

# The Languages Bridge

– a multilingual way  
to learn language skills



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'I enjoyed it because it was a challenge, but it was a challenge that was fun!' - one eleven year old's opinion of lessons from the Languages Bridge. She was a detective receiving multilingual witness statements from fictional colleagues around Europe about the movements of Mr. X, the international jewel thief. She and her classmates were using their language skills, recognising and understanding cognates, that different textual features and layout give clues to understanding and applying skills of interpretation, to understand and collate information in four different languages.

## What is the Languages Bridge?

This series of lessons is part of an innovative, web-based programme of multilingual materials designed to teach how languages work. It was developed between 2004 and 2007 by a team of Modern Languages and English teachers at the International Learning and Research Centre in the South West of England. They researched pupils' language learning styles, identified key elements of language learning. Six Building Blocks were created comprising over 20 hours of interactive materials for children aged 7-14 to develop listening and reading skills, word, sentence and text level comprehension skills. They increase confidence as a language learner, and encourage thinking skills and analysis in collaborative classroom tasks often with a narrative context. Activities involve comparison of 9 European languages, Mandarin and Japanese. The materials were trialled in 12 primary and 2 secondary schools.

## The Languages Bridge in 6 schools in Gentofte

Since 2007 over 160 schools across the UK use the programme, and now, following a presentation in Copenhagen in May it will be used in six schools in Gentofte Municipality. This came about as a result of the International Learning and Research Centre's strong partnership with Gentofte Municipality, developed over several years. Participation in the conference was the culmination of a successful Comenius Regio project to share pedagogical practices.

The International Learning and Research Centre was established in November, 2000, as a self-funded, not for profit, innovation and development centre. It invests in and promotes school and community-based practitioner enquiry and research. Innovation is promoted through local, regional, national and international projects which provide the focus for leading-edge practitioner research and enquiry programmes

The innovative, multilingual teaching materials in the Languages Bridge appeal to the curiosity of young learners through the use of narrative and active learning and remove the fear of attempting other languages. The programme is not trying to teach specific vocabulary or content in any languages, but rather give students experience of a wide variety of languages. It encourages them to try out their skills of deduction and analysis, as well as the more practical skills of listening and speaking. They do this collaboratively through investigative, practical activities, often around a theme or story. Each lesson also culminates in the students presenting and discussing their conclusions about how languages work.

## The content of Building Blocks 1,2,3

Building Block 1 explores how languages communicate meaning through sound patterns, body language, gesture and facial expression. Students discover a tonal language (Mandarin), a language using a different alphabet (Bulgarian – Cyrillic) and finally accents, and why they are used, which is a challenge for UK students. Building Block 2 explores the concept of cognates; how they vary in spelling and pronunciation, how they are useful to the language learner, and why they exist. From this, students draw conclusions about the concept of families of related languages.

'Do they have verbs in French?' was overheard by one student trialling a lesson in Building Block 3, which ex-

The screenshot displays the 'The Languages Bridge' interface. At the top, it says 'Building Block 3 Lesson 3'. Below this, there are several cards and images:
 

- A card with food items: 'la pizza', 'el pollo', 'la hamburguesa', 'el pescado', 'la naranja', and 'el tomate'.
- A card titled 'Chinese Radicals' showing characters like '日', '木', '山', '口' and their corresponding radicals.
- A card with a Japanese newspaper clipping titled '雞肉情' (Chicken Love) and a headline '2470億 戴姆勒賠佳'.
- A card with a Japanese woman in a kimono and the text 'Positive Prunella will wear a kimono.' and 'Negative Norbert wa kimono o ki'.

plores sentence structure in different languages. Many of the concepts in the Languages Bridge we as languages teachers take for granted. Our research showed that students need to actively explore these concepts to gain a deeper understanding in order to apply this knowledge in their language learning.

This often involves making explicit links between mother tongue and foreign languages. Building Block 3 uses practical activities to link understanding of word classes in mother tongue to foreign languages. Gender is another alien concept for UK students, which they explore in various different languages to show that it is English that is unusual in not having gender.

They finish this Building Block by applying knowledge of word classes and sentence structure to a real text to aid comprehension. The text used is a short passage from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in many different languages, including Danish.

#### **Danish (Dansk)**

*Alle mennesker er født frie og lige i værdighed og rettigheder. De er udstyret med fornuft og samvittighed, og de bør handle mod hverandre i en broderskabets ånd.*

#### **German (Deutsch)**

*Alle Menschen sind frei und gleich an Würde und Rechten geboren. Sie sind mit Vernunft und Gewissen begabt und sollen einander im Geist der Brüderlichkeit begegnen.*

#### **Italian (italiano)**

*Tutti gli esseri umani nascono liberi ed eguali in dignità e diritti. Essi sono dotati di ragione e di coscienza e devono agire gli uni verso gli altri in spirito di fratellanza.*

#### **Romanian (limba română)**

*Toate ființele umane se nasc libere și egale în demnitate și în drepturi. Ele sunt înzestrate cu rațiune și conștiință și trebuie să se comporte unele față de altele în spiritul fraternității.*

Students are encouraged to see patterns and recognise words by using knowledge of cognates, sentence structure, context and comparison with the sentences in other languages.

#### **Building Block 4, 5, 6**

Building Block 4 explores word properties, sound and spelling characteristics of word groups, prefixes, verb endings and the construction of characters in Mandarin. Understanding and recognising imperatives, questions, statements, and exclamations is explored in Building Block 5, as well as negative constructions and how to use knowledge of layout, context and structure to understand a longer real text in different languages. Building Block 6 puts students into a simulated 'foreign' situation to apply their language skills for real purposes and real audiences. The aim is to develop linguistic confidence and willingness to take risks and to reflect on what has been learned through the programme.

#### **European Award for Languages 2009**

National and international dissemination has led to a web-based Online Community of Learners accessing the materials and contributing to their further development.

Schools that subscribe send a teacher to a training day to familiarise them with the pedagogy and materials, including full lesson plans and background language notes, as we are yet to find a teacher competent in all the eleven languages included! Many primary teachers using the resources are not language teachers, so all the necessary support is provided. They are also encouraged to provide feedback to continue to develop the programme. New materials were added in May 2011 as a result of such feedback.

In 2009 the Languages Bridge won a prestigious European Award for Languages. The Award recognises innovative approaches to language learning. The judges said; 'This project is built on showing the similarities as well as the differences between languages. It is an approach which empowers pupils and produces confident language learners.'

#### **MULTEMO a multilingual toolkit for mobility**

In 2010 the International Learning and Research Centre was awarded a Leonardo Transfer of Innovation grant from the European Commission to take the Languages Bridge methodology into Europe working collaboratively with 5 European Partners in Vocational Education. We are developing MULTEMO, a multilingual toolkit for mobility, which will be a programme of materials using pedagogical principles from the Languages Bridge for vocational students aged 14+ to develop their language skills. The aim is to create more linguistically adaptable young people, more confident and able to access the European employment market.

It was a pleasure to present to Danish colleagues. Their enthusiastic participation in the workshop, feedback comments, and their desire to widen Danish students' horizons and understanding of languages other than English suggests there is great potential for this approach to languages teaching in Denmark. If you are interested in further information about the programme please go to [www.ilrc.org.uk/languagesbridge](http://www.ilrc.org.uk/languagesbridge)

**Trevor Davies** is an experienced foreign languages teacher and was Head of a Languages Faculty in a large UK secondary school. He is now the Primary Languages Adviser for Wiltshire and a Senior Consultant at the International Learning and Research Centre leading action research programmes.

He was a member of the core research and enquiry team for the 'Languages Bridge' [2004-2007] and now coordinates the resulting Online Community of Practice of approximately 160 institutions. He has disseminated the Languages Bridge project nationally and internationally. The programme, under his direction, received a European Award for Languages 2009.