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Moving On, Broadening Out

A European perspective on the transition between primary and secondary foreign language learning

Cet article pose la question de savoir comment il serait possible d'assurer une continuité dans l'apprentissage / l'enseignement des langues au moment du passage du primaire au degré secondaire. Après une vue d'ensemble de la situation dans divers pays européens, cette contribution rend compte des avancées faites dans le cadre du Projet Comenius «Du primaire au secondaire: continuité de l'enseignement des langues vivantes étrangères». Un ensemble d'activités-pont, dont l'objectif est de permettre aux élèves de transférer les compétences acquises au degré primaire dans le cadre de tâches ouvertes d'écriture et de prise de parole, constitue une des mesures proposées. Le DVD qui se trouve dans le présent numéro permet de visionner des exemples de séquences d'enseignement accompagnés d'un commentaire sur l'implication de ces activités dans la pratique.

1. The state of the art in primary – secondary transition in Europe

The problem of transition between primary and secondary education has been a matter of concern for many years in the educational field. Regarding education in general, plenty of research and literature has been devoted to the issue of transition. Nevertheless, concerning foreign language learning and teaching, research and literature on transition is scarce. This is the reason why a group of universities and teacher training institutions from different European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland) decided to work together to analyse the problem and try to design materials that could contribute to making foreign language (FL) transition smoother. The project Pri-Sec-Co¹ (Primary and Secondary Continuity) had as its main objectives to exchange experiences, collect models of good practice and design bridging tasks in the field of FL to facilitate the transition between the two educational levels.

It is important to point out that although transition may have a common meaning for most of the countries involved in the project, the way in which it takes place differs substantially from one country to another. For instance, whilst German and Austrian pupils move from primary to secondary education at the age of nine/ten, French, Hungarian, Spanish and Swiss pupils change schools at the age of eleven or twelve, which implies that, from a psychological point of view, children are at a different stage of maturity. On the other hand, in Sweden the transition phase is not considered an issue

of concern as children can attend the same school from seven until sixteen years of age. The emphasis placed on foreign languages is also reflected by the number of FL teaching hours. The differences are great in the last classes of primary school: from a minimum of 54 hours per year (France) up to 90 hours per year in Germany, with Switzerland having two foreign languages on the curriculum (ca. 160 hours). In secondary school, the range extends from 80 (in some regions of Austria) to 240 hours (Switzerland) per year.

The first phase of Pri-Sec-Co was concerned with examining the different situations in the countries involved in the project and the various needs as far as improving the continuity of foreign language teaching was concerned. In Germany, since 1995, English and French have been taught from the ages of 6 or 8 in many regions, but there is no real continuity between primary and secondary foreign language teaching, although awareness of the issue is growing and teacher training courses are starting to be organised on the subject. The situation is similar in Austria, where English and French have been taught since 2002 starting at the age of 7, with work only now beginning on ensuring continuity at the secondary level. In Spain, English has been a compulsory subject since 1990, first introduced at the age of 8 and subsequently brought forward to the age of 6 in 2002. Although continuity is addressed in the official documents, there are no guidelines for its implementation.

In Hungary, English, German, and, less frequently, French, Spanish and Italian are taught as of 9 years of age.

In German-speaking Switzerland, French has been taught as of age 10 since the early 1990s. From 2004, primary English started at age 8. For both languages specific transition material striving for continuity between primary and secondary teaching is available on the market. In Sweden English is a compulsory subject from age 11 (since 1969) and is also very present in daily life. As mentioned above, the Swedish school system has no clear break between primary and (lower) secondary levels; the nine years of compulsory schooling from ages 7 to 16 forming one continuous level. Assessment is mainly continuous with national assessments taking place at certain key stages. Finally, France introduced foreign languages into its primary school programmes in 2002 and currently they are taught as of age 6 or 7 in schools where there are qualified teachers. Transition documents for teachers and pupils exist but are poorly used if at all.

2. Scenarios for continuity: issues of methodology and training

The shift from primary to secondary education is a crucial and difficult moment in the learning process of most learners. Most of them are entering their pre-adolescence, a period in which their bodies and minds undergo major transformations which they may not always fully understand or even be aware of. In secondary school the new context can be markedly different from the communicatively oriented, content-based and multisensory approach adhered to in most primary schools (Kolb & Mayer 2010:2). First, there is a greater number of teachers, second, learners are required to have greater autonomy and responsibility, and third, classes may often be larger and more heterogeneously composed. Furthermore, from the close guidance and control by teachers and family during primary education, pupils are now

moving towards greater independence. It is they themselves who have to schedule their time and organize their activities.

Methodology in the area of language teaching usually changes: the larger, heterogeneous groups, the few teaching hours and, often, the unavailability of a specific language classroom, tend to hinder the use of different resources and the development of multisensory activities characteristic of foreign language methodology in primary school (realia, drama, crafts, use of audio-visual materials, etc.). These changes also favour individual work and writing skills at the expense of teamwork and oral activities. For all these reasons, according to a widely held view by most pupils, learning foreign languages is “less fun” in secondary than in primary schools.

Then, in many cases, transition implies a rupture in the learning process due to the different learning cultures and teaching approaches between primary and secondary schools. As Jones (2006: 160) states, “some secondary school teachers simply ignore the foundations that have been laid in the subject and teach MFL as if the children were new to the subject”. It is important to avoid these start-again effects which can reduce many learners’ motivation. This implies the need for the secondary teacher to build upon the competencies primary children bring with them.

There is general agreement that regular meetings between teachers of the two levels are important to increase each side’s knowledge of the teaching methodology of the other level. For Jones (2006: 162), visits to primary schools can be extremely beneficial for secondary school teachers at an early stage of their career as well as lesson observations, which can be a very effective means and form an essential part of the dialogue on transition. Another idea is that of organising meetings between pupils of the two school levels, which in the

few cases which have been observed and described, appear to have aided the younger children with the transition phase. It has also been suggested that parents should have more information about the requirements and methods of FL learning at the new level and school so that they could support their children in the transition phase.

One of the main objectives of the project was to design teacher training modules on continuity which, besides putting in contact teachers from the different levels, could serve as the basis for developing teacher training courses and conferences adapted to the needs and contexts of individual European countries and used for initial or in-service training by teacher trainers or for autonomous learning by teachers themselves².

One task of the teachers of the last year of primary and first year of secondary education should be the building of bridges to facilitate the transition between these two stages: the former by preparing their learners for more autonomy and responsibility, being aware of what is expected from them at secondary level. The latter by knowing how primary pupils have worked and what they have done, without forgetting that, above all, in the first years of secondary education their new learners still have a lot of the child in them.

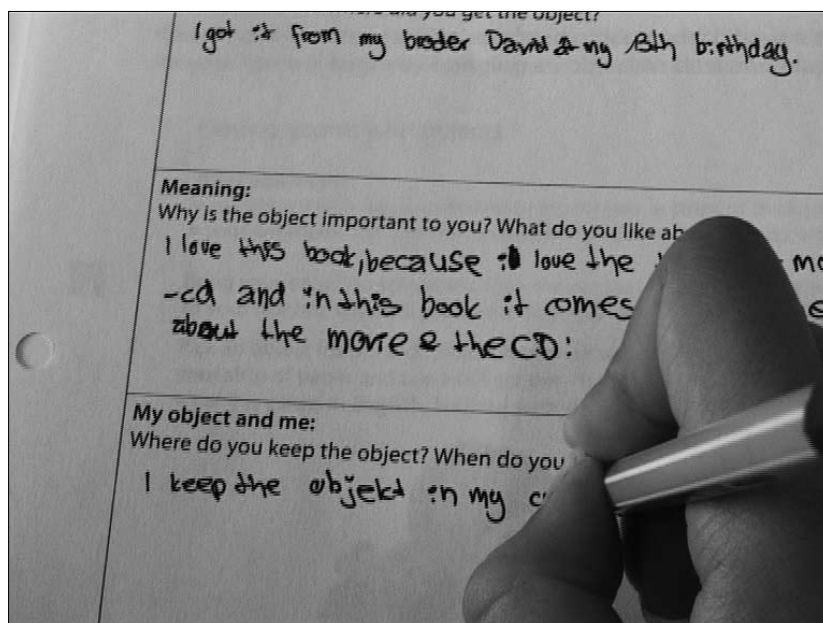
3. Bridging tasks in action

Bridging tasks are learning scenarios which focus on the language acquisition and communication potential around the transition from primary to secondary school. They have been designed by teacher trainers and researchers in the Pri-Sec-Co partner countries, usually in collaboration with practising teachers. The purposes of the bridging tasks are as follows: They ...

- reflect up-to-date primary school methodologies

- motivate pupils to interact and produce language
- display the pupils' growing competences in primary school, to be perceived by secondary school representatives, at CEFR levels A1 and A2 (where A2 refers to receptive competence above all)
- trigger the use of a small number of basic structures and functions consistently (not necessarily free of mistakes)
- offer multi-level prototype designs, making possible similar tasks with different approaches (e.g. easier / more complex reading texts, speaking with more or less language support)
- are often oriented towards a clearly describable outcome or product (task-based learning)
- are designed to provide a stepwise process leading towards the outcome with opportunities for intermediate feedback (peer-to-peer or teacher-led)
- allow pupils to bring in their own pre-knowledge and everyday life experience
- are not based primarily on subject matter acquired and learnt previously at school, but foster a discovery approach to learning (e.g. involving the school environment)
- offer the possibility of primary/secondary loops: part of the task can be recycled at the secondary level (e.g. the presentation of a poster produced at primary level)
- include components of formative and/or project assessment.

Twelve of the bridging tasks (BTs) have been trialled and filmed in primary and secondary schools in Austria, France, Germany, Hungary, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. The task materials as well as the video films have been published on the Pri-Sec-Co website for use in pre- and in-service teacher training as well as self-study by teachers and interested parties. In order to spread the video materials in



Graph 1

higher quality than the downloadable wmv-files, a DVD has been produced, which is distributed as a free supplement to this issue of *Babylonia*.³ Two of the tasks have been presented as part of a *Babylonia* “Encart didactique” (*Babylonia* 2/09) to be adapted to the local circumstances at transition.⁴ In the following, we will present a brief analysis of one of the video samples, focussing on the role of writing as both a learning support and a learning outcome which can enhance continuity. Such analyses could be carried out as study tasks in pre- or in-service teacher training (see the rubric *Study Tasks* in the *Video samples* section on the *Pri-Sec-Co* website).

In this bridging task, “My object, my memories”, the learners create texts which are used in communicative situations, not as an end in themselves. The primary school pupils bring an object to school that means a lot to them and with which they connect a story or experience. They label their objects and memorise the names of their classmates’ objects. In a memory game, they attempt to write down as

many objects as possible. They then create an informal text under given rubrics that will serve as a set of notes for their presentations (see Graph 1). In the newly mixed secondary class, they talk about their souvenir in front of the class, saying why it means a lot to them. For their mini-presentation,



Graph 2

they use notes or a text as support or they speak freely, with different degrees of intensity and information density (see Graph 2).

In Transcripts 1 and 2, two pupils' presentations of their objects are displayed⁵.

Transcript 1: Noah's presentation

I have my object from Zurich and I like my object why it's so scary and on the beginning was the object on little pieces and I glue this to this figure and draw it. And I think in the future is my object important for me because it reminds me of the time of a child.

Transcript 2: Fabiana's presentation

In the holiday I went in the pool. I took my watch. Then I wanted to swim so I put my watch in the grass. After swimming I went at home and I forgot my watch. At home I thought oh I have my ... er I have forgotten my watch in the pool. Then next day I went to the pool, I searched my watch but I didn't found my watch. Next day I went again to the pool. I went to the desk and asked: Have you found my watch? The man on the desk said: Yes, we found a watch and he give ... gave back my watch.

Both pupils have prepared a set of notes as they explored their object before the summer holiday. Before starting to speak, Noah goes back to his desk to get his tiny slip of notes, but then he doesn't actually look at it. Rather, he relies on his memory and speaks quite fluently with some halts and hesitations. Fabiana, on the other hand, has a longer contribution to make, which contains a story element. She reads her presentation off in a rather monotonous voice, displaying her watch in her hand. While the text is formally well constructed and contains different tense forms, there is an impression that she doesn't quite "own" the text. It may well be that a more expert speaker of English supported her in formulating it. It would be difficult to assess the two

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performances according to a systematic set of criteria because of their different modes of delivery and the differing roles that writing and literacy play in the development of the outcomes. However, this continuity-building task is not a testing event, but an occasion for observation and informal diagnosis; a sensitive secondary teacher can get quite a dense account of what the pupils have been doing and can do with the language, using the means available to them. In addition, he or she would be able to spot potentials and needs for the further development of the new pupils' linguistic and communicative competences.

In this task as well as in other BTs, the reason for communicating stems from the information gap in the transition situation itself; this works as long as the pupils are motivated to share such information. To some extent, the methodology of continuity is no different than standard task-based learning or communicative language teaching. What is characteristic of bridging tasks, though, is their use of the authentic social and educational context of the transition phase to create a need for exchange. The focus is thus on the construction and negotiation of shared meanings rather than on the performance of some linguistic feat.

4. Implications for good practice around the transition

Since continuity in foreign language learning is only possible if teachers know exactly what competences,

learning strategies and thinking skills to build on, the assessment of learning outcomes is vital for a successful transition. Examples of good practice assessment material were collected in the Pri-Sec-Co Website with an emphasis on the productive competences of speaking and writing as these are often perceived as difficult to assess during the transition phase. For each set of materials, an original scanned-in example is provided together with annotations on how this material could help with assessment and diagnostic procedures at the transition. Generally speaking, most of these assessment materials can be incorporated within the bridging tasks to provide tools to diagnose individual progress.

According to Hunt et al (2007: 921) "a stream-lined record, compiled by the primary teacher would certainly assist in planning and differentiating in the secondary classroom". To achieve this, primary teachers could establish general minimum objectives and contents for transition to secondary education according to the self-assessment grid proposed by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and the national curricula for modern languages in primary education. These could be used as guidelines to make primary FL teachers aware of the items most secondary FL teachers usually demand from primary learners when they enter secondary education. Some of these minimum objectives could be that learners...

1. know and use basic vocabulary
2. use formulae and chunks to ask and answer orally and in writing in the FL
3. can answer questions or complete information from a simple reading or listening text
4. can write simple dialogues and express them orally.
5. can communicate in English in simple everyday situations
6. recognize and apply basic grammatical structures within the context in which they have worked.



Also establishing evaluation criteria could prove to be useful. The central aim of these criteria would be to orientate primary language teachers on the assessment of their learners at the end of the primary school. Furthermore, minimum previous habits acquired to enter secondary could also be established.

Concerning BTs, there are a number of ways in which these tasks can be combined with existing assessment materials and procedures. In many countries it may be important to link the communicative activities to competence descriptors derived from the CEFR and/or the national curriculum. This will allow users to derive criteria of success and rating scales. However, the BTs are not intended as tests in the first place. Rather, they lend themselves to a portfolio approach, such that pupils' products can be integrated into the ELP Dossier (e.g. a recording of the presentation of a favourite object, or a poster displaying differences between the primary and secondary school buildings and timetables). This will direct secondary teachers' attention to what transiting pupils can do rather than their shortcomings or mistakes.

As the European Language Portfolio is available in most if not all the partner countries but not yet widely used in schools, one of the project's aims has been to promote this tool. The European Language Portfolio is an open-ended record of a pupil's achievement and progress in languages. It includes a self-assessment record of what a pupil can do in listening, speaking, reading and writing with space for examples of work. The ELP, which in most of the partners' countries is being piloted at the moment, seems to be an adequate tool to ensure the continuity of the learning process started at primary level. One of the main functions of the ELP is to inform readers about the communicative abilities and language experiences of their owners. If the benefits of an early start are not to be lost, secondary teachers will need to find ways to start from where their new pupils are and this information can be easily found in each of the three sections of the ELP. Therefore it is important to encourage teachers to work with this tool and to familiarise learners with self-assessment so that they can be more aware of their language learning progression.

Notes

¹ See <http://www.pri-sec-co.eu/en/home.html>. The main outcome of the Pri-Sec-Co project is an interactive website on the topic of transition which enables users to obtain information on the transition situation in different European countries, to get insights into primary and secondary language classrooms, to download teaching materials, videos and study tasks for teacher training and to exchange views on the topic of continuity. It is aimed at teachers, student teachers and teacher trainers.

² See <http://www.pri-sec-co.eu/en/resources-for-teachers/teacher-training.html>

³ The project was financially supported by the European Union's Lifelong Learning Programme. The DVD has been produced with finance from the project. The authors and Babylonia gratefully acknowledge this support.

⁴ An example of such a local adaptation is the primary - secondary transition module in the Explorers series (Achermann & Stauffer 2009).

⁵ The pupils' names have been changed in order to preserve their anonymity.

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