

## Foreign Language Learning at Cyprus Primary Schools

Sophie Ioannou-Georgiou - Cyprus Pedagogical Institute  
Pavlos Pavlou - University of Cyprus

### Historical Development

Cyprus was a British colony from 1878 to 1960 and English was introduced as an integral part of the curriculum in the two top classes of the larger schools in 1935. This, however, did not bring the desired results since the teachers were only graduates of secondary schools in which little attention was paid to English and therefore lacked in knowledge of the language as well as in knowledge of effective methodology. When more emphasis started being placed on English and the subject was upgraded to one of the most important ones in the syllabus, English found itself in the middle of a political campaign.

Various liberation movements broke out at irregular intervals during the British rule. This meant that an anti-British feeling was present, something which of course affected results in English language education. However, the negative influence this anti-British feeling had on the learning of English became even more evident during the intense 1955 - 1959 EOKA struggle. The teaching of English at schools was seen as a British imperialistic instrument and students of all levels reacted against it. Massive walk-outs of English classes as well as burning English textbooks was seen as the students' way of contributing to the struggle. Where Primary Schools are concerned, Matsangos, M. (1990) notes that the liberation struggle had managed to achieve "the expulsion of ELT from all Greek primaries".

Negative feelings towards the British were so intense at the time that the minute the Cypriots took education in their power they abolished the teaching of English in all Greek-Cypriot Primary Schools.

"English as a subject in the elementary schools was officially abolished by the Greek Board of Education when it took over the control of Greek-Cypriot education in May"

(T.P. Lightbody. Report of the Department of Education for the school year 1958-59)

The situation changed after Cyprus gained independence in 1960. Things calmed down and Cyprus set out to become a modern state. Education needed to emphasise a foreign language and due to the close relations the state still had with Britain, English was chosen.

In 1965-66, the teaching of English was reintroduced and this time it was officially part of every school's syllabus. Pupils started learning English at the age of 9/10 with two periods a week and continued up to the last year of secondary education (18 years of age). The ones who taught English at Primary Schools were Primary School teachers with some (or sometimes no) specialisation in the teaching of English and the textbooks used were until 1984 imported from England and very structural. In 1981 there was for the first time a National Curriculum for the teaching of English.

Consequently, the Ministry of Education decided to have the Curriculum Development Unit write local course books. British consultants, financed by the British Council, were brought in and two series of books were written: "Taking Off" (5<sup>th</sup> year-age 10) and "In Flight" (6<sup>th</sup> year -age 11). The books tried to introduce new approaches but were still very much traditional/structural.

In 1992 the Ministry of Education introduced the teaching of English in the fourth year of Primary (age 8/9) with only 40 minutes a week. At the same time a new curriculum and a new course book series was being prepared by the Ministry of Education's Curriculum Development Unit (Primary Education). This signalled a new effort from the Ministry to modernise the teaching of English with an emphasis on the principles of the communicative approach.

In-service training was launched to support primary school teachers in coping with the changes in the syllabus and methodology. Courses were offered by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute, which is financed by the Ministry of Education and were open to any interested teacher. However, the 40 minutes a week proved to be inadequate and, by 1993 this was doubled to 80 minutes a week offered in two periods of 40 minutes.

The new curriculum was published in 1994 and the new course book series "English for Communication" which covered all 3 years of primary was completed in 1996.

### **The Present Situation**

According to the Cyprus National Curriculum for Primary Schools, the English language is a compulsory subject. Children start learning English at the age of 9 (fourth year of Primary School) and continue to do so until they graduate secondary school at 18.

English in primary is still taught twice a week in 40 minute periods. The curriculum adopts an eclectic approach to language learning although the communicative approach is claimed to have a stronger influence on the philosophy and the methodology adopted.

The affective aim of the curriculum is to promote a positive attitude towards English language learning, the English language and the people, whose mother tongue is English. In terms of competence the pupil is expected to be able to communicate appropriately and efficiently in basic everyday situations. The curriculum is put into practice through the "English for Communication" course book series which was produced by the Curriculum Development Unit.

In the first stage of learning, and especially in the first year, the emphasis is placed on listening and speaking. Pre-forms of reading exist and the mechanical skills of writing are emphasised since the children have to get to grips with a new alphabet. The emphasis on listening and speaking continues through to the last year of primary. Reading skills are emphasised in the last year of primary (third year of English). Writing skills, however, do not seem to have their fair share of teaching emphasis.

The level of writing is mostly at the sentence level and at the paragraph level in the third year of English. Writing remains structural and guided throughout primary.

Testing is part of the language programme although there is an emphasis on teaching in an enjoyable and fun way so that positive attitudes towards English are developed (very similar to the Austrian model - R. Edelman). The tests to be set during the primary language programme are given in the Teacher's Book which includes photocopiable tests and revision activities for every five units. Nevertheless, the Ministry makes an effort to play down the importance of marks and relieve any stress on the learners. The philosophy underlying the tests is to help the teachers evaluate their work and help the pupils.

The teachers are therefore advised not to mark the tests and not to give grades to the pupils something, which is an existing policy of the Ministry of Education for all the subjects in primary education. The Teacher's Book does not offer any assistance on how to use or how to mark the tests given. This might, however, result in teachers misusing the tests or in teachers improvising their own marking scheme for use with their pupils.

## **Teacher Training**

### Initial training

Up to a few years ago all Primary School teachers in Cyprus were graduates of the Cyprus Paedagogical Academy whereas teachers in the Secondary Schools had to be university graduates in their subject area. Secondary school teachers still have to hold a university degree in their subject area and are obliged to attend a one-year course at the Pedagogical Institute before they are allowed to go on a tenure track.

During the last decade graduates of foreign universities have been allowed to teach at primary schools provided that they attend a special course designed for and offered to them by the Cyprus Pedagogical Institute on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Another development is the recently established University of Cyprus which has now replaced the Pedagogical Academy and will in the future be the main provider of primary school teachers who are now required to hold an appropriate university degree.

On various occasions when there is a lack of teachers, then secondary school English teachers (usually English literature majors) will be employed as a temporary solution for the teaching of English.

The primary schools today and the teaching of English are however still dominated by graduates of the Cyprus Pedagogical Academy. These teachers have had a threeyear education at the Academy during which they studied English as part of their syllabus. English was taught each year of their studies as language development, literature and teaching methodology. Students had the option of specialising in three subjects in their final year. If English was chosen as a specialisation subject, it was taught intensely throughout the final year purely as a TEFL subject. All the students of the Cyprus Pedagogical Academy had to undertake teaching practice for four weeks

each year during which they would teach English as a foreign language and would be observed by an instructor.

### In-service training

Apart from the various initial training courses it offers, the Pedagogical Institute's main responsibility is to offer in-service training for all state teachers. Various courses aiming at previously identified needs of the teachers are offered throughout the academic year. These courses are offered for free and usually take place in the afternoons either at the premises of the Pedagogical Institute (Nicosia or Limassol) or at various other locations all over the island. They are not compulsory and are not part of the teachers' assessment. Schools can also ask for a course/seminar/workshop to be organised solely for their needs to take place on the school's premises.

Compulsory courses are offered by the Pedagogical Institute to teachers who are promoted to an administrative post such as Deputy Head.

### Teacher Appraisal and Career Development

It is important to include a bit of information about the Teachers' Appraisal System since it is very closely related to a teacher's motivation and class "morale". A teacher when appointed to the Cyprus State Education system knows that there are no promotion opportunities in the near future. S/he will be visited by an Inspector once or twice a year and will be evaluated in the form of a report prepared by the Inspector and which he/she is not allowed to see. After completing 12 years of teaching he/she will be numerically assessed by the Inspector for the first time. Only then, is a teacher eligible for promotion and even then it is very unusual that he/she will be promoted. Since every school teacher that has completed 12 years of teaching is allowed to be on the promotion list, they all do apply. In order to deal with this large number of candidates, the Educational Service Commission which decides on who is promoted, uses years of service as its most powerful criterion. A teacher, with only 12 years of experience will therefore, have very few chances and will in reality sit back and watch until his/her turn come (when his/her age group is the oldest one up for promotions).

We believe that this situation where what really matters is merely how many years you have been teaching and not factors such as the quality of your work, has a disheartening and demotivating effect on the teachers who could in the end lose all enthusiasm for their work.

### Recent Developments

The introduction of a new curriculum and a new course book series are the most recent developments in English in primary education. A gradual introduction of the new course books started in 1992 and the books have now been used by all schools and in all levels for four years. A project to evaluate the books is already under way. The first book of the series "English for Communication 1" has already been evaluated through questionnaires and interviews and has been revised based

on the findings of the survey. The new, revised, book will be introduced to the schools in 1998. The second and third books of the series are currently under study.

The whole of the language programme (course books, staff, attitudes, etc.) adopted by the Cyprus State from primary to secondary was evaluated by Dr Roger Bowers and his team during the academic year 1997 -1998. The findings are yet to be announced.

Also evaluation of the whole of the Cyprus education system has recently been carried out by a group of UNESCO experts.

For more information on the Cyprus situation contact:

Sophie Ioannou-Georgiou  
Cyprus Pedagogical Institute  
Latsia P.O Box 12720  
Nicosia 2252  
Cyprus

Pavlos Pavlou  
Dep. Of Foreign Languages  
P.O.B. 537  
1678 Nicosia  
Cyprus

or

Curriculum Development Unit (Primary Education)  
English Team  
Ministry of Education and Culture  
Nicosia  
Cyprus

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