

Mandarin language learning at Rosendale Primary School

Rosendale is an outstanding primary school located in south-west London with 700 pupils on roll. The school has a diverse intake typical of an inner London school.

At the start of this academic year, we launched a pilot, in one of our Year 3 classes, of a more intensive approach to language learning.

Children have a natural facility to learn languages at primary school age. We want to explore whether it is possible, working within the constraints of the current national curriculum, for a whole class to achieve a moderate level of fluency in a foreign language (in this case Mandarin Chinese) by the end of their primary schooling.

Pedagogy

Every class at Rosendale from Reception upwards has a weekly 45-minute language lesson. To this we have added, in our test class, four 15-minute bursts of language learning each week. Whereas the longer Mandarin sessions are held in the school's languages room, the 15-minute sessions are held in the classroom. They are conducted entirely in Mandarin and there is no prior preparation – the teacher simply walks into the room and starts talking.

Mandarin is popular among all the pupils in the test class. Rosendale uses cooperative learning structures to ensure that all pupils are engaged and contribute to every lesson. They are proving particularly effective in language learning as a means to ensure that everyone is speaking and practising equally.

In addition, we have invested a small amount of money in on-line learning software that allows the pupils to practise Mandarin during independent learning time in the school day or at home. The exercises the pupils complete can be reviewed, on line, by the class teacher.

There is obvious scope for use of new technologies in language learning. We have established a partner school in China and are about to trial direct pupil-in-China to pupil-in-England language learning lessons using Skype. The time difference will mean that this will have to be carried out first thing in the morning.

Progress

The class had previously studied Mandarin, once a week, for one term during Year 2 (for the other two terms they had studied French).

At time of writing (two weeks from the end of the autumn term), the pupils have learned vocabulary (approximately 70 words) covering greetings, family members, nationality, where they live, places in town, animals, hobbies and professions. They have learned to speak in simple sentences, in particular using the verbs 'to have', 'to be' and 'to like', and using the first and third person. They have also learned the days of the week, months and numbers from 1 to 99. Lastly, they have learned a number of songs.

Assessment

We are following the Asset Languages Breakthrough Curriculum and expect all of the class to achieve Asset Languages Breakthrough level by the end of Year 3 – and many to significantly exceed this benchmark.

Clearly, the pilot programme is only in its early stages. However, progress is encouraging and there are no obvious impediments at this point. If progress can be maintained at the current rate through primary schooling, we see no reason why these pupils should not achieve GCSE standard, at least in speaking and listening, by the end of their time at Rosendale.

If this more intensive approach to language learning at primary school can be shown to be effective, and in light of the priority placed on language learning by the current Government, then the question arises as to whether an objective case could be made for allocating more time and resources to language learning in the primary phase of education. It would also highlight the need for a more strategic approach to foreign language learning across primary and secondary schooling where often there is little joined up planning between the primary and secondary schools in a local area.

We would be interested in exchanging experiences of primary language learning, in England or in other education systems, and in any research on the impact of language learning in primary school on wider pupil engagement and achievement.