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[LangSEN Project](#)

## Keynote speech: LANGUAGES FOR ALL?

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### Introduction

I count it a great honour to be invited to address this international gathering, especially one which brings language teachers and SEN teachers together. Such gatherings are extremely rare - I know, because I have tried to organise some myself. The project team must be congratulated for having succeeded in bringing together such a wonderful mix of expertise, and I sincerely hope that some of what I have to say will be of some help to you in your deliberations this week.

This is the start of a most interesting and important programme. I hope that I can contribute by offering you some of the thoughts that have arisen from my ten years of work in this field and by sharing with you some of the issues which have arisen in the course of that work.

I must make clear from the start, however, that although I have close links with a number of educational institutions in Scotland, I don't represent any of them. My views are strictly my own! What you will hear is a personal view, albeit from a person with an obsession!

I should also point out that the educational system in Scotland is different in a number of respects from the rest of UK, so some of the things I shall describe are unique to Scotland, and may not apply to the rest of the UK.

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First, I'd like to introduce you to Billy [Photo] whom I met on one of my first visits to a special school, back in 1994. Billy had moderate learning difficulties and a great enthusiasm for language learning! I've put him on my title page to remind me - to remind us - that this workshop is not only about educational policy and practice, but about the education of children, and some of our most vulnerable children at that. I believe that the work we do in modern languages, when we get it right, can enrich children's lives in ways that no other school subject has the potential to do.

I have put a question mark at the end of my title to remind me - to remind us - that it really isn't obvious to everyone that children with SEN should or could do languages. If this is what we are going to advocate, then we must know that what we are doing is right. As David Marsh said yesterday, "**IS** it the right thing to do?"

<http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk>

It certainly wasn't obvious to me ten years ago. I started my professional career as a teacher of French and English in mainstream schools. It was not until 1994, when I was appointed to a national 2-year project and asked to investigate modern languages and special educational needs, that I started to visit special schools. (That's when I met Billy.)

What I discovered there astonished me. Not only were there many children learning foreign languages, but they were clearly enjoying the experience and were proud to show off what they could do.

This contrasted markedly with the experience in some mainstream schools where some children were reported to be antagonistic and reluctant to engage with foreign language learning. What puzzled me here was that the difference in response didn't appear to be due to differences in cognitive ability, for the enthusiastic ones supposedly had had less cognitive ability than those in mainstream schools.

Two years ago I conducted another small piece of research which highlighted a similar anomaly. Questionnaires were returned by 150 secondary schools. These were either special schools or mainstream schools specially resourced to provide for pupils with special educational needs. Between them they made provision for just over four thousand pupils with special educational needs, which ranged from mild to severe and complex learning difficulties, and included children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, physical and sensory impairments and communication disorders.

We found that about half of these pupils were offered some kind of modern language programme. What was surprising, however, was that pupils representing all these difficulties could be found in **both** groups. The data clearly suggested that the decision about whether or not to include modern languages in the curriculum relates more to **adult expectations** of pupils' capabilities, rather than to the **actual potential** of pupils to benefit.

I have long been convinced that these anomalies require investigation. We know enough now to convince us that all children **can** benefit when we can get it right. But we also know that we can get it wrong! I have spent the last ten years trying to identify some of the qualities which seemed to make language learning a pleasurable and rewarding experience for some children (including some children we might not have expected to respond to language learning) to but not for others.

I shall have more to say about that later, but I am confident that the work undertaken in the course of this project, and your own case studies, will contribute greatly to that understanding.

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### **Aims, expectations and benefits**

I want to follow three themes in my talk. Although I shall talk about them separately, they are really interlinked.

I'd like us to be clear about the aims and expectations we have of the learners we're concerned with, when it comes to talking about Modern Languages. It seems to me that it is only when we are clear about aims, expectations and benefits that we can really begin to look at course content, resources, methods, and so forth with a clear eye. We also need to be clear for the sake of those whom we need to convince.

What are the aims, expectation and benefits we have in mind? Are they the same aims, expectations and benefits that we count on for other learners? Or are they different? And if they ARE different, what are they exactly?

If we are going to promote the teaching of languages to people with SEN, we need to know that it is the right thing to do, and we need to be able to convince others of that fact. We have to be clear about what our aims for them are, what expectations we have of them, and what benefits we expect them to obtain from their effort, and from ours.

The introduction to The Common European Framework of reference for Modern Languages makes the assumption that *"... the aim of language teaching is to make learners competent and proficient in the language concerned."*

And the LangSEN website itself affirms that *"the human capacity for language learning is not limited."*

Does this mean, then, that we expect learners with special educational needs to achieve the same levels of communicative competence as all the other learners in our schools? Surely that is not the expectation that most people have? Many people seem to have the idea that language learning is something difficult - too difficult for learners who are still struggling to master their own language. (How long did it take **us** to reach the level of competence we enjoy today?)

Yet there **are** many young people who confound this notion, young people with significant special educational needs who clearly enjoy their foreign language learning and who gain immense benefits from their study.

What, then, **should** our expectations be?

For those young people with physical or sensory impairments there is no reason at all why our expectations should be lower than our expectations of young people who don't have these impairments, though we may need to present our learning material in different ways.

For young people with developmental delay, communication difficulties, general or specific learning difficulties, our **expectations** may be slightly different. But this doesn't mean that they should have **no opportunity** to engage in foreign language learning.

What, for these children, should our expectations be?

In 1993, The National Curriculum Council in England, after an extensive two-year research project in which children with special educational needs followed a structured language learning programme concluded that "*pupils can operate in a foreign language at the same conceptual and linguistic level as in their own language.*"

If the Curriculum Council was right, this raises some important issues.

Most importantly, it presents a real challenge for educators, for no longer can we accept the excuse for excluding some learners because "they don't know their own language well enough yet!"

What this research is implying is that all children are born with **a capacity for language**. Which language - and how many languages - they use is determined by the circumstances of their birth and upbringing. If Billy, for example, had been born in Graz instead of in Inverness he would surely have been as proficient now in German as he actually is in English. Although it is too late now for Billy to achieve the same level of proficiency in learning German as a second language, the potential he had, and may still have, cannot be ignored.

I'm **not** suggesting that our SEN learners can actually reach the same level in their second language as in their first - we know that the conditions cannot be replicated - but the challenge to us as educators is surely to bring them **as close to that potential** as we can?

The study I have referred to listed 3 main benefits to learners with special educational needs.

- language development
- social development, and
- cultural awareness.

Bencie (Woll) referred to the first two of these yesterday, so I don't want to spend too long on them, but I would like to make one or two remarks.

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## Language development

If the researchers are right, there are two main linguistic benefits we might expect: communicative competence commensurate with the learner's potential, which we must not underestimate; and a growth in metacognitive awareness.

Those who work closely with learners with special educational needs, and who have experimented with foreign language learning, tend to agree with the Curriculum Council's claim that learning even the rudiments of a foreign language enables learners to extend and develop linguistically.

I **do** think that we must **not** underestimate how far children can go if we can find the right approaches to motivate them and to help them to learn. Time and again teachers who were initially sceptical about an individual child's ability to learn foreign a foreign language have expressed surprise at how well he or she has managed, at least in the early stages. A mainstream primary teacher in my local primary school, where they have recently introduced French into the timetable said to me recently about a boy who has special needs: "He's just as good as anyone else in the class, in fact he's a little bit ahead of some of them."

At the other end of the age range, just last year, a secondary school teacher told me that a sixteen-year old autistic girl had won the school prize for French.

In my own school, several years ago, a boy who had serious problems with literacy and numeracy found that he could nevertheless do languages. He left school with qualifications in French and German, but nothing else. He began his working life as a shelf-stacker in the local supermarket. I met him again last year when I went to lecture to some student teachers at one of our Universities. This boy, now in his thirties, had gone to night school to gain entry to university, got his degree in French and German, and is now teaching both languages in a in a mainstream secondary school. He also runs a summer school for foreign students of English. Yet if some teachers had had their way, this boy would never have been allowed to study languages. How much poorer would his experience of the world have been?

Can I tell you about Mary? Mary wasn't a high flier, by any means, in fact she went to a special school and was not considered to have much potential educationally. Mary was of the same opinion. She was not much interested in learning because the basic literacy work which took up most of her time in school was very repetitive, and a bit babyish.

Then the school decided to introduce a European dimension. Every Wednesday afternoon, while half of the class went swimming, Mary's group studied a different European country. At the end of the term I was invited to go along and see the work they had been doing. Mary was sent to the school office to escort me to the classroom. As we walked along, chatting about why I had come, Mary said to me proudly: "I can speak twelve languages!" I was astonished, of course, but before I could ask what this

actually meant, she asked me; "How many languages can **you** speak?" I was ashamed to admit the truth!

Mary's teacher later explained to me that she had found a tape on which were recorded greetings in all the languages of what was then the European Community (12 countries). So each week, when the children were looking at geography, food, life styles, flags, currency, and so on, they also learned to say "Hello!" and "How are you?" in the corresponding language.

Mary had been fascinated by this, and had learned all the phrases, even asking if she could borrow the tape to take home and do extra work. By the end of the term she could, indeed, say "Hello" and "How are you?" in twelve languages.

You may say that this would not have got her very far, so what was the point? But Mary's teacher pointed out that this achievement represented for Mary the first time - ever - that she had been able to do something that nobody else in her world could do. She had succeeded in doing something extraordinary. This was an enormous boost to her self-confidence. Mary's whole attitude to school changed; she began to see herself as someone who **could** be successful and she was now prepared to try where before she had been more likely to give up.

### **Social development**

All languages are about communication and interaction. Children with special educational needs often have difficulty with aspects of this, either because of language delay, or for other, perhaps social reasons. The nature of the tasks we set for the children often provide opportunities to practise social interaction. Role play, turn-taking, making eye-contact; saying please, thank you and excuse me. I was very interested in what Bencie had to say yesterday about presenting functional grammar within a social context.

I remember a little Asian girl. I don't know her full name, but her classmates called her Raji. Raji was a selective mute, unable to bring herself to communicate with adults, though she was seen to chatter away to classmates in the playground. When her class started to do French no-one expected her to join in, and at first she didn't. When they got round to learning numbers, however and were learning to count from 1 to 10 in French, she could contain herself no longer. "I can count from 1 to 10 in Punjabi," she announced, hesitantly. When her teacher got over the shock of hearing her speak, she asked Raji to demonstrate, which she did, and then proceeded to teach the rest of the class to do the same. After that Raji joined in the class with enthusiasm and was soon chattering away to anyone who would listen. She later explained that everyone at home spoke Punjabi, and she had been ashamed of her family, and her own accent, until she learned that there were lots of other people in the world who spoke differently too, and that it was OK, and even a source of pride.

## Cultural understanding

But I have a strong feeling language learning, by itself, is not enough. Some children, we have to admit, will not get very far with it, no matter how inspirational we are or how hard they try. There surely has to be more to justify the time and effort we (and they) spend on such activity.

As I was preparing this talk, Terry Davis, Secretary General of the Council of Europe made a speech to mark the European Day of Languages. He said:

*"Language learning is a powerful tool for building tolerant, peaceful and inclusive multicultural societies. The experience of learning a new language helps to develop openness to other cultures and acceptance of different ways of life and beliefs. It raises awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity and promotes tolerance of people with a different lifestyle."*

I am sure that you will agree with me when I say that, in our beautiful and sometimes sad world, this **openness** and **acceptance of difference** is crucial to social harmony of the Europe of today and tomorrow, and is of vital importance to **all** of our young people, regardless of their abilities or disabilities, not just those who will become our future linguists. It is worth reminding ourselves, I think, that it is not just Europe as a collective entity which is multilingual and multicultural; it is each of our individual countries. We don't **need** to go to another country to hear other languages spoken, or to meet people with lifestyles different from our own. They are there, in our own communities. If we cannot show that we value the languages, and the speakers of those languages, in our own community, how can we justify to young people our insistence that they learn the language of some distant community?

The LangSEN website makes the same point when it talks of "social cohesion in a multicultural and multicultural Europe", but then goes on to point out that "People...should be given the opportunity to open up bridges between their **internal** world and the **wider community**." This 'bridge building' seems to me to be enormously important.

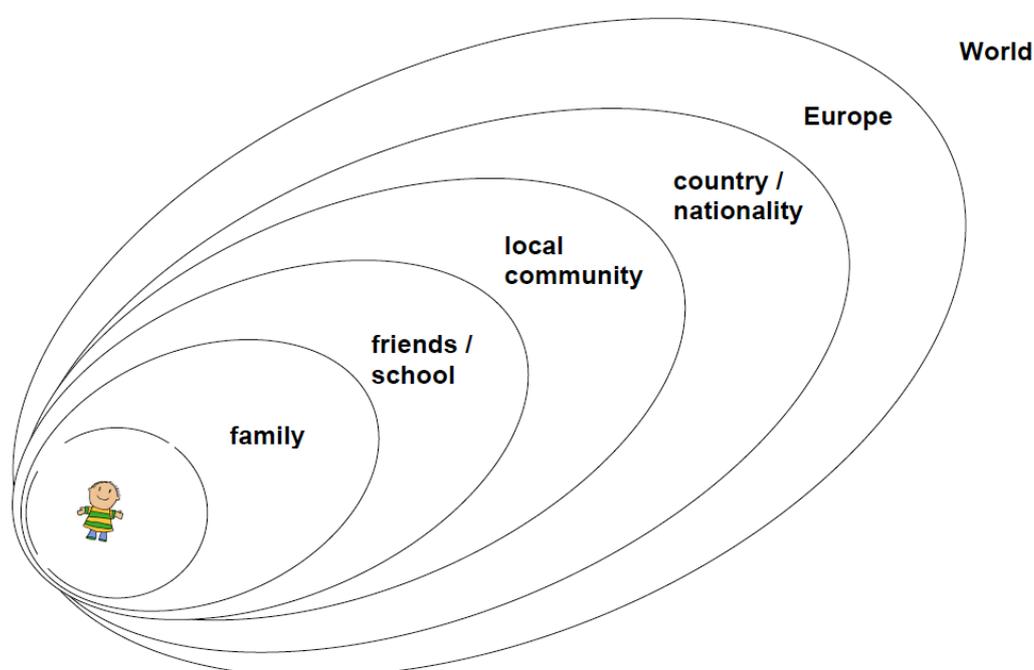
This '**bridge building**' is what we found the special schools doing so well. Not only were they providing opportunities for children to learn about foreign countries, they were using that work as a context for **learning about their own communities as well**. And this is very important. Some of the children we are concerned have difficulties not just with language but with **concepts**. They may have little understanding of the concept of distance other than perhaps 'near' and 'far'; for them 'far away' may describe the distance between the school and home. They may have very limited contact with their local community and a trip to the local town centre may be strange enough.

This is what I mean:



What sense will some of our children be able to make of 'foreign-ness' and 'foreign languages'? How can we help them to see any relevance in the work we are planning to ask them to do? How do we bridge that gap?

Well, here is a model that we used in an early project report in Scotland to describe the attempts that special schools were making to bridge the gap:



Special schools were deliberately linking their modern language programmes to the personal development programmes they saw as crucial to their pupils' education and trying to set foreign language learning in a context which would make sense to the child.

But as well making sense to child, it had to help to develop skills, knowledge and attitudes which the child needed to acquire anyway. For some of our most needy children, this simply meant using Europe as a source of ideas for extending the sensory curriculum, giving them a wider and more interesting range of experiences than their immediate environment might provide.

I'd like to give you an example of this:

In a school for young people with profound and complex disabilities, where many of the pupils needed help with feeding, the staff had sought to make the canteen a more pleasant place by playing music during lunchtime. I dare say you know of similar settings. The music disguised the inevitable noises but the music itself was unremarkable. One week the teachers decided to play a tape from a different European country each day. As far as I remember, they played some French accordion music one day, a German or Austrian brass band another day and the children began to get interested and to comment. I forget what else they played, but I know they concluded the week with some Spanish flamenco music. The effect this has on the children was astounding; they began to smile and beat their spoons in time to the music and to wave their arms about. They were so stimulated by the music that the staff decided to add it to the curriculum. They bought castanets and tambourines and the children loved it. It gave the staff a new enthusiasm too, to have found a new way of stimulating their children.

This was not language learning as we might imagine it, but who can say that the children's lives were not enriched by their European experience, even if they were unaware of Europe itself?

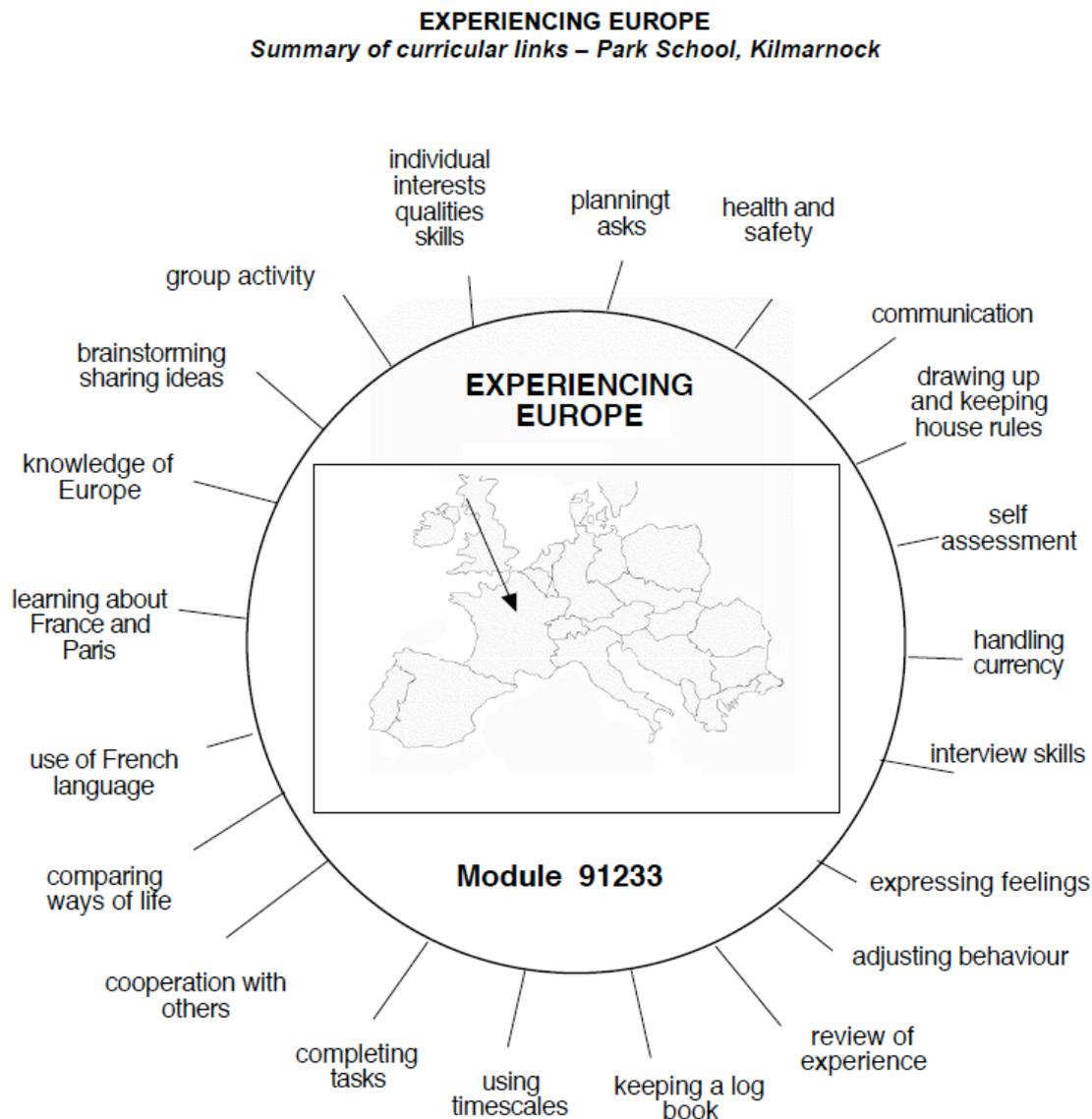
This example began with the individual student's need for stimulation, and the needs of the wider school community. It is this idea of interlocking communities and expanding horizons which helps special schools to progressively bridge the gap for their young people. This is the text that accompanied the diagram in the original pack. I think it is important enough to read out in full.

*Pupils with special educational needs are citizens too; indeed, it could be argued that they more than most need a clear sense of themselves in community. Without an awareness of themselves and of the close and local communities to which they belong, the idea of a European community can have no meaning.*

*The first step, therefore, in developing a European dimension for pupils with special educational needs, will be to ensure that, for all pupils, the school ethos and the curriculum exemplify and promote an awareness of oneself in community, with all the rights and responsibilities that entails.*

*For some pupils, the community will be their immediate environment; for others it will embrace the many interlocking communities, including Europe, which make up our modern world. For most, the programme will include an opportunity to become familiar with the culture and language of some of our European neighbours.*

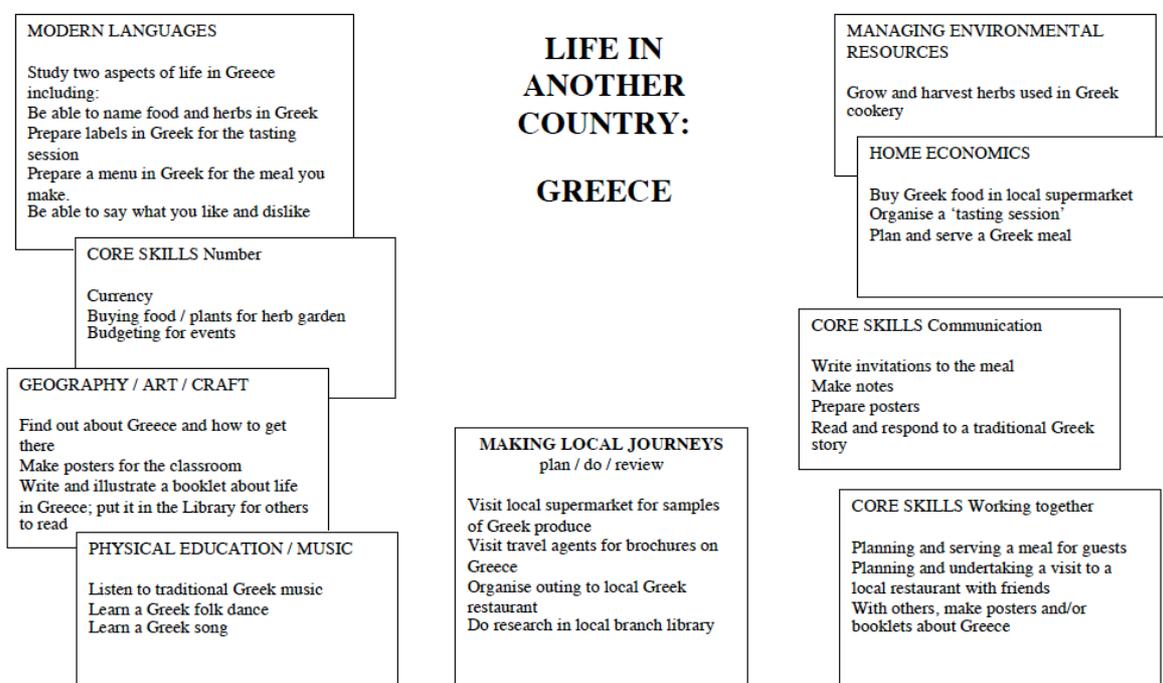
Here is another example:



This is how one special school portrayed their curriculum for school leavers. They used the occasion of a trip to their twin town in France to create a coherent programme of learning activities for their pupils. You can see that all the work is focused on the 'European dimension' within which modern language learning has its place, but it is only one of many learning activities. However, the language to be learned has a clear purpose; it is language they will be able to use during their trip.

Cultural content, used in this way, provides an immensely powerful and motivating context for language learning.

Here's how another school used *Life in Greece* as a context for exploring their own community and developing a wide range of personal skills:



The programme focused on *Greek food and tourism* (Food is always a popular subject!) The children learned about *Greece*, its geography, art and culture, and made up booklets which were eventually placed in the school library. They learned to cook *Greek dishes*. They grew herbs for use in their *Greek cooking*. They wrote invitations to staff whom they invited to share the meals they prepared. They helped to organise visits to the local supermarket to see what *Greek produce* they could buy, to the local travel agent's to collect brochures about *Greece*, to the local library for books to consult; they learned a *Greek folk dance*. And they learned some *Greek words and phrases* to use while they did all these things.

Again, language learning has its place. Again, it is the local context in which the language learning takes place which gives the foreign language its purpose and illuminates its meaning.

### Conclusion

I could go on, but my point is this: that for children with special educational needs, modern languages need not be an esoteric subject with little relevance to their lives. It can be the catalyst for building that **sense of belonging** which is crucial to the mental well-being of every child and which, for some, may be so difficult to achieve.

I believe we must develop ways of presenting language learning in a context of **community** which has meaning and relevance in the lives of the children we serve. If we are to justify spending time on modern foreign languages then this must enhance aspects of children's lives which no other subject can achieve, by building bridges between the child and his/her **own** community as well as with more distant ones.

So, we know that this is possible, and we know that children respond well to it. Indeed, it sometimes seems little short of miraculous, because although some of the benefits I have described are predictable, **some are not**. And sometimes, perhaps more often than we realise, those unpredictable benefits can be life enhancing for individual children.

Like Raji, for example, who learned to speak and to take a pride in her linguistic and cultural inheritance.

Or Scott, who found he could do sums in German which he was unable to do in English.

Or Jack, profoundly deaf, who found through comparing word order in German with word order in English, just what made English word order different from the BSL which was his first language.

Or Samantha, a girl with aphasia, who had great difficulty focusing on normal text but who discovered in the course of learning vocabulary that she **could** read text comfortably, provided it was printed in short lines rather than the full width of the page.

Time and again teachers have told me of these little unexpected miracles which have changed the lives of individual pupils. Perhaps you have similar stories of your own?

It is this very unpredictability which provides, for me, the strongest justification for including some experience of foreign language learning in the curriculum of **every** child. If we cannot predict what advantages they may gain from an opportunity to be involved in foreign language learning, neither can we predict what advantages they may lose if we deny them the chance even to try.

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