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**Perspectives on transition from primary to secondary school:
What can Modern Foreign Languages teachers in England learn from teachers
in Saxony-Anhalt?**

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Background

One of the objectives of the National Languages Strategy (Department for Education and Skills, 2002) was the introduction of primary modern foreign languages as an entitlement for all pupils. Following a period of consultation on the National Curriculum, the place of PMFL was confirmed as a requirement on all primary schools' timetables for KS2 pupils as from September 2014 (Department for Education (DfE), 2014).

In an earlier article (Chambers, 2012), I reported that approaches to transition adopted were inconsistent and examples of good practice few and patchy; there was little evidence of liaison or collaboration between primary and secondary school colleagues; there was no evidence of exchange of data on pupil performance or progression; pupils, more often than not, started their language learning experience afresh at secondary school, with little regard to what they had learnt or how they had learnt it at primary school. The picture was bleak and suggested that little had been learned from the work of Burstall on 'Primary School French' in the late 60s (Burstall et al., 1974)

It seemed pertinent, therefore, to consider what might be learned from the experiences of teachers in other countries in relation to transition. Saxony-Anhalt, Germany, was chosen as the locus for a comparative study, given that the context and conditions there were similar to those in England.

Research aim and methods

The aim of the study was to examine the variables influencing 25 German teachers of English, concerning the preparatory work they had done to meet the challenge of transition from primary to secondary school for MFL and the transitional strategies they had implemented. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed, given that it allows a flexible approach to the in-depth exploration of issues within a structure considered in advance. The following were the main areas addressed:

- How had schools prepared for transition?
- To what extent had primary and secondary schools collaborated to prepare for transition?
- Was information exchanged between primary and secondary schools relating to pupils transferring between them?
- What arrangements had been put in place to manage transition?

Findings and Discussion

Contrary to expectations, there were arguably more similarities than differences between the English and German contexts in relation to MFL transition from primary to secondary school. For example, none of the sample schools in Saxony-Anhalt had a teacher with specific responsibility for transition in MFL. There were few examples of secondary teachers spending time in primary schools, learning about approaches to teaching, familiarising themselves with materials or collecting data on pupil achievement.

A variety of approaches to diagnosis of pupils' competence was adopted in the secondary schools in both contexts, including testing a few weeks into the first term at the secondary school and/or focussed observation over the course of the first term.

There was very little evidence of secondary school teachers building on teaching methods familiar to their new cohort of pupils.

Findings from both Saxony-Anhalt and the North of England suggest that neither context approaches assessment with a great degree of seriousness.

Whilst considerable overlap has been identified in the two research contexts, I would argue that Saxony-Anhalt demonstrates differences in practice which merit serious consideration by policy makers and MFL teachers elsewhere.

The importance of the place of English on the primary school curriculum is accepted. At the same time, it is acknowledged that primary school pupils need good teachers of English, who can offer a good model of competence, so that the foundation on which secondary teachers build is sound. To address this, since the inception of English on the timetable of all primary schools in Saxony-Anhalt, the state has made a serious investment in the training of primary teachers, including placements in England. Provision for the training of primary teachers in England varies widely. In some areas it is very good indeed (Barton, 2014: 169); in others it is seriously lacking; at best, it could be described as patchy (Board and Tinsley, 2014; Cable et al, 2010).

In many regions, stakeholders are still debating whether it is better for teachers with expertise in teaching primary-age pupils (but perhaps lacking in MFL competence) to teach MFL or for secondary MFL teachers (probably lacking in experience and expertise in teaching primary-age pupils) to take on this responsibility. The situation in England is improving as more Newly Qualified Teachers (NQTs) are entering the system having trained specifically in the teaching of PMFL. Whether the number of courses on offer and whether the number of NQTs coming through is adequate is questionable.

In Saxony-Anhalt one finds a collaborative working relationship between the foreign language department (ie English) and the first language department (ie German). In the English sample, examples of liaison and discussion of teaching approaches between foreign

language and English colleagues were relatively rare. This is partly attributable to the fact that there are fewer examples of teachers combining a foreign language with English in the north of England than there are those combining English (the foreign language) with German in Saxony-Anhalt.

Conclusion

The venture across the border into a province of one of our European neighbours provided both reassurance and guidance. The reassurance relates to the confirmation that we in the North of England are not the only ones to be facing challenges posed by MFL-specific transition. The guidance relates to the seriousness with which PMFL in Saxony-Anhalt is taken. The training of primary teachers in English is appropriately funded, including time spent in England. The focus on one language (ie English) in the primary school facilitates a smoother transition to secondary school with an approved scheme of work, approved teaching materials and an approved method of teaching. This allows a greater degree of common experience and common knowledge shared by pupils and a higher level of foreign language competence. (See Barton 2014, for a strong argument against such an approach.) Colleagues work together more closely, certainly across first and foreign language departments.

September 2014 has come and gone. PMFL now has its place on the primary school timetable. Much work remains to be done before it can be regarded as appropriately resourced, appropriately taught and established. I maintain that we should continue to review the practice in other countries where PMFL has been on the timetable for longer. There is always something to learn from their experiences and good practice.

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