

ENGLISH, MOTHER TONGUE : PRIMARY PROGRAMME

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

1. The aims of mother tongue teaching in primary classes have always included the acquiring and improvement of skills in reading and writing. Because of the difficulties these skills present for many pupils, they have been given a great deal of attention and practised through a wide variety of exercises. But increasingly they are now seen, not as isolated activities, but in a context of language growth and development.

As the complexity of language has been realised, and the way in which children acquire it better understood, it has become apparent that the problems of the teacher of the mother tongue are not those of the teacher of a foreign language. The six-year-old child comes to school already able to understand and employ most of the common structures of his native language, and already possessing a considerable vocabulary. During all his school years the lessons concerned with his reading, writing and speaking are only part of his total awareness of language. His more confident grasp of more complicated structures continues to be gained intuitively, as he needs to interpret more complex experiences. The teacher, of course, seeks opportunities for intervention and knows the occasions for direct instruction. But the major part of his skill lies in extending the range of that experience, both at first hand and through literature, in such ways that new demands are made upon the child's language, in listening, talking, reading and writing. The teacher's skill will order his material and his lessons to secure progress in all these modes of language, but his first task is to make certain that the child senses the pleasures and profits of learning to read and write, and of talking with and listening to people, whether teacher or other children.

There will be times when one or other of these four modes will be given immediate priority, but, if they are to be meaningful to the child in school as in everyday life they must be seen to be interdependent and to lead into each other. Every lesson is a language lesson in the sense that the mother tongue is being taught continually - or, perhaps more accurately in the European Schools context, most lessons are.

2. This last qualification is important since there is in any case a significant proportion of children from families where English is literally not the mother-tongue, which may militate against the growth of its usage in the home. In addition, the local reinforcement of English, through television, cinema, or libraries is not extensive.

3. Another feature which may be specific to the English-speaking section is that a number of young children may have had fairly considerable time in a nursery or an infants school before they join the European Schools. Such a school will have provided the child with a range of books and a wide experience of stories and poems, beyond those even of a good home. It may also have organised its teaching and learning in an elastic way, which will have allowed children to progress at their own rates. Thus some of these children at the age of five or six will already be reading or on the point of reading.

4. In aiming at a growing control of oral and written language, enabling children to express themselves and to communicate with others, the following objectives can be listed.

a) Oral English

The prime mode of expression and communication is speech, and Piaget's work has demonstrated the close link between speech and play in very young children. Almost half of their speech is in the category of monologue or soliloquy (ego-centric speech) with the child speaking to himself, even in the immediate presence of other children.

The conclusion to be drawn is that teachers of young children need to make provision for this type of language within the class. Opportunities need to be provided for children to play, in the presence of but not necessarily with other children, in situations which they are creating for themselves. Play situations will stimulate this ego-centric speech, and classroom equipment which includes, for example, a home corner, dolls and dolls' clothes, improvised roadways and airports, constructional toys, water, sand and clay will allow these situations to be created. The purpose of affording opportunities for children to play, and to talk while they play, is to provide for a specific type of speech development, requiring encouragement, or perhaps intervention, by the teacher from time to time. Thus enter incidental conversation, between child and teacher or between child and child; topics of interest to the child from home or his surroundings; topics from his occupations in school or outside response to story, poem or song; the telling of stories whether reproduction or invention. With older children the work grows increasingly sophisticated, and such resources as a tape recorder or slide projector are valuable.

It is with older children, also, that too great a concentration on individual work cards, employed to allow children to get on for themselves, may stifle talk, and inhibit the learning which can only come from attempting to formulate ideas in speech.

b) Reading

i Possibly the most important help and stimulus to reading is a plentiful supply of books which are suitable for the children in each class; the opportunity to display them and make them available to look at, leaf through, read and perhaps borrow; and occasions when the teacher reads from them. It is in such a climate that the teachers' materials and instruction are most successful.

All children do not learn to read at the same age any more than they learn to talk or walk at the same age. There is need for understanding and tolerance and an avoidance of stress, from both teacher and parent, for the late starter. By and large, boys do not come to reading as easily as girls. Conversation, play, story respect for questions, are all helpful, probably essential.

The consensus of research findings indicates that there is no single method of teaching reading that is best for all children all the time. In consequence, teachers tend to use modes of instructions, activities and materials drawn from a variety of sources. There are dangers in this situation. For instance, the freedom of teachers to select their own combination of methods can lead to such differences between the work carried out within classrooms in a single school, that some children may become bewildered and confused. The lack of ordered continuity in the teaching of reading could become grave without regular consultation, and it is imperative that teachers keep themselves informed of new interpretations of this difficult process.

Each school needs for the teachers at least a nuclear collection of books on literacy, and the forthcoming publication of the report of the Committee of Inquiry into Reading and the Use of English will be a major revaluation. In any research on the teaching of reading the single indisputable fact is that the teacher variable is more important than the method or approach.

The most useful line of approach seems to be to regard the acquisition of reading as a process in which a number of inter-related skills and competencies are brought together to discover meaning in print. From this point of view, a "method" of teaching reading would be an organised attempt to structure a programme that enables a child to master those skills or behaviours (eg grapheme - phoneme relationships) which are essential to translate the written code, and at the same time a programme that provides for a developing competency in language (eg the command of information and reasoning). A constant review of such a programme is more valuable than the composition of a rigid programme for all to follow.

ii The fundamental importance of learning to decode print and manuscript can over-shadow the need to develop intermediate and higher skills, and to move towards adult reading. The final objective of fluent, silent reading must be remembered, and here there is no substitute for a considerable supply of books both fiction and non-fiction.

The further skills are probably most easily categorised as understanding or comprehension, although they can only roughly be regarded as successive. The reader must first literally comprehend in order to identify and recall material, and it is this literal comprehension only which many books and reading laboratory materials exercise. They have one grave defect, that they do not satisfy the prime reason for reading, which should be that it is undertaken to satisfy some previous purpose. In addition, since they are convenient classroom exercises and over-used, they may stand in the way of developing skills of reorganisation, inference, evaluation and appreciation which any reading programme should bear in mind.

c) Literature

The role of literature is to bring the child into an encounter with language in its most complex, varied and rewarding forms, so providing him with a personal resource in coming to terms with his experience and his fantasies, and giving him an imaginative insight into other people and their lives.

The teacher needs to be able to present literature which is more mature than the child would seek out for himself or take in by himself. Most commonly it would be presented by reading, but record, tape and radio broadcasts can all assist.

Poetry has a special claim to inclusion in children's education. Carefully chosen poetry will not only throw light on life but will foster sentiments and nourish the imagination. Poetry, therefore, should not be lightly chosen or read to children without preparation. Children enjoy colour and texture of language and sound, unexpected and exciting words and clear images, which help them to see clearly. These are the poetic qualities which appeal to children, and they will gain from stories, poems of action, poems of humour, poems which describe both the world they know and the world they dream about. Even difficult poems sometimes have passages in them which children can appreciate.

d) Writing

A child learns to speak naturally, but he must learn to write consciously. Writing is in part an unnatural activity, and one of the central purposes of a school is to teach the child to write. Writing begins most readily from talk, and the first motivation is provided for a child when a teacher gives shape and some permanence to his stories and news by putting them on paper for him. Children begin to write at ages and stages which vary even more than those they start to read. The child who has been exposed to storytelling and children's books, and to parents and friends who write freely, is more likely to begin earlier and to be successful. He learns to copy and then to write independently for himself.

As children gain in proficiency it becomes clear that the essential requirements in free written work are to have a reason for writing, to have plenty of time to write, and time to finish. The re-telling of stories will help good sequence because this will be controlled by the action of the story. Descriptions of visits and experiences will offer occasion for writing, preceded by discussion which will help in the choice of vocabulary. Time must be found for personal and imaginative writing. As he gets older he reaches towards more impersonal objective writing, which can sustain a degree of exposition. The teachers' influence is greatest when discussion and correction take place between him and the individual. From the study of each child's work, he will know what teaching to give in spelling, grammatical accuracy and punctuation.

e) Language Study

Children acquire most of the grammar of their mother tongue intuitively and before ever they start school. There may still be a case for making explicit a form of linguistic behaviour which they have implicitly assumed, although research does not support the argument. There may be a special case in the European schools, with their considerable emphasis on the teaching of modern languages, so that some pedagogical exchange is possible between teachers of English as a native language and English as a second or foreign language, and teachers of other languages also. If such discussion requires the continuance of traditional grammatical categories, it is imperative that teachers inform themselves of more recent and more carefully refined descriptive grammars, and of their implications for teaching. In particular, stances taken over grammar may valuably be replaced by explorations into usage. Usage is concerned less with the predictable structures and word forms, more with their changing status. A child needs help in acquiring varieties of structures and forms, and in selecting from among them those most appropriate to his purpose.

Children are readily interested in words and their uses. However, not all children will understand abstract terms, and any further teaching of grammar is best left until the transfer to the secondary department. Of course, most children of primary age will be learning a second language, and they will be confronted with some grammar almost from the beginning. But the grammar of English is quite different from that of another language, and the grammar of the latter is much better learned with the language itself.

When primary-age children learn a foreign language, their work in writing and translating can keep pace with the grammar they have learned, but when children use their own language they employ sentences and expressions which range far beyond their knowledge of grammar.

f) Drama

The beginnings of drama are to be found in children's play. As children grow older they act versions of stories they have heard adding to them from their own imagination. At first the play will be through mime and movement, later the children add speech - usually very much to the point, and only secondary to the movement.

As the children get older the dialogue plays a bigger part and as fourth grade pupils the abler children will have little or no difficulty in writing their own scripts. An important aspect of the creativity of dramatic speech as distinct from writing is the inexhaustible fund of acceptable forms and idioms available to children from a very early age; only at the top of the primary school are the children able to interpret satisfactorily other people's plays.

g) Punctuation

The use of some punctuation marks (a period, or question mark) is essential, and direct instruction in them is an economy of time. The use of others (a comma, an exclamation mark) may be a matter of judgment, and the writing of professionals shows that their use varies with a writer's intentions - indeed, the punctuation system is probably not adequate to all of our writing needs. Punctuation should arise from a child's own written work so that its purpose (and its variety) become apparent. Teaching could centre on full stops and commas, and on question and exclamation marks, while speech marks and possessive apostrophes might be left to the fourth grade or later. It may be necessary, and it could be illuminating for the child, to compare and contrast conventional usage in other languages in school eg the use of the comma in German.

h) Spelling

There is no single road to acceptable competence in spelling. Some children are better spellers than others, probably because their visual retention is superior. Many children assimilate correct spelling through reading, but some will need the support of a few rules and of systematic learning of the more common words which present spelling difficulties. Spelling is important, but it must take its appropriate place in the wider sweep of the child's learning, and if one of the main aims of the teacher is to help the child to express ideas on paper, then there is perhaps a reason not to over-stress correctness of spelling in the early stages. Spelling teaching which is based on lists of words almost wholly unconnected with the child's immediate needs is unlikely to be of the same help as that which regards spelling as an integral part of the work which is being done.

Instilling a habit of consulting dictionaries is probably the most lastingly helpful thing a teacher can do.

i) Handwriting

This is a complicated skill and no child acquires it naturally or easily. While it is being learned, the child can hardly be expected to give his full attention to what he is trying to communicate. Provision needs therefore to be made for the two activities - handwriting and communication - not to interact too forcibly one upon the other. A good form should be chosen to begin with, one from which each child can develop his own style.

j) Resources

Of the material support essential to a teacher of the mother tongue, a plentiful supply of books, fiction and non-fiction, both in a school library and in classrooms, is paramount. Text books of varying kinds will be wanted by most teachers, and opportunities for the duplication of teachers' own material is very desirable.

Cassette tape records and simple recording facilities are increasingly important, with access to a record player, a slide projector, and radio and television programmes where appropriate.

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SCHEME OF WORK

To permit a degree of elasticity and to allow for differences in individual progress at this stage of education, the syllabus is arranged in three bands - Year 1; Years 2 and 3; Years 4 and 5.

YEAR 1

a) Oral English

i. Speech and Conversation

Opportunities for play with materials and in situations which encourage speech, either ego-centric or social. Conversation between child and child - time should be allowed each day for free conversation among themselves. Conversation between child and teacher, or indeed, other adults.

Encouragement to speak about topics of interest to the child himself, are to talk with others about them - arising from the home, the school environment, local environment, books and broadcasting.

ii. Stories, Poetry, Songs.

Listening each day to stories is very important to small children, and the wealth of folk, fairy and nursery tales from each country should be explored. Nursery rhymes should be read aloud, recited, sung, as should suitable modern verse. The children can re-tell and re-enact the stories and rhymes, which can also be a source of ideas for painting and a model for inventing their own stories.

b) Reading

The class is likely to contain children who have not yet made any start on reading, but also some who have begun to read in other schools. For those who have not yet started, the gradual building up of a sight vocabulary, through name tags, list of children's names, job lists, weather charts, labels on furniture, nature table, etc. The provision of simple library books, largely illustrated. The use of flash cards and picture vocabulary lists, the introduction of graded reading material, and some phoneme and grapheme recognition.

Those who have made a start will be eased into this programme at suitable points.

Records of progress.

c) Writing

Guidance in the use of books, crayons, paints; rhythmic pattern practice; letter patterns; letters of the alphabet - upper and lower case in print script. Copying (writing over or underneath teacher's version) of captions, names, items of news. Progression to joined print script. Work books, news, diary, stories.

Records of progress.

YEARS 2,3

a) Oral English

i. Conversation

- Incidental and free conversation between child and child, between child and teacher (important in multi-lingual environment).
- Conversation arising out of topics of interest to the child: the home, the school, the class, the previous country, the neighbourhood, people and their work eg the postman, nurse, etc local events.
- Child encouraged to listen intelligently to others. Listening exercises to promote this, eg identifying sounds on tape, listening walk, retelling of stories, etc. Child encouraged to improve his language by critical listening.
- Extension of topics for discussion as child's interest and knowledge grows. Television and radio, films, games and hobbies, news. Fantasy material - ghosts, adventure, etc.
- Environmental topics: plants, animals, pets, food, clothing, children of other sections in the school, children of other lands, etc.

ii. Stories

Child listens to folk, fairy and nursery tales told or read by the teacher. Child retells story. He creates his own, being allowed to express himself freely. Conversation about stories read. Progression to simply told versions of legends of other cultures, to stories of historical background and tales of adventure.

Stories from child's own reading as he masters the technique.

iii. Poetry, Rhymes and Song

Teacher reads simple poems and rhymes of interest to the children. Children recite and sing. Children compose their own poems having listened to a poem or seen a picture or heard music.

Progression to narrative and nature poems, children memorise poems of their own choice. Group and individual recitation.

iv. Drama

Dramatisation of stories, poems, rhymes. Puppetry as dramatic expression. Children compose their own sketches and dialogues.

b) Reading

Experience and interest based reading, each child progressing at his own level.

- Pre-reading activities:

Oral work as described in (a)

- The extension of a basic sight-vocabulary, eg names, labels, flash cards, wall lists, greeting cards, posters, advertisements, weather chart, news sheet.
 - Reading games: picture and word matching, matching words to words, matching captions to pictures.
- Reading of simple read-write cards.

- Use of suitably, graded reading scheme or schemes.
- Word study, elementary phonic training, word groups.
- Availability of a variety of simple, well-illustrated books both factual and imaginative for children's use in Book Corner or Library. As technique is mastered, children progress to independent, silent reading both functional and recreational with oral reading when necessary.

Discussion of matter read and questioning for comprehension.

Testing and recording.

c) Writing

To enable the child to give written expression to his experience.

- Use of brushes, crayons, chalks, scissors to develop muscular coordination.
- The copying of words or phrases which give meaning to the child's picture or experience (in conjunction with reading Activities).
- Formal letter and rhythmic patterns as an introduction to handwriting. Use of unjoined print script, at first, leading to the development of a fluent and finished style later.
- Child writes words or phrases from memory, eg his own name, labels, captions for pictures etc.

Simple read-write activities.

- Writing of simple news, leading to class diary, birthday cards, advertisements, etc as technique is mastered.
- Personal and creative writing in response to stimulus, eg an experience, a visual or an aural image, an imaginary situation.
- Writing for individual and group projects and themes.
- Letter writing.
- Picture and word dictionaries in conjunction with oral work.
- Guidance in how to present and exhibit their work.

GRADES IV - V

Language now becomes a more unified activity as the basic techniques are mastered.

a) Oral English

i. Continuation and development of speech and listening as outlined for younger children. Continued importance of incidental conversation between child and child, between child and teacher, of intelligent and critical listening leading to mature thought and appreciation.

- Discussion of topics arising out of personal experience. Project and theme work at individual group and class level: factual material, surveys, polls, interviews,

commentary. News.

- Topics arising from other subjects: Mathematics, environmental study, eg climate, clothing etc, art and craft activities.

- Topical events. Radio and television. Films, Games and hobbies. School outings etc.

Impromptu speech.

- Wide use of books, tapes, films etc.

- General extension of vocabulary in conjunction with reading activities.

- A more formal treatment of oral language children helped in their everyday language by listening critically and imitating the examples of good speech.

Reference to grammatical terms where necessary.

Spelling as required.

ii. Stories

- Narration and discussion of more difficult fairy tales, folk tales, legends, myths and sagas. Tale of adventure, of historical reference and biography.

- Selective reading by the teacher of extracts of good prose with a view to developing a critical and appreciative attitude in the children.

- Access to a wide range of books both non-fiction and fiction, in the school library.

iii. Poetry and Song

Use of anthologies of poetry by the children containing a wide range of lyrical and narrative poetry about people, animals, birds adventure, heroism, travel, etc.

Reading by teacher and pupils.

Discussion and explanation of some poems suited to the ability of the class in order to develop appreciation.

Memorisation of poems of children's own choice.

- Class, group and individual recitation.

- Children encouraged to write in verse. Singing in cases where poems are set to music.

iv. Drama

- Children dramatise plays, stories, poems heard or read.

- Children compose their own plays and dramatise them.

b) Reading

- Extension of reading ability. Reading aloud where necessary.

- Development of functional and recreational reading.

Functional reading for projects and themes. Guidance in selection and note-taking, in the techniques of presentation.

- Creative reading as a stimulus to creative activity-talk, writing, music, drama, poetry, tape recording.

- Increased emphasis on silent reading.

- Extensive use of books and other reading material both fiction and non-fiction. Anthologies of prose and poetry, encyclopedias, reference books.

- The development of reading maturity through responses to selected works.

- Reading tests and records.

iii. Writing

- Consolidation of handwriting skills.

- Development of personal and creative writing - stories, poems, letters, songs, class magazine, news sheet, diaries, dialogues, plays and scripts, events.

- Use of various stimuli, books, films, photographs, experiences.

- Development of objective writing: writing for projects and themes, note taking, reports surveys, etc.

- Direct guidance in presentation of written work, eg punctuation and paragraphing, sentence structure etc as the child requires. Child encouraged to revise and correct.