness. (Shakespeare, *Two Gentlemen of Verona* Act 3 Sc.2)
- 47 We received a business school prospectus encouraging the cream of our nation to apply to this school:
- À l'aube de l'an 2000, la politique et le droit sont soumis à la loi de l'économie. Les concepts philosophiques qui dominaient hier ont laissé place à l'hégémonie des échanges commerciaux. Les penseurs qui exercent une influence sur la société se trouvent désormais à la tête des entreprises. Aujourd'hui, l'ordre mondial n'est plus tout à fait utopique ; les régimes politiques totalitaires sont de moins en moins nombreux ; l'économie de marché a prouvé sa supériorité sur les autres formes d'échanges.
- 48 The message is clear. This is the new business revolution, ushering in a new totalitarian regime. So is our language to become simply a vehicle stripped of its beauty and expression and its original purpose, communication between men. Are we to take this lying down?
- 49 Are we to be bulldozed into encouraging our students to believe that the only hallmark of success is reaching the top in the business world? Are they to be bamboozled into believing that nothing else is worth doing in this god-forsaken world of progress? Is there to be only one set of values acceptable to ourselves and our children?

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NOTES

1. CRITT (Centre d'innovation et de transfert de technologie), Université de Rennes.
2. Cf. ELM: Espaces langues multimédia à séquences individualisées, alternatives aux laboratoires de langues.

AUTHOR

CATHERINE HILLMAN-STEVEN

Institut d'Administration des Entreprises (IAE) de Basse-Normandie, Université de Caen.