

$$\frac{A_{10}}{844}$$

Barbara Dawes
**An English Language Syllabus
for Italian Primary School Teachers**



Copyright © MMXII
ARACNE editrice S.r.l.

www.aracneeditrice.it
info@aracneeditrice.it

via Raffaele Garofalo, 133/A-B
00173 Roma
(06) 93781065

ISBN 978-88-548-4966-2

*No part of this book may be reproduced
by print, photoprint, microfilm, microfiche, or any other means,
without publisher's authorization.*

I edition: July 2012

Index

- 9 Preface
- 11 Introduction
- 15 Part one
Early Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: An
Overview
- 33 Part two
English for the Primary School Teacher. A Language
Learning Profile
- 59 Part three
Designing an English Language Syllabus for Primary
School Teachers
- 103 Part four
Building linguistic repertoires from the analysis of teach-
er discourse: a case study
- 135 Appendix
- 139 References

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to the following persons who have helped me in the preparation of this study:

Rita Calabrese, whom I worked alongside in the Italian Ministry's English Language Training Project for Primary School Teachers for the preparation of the A2 syllabus which was the starting point for the present research;

Christopher Taylor, who, as President of the Italian Association of University Language Centres (AICLU), was deeply involved in the aforementioned Language Training Project and who kindly took the time to read the study on completion and to write the preface;

Colomba La Ragione, Director of the Language Centre at the University of Naples 'Parthenope' for her constant support, encouragement and direction;

August Viglione, a friend and colleague, for his meticulous proof reading and editing of the text.

Finally, special thanks go to Josephine Sessa, Principal of The International School, Naples, for her willingness to take part in the project and for kindly giving permission to carry out the recordings of lessons at The International School, and to Jennifer Coppola, the Social Studies teacher who generously agreed to the recordings of her lessons and whose patience and cooperation through the project has been indispensable.

Preface

This monograph is particularly timely in that the large-scale and ambitious project to provide all Italian primary schools with English teaching (*progetto di ricerca nell'ambito del piano di formazione linguistica e metodologica in lingua inglese per i docenti di scuola primaria*) is drawing to a close, at least as regards the first phase. The project, launched by the Italian Ministry of Education (comunicazione di servizio 1446/05) and culminating in the publication of the volume *Quale profilo e quali competenze per l'inglese del docente di scuola primaria* thus had as its main objective the “formazione linguistico-comunicativa e metodologico-didattica” of primary school teachers not yet qualified to teach English.

The project brought together experts from the ministries of Education and of Research, as well as from the *Agenzia nazionale per lo sviluppo dell'autonomia scolastica*, from various universities and teaching organisations and from AICLU, the national association of university language centres. Naturally the meetings of representatives of such diverse entities led to fruitful and constructive debate as to which approach to follow, what content and strategies to teach, which methodology to encourage and indeed, what syllabus to adopt. Several versions were proposed and discussed, some already in existence, others in the pipeline, as testimony to the openness of the discussion and the quality of the proposals.

Designing a Foreign Language Syllabus for Italian Primary School Teachers, the work of Barbara Dawes from the *Partenope* University

in Naples, is clearly another valuable contribution. It picks from ideas already present in previously illustrated sillabi and blends these with some original ideas regarding thematic modules, cross-curricular links and the use of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning), that is the methodology whereby English is taught together with other subjects. The choice of words here is deliberate in that the debate as to whether English is taught through history, geography, mathematics, etc. or whether those subjects are taught through English, is controversial. The monograph deals with this question intelligently, discussing how it can be made to work in the primary school context. This, together with other important insights into how to teach the English language to young children, point to the usefulness of this volume at a national, and indeed international, level.

Christopher Taylor
University of Trieste

Introduction

In the last two decades there has been great interest in the early learning of foreign languages (hereafter EFLL) in Italy as in the rest of Europe which has given rise to a number of government programmes to promote the learning and teaching of foreign languages in primary and nursery schools. The investment in EFLL is part of a general European language policy to raise the level of foreign language proficiency in all member states and to promote the learning of European languages. Italy has responded vigorously to European directives and there has been a concerted effort on the part of Italian authorities to improve foreign language proficiency among Italian schoolchildren and students. In the primary sector the most recent initiative is the law introducing English as a mandatory subject from the first year of primary school¹. The decision to entrust the teaching to primary school generalists has posed an enormous challenge: that of training primary practitioners, many of whom possess very little foreign language background, to teach English. Moreover, the specificity of the training requirement deriving from the learners' target environment, the primary school, makes it necessary to design a language programme which can respond to the specific needs of both the trainees and their future pupils.

Over the last few years a number of studies on primary foreign languages (hereafter PFL) has appeared and research into the best

1. Decree Laws n. 53 28 marzo 2003 n. 53 19 February 2004 (Riforma Moratti).

ways of delivering PFL and into early language teaching methodology has grown ². Such studies have, of course, a direct relevance for language training programmes aimed at the primary teachers and they need to be borne in mind in the designing of special syllabuses.

In view of the present mandatory status of English in Italian primary schools, the aim of the present study is to propose an English language syllabus for Italian primary school teachers. Nonetheless, it should be borne in mind that much of what will be discussed is relevant for all foreign language teaching.

The study is divided into three parts. Part one provides the background to the project: in order to understand the main issues involved in the creation of the syllabus, we will provide an overview of early language learning and teaching and trace the evolution of European and Italian foreign language policy in the primary sector.

2. On early foreign language learning and teaching methodology: Lightbrown, P., Spada, N. (2009) *How Languages Are Learned*, OUP, Oxford, 3rd edition; Daloiso, M. (2007) *Early Foreign Language Teaching*, Perugia, Guerra Edizioni; Pinter, A. (2006) *Teaching Young Language Learners: Oxford Language Teachers' Handbook Series*, Oxford, OUP; Cameron, L. (2002) *Teaching Languages to Young Learners*, Cambridge CUP; On foreign languages in the primary school: Jones, J., Coffey, S. (2006) *Primary Modern Foreign Languages*, London, David Fulton Publishers; Mazzotta, P. (a cura di) (2002) *Europa, Lingue e Istruzione Primaria*, Torino, UTET; Sharpe, K. (2001) *Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary School*, London, Kogan Page Limited; Driscoll, P., Frost, D. (1999) *The Teaching of Modern Foreign Languages in the Primary School*, Routledge, London; on European early learning programmes: Blondin, C. et al. (1998) *Foreign Languages in Primary and Pre-school Education: Context and outcomes, a review of recent research within the European Union*, CILT; Doyle, P., Hurrell, A. (eds.) (1997) *Foreign Language Education in Primary Schools*, Council of Europe Press.; Edelenbos, P., Johnstone, R.M. (eds) (1996) *Researching Languages at Primary Schools: some European perspectives*, London: CILT; Hurrell, A., Satchwell, P. (1996) *Reflections on Modern Languages in Primary Education. Six Case Studies*. CILT. On teaching English to young learners: Bondi, M., Toni B., Guelfi D. (ed.) (2006) *Teaching English, Ricerca e pratiche innovative per la scuola primaria*, Napoli, Tecnodid; Bianchi, C., Corasaniti, P.G., Panzarasa, N. (2004) *L'inglese nella scuola primaria L'insegnamento della lingua straniera in una dimensione europea*, Roma, Carocci Editore; Edwards, C., Willis, L. (eds) (2005) *Teachers Exploring Tasks in English Language Teaching* Palgrave Macmillan; Pinter, A., Wang, C., Rixon, S. (2003) *Teaching English in the Primary School: from Theory to Practice*: Beijing: Beijing University Press; Moon, J. (2000) *Children Learning English*, Oxford, Macmillan; Vale, D., Feunteun, A. (1995) *Teaching Children English*, Cambridge CUP.

Part two relates the theory of languages for special purposes (LSP) to the syllabus and examines the learners' language profile. Part three presents the language syllabus and discusses its contents. Part Four presents samples of teacher discourse based on a mini corpus of lesson tape-scripts with the view to identifying a number of useful discourse functions and linguistic repertoires to be included in a pedagogic language syllabus for primary school teachers who intend to teach English adopting a CLIL approach.

Part one
Early Foreign Language
Learning and Teaching:
An Overview

1.1. EFL: some theoretical issues

Over the last fifty years there has been much debate as to the advantages of an early start in foreign language education. Opinion has tended to polarise with detractors arguing that it can actually damage foreign language development and supporters claiming that it can considerably enhance subsequent foreign language learning.

In the mid-twentieth century interest in EFL was initially triggered by studies in developmental psychology, which emphasised the emotional disposition and intellectual readiness of young children to learn a foreign language (Gesell 1957, Ilg 1956), and neurophysiology, with its critical period hypothesis (hereafter CPH) and the concept of early brain plasticity (Penfield & Roberts, 1959, Lenneberg (1967). The idea that children are natural language learners gave rise to a number of experiments in primary schools both in America and in Europe in the 1960s, although these did not always yield the desired results and they were abandoned after reports claimed that there had been very little improvement in the proficiency of the children taking part¹. The theories relating to CPH

1. An early experiment of FLT was conducted from 1963 to 1973 in the United Kingdom as a government sponsored pilot scheme to test the feasibility of starting French from the age of eight but was abandoned after the publication of a very damning official report in 1974 (Burstall, C. *et al.*, (1974), *French in the Primary School: Primary French in the Balance*, Windsor, NFER Publications) which put an end to further experimenta-

and stages of development were challenged and the idea that age alone accounts for language proficiency came under review. At the same time other studies appeared arguing that the more highly developed learning strategies of older learners can compensate for early plasticity (van Parreren 1976) and that an early start has no real advantage.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, new research applied theories from cognitive psychology about meaningful learning and constructivism (Piaget, Ausubel) and from social cultural theory (Vygotsky) to second language acquisition. These began to show that other factors, such as the need to provide children with a setting for meaningful and action-based learning (McLaughlin, Rossman & McCloud 1983) as well as with appropriate “scaffolding” (Bruner 1976) and with a sufficient exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen 1981), are important in determining student success and that they need to be taken account of in implementing early language programmes. Criticism of the audio-lingual methods adopted in the early experiments revealed the need for primary teaching to adopt meaningful use of the language and de-emphasise grammatical analysis and rote vocabulary use.

The research into second language acquisition has continued over the last decades² producing variations on the “critical period” theme, as in the “sensitive period” theory, the “tuning in” hypothesis and the “natural sieve” hypothesis (Cohen 1991). More recently,

tion in the country for the next twenty years. For an analysis see Sharpe K (2001) *op. cit.*, London especially pp4–9. On the FLES (Foreign Languages in the Elementary School) experiments in the United States: Saunders Semonsky, C.M., Spieldberger, M., A., (2004), *Early Language Learning: A Model for Success*, Connecticut, IAP; M.A., Curtain H., & Pelsola C.A. (1993) *Languages and Children: Making the Match* (second edition), White Plains, NY, Longman. Alongside these experiments were the more successful immersion programmes in Canada for children in bilingual communities, the context of which was quite different.

2. For critiques of the current literature and general overviews see Larson-Freeman, D., Long, M. (1991) *An Introduction to Second Language Acquisition Research*, New York, Longman; Long, M., Doughty, C. (eds) (2003) *The Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford, Blackwell; Mitchell, M., Myles, F. (eds) (2004, 2nd edition) *Second Language Learning Theories*, London, Arnold.

while ELTM (Early Language Teaching Methodology) has tended to embrace Krashen's natural acquisition theory, favouring the interiorisation of language by the child in an unconscious way (Daloiso 2007), other experts insist on the differences between the process of language learning in a natural context (as in the case of L1) and that of learning a foreign language through classroom instruction. The latter situation, it is argued, requires a different approach and the need to provide a deliberate and sharp focus on selected linguistic phenomena (Sharpe, 2001). A 2006 European report³ has reiterated the value of helping children to develop proficiency through metalinguistic awareness, and to learn to think strategically through monitoring and regulating their learning.

It is doubtful that there will ever be complete agreement regarding early language learning theory. There are in fact so many variables at play and, as Johnstone (1994) points out, age is only one of many determinants of the ultimate proficiency attained in a second or foreign language. Other factors, such as the appropriateness of the methodology used, teacher skills, the learners' individual disposition and motivation as well as institutional factors, such as the amount of time allotted to language learning, all have to be taken into consideration.

Nonetheless, there is now general consensus that while a more receptive disposition is only an enabling factor and an early start is neither strictly necessary nor a sufficient condition for the attainment of proficiency in another language, if the right educational environment is produced an early start can be extremely beneficial and facilitate the introduction of a second foreign language at a later stage. Johnstone (2002) observes that an early start makes it more likely that children will acquire a good command of the sound system, that they will experience less anxiety and that they will have more overall time learning the language. Above all, an early start to foreign languages is seen to positively impact on the child's overall language and educational development and in particular to help

3. *The Main Pedagogical Principles Underlying the Teaching of Languages to Very Young Learners*, Final Report of the EAC 89/04, Lot 1 Study, European Commission, October 2006.

engender a positive attitude towards other cultures⁴. It is this educational and pedagogical argument which underpins the primary foreign language policy in Europe which we will now examine.

1.2. Early Foreign Language Policy in Europe

Although the educational arguments for an early start to language teaching had been expounded by linguists and educationalists as early as the 1960s (Sterne 1967), it was only at the very end of the 1980s and in the 1990s that European language programmes specifically targeted young learners and began to promote the generalised introduction of foreign language learning in primary schools as a major policy initiative. Up till then provision widely varied in Europe both between countries and within countries⁵. In some European nations, foreign language learning had been a permanent part of the national primary curriculum for many years⁶, while in others

4. Johnstone, R. (2002) *Addressing the Age Factor: Some Implications for Languages Policy*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe, observes that early language learning “fosters underlying qualities such as a child’s literacy, language awareness and personal development....it provides a formative educational experience which will encourage children to shape their own plurilingual and multicultural identity as befits the modern world in which they live” (p. 19); Jones, J., Coffey, S (2006) *op.cit*, argue that contentious gains in proficiency, in terms of measurable stocks of knowledge specific to a language, are not the most important reason for an early start, but rather openness to different modes of communication through the development of a repertoire of effective language learning strategies and the fostering of positive attitudes towards language learning, are the most significant benefits of an early start.

5. For comparative data on early FL provision in European primary schools see: *Foreign Language Teaching in Schools in Europe*. A comparative study, Eurydice, 2001, especially paragraph 2.1; and the subsequent publication *Key Data on Teaching Languages at School*, Eurydice, 2005, in particular Fig B3 p.28. (Download available at website: <http://www.eurydice.org/portal/page/portal/Eurydice/showPresentation?pubid=025EN>).

6. In the bilingual Benelux countries of Luxembourg and the German-speaking part of Belgium – where foreign languages include languages with official status and minority regional languages – primary foreign languages had been introduced in the first half of the twentieth century. Since the 1950s they had become part of the compulsory primary curriculum in several Nordic countries, firstly in Denmark (1958), and subse-

it had been introduced in certain regions of the country as an initiative or requirement of local and regional authorities, sometimes on an experimental basis⁷; in other countries still, as we have already seen in the case of the United Kingdom, early experimenting with foreign languages was abandoned and the subject was dropped completely from the primary curriculum.

At the European level, the revival of interest in early foreign language learning received initial impetus from the shift in perspective of the Union's language policy: while back in 1976 it had called upon member states to ensure that all pupils learned at least one foreign language, in 1995 the European Commission's White Paper recommended that all students should be proficient in at least two European languages and have a working knowledge of a third as an essential qualification for citizens to contribute to the construction of an integrated Europe and to enable them to benefit from the professional and personal opportunities of a single and increasingly enlarged market. The commitment to multilingualism, which is currently one of the cornerstones of European language policy, also has a political motivation, of course: while it is generally acknowledged that the Union needs a vehicular language to achieve mastery in business, industry and the profession and to facilitate general communication between the citizens of a continent with over 40 indigenous languages, the widespread adopting of English as the first foreign language in nearly all European countries has obvious political and cultural drawbacks which European policy makers are seeking to redress through the promotion of plurilingualism as the basis of the European educational policy.

The other important development in perspective which has impacted on the promotion of primary foreign languages concerns the

quently in Sweden (1962) and Finland (1970); similarly, in eastern and central European countries primary foreign language provision had long involved the compulsory teaching of Russian although this was more often than not treated as a second rather than a foreign language.

7. In Italy, for example, Balboni refers to experimentation with primary foreign languages in the 1950s and 1960s in parts of Tuscany and in the bilingual regions of the Aosta Valley and the Trentino–Alto Adige/Sudtirolo. See: Balboni, P. (1988) *Storia degli insegnamenti linguistici nella scuola italiana dall'Unità ai giorni nostri*, Padova, ed. Liviana.

more recent attention to the development of intercultural competences and their contribution towards building European citizenship. Whereas in the 1980s the main objective and thrust of European action and programmes was to teach children languages for practical communication through the adoption of the communicative approach to language teaching and learning⁸, now the aim is to develop both linguistic and intercultural skills which are seen as essential if children are to be fully equipped to live and work in today's multilingual and multicultural world. Back in the 1960s one of the early advocates of primary modern language teaching had argued that the traditional vernacular view of primary education was unrealistic in a world in which half the population was bilingual and many communities were clearly multicultural⁹. Thirty years on, with the enlargement of Europe, globalisation and increased international mobility, such a view is even more compelling.

With the emphasis on plurilingualism and intercultural communicative competence, early language learning began to take on heightened significance and relevance. On the one hand, it was argued that the early introduction of one foreign language would facilitate the learning of another language at a subsequent stage, helping children to nurture a language acquisition disposition and to make them aware of the language learning process. Closely related to this argument is the important question of motivation and the idea that, by fostering interest for languages from an early age through a different approach, negative attitudes to language learning which often undermined FLE in later school would be countered¹⁰. On the

8. These aims were reflected in the objectives of the early primary school projects in which school teachers focused on children's linguistic competence and achievement in basic skills: first listening comprehension and speaking, then reading and writing. Little attention was given to the cognitive and attitudinal dimension.

9. Stern, H. (1969) *Languages and the Young School Child*, OUP.

10. This is one of the key ideas underlying the recent resurrection of modern languages in UK primary schools with the commitment to introducing foreign language learning in every primary school by the year 2010 and the current implementation of pilot projects which the British Government hopes will reverse the negative attitudes toward learning languages and the very poor grades attained by students in languages

other hand, it was claimed that foreign language learning could help young children develop a positive attitude towards other cultures and ways of thinking, promoting reciprocal tolerance, respect and appreciation for diversity, especially drawing on young children's natural curiosity and openness.

Thus, since the 1990s, alongside the wider educational justification for an early start to foreign languages and the view that it would contribute to supporting children's overall cognitive development, helping them to improve interpersonal skills, social skills and awareness of their mother tongue, the requirements of multilingualism and intercultural competence, compounded by the insistence on lifelong learning as an essential concept in Europe's new educational policy, have made early language learning a focal point in European programmes and actions.

In particular, as part of the Council of Europe's Modern Language Project "Language Learning for European Citizenship" carried on between 1989 and 1997, international workshops and seminars involving cooperation between various European countries were carried out on the subject of foreign language teaching in primary schools. Various aspects were treated relating to objectives and content, methods, organization, continuity, evaluation and teacher education and several key issues or dichotomies emerged which continue to be extremely relevant to present day policy makers, curriculum planners and schools:

- should primary foreign languages be integrated into the curriculum or should they be treated as a separate subject?
- should the main aim of primary FLT be language learning or raising linguistic and cultural awareness?

until now. This is a radical change in the UK's language policy: compulsory languages at the age of 14 have been dropped and through the focus on early foreign language learning the government hopes to lay the foundations for a "languages revolution" by getting pupils interested in languages at an early stage and fostering a positive attitude which will make pupils keen to carry on studying languages in secondary school in the UK. On the government's new language policy and strategy see the official publication issued in 2002 by the Department for Education and Skills, now the Department for Children, Schools and Families, *Languages for All, Languages for Life: A Strategy for England* .