

## GUEST COLUMN - June 2021

### Great news! Primary languages are rubbish!

By Old Cobbler

[Ofsted blog: schools, early years, further education and skills](#)

As the subject lead's blog on the Ofsted website explains, inspectors recently visited 24 primary schools, all rated excellent at their latest inspection, to assess the quality of their languages teaching.

We would presumably be expected to find some of the best primary practice in these beacons of excellence. However, to quote Voltaire's *Candide* at the end of the eponymous novel: 'if this is the best of all possible worlds, whatever are the others like?'

As the blog explains, primary schools were given a legal responsibility to teach languages in 2014. This radical move was unaccompanied by much advice about how to do it and who might teach it. As with Mao's revolution in China, the feeling was that a thousand flowers should be allowed to bloom. And bloom they did, with the occasional rose concealed in a forest of dandelions, thistles and nettles.

The blog identifies three different models: using a teacher who knows the language (radical), finding a mug or enthusiast to organise it for colleagues (practical), or call in foreign reinforcements from the school or local community (hopeful). All three of these models, we are told, 'can work', but so can my 1980s lawn mower. It's just that most of the time it doesn't.

Between 1968 and 1974, Clare Burstall produced three reports evaluating the primary languages project begun in 1963. The final conclusions were that there was a vast variation in quality, no consistency of approach and little attention to what would happen later in the secondary schools. Reading between the lines of the present survey, there is now a vast variation in quality, no consistency of approach and little attention to what will happen later in the secondary schools.

Any report written between 1974 and 2020 would have had the same conclusions. The schools may not have any consistency, but the system certainly does.

At one point in the blog there is a suggestion that the future is orange: Mandarin orange. Or perhaps it could be Hebrew, or Latin, rather than the usual array of

European languages. I used to be asked why we always taught French (answer: because we have French teachers because we teach French). We have a bit more diversity now, but are not, to my knowledge, awash with teachers of Mandarin, Hebrew or Latin, or indeed French now that we teach it to so few to any reasonable level. And if we teach these 'exotic' languages well in a few primary schools, what happens next? Can the Mandarin duck fly, or is it dead already?

The blog tries to put a brave face on this calamitous state of affairs. To quote the rare examples, a few schools were teaching languages 'really well', the pupils were 'having a brilliant time', and this was 'great to see'.

But these isolated comments sit like lost jewels on a bed of slurry. In the (many?) schools 'just scratching the surface' of the curriculum pupils could only offer 'a few nouns, colours or numbers', a tremendously useful skill when singing 'ten green bottles', but not the best preparation for a future citizen of the world.

Governments of all complexions, over the last sixty or more years, do not have a proud track record in promoting the cause of languages.

Every so often, they declare a crisis, set up a commission, develop a project, and then lose interest within a maximum of two years. Ask, for example, the schools who entered the diversification project in the mid 1990s only to have the funding withdrawn a couple of years later. That project included the idea of training some teachers to teach the languages in question, but such radicalism was short lived. We have a national aversion to longer-term planning.

I am reminded of the story of the old gardener who spent a year reclaiming a very wild patch of church land and creating a garden. The vicar was impressed: 'what a wonderful job you, and God, have done in making this lovely garden'. 'Yes', replied the old man, 'and you should have seen what it was like when He was doing it on His own'.

Let a thousand flowers bloom, indeed!

*Old Cobbler has an authoritative perspective on Her Majesty's Inspectorate in England.*