

## **Modern Languages in the Primary School: The Generalist versus Specialist Debate**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores two models of teaching a modern language in the primary school. In the 'generalist' model the primary class teacher is also the (trained and qualified) modern language teacher whereas in the 'specialist' model a teacher with specialist knowledge in the modern language (ML) teaches the subject in isolation to another class for a specified time. The author argues that the generalist model is the more effective of the two and that primary teachers should receive proper modern language instruction during their initial training period. This would also help them to meet the requirements of the proposed curriculum changes envisaged by the Scottish Executive as detailed in their policy document '*A Curriculum for Excellence*'.

### **Background**

In Scotland many primary teachers were (and continue to be) given the opportunity to train in the effective teaching and learning of a modern language. I graduated from St Andrew's College of Education in 1996 with a First Class Honours Degree in Primary Education. During this time Spanish was one of my two specialist subjects. I was fortunate enough to spend my third year school experience in Oviedo, in the north of Spain. Along with three other BEd students, we were the first to be given the opportunity of spending a three month school placement in Spain. During this time I spent one month at the University of Oviedo's teaching faculty (Magisterio) and two months in a primary school. This experience exposed me to both Spanish language and culture. It developed my linguistic competence and also enhanced my confidence and self-esteem.

In 1997 I found myself on supply in my present school in St Elizabeth's Primary School in Hamilton, South Lanarkshire. I was delighted to discover that the modern language taught there was Spanish. There were two other teachers who had participated in the government-sponsored MLPS (Modern Languages in the Primary School) training.

Some primary teachers with MLPS training are able to integrate the ML throughout their school day with their own class (the generalist), some (in the case of many infant and junior class teachers) teach the subject in isolation to another class (the specialist) and some teach their own class and another class or classes (generalist and specialist!).

For a number of years I taught in the upper school and therefore had the responsibility of teaching Spanish to my own class, i.e. as a

'generalist'. This provided me with the chance to immerse my pupils in Spanish throughout the school day. My pupils were soon able to identify the day, date and weather, order their lunches, greet others at various times of the day and say their prayers in Spanish. They experienced success in the target language and their knowledge was commented on favourably by my colleagues in the secondary school when my former pupils embarked on their new courses there. I believe that my pupils experienced such a high level of success because firstly they were immersed in the language. Secondly, being taught by their class teacher meant they were taught by someone who was in an excellent position to foster relationships with them and who had thorough knowledge of each individual pupil.

My two other Spanish trained colleagues who were teaching in the infant department were responsible for teaching the language in isolation as a discrete subject to the other two P7 (?) classes once per week for 45 minutes, i.e. as 'specialists'. The birth of the Modern Language 5-14 Document (Scottish Executive 2000) stipulated that all four language components, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing should be addressed. As a result many primary language teachers collaborated with one another to devise new materials. At our school I discovered that my colleagues were finding it difficult to deliver the new curriculum as they had limited time to meet its requirements. However, I was in a very different position. If for example schools were off on holiday on a day when Spanish would have been taught, I was able to catch up later on in the week using my flexibility time. My colleagues, on the other hand, did not have this same opportunity and very often language teaching time was simply lost.

Circumstances changed, however, in session 2003/2004 when I made the decision to move to the school's infant department in order to develop both personally and professionally. This meant that all senior pupils would now be taught Spanish a maximum of one hour per week by a 'specialist' teacher.

I embarked upon teaching the upper school classes Spanish one hour per week. Although I was delighted that I was still in a position to continue teaching a modern language to our older pupils, I was very quickly made aware of the pitfalls of the 'specialist' approach to ML learning and teaching. Now if the session had to be cancelled it was very difficult to re-schedule the session to suit both the specialist and the class teacher due to the very heavy demands of the primary curriculum. Moreover, I also found it harder to develop relationships with pupils because my time with them was very limited and thus, too was my knowledge of each individual pupil. In other words, I now found myself in the same position as my two colleagues had done earlier. I did not have the same knowledge or understanding of the pupils and was unable to develop such good relations as I would have been able to as a 'generalist'.

In addition, I found it difficult to provide quality feedback on the assessment of my language pupils' ML homework tasks as one whole week had lapsed since our last session. I felt that any written feedback was almost worthless as by the time I was face to face again with the pupils the learning intentions and the success criteria were no longer at the forefront of their minds. Furthermore, having to revise the previous week's lesson also slowed down the learning process since I was unable to cover the same amount of topics as I had covered previously when I taught Spanish to my own class as a generalist.

I fully appreciate the argument for specialist teachers being responsible for the effective teaching and learning of the ML in the primary school and recognise the many benefits:

- excellent expert linguistic model;
- correct pronunciation;
- spontaneity.

However, these advantages cannot be turned into real learning without the appropriate pedagogic expertise. Generalists have expertise in primary pedagogy, and they have rich relationships with pupils to underpin motivation and learning. Most importantly, they have the ability to embed and integrate the ML into all aspects of classroom life. This idea is supported by Driscoll (1999: 36) who claims that "generalists engage with pupils as learners much more directly."

If the inclusion agenda is really to be met in the case of ML it has to be recognised that the organisational arrangements cannot be costly. Similarly, ML teaching will have to be provided as a matter of professional responsibility not just as an expression of interest as may previously have been the case. After all, primary teachers do not have a degree in English, Maths, Music or Art but are expected to deliver a curriculum covering these five areas. It should therefore be mandatory for students to study a ML during initial teacher training so that they can deliver this subject along with the rest of the curriculum.

Having experienced both the 'Generalist' and 'Specialist' model over a number of years, I can confidently claim that the generalist approach holds many more benefits for our young ML learners. I believe that this approach is much better suited to develop pupils' confidence, enhance their self-esteem, promote success in ML learning, open up their minds to other cultures and languages and to support their natural inquisitiveness to learn and "have a go" than the sporadic interjection of the specialist approach. This may be a way forward in other areas of education in order to develop the four national priorities envisaged by *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Scottish Executive 2003).

During a recent Labour Party Conference, Jack McConnell stated his desire for ML to be taught from Primary 3 upwards. For this to be the case, I believe the 'Generalist' versus 'Specialist' debate needs to be explored further and adequate training in all four components of language learning and acquisition provided at the initial stage of a teacher's career.

**References:**

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