
The Europe Meets School Programme: Thriving Cultural and Language Lessons

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My memories of language lessons at school are along the same lines as my memories of “food technology” classes or girl's netball – characterised by a sense of confusion, an oddball teacher and the rhetorical question of “why exactly am I being made to do this”, as I learnt how Smartie cookies are made step-by-step on a production line or as I gallivanted round in one of those itchy pleated sports skirts, having a whistle periodically blown at me whilst my male classmates were allowed to charge and scream aimlessly in the mud for an hour. You get the idea – languages were generally met with a “sigh” by most British school children, including myself, and most look back on their days of unpronounceable French and head-in-hands German grammar as a closed book that will gather dust for some time.

With 95% of Brits estimated to be lingo-lacking according to the BBC, it's no wonder that concern has risen over our linguistic ignorance and over the part that this stagnating position plays in an ever-interconnected and international global scene. Evidently, it is amongst school pupils and peers that we can pinpoint the birth of this general lack of concentration on and ambition towards languages, bringing to light both cultural and institutional problems. But, when fingers point to our schooling, what exactly is at fault?

Could it well be our exam-obsessed learning goals and uninspiring curriculum, topped off with our afterthought attitude towards languages that makes us Europe's most monolingual country? Guardian education and social affairs journalist Louise Tickle hits the nail on the head for many of us in saying: “Learning a foreign language is difficult, right? Well, yes, it is if you start at 11 (no child in England, Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland has to learn a modern foreign language before they start secondary school), only do it for three years, get the bare minimum of curriculum time, have your classes so spaced out that you forget what you learned last Wednesday when it comes to the next lesson on Tuesday, and never get to apply your skills, so it's all theory and no practice (let alone pleasure) ... this is pretty much how schoolchildren in the state sector are taught modern foreign languages in the UK.”

Numerous conversations with Erasmus students at Charles University on this topic prompted me to gage some more tangible answers. It was on my visit to a small, local Czech school in Strančice near to Prague as a part of the *Europe Meets School* programme that I was enabled to do a bit of cross-comparison. This recent scheme, which was kick started in Germany and brought to Prague in 2008 by the Erasmus Club at the Faculty of Arts, has a simple but budding initiative; exchange students assemble a project such as a play or presentation for a native school at their host country, informing the children on a topic of their choice about their home. Your only criterion is imagination and stimulation, encouraging the children to be active and inquisitive, ensuring that “everyone can experience the richness of European culture.”

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Charles University has overseen 15 EMS projects in the year 2013/14, fostering some unique, enriching topics such as Spanish fairy-tales, Ancient Greek monsters, popular German music and Swiss dialects. Visiting students have been given the opportunity to run 1-6 sessions for 1-2 groups, giving the children an insight in to life outside the Czech Republic on countries such as Slovenia and cities such as Dresden. Presenters can also incorporate any specialised knowledge they have, which has facilitated some one-off, alternative sessions such as a Welsh language workshop and some hands-on Baroque in Moravia and Austria and traditional Portuguese tiling for architecture lessons and art schools.

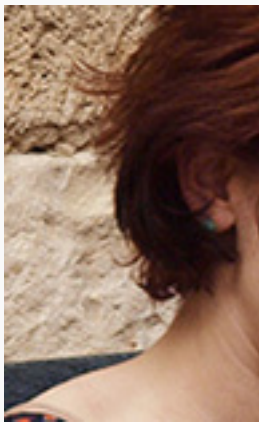
These projects have everything to do with languages, as many have been conducted in a foreign language for the children. I was all too hasty jamming my PowerPoint full of photographs in the event of a serious language barrier, where I soon found there wasn't much of one at all. So, there was me in top British style, talking about tubes and Big Bens, Royals and chunky chips, in English of course. I arrived expecting a slow session of continuous translation, but I was greeted with beaming smiles and perfect hello's, good morning's and how are you's at this sweet local primary, ZŠ Strančice. Although my audience was no older than eleven, they were all very capable at asking and answering questions in English and following my dialogue, turning only sometimes to the class high-flyer for translation in to Czech and nudged occasionally by their teacher to construct full and grammatical sentences. My two sessions whizzed by, followed by a humorous question and answer session, and I was astonished at their attentiveness to an English-taught class and their promising capabilities at such a young age.

For the case of British schoolchildren, we can harbour some hope from children's obvious susceptibility to languages. Like little sponges, they absorb their exposures and retain them for years to come – one of my delights from previously

working with children at a play centre in an international town was their ease in up to three languages before they could locate their countries of heritage on the map. At ZŠ Strančice, the EMS trip was a learning experience for me as much as the children, bridging an understanding between two very different education systems. From observing their conduct of foreign language teaching, it seems that Czech primary school is undoubtedly the crucial, determining age for the future of a young person's bilingual fluency, and that – putting it simply – British schoolchildren need to be made to do it. If we take a leaf from Europe's book, this turnaround can be made in putting languages at the forefront of learning, with a similar tone of seriousness as core subjects such as Maths and Science. By injecting it equally in to all dimensions of school life including conversations between the teacher and pupils, recreational activities such as pen pals, drawing and play, guest speakers and cultural programmes, languages becomes less of a regimented, isolating experience and more of a gentle, practical one, that eases languages in to culture and mind. This in turn seems to create an air of 'naturalness' to the acquisition of a second language.

Blogging head teacher Tom Sherrington poses the question in his article *Lost in Translation: Why Modern Foreign Languages in Schools Needs an Overhaul*: “if you had a completely free choice, what would your school curriculum look like?” My EMS visit got me thinking just this, and Sherrington calls on fellow teachers to use this simple line as inspiration. Would it be possible to scrap fragmented lessons, confined curriculums and panic attack-inducing exam pressure for some creativity and application through interactive tasks that challenge and vitalise students on a daily basis, with teachers who praise and nourish them? This was exactly what Sherrington reiterated to the *Guardian*, admitting that “we simply don't give it enough time in the curriculum” and that approaches are “limiting and formulaic”, with little relevant, engaging content, which he eludes as a “diet of vocabulary-driven rote learning with a bit of grammar tacked on”, claiming he has “too often (...) seen lessons in very good schools where students might learn a list of colours in isolation ... but can't put a related sentence together with any confidence. Furthermore, six months later, the earlier vocabulary has been forgotten.”

This deficiency in the syllabus, where “language learning is not high on their list of priorities”, Sherrington reaffirms, is backed rather worryingly by a “popular culture” that is “exclusively Anglo-centric, fuelling a complacent cultural-lingual apathy.” British schoolchildren fit within this culture as a new generation of people with a fairly passive identity with modern foreign languages... without being overly-critical and Scroogey (I did have some good school trips thanks to GCSE German), he gets it right in saying that “a meagre two hours per week is no contest for the mighty cultural counterweight that says: 'Who cares? Everyone speaks English anyway!’” This is because sadly, this mindset extends beyond the classroom and on to the beaches of Spain, Portugal and anywhere else with a chip van and a semi-warm coast really – watch out for the sunburnt pie-eater in their natural habitat, speaking English at, rather than to, almost anyone and everyone, loudly and slowly, adding “mate” on to any bar order. Cringey.



Poppy Gerrard-Abbott is an Erasmus student studying BA Humanities at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University and her home university is the University of Essex in England. She chose to write for the iForum to build on her journalism skills and meet other aspiring journalists; to grow closer to the social and creative life of Charles University and to learn more about Czech culture and life in Prague through attending local events and researching Czech issues and current affairs.

Poppy saw the iForum as an exciting opportunity to pursue her interests in politics, culture and history whilst meeting other Erasmus students. She thinks it's a very worthwhile and fun experience that has brought some exciting opportunities her way, extended her writing skills and her knowledge of the Czech Republic, and hopes Charles University continues to offer such placements to future students.