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**The impact of the new National Curriculum on language teaching**

Article | Published 20 March, 2013 **| By: Rachel Hawkes**

TES languages adviser Rachel Hawkes has digested the new National Curriculum for KS2 and KS3 and come up with some ideas of how this might change how and what’s taught in the languages classroom

The new National Curriculum document for languages is brief, in the version [I’ve uploaded to TES Resources](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/New-NC-document-KS2-and-amp-KS3-reformatted-6325124) both KS2 and KS3 fit easily onto one slide. While I welcome a slimmed-down curriculum with room for flexibility, creativity and choice, freedom also produces uncertainty and no small degree of anxiety.

Over the next few months we will need to find ways to share ideas and practice as we interpret the new framework for the classroom. I’ve been thinking in particular about three key areas of practice: transcription, translation, and reading literary texts. Although these refer specifically to KS3, it’s useful to start by identifying the links to the relevant section of the KS2 document, as this gives a clearer idea about practice in a classroom context.

Health warning! These thoughts are by no means exhaustive or ‘finished’; they are just a collection of thoughts and resources, a point on the journey so far.

**Transcription**

There might be concerns that the requirement for students to be able to ‘transcribe words and short sentences that they hear with increasing accuracy’ is a return to old-fashioned dictation. This need not be our interpretation. It helps to make a link to the KS2 statement that learners should ‘explore the patterns and sounds of language through songs and rhymes and link the spelling, sound and meaning of words.’ Seeing the former as an extension of the latter enables us to contextualise both as phonics knowledge, a secure grasp of the sound - writing relationship, which I suspect would incur very little resistance amongst languages teachers. Many already teach FL phonics at KS2 and develop the practice at KS3. There is a [phonics resources collection for French, German and Spanish here](http://www.tes.co.uk/article.aspx?storyCode=6325310).

Teaching the sounds of the foreign language in an active way achieves the following:

* develops pronunciation
* builds pattern-finding and link-making
* increases autonomy
* improves confidence in performance
* facilitates comprehension

At KS2 this can involve teaching [key phonics words](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Phonics-1-6046598/) and reinforcing the links through [games](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Phonic-cards-activity-6186720/), [story reading](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Pronunciation-practice-Dr-Seuss-gap-fill-story-6186724/), [syllable square activities](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Pencil-case-syllable-square-spelling-activity-6186766/) and a variety of other [pronunciation activities](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Presentation-of-Spanish-greetings-and-names-6186750/).

At KS3 there can be a natural continuation of this activity, as part of the routine classroom communication. Every time a student wanting to know the FL for a word or phrase, asks “¿Cómo se dice ‘a game’ en español?” and records the teacher’s response, “un juego”, they are practising the correct transcription of FL words. It may also be helpful to listen to or watch an advert or a short clip and try to record the FL for any words and phrases they hear. Capturing the correct spelling of words that are heard is related to the skill of pronouncing accurately from text. At KS3 this can be expected to happen more confidently with texts that contain both [familiar and unfamiliar language](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Cuentos-1-narrating-stories-6112851/).

**Translation**

There has been some anxiety about the references to translation both into and out of the FL. I think this is a natural reaction to what could be seen as a methodological pendulum swing back towards the days before communicative language teaching.

However, if we interpret the references as ‘task’ rather than ‘methodology’, we can be less concerned.

Many languages teachers make occasional use of translation into and from the FL in the classroom. There’s no indication that there’s to be any formal testing of translation, which would be a different proposition entirely, and rather more fraught with danger than its inclusion as one of a whole range of different teaching tools. Given its inclusion in the new documentation, it’s perhaps worth exploring a little further - what is translation good for?

As well as being just one of many methods to assess comprehension of a written text, I think that translation can also be:

* a spontaneous reaction to FL text with the question ‘What does this mean?’
* the closest reading of a text
* an exploration of the links between language use and grammar
* a demonstration of mental agility, memory, linguistic precision
* a door to intercultural appreciation

The benefit of translation will depend on the teacher’s expertise in clarifying the learning purpose of any task and in selecting an appropriate text.

One thing we shouldn’t overlook is the natural leaning towards conscious reflection that most learners experience after several years in formal education (ie at KS3). If you’ve taught foreign languages to adults you’ll probably be familiar with the urge to know the meaning of any new language you encounter, in fact the need to dissect it! KS3 learners are not yet adults, but neither are they the spontaneous learners they were on entry into primary school.

Another important consideration is the technological age we live in, with its free online translation tools. It feels important that we teach students strategies for using online tools well, steering them towards high-quality online resources and helping them recognise the pitfalls.

It’s true that the more I think about this, the less use I find for straightforward word-for-word ‘accurate English translation’ of FL material. I gravitate towards ‘summary translation’, including the idea of multiple source summary translation, where two or three different FL source texts are synthesised by students into one English summary.

However, I can see a use for adapted ‘parallel translation’ at KS3 (and KS4 for that matter), whereby students are given a gapped FL text and a gapped English text, where the gaps in one correspond to the text given in the other. The task of completing both texts pushes students towards noticing some essential features of the language that can be particularly resistant to other classroom methods.

This [parallel translation resource](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Parallel-Translated-adapted-6325138/) is just one of a few experiments to see what sorts of translation activity are helpful to students at KS3 and KS4.

Going further with translation into the FL, and following on the back of some interesting work led by Ernesto Macaro and Suzanne Graham as part of the [Professional Development Consortium in Modern Foreign Languages project](http://pdcinmfl.com/about/) (PDCMFL), I experimented with a writing strategy at KS4 which involved students generating an English version of a writing task before producing it in the FL. I found that it was effective, although it’s important to follow the recommended approach. Here’s an example, which I adapted for my middle ability [KS4 class](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Practicas-laborales-6300796/) (see slide three of PPT two). In my department we are also trialling short [prose translations](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Prose-translation-milestone-assessment-1-6325141/) into the FL as formative KS3 assessment. Students respond positively to the definite nature of these tasks, and the clarity of the feedback they receive as a result.

**Reading literary texts**

I think that this statement about reading at KS3 is interesting. To put it in context it’s important to align it first with the corresponding statement at KS2, “appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language.” To my mind the line of continuity is less easily drawn here than it is for transcription, but this is obviously because the prevailing notion at KS2 is one of appreciation rather than comprehension, as it is as KS3. That said, to my mind the development from joining in and enjoying stories and songs towards understanding them must inevitably be a gradual one, rather than an abrupt gear change in experience between Y6 and Y7. As languages teachers, we have some interesting territory to explore in terms of bridging this potential divide in learning experience.

We can start by trying to find some [‘literary’ texts that are suitable for KS3 learners](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Tagebuch-2-and-39-literary-and-39-texts-for-KS3-6325146/). Some may be considered classic literature whilst others may be non-fiction writing, I found the internet is a treasure trove of [50 word stories](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/50-word-stories-Spanish-6325147/), some of which lend themselves very well to KS3.

We also need to consider when it is still beneficial at KS3 to appreciate more than to understand or, to put it another way, to listen, join in and enjoy rather than complete a worksheet! This might certainly be the case with some [songs](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Song-Allison-Iraheta-El-viernes-te-olvido-yo-6325149/), for example. Equally [other songs](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Song-Ser-o-Estar-Jesse-and-amp-Joy-6325151/) may be worth exploiting linguistically, thematically or both.

I think [Mafalda cartoons](http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resource/Cartoon-Mafalda-6325152/) qualify as literary texts – they’re certainly something of a classic in comic terms!

As always it will be great to pool ideas from other teachers on these and any other features of the new NC documents that need further thought. And even better if teachers can upload any resources or links to *TES* for all to share.