

# The importance of learning languages in school



**Fiona Dunmore has been teaching Spanish and English as a foreign language for over eight years and runs Viva Language Services based in Peterborough, Cambridgeshire which provides foreign language tuition for private and corporate clients of all ages and levels. <http://www.vivalanguageservices.co.uk/> She even teaches via Skype and has some very definite opinions on why languages should be learnt, if not at school then later in life.**

Since we are part of the European Union, we can work, study and live almost anywhere we choose. If we can speak the language of the country we stand a much better chance of living a happy and full life. Economies such as China, Brazil, Russia and India are becoming increasingly important for business, therefore speaking the language of these countries is essential if we want to compete internationally. The UK's export industry has declined over the past ten years, so if we want our economy to recover, we need to look towards international trade with these stronger nations, away from our recession-hit country.

Being able to communicate in other languages is not just important for work, it also offers many more opportunities than if we were monolingual. Languages help us make friends across the globe and learn about other countries and cultures. Foreign travel becomes more rewarding and we are able to experience things that would otherwise not be possible.

Given that languages are a highly valued skill, it is worrying that we lag far behind Europe when it comes to learning languages in school. In 2012 a report by the European Commission on "Language competences for employability, mobility and growth" found that only 9% of pupils in England had reached a level of "independent user" in a foreign language compared with 82% in Sweden. It is for these reasons that we need to acknowledge our lack of foreign language skills and start promoting language study in schools as soon as possible. Education Minister, Elizabeth Truss clearly summarises this: "We must give young people the opportunities they need to compete in a global jobs market - fluency in a foreign language should be another asset our school leavers and graduates are able to boast."

## How can we encourage language learning in schools?

- Allow pupils to choose which language they would like to learn rather than forcing them to learn one they are not interested in. Maybe they have relatives

from a particular country or plan to work there in the future. Perhaps they already travel to the country on holidays and would benefit more from studying that language.

- Help students to recognise how valuable speaking another language will be. There are many career opportunities that need language skills, not just translators, interpreters or teachers, but also bilingual secretaries, airline crew, international lawyers, health workers, social workers, engineers and science experts. By explaining to students that they stand a better chance of finding a job or being promoted and earning higher salaries if they can speak other languages, they will be more motivated to succeed. Perhaps the reason why pupils in other European countries are more successful at languages is because they understand their usefulness in later life. In the UK languages are not considered important.

## How can we improve language lessons?

Make languages achievable for pupils of all abilities. Having spoken to many students on this subject, the general opinion seems to be that foreign languages are just "too difficult" in which only the highest achieving pupils can hope to excel. However, learning a language should be something that anyone can achieve since we all managed to learn our first language! If class sizes were smaller, children would be more eager to participate and feel less intimidated by the more confident speakers.

Keep it simple. Introducing the language gradually and keeping it as straightforward as possible may be the key to maintaining long term interest. If complex grammatical terms are used too early, often when such terms have never been studied in English, this can be extremely off-putting. Perhaps the reason other European countries do better than us at learning languages is because they study grammar in their own language which then helps their understanding of how other languages work. English grammar and foreign language study are very much interlinked. Maybe this is one of the ways we are going wrong as we rarely teach English grammar. Under the right conditions, learning a language should not be any more difficult than learning any other subject in the curriculum.

Dedicate more time to language lessons. We only give pupils half the time that they do in continental countries. Ideally learning a language needs practice every day if possible, therefore two or three lessons per week is inadequate to reach a good level. One UK school that decided to devote more hours to French and German lessons has noticed considerable improvements, as Head teacher Tom Sherrington, of King Edward VI

Chelmsford claims, "In the five years since we've devoted four hours per week at KS3 to either French or German, we've seen a phenomenal impact: our year 9s are more confident speakers and all-round better linguists than our year 11s ever were before with GCSE results to match."

Make learning realistic. The aim of learning a language should be to communicate in real-life situations. I have tutored Spanish A-level students who could discuss racism quite comfortably yet were unable to order a drink or check in at a hotel in the language. It seems that language teaching has become too "exam-driven" as Dr. Jim Anderson, senior lecturer at Goldsmiths University says, "The GCSE exam is very narrow: it lacks interesting content and appropriate tasks. This probably contributes to the fact that fewer than 10% are doing any sort of language learning after GCSE."

## Creative ways to make language learning enjoyable:

- Encourage class discussion by using topical material such as the online news service aimed at schools, "The Day" which publishes translations of daily news stories into key European languages.
- Study contemporary foreign films, books, songs and artists. Use foreign magazine articles and online websites on subjects that interest young people today.
- Incorporate interaction and immersion into lessons. Some schools allow students to prepare a typical dish from the country by following the recipe in French or Spanish and listening to instructions given in the language by the teacher. At the Royal School, Bath, students have created videos for the school website such as a fashion show in Spanish.
- It is easier to master grammar rules and retain new vocabulary if they are taught within a context. For example, the verb "to want" could be introduced through a dialogue ordering food and drinks – create practical scenarios that pupils could see themselves in on their next trip abroad. It is all very well learning lists of words; colours, fruits or clothes but the next step is teaching how to build a sentence with these words. If the words appeared alongside a picture and a sentence, this would aid visualisation and retention of the object or phrase.

## Technology in the classroom:

- Blogging: Set up a class or school blog whereby pupils are encouraged to add their own articles they have written in the language. The British Council has created a guide to class blogging.
- Video conferencing: Tools such as Skype allow students to easily interact with children in schools in other countries,

practising their language skills without constraints of travel expense and time. What better way to give students an incentive to learn a language than direct communication?

- Podcasts: Most computers allow you to make recordings and with programs such as Audacity you can edit and create mp3 files. This is particularly useful for pupils who may not have good written skills. It is an effective way to improve speaking and listening skills and podcasts can be saved for later revision.
- E-publishing: Apps such as “Book Creator” on iPad allow pupils to create their own e-books. By creating, editing and proofing their own written work they will become proud of their achievements, more motivated to succeed with more confidence in the language.
- Social networks: Schools could set up a Twitter feed with words and phrases

in the language with links to interesting videos and audio in foreign languages.

**“Operating effectively in a global economy relies on the right language skills – and the UK has the worst foreign language proficiency in Europe.”**

(The Confederation of British Industry, CBI).

Studying the culture: To bring languages to life it would be a fantastic idea to study the country’s culture; such as traditional festivals and celebrations. Show students video clips over the Internet of how festivals are celebrated so that they can see how fun they are. Have a “Spanish fiesta day” or a “French Bastille Day” whereby the students dress up as natives.

**What is most apparent is that the sooner we take responsibility for our nation’s lack of language skills the better.** The best way to do this would be by starting earlier and reforming the way we teach languages in schools. Perhaps we would do better by recruiting and training more native speaking teachers and language assistants. There are many potential teachers out there who just need the appropriate training to teach MFL in schools. Who better to teach their language than a native-born speaker who is passionate about sharing their language and culture with the next generation? This would give pupils the opportunity to practise the language regularly with a native speaker and rapidly boost their confidence in the language.

**An opinion piece by Fiona Dunmore- of Viva Spanish Lessons...**

[www.vivalanguageservices.co.uk](http://www.vivalanguageservices.co.uk)

**Many teachers are discovering that using elements of British Sign Language in the classroom is an effective tool in stimulating learning of language and numeracy skills. Find out why with SignSpell.**

**Beyond phonics**

**Schools Encouraged to Explore British Sign Language in the Classroom**

Many teachers are discovering that using elements of British Sign Language (BSL) in the classroom is an effective tool in stimulating learning of language and numeracy skills for hearing children. It encourages physical expression of words helping to reinforce learning through visual and kinetic association, and it enhances vocabulary and retention of words and spelling.

While BSL can integrate easily into most reading programmes, the challenge remains that teachers are often too busy and have limited resources to either undertake additional study, or to build sign language into their classroom curriculum. But learning resources that encourage schools to think beyond standard phonics-based teaching in early years education are strongly endorsed by the Education Department Service.

Research has shown that reinforcing spoken language learning, with visual and tactile information, can help increase children’s memory.

Dr Marilyn Daniels, a professor at Penn State University undertook several studies involving over 400 primary level pupils which revealed a range of benefits of learning Sign for hearing children.

Dr Daniels found that ‘By associating [the] words and symbols with actions,

[the] children can remember things faster and better. This means teaching sign language facilitates the teaching of regular language.’

Findings also revealed that BSL promotes oral language development by providing strong visual clues to words contextual meanings, leads to faster learning through attentiveness and fascination, strengthens reading comprehension and encourages inclusion.

One of the challenges for inclusive education is making sure classroom teachers have the support they need to work with children with all learning styles and levels of ability. A major element in successful learning is enjoyment and fun.

Dr Daniels noted ‘One benefit of pre-schoolers learning sign language is that it is fun and interactive. [Students] will be using their hands and body to communicate and that stimulates their brains, making it easier to learn... By associating the words and symbols with actions, the children can remember things faster and better. This means teaching sign language facilitates the teaching of regular language.’

In recognition of the weight of evidence demonstrating enhanced results in literacy, the UK’s specialist awarding body for British Sign Language, Signature, has developed SignSpell, an exciting range of educational books and online resources for children at Key Stage 1 & 2. Written for children in their early years up to age 11 years-old, SignSpell uses fingerspelling and signing commonly used in BSL, as a vehicle to enhance children’s language skills, broaden their communication toolset and support emotional and kinetic learning.

Told through a combination of books, online games and videos of words and phrases, SignSpell is the first holistic educational resource of its kind, designed



to help hearing children in their early years to read, spell and remember words through basic BSL.

**Competition:**

We’ve teamed up with Signature to give away Series One of SignSpell worth £199. For your chance to win, email your details to: [info@signspell.co.uk](mailto:info@signspell.co.uk) with the reference EDUMAG. (Offer ends 31/08/13)

The SignSpell pack is based on a series of 12 beautifully illustrated and digitised character-based storybooks, and is supported by 50 themed lesson plans, teacher notes and learning outcomes for throughout the school year. In addition, a Video Dictionary comprising over 500 clips of humans signing words and phrases is also included. With over 90 interactive digital games for use on the whiteboard, computer or tablet, and a host of printable activities and flashcards, SignSpell encourages children’s imagination and develops key reading and spelling skills.

**For more information please visit: [www.signspell.co.uk](http://www.signspell.co.uk) or call 0191 383 7911**

