

The World of Languages and Languages of the World

John Cloughton discusses his work on making things stimulating for young language-learners.

The World of Languages and Languages of the World, WoLLoW for short, is a project, a creature, that has grown from several years of thinking and talking with teaching colleagues from many schools across the country, particularly in Birmingham, UK, at Norwich School and Cheadle Hulme School.

We started out by talking about the teaching of languages - English, modern languages, classical languages, and how they might be better co-ordinated. After all, in my long experience, those departments rarely communicate with each other, though they have much in common. We soon came to realise that there were much bigger issues in the teaching of languages in the UK, especially in primary schools. The British Council's Language Trends survey tries to be positive every year, but there is not much to be positive about. Indeed, one of the biggest problems is this: whatever language material pupils study at primary school, they start all over again in secondary school. That isn't great for the morale or motivation of pupils – or teachers.

The four WoLLoW founders decided upon a hippopotamus as a symbol. We set about creating a curriculum and a set of resources that provide a complete alternative to the concept of teaching any particular language or languages. Instead, we set about teaching about language in general and languages in the plural – how they work, how they are related to each other (including English) and how they are linked to other subjects. We realised that this approach has particular value in schools where pupils speak many languages: it enables them to bring their own languages, lives and family histories into the classroom. By following the WoLLoW curriculum, we hope that boys and girls will leave primary school with an understanding of language, an enjoyment of language, a curiosity about languages, and regard for the languages that they already know.

One big difference between WoLLoW lessons and other language-teaching methods is that WoLLoW lessons aren't didactic: it's not about the teacher teaching the pupils words or phrases or grammatical rules and

structures. WoLLoW lessons are more about dialogue, sharing, exploration, thought, understanding: the pupils will, between them, know much more than the teacher, and it's nice for the teacher not to have to be omniscient. Indeed, you don't even have to be a specialist linguist to teach WoLLoW.

It might be best to give an example of some lessons we have created. An early one is Multilingual Me in which we ask the pupils to think about the languages they speak, at home, to friends, in school, and to think about the languages known and spoken in their families. To do this, they need to ask questions at home but also think about bigger issues of history, migration, empire and the diversity of their own community.

Another of my favourites is Days of the Week. We start by asking why English days of the week are named as they are – and what it has to do with the Vikings. Then we can compare and contrast French, Italian and German names for days and talk about Greek and Roman gods, the planets, and the origins of the Sabbath and the Lord's Day. Following this discussion, the teacher can ask the children about day names in other languages they might know such as Farsi or Chinese or Russian or Tagalog. There might even follow a discussion of why there are seven days in a week.

Another popular activity is to have a go at the Greek alphabet, realise that it's not so hard to work in a different script, see why 'physics' isn't spelt 'fisiks' [Editor – except when using the phonetic alphabet!] and realise that we can work out what – and why – 'biology' and 'biography' and 'autobiography' and 'automatic' and 'cinema' mean what they mean.

The particular challenges involved in establishing and teaching a language-learning curriculum in UK primary schools is that the national curriculum and the school inspection regime (Ofsted) means that there is a shortage of time and of language teachers, and most of the attention is on the core subjects, which do not include languages. There isn't even a languages curriculum as such, meaning that what schools offer varies in content, quality, quantity, and methods. When pupils leave primary school, their experience of learning about language or learning a language varies so much that secondary schools have little choice but to start all over again. In secondary schools, there is a focus on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subjects - languages are not especially valued. They are

considered difficult and perhaps irrelevant; other subjects, especially STEM, take over. Finally, there has been a return from a wider curriculum for the 16-18 year-old age group in recent years (from AS and A level to 3 A levels), which has squeezed languages further, meaning that very few students get through the eye of the needle to A level.

The challenge for those who value knowledge about language – and languages – is to see how this approach can make a difference to the experience of school pupils in the UK (and elsewhere, too). It's probably easier to bring this approach into primary schools where so much of the curriculum is about languages because language is fundamental to learning. However, it becomes harder in secondary school when there are the pressures of curriculum and exams and assessment.

Language teachers cannot, as teachers, turn back the tide on their own. However, they can do two things. The first is to work more closely with other humanities departments, especially English, to show that language-teaching is not a sideshow, but central to the school curriculum. Over the years, the scientists have formed themselves into the STEM phalanx, so why not language-teachers? The second is then to go to heads and academic deputies, and present this argument with energy and urgency, so that they have no choice but to look at languages in a new way.

John Cloughton retired as the Chief Master of King Edward's School, Birmingham in 2016 and is a co-founder of WoLLoW (The World of Languages and Languages of the World). He studied Greek, Latin and Ancient History at A-level and Classics at Oxford - it wasn't a particularly good idea for him to go to work in a merchant bank in London. After a year, he was utterly miserable, and was inspired by the question 'What did you ever enjoy?' His answer was - to return to 'Latin and Greek' as a teacher.

Find out more

If you would like to see more about WoLLoW, visit theworldoflanguages.co.uk/

Editors' comment: We loved this approach to teaching language to school pupils because, like Babel, it takes the position that human language is fascinating and can be entertaining as well as bringing people together through a shared interest in how human beings communicate.

We are aware that the problem of the status of language learning and teaching may be specific to the UK, mainly as a result of the dominance of monolingual English speaking in UK society which results in an assumption, English being a world language, that learning about language/learning languages doesn't matter. We would love to hear from other communities and places where this problem is being tackled, so get in touch with us if you have similar experiences – and particularly if you have solutions.