

## ***Vienna Bilingual Schools Programme***

Hazel Crichton, University of Glasgow

There are many strategies used by different countries to teach English and other foreign languages. The model described below is one of a variety employed by the Vienna Board of Education: the Vienna Bilingual Schooling programme (VBS). This particular model has proved very successful in terms of pupils' attainment, not only in English, but also overall, according to Stuart Simpson, Project Manager, of the Europabüro of the Vienna Board of Education (2006).

The city of Vienna has been said to be at the crossroads of Europe. Its neighbours speak a wide variety of languages and this is perhaps why the Vienna School Board appears to have embraced the European Commission Action Plan (2003) which calls for EU citizens to be able to communicate in their mother tongue, plus two other languages. It has instigated a variety of initiatives which place modern languages at the centre of the educational process. This article, which describes a visit to two Viennese schools which offer a bilingual programme for German and English speaking students, is an initial exploration of the strategies used in Vienna and of the issues it raises for ML within the Scottish curriculum.

The decision to offer bilingual provision in Viennese schools was made after the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent opening of borders of Eastern European countries. Numerous Western companies opened offices in Vienna, which was seen as the city best placed for an operations base. Many of the staff of these companies had children and the Viennese School Board was asked to provide education for them. As it was to be state funded, native speaking German children also had to benefit so it was decided to set up a class in each year group in the school's designated bilingual schools, made up of equal numbers of children who had German as a first language and English as a first language, approximately 14 of each. However the German native language speakers were required to have some knowledge of English, possibly through family or other connections or having attended an English nursery.

There are now seven primary schools, eight middle schools and five upper secondary schools, which are classed as bilingual schools, most of which have 1 class per year following the bilingual model. According to Simpson (2006) it is unlikely that this number will increase, as the number of English speaking children seems to have stabilised and has remained constant for the last few years. However such initiatives give the impression of a city whose education department is flexible in its approach and is keen to promote multilingualism and an openness towards and appreciation of other cultures.

I was able to spend two days visiting two bilingual schools, a primary school (ages 6-10) and a middle school (ages 11-15), to see how this system works. Funding was secured for me to do this through the EU partially funded European project, EdGate. EdGate is a project which aims to improve economic growth through education. One of the main aims of the EdGate Project is to develop a new educational concept for a European Regional College (ERC) that will enable European students aged 6-18 to become mobile in a united Europe of tomorrow. The project involves ten partner regions from eight countries (see [www.edgate.eu.com](http://www.edgate.eu.com) for more information).

Although the time scale for the visits was short, it was intense and it was possible to get a sense of the ethos of these establishments and how they operate. The aim of the study visit was to focus on a sample of VBS schools with a view to seeing how they worked in practice and if there were any elements which could be incorporated into the Scottish education system. The first part of this report will describe the programme followed during the two days, the visits to the schools, and the discussions with teachers, head teachers

and representatives of the European office of the Vienna Board of Education. A description of the benefits of the visit follows, both in terms of greater understanding and appreciation of the system at a personal level and of the possibilities of integrating aspects of the programme into the Scottish school system.

The main areas of investigation were:

- how the schools are organised;
- the pupils who attend the schools;
- the teachers;
- how the classes are organised.

Each visit was structured around a series of questions designed to form a coherent picture of how the schools operate, the selection and nature of the pupils, the selection and nature of the teachers and what actually happens in the classroom. The ultimate aim was a comparison with the Scottish system, with the intention of establishing whether Scottish pupils could possibly benefit from some of the approaches identified as successful. Already in Scotland an effective programme of Gaelic immersion teaching has been established, with increasing numbers of pupils (Scottish Executive, 2006). Perhaps similar initiatives could be beneficial for modern languages.

The programme planned for the Study Visit allowed me to spend two days in two schools: the VBS in Wendtstattgasse, a lower secondary school, which caters for students from age 10-14, and the VBS in Meißnergasse, a primary school catering for children from age 6-10. There I observed classes, spoke to the children and teachers and interviewed the head teachers. Thereafter in the European Office of the Vienna Board of Education I interviewed Romy Hölzer, who has special responsibility for the VBS schools and Stuart Simpson, who is in overall charge of the project.

The Wendtstattgasse school is the only true 'bilingual school' in Vienna, in that all its classes are taught bilingually; other VBS schools have a bilingual section for each year group. It is a small school comprising 207 students and 27 teachers, although some of these are part-time. There are two classes in each year group. Each class has between 25 and 30 pupils, approximately half of whom are classified as English native speakers. It should be noted that here, as in all the VBS schools, many of these non-Austrian children come from countries where English is one of the official languages: India, Pakistan, the Philippines, many African countries, as well as the UK, USA, Canada, New Zealand or Australia. In fact I was struck by the number of different nationalities in the VBS classes. According to the head teacher, Martha Hafner, this appears to contribute to a tolerant and open-minded attitude in the pupils. Viennese children whose parents wish them to attend the school, must have either been to a bilingual primary school or attend an 'orientation talk', accompanied by their parents, where their competence in English and their social competences are checked. The purpose of this is to ensure that they are able to follow instructions and communicate at a basic level in English and assessors are also interested to observe how they interact with other children in a group.

The teachers' qualifications vary, with about a third having qualified through the university, thus they are qualified to teach in all areas of secondary education; another third have qualifications from the Pädagogische Hochschule, allowing them to teach in primary and lower secondary schools<sup>1</sup> and about a third, the native speaker teachers,

---

<sup>1</sup> The 'primary to lower secondary school' qualification has not existed in Scotland up till now. However there is the possibility for primary teachers to upgrade their qualifications to enable

have teaching qualifications from their own country. All German speaking teachers in the school must have a good working knowledge of English and are encouraged to communicate with the native speaker teachers in English outside the classroom. All classes, apart from language classes, are taught in a mixture of German and English with two teachers (the German native speaker and the English native speaker) team teaching. Apart from informal discussion, teachers have a timetabled planning afternoon every two weeks, where they plan their lessons in detail. I observed lessons in Biology, English, Maths and Geography.

A surprise was that all teachers spoke at normal speed; no concessions were made for either group of learners. All children seemed able to follow the lesson and were able to contribute in both languages. Teachers were very skilled at working as a team. Although there were variations, generally as each teacher started his contribution, he would recap in his language, checking that the children knew the key words in that language and then move on to the next stage of the lesson. This was done consistently, so that both languages were being reinforced as well as the subject knowledge. Key words were written on the board in German and English. The longest a teacher spoke was about 3-4 minutes at a time, before the other teacher would make a contribution, although it was often shorter. There was a great deal of interaction between the teachers and the pupils, making skilful use of questioning. If a child's utterance was wrong factually, it was corrected. When pupils made linguistic errors, the teacher merely repeated the answer using the correct model. This would seem to follow the pattern of children's first language acquisition in the home. In fact in an evaluation of the school (Morgan, 1999), one of the conclusions was that:

*'... a bilingual school such as the Wendtgasse can offer a mixed language background (with all its concomitant benefits) similar to that of a bilingual home'*

This appears to support Krashen's theory of second language acquisition. (1988, in Schütz, 2005)

*'Acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language natural communication - in which speakers are concerned not with the form of their utterances but with the messages they are conveying and understanding.'*

During a limited discussion with teachers it emerged that, after an initial planning period, they developed their roles intuitively while working together. The collaborative nature of their input is an area which could benefit from further investigation.

The only class I saw which was not taught bilingually was the English class, where the final year students (aged around 15) were planning a trip to Cornwall due to take place two weeks later. They had been to the library and computer room in order to research various places of interest and were reporting back in English on what they had found out. The atmosphere in this, as in all the classes I observed, was open, supportive and interactive, with the pupils clearly keen to communicate and the teacher using questioning to help the learners develop their answers, for example, when one of the pupils mentioned a folk tale from Cornwall, the teacher responded:

*'That sounds like a gripping story. What is a gripping story?'*

When I spoke to teachers in the staff room, where they communicate mostly in English, there was an impression of a team spirit, with a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. There is a parents' association and the parents are very interested and supportive of the school and their children. This family atmosphere of encouragement and motivation is very

---

them to teach areas of the lower end of the secondary curriculum, providing they can satisfy a number of GTCS requirements.

important according to the head teacher. When I asked her what advantages the VBS would give children who were already English native speakers, given that they would be exposed to German in a 'normal' school anyway, she replied that they were less isolated in a VBS as there were other pupils in the same situation who could give support if need be.

There is the possibility that German native speakers and English native speakers have few opportunities to socialise outside school. According to the head teacher, in school the pupils from both language groups mix well and use a combination of both languages to communicate. This certainly was the case with the children I observed at the morning break and, in the evaluation report one of the pupils was quoted as saying:

*'...here you learn it [English] automatically. It's just like talking to friends' (Morgan 1999).*

The Meißnergasse primary school is more typical of the VBS schools: it has one class per year which is taught bilingually. As in the Wendtstattgasse, classes comprise approximately half English native speakers and half German native speakers. Viennese children whose parents wish them to be in the bilingual class must pass an interview, which tests sound discrimination, the level of maturity of the child, and their knowledge of English. The children do not have to be fluent, but have to be able to communicate. One English native speaker teacher is employed for two year groups and either works in the classroom with the class teacher or works with children in the 'English' room, where no German is permitted. The English native speaker teacher divides his/her time between the two classes. Non-native English speaking children in the class have two lessons per week of English language in the first two years (ages 6-7) concentrating on speaking and listening. This is mainly done through games and songs. Reading and writing skills are introduced and developed in the third and fourth years (ages 8-9). Children are taught reading and writing in their own native language from year one.

As in the Wendtstattgasse, native German speaking teachers are expected to have a high level of English, even the teachers of the non-bilingual classes. Also similar to the Wendtstattgasse, the English native speaker teachers had been asked to speak only in English to their German speaking colleagues thus developing their skills in English. Indeed the head teacher expressed the view:

*'Theoretically, it would be possible for an English native speaker teacher to be unable to speak German'*

This is because they are seen as a source of training for the German native teachers, being effectively forbidden to use German in the school. Although it was certainly not the case in this school, both of whose English native speaker teachers were proficient German speakers. However, during a later interview the project manager who oversees the programme estimated that up to 30% of English native speaker teachers might have a poor level of German.

Once again, in observing the children doing various activities with their teachers, I was surprised how comfortably they were able to switch from one language to the other; the German native speaker teacher also switched languages to reinforce points made in the other language. When the children (aged 10) heard me talking with their teacher, they were eager to communicate in English. The native speaker teacher asserted:

*'The children don't really know which language they're using'*

As in the other school, the two languages were used for communication and there was very little correction of mistakes outwith the lessons actually focusing on the language. Most correction of the pupils' language again consisted of recasting the child's

statement using the correct form. Officially there is one hour per week for planning, but as the native speaker teacher observed:

*'...unofficially, it's more. There's a lot of planning necessary. It's crucial that the team gets on well'*

Her stress on the importance of good relations between the teaching staff echoes sentiments expressed in the Wendtstattgasse school. Relations between the bilingual and monolingual classes (who have proportionally more English input than in other non-bilingual schools) were good, she stated, possibly because of a greater awareness of the second language and culture within the school, but also because of initiatives such as the English afternoon club and the fact that the children who stayed for afternoon care (approximately half of the school population) are mixed in different groups and socialise together. The parents were very involved with the school, with some volunteering to work in the monolingual classes 'teaching' English for 30 - 60 minutes per week, using different activities such as songs, games etc. Both this school and the Wendtstattgasse school take the children in the bilingual classes to an English speaking country in their final year. When they are abroad, they send e-mails and letters back to the school which are displayed for everyone to read.

The visits to the two schools gave a good picture of how the system operates. To find out more about the rationale and the background, Ms. Romy Höltzer and Mr. Stuart Simpson of the European Office of the Vienna Board of Education were then interviewed.

As outlined previously, the bilingual schools were created to educate the (mainly English speaking) non-native children living in Vienna. The city had to pay for this educational provision as part of the overall education budget and the feeling was that native Viennese children could also derive some benefit from the integration of the non-native children, both in terms of English language learning and a greater awareness of intercultural issues.

When asked if there were plans for more schools of this type, Mr. Simpson said it was unlikely, unless there were an increasing number of English native speaker children. He was clear that the numbers in the bilingual classes should remain roughly equal. There should be no dilution of native speakers per class in the model. However there are plans to expand other monolingual models, putting more emphasis on the intercultural aspects of global education and foreign language learning.

In terms of providing young people with an open attitude to other cultures and races, as well as enabling them to become proficient at operating in another language, the Vienna Board of Education appears to have found a way of developing a highly successful model. According to Mr. Simpson, pupils who go to the VBS tend to be overachievers and appear to be more flexible mentally. Research would appear to back this up. In a study conducted by Bialystok (1999) bilingual children demonstrated superior levels of ability to monolingual children in solving experimental problems, which required high levels of control. Other researchers claim bilingualism has a positive effect on divergent thinking and creativity (Torrance *et al* 1970).

The children's home environment was also felt to be an important factor:

*'The children aren't necessarily brighter but they tend to have more support at home. The parents have made a commitment to their children's learning by placing them in the school and so they're keen and motivated to support them.'*

This was echoed by both head teachers and Mr. Simpson who all emphasised the active parental involvement in their children's education. Research agrees that children who are supported at home become higher achievers. Ho Sui-chu and Willms (1996) in their

discussion of parents' involvement in their children's progress found that pupils who achieved higher grades had parents who engaged with their children's education. Bogenschneider (1997) concurs that parents who attend parents' meetings, check their children's progress and help with homework are more likely to have children who perform well academically.

Obviously such a system could only work in cities where there are large numbers of foreign nationals, but in the Scottish context, Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen spring to mind as cities which could organise similar programmes. A bold initiative such as this would require funding and continued commitment, not only on the part of our politicians but also by teachers at all levels. The City of Vienna made a clear decision to employ only native speaker teachers as the teachers of English and a certain sum is set aside each year to fund this. This sum is not supplementary and is part of the overall education budget. As a result, numbers of pupils in classes throughout the city, both in the bilingual and monolingual schools are near the maximum 30 pupils per class. It was not possible in the short time allocated to the visit to find out teachers' views on this but, in the Scottish context, where teachers are calling for reduced class sizes, a proposal of this sort could possibly come up against opposition, if the result were to be class sizes at the same level as at present, or higher. Perhaps the answer is to follow the lead taken by the Gaelic lobby, which has had considerable success in raising the profile of Gaelic teaching and learning in Scotland. There exists in Scotland a commitment to providing Gaelic education and there has been a rise in numbers of children whose parents want them to learn Gaelic. When Gaelic was officially recognised as one of Scotland's official languages in 2005 *Bòrd na Gàidhlig* was established as the Gaelic development agency. This powerful pressure group, combined with the commitment and enthusiasm of interested parents, has achieved funding and assurance for the development of Gaelic education from SEED. In August 2006 the first stand-alone Gaelic medium secondary school opened in Glasgow.

Maybe we need to learn from the Gaelic experience. At a recent conference at the Royal Society of Edinburgh in March 2006 (RSE 2006) about the future of language teaching and learning where speakers included policy makers, working linguists in the business community, academics, and teachers, the value of language learning was clear. Bilingual schooling may be a distant aspiration, but given its success in producing effective communicators in the Viennese context, perhaps it would be worth looking at ways of increasing the amount of foreign language pupils are exposed to in Scottish schools. There have been a number of partial immersion projects in the primary sector, the most well-known of which, Walker Road Primary in Aberdeen, has received very positive evaluations (Johnstone 2003). Gaelic immersion pupils in the primary have been considered at least as proficient as their exclusively English-speaking counterparts, while at the same time becoming fluent in another language (Johnstone, 1998). The philosophy of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning)<sup>2</sup>, of which these two initiatives are examples, would appear to mirror that of the VBS, in that content is the central focus; meaning is placed above form and the increase in effective communication skills is developed as the learners progress. Perhaps, as suggested on the CILT website (CILT, no date), schools could use foreign language assistants to develop materials or collaborate in the teaching of classes or modules in the foreign language. This could be developed by some form of action research, which could open up further

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information about CLIL see CILT <http://www.cilt.org.uk/clip/faqs.htm>, EuroCLIC (European Network for Content and Language Integrated Classrooms) <http://www.euroclit.net/index.php?inhouid=inhouid/euroclit/main.inc> or read Do Coyle's article in Issue 13 of the Scottish Languages Review ([www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/slr](http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/slr)).

discussion. Head teachers and senior managers must also be informed of the advantages for their pupils of more exposure to foreign languages.

The time spent visiting the VBS school system identified a need for further comparative research in the areas of pupil language development and how it continues into career choice and life patterns. There are also implications for teacher training and teacher career development regarding the collaborative nature of the teachers' interaction and how it is developed.

It is not unreasonable to assume that Vienna's position at the heart of Europe has played a major part in the development of models of schooling which put languages at the heart of pupils' education. Scotland, on the edge of Europe, has perhaps not yet recognised an imperative need to develop the linguistic capabilities of her citizens. However if we wish young Scots to increase their global understanding, improve their employment potential and acquire the attributes and skills that provide opportunities for individual advancement in professional and personal life' (Gallagher-Brett, 2005), it may be wise to follow the lead of enlightened head teachers such as Duncan Ferguson, Rector of Plockton High School and John Docherty, Head teacher of St. Ninian's High School, Eastwood who, in presentations at the SCILT conference in June 2006, demonstrated, in different ways, how a supportive attitude to the teaching of languages can facilitate uptake and enhance pupils' prospects. Finally, the *Schools of Ambition* and *A Curriculum for Excellence* initiatives seem to offer the opportunity for at least some schools to develop a new model of modern language teaching which could do more to ensure that Scottish pupils do not miss opportunities which are taken for granted in other European countries.

## References:

Bialystok, E. (1999) 'Cognitive Complexity and Attentional Control in the Bilingual Mind'. *Child Development* 70 (3), 636-644.

Bogensneider, K. (1997) 'Parental involvement in adolescent schooling: A proximal process with transcontextual validity'. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 59, 718-733

CILT (no date) Information on CLIL: <http://www.cilt.org.uk/clip/faqs.htm>

European Commission Action Plan:

[http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act\\_lang\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/doc/official/keydoc/actlang/act_lang_en.pdf)

Gallagher-Brett, A (2005) *700 reasons to study languages*. Southampton: Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies. [www.llas.ac.uk/700reasons/700\\_reasons.pdf](http://www.llas.ac.uk/700reasons/700_reasons.pdf)

GTC Scotland:

[http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/site/ProfessionalDevelopment/ProfessionalRegistration/Routes/GainingRegistrationtoTeachS1S2/Registration to Teach S1 S2 1.asp](http://www.gtcs.org.uk/web/site/ProfessionalDevelopment/ProfessionalRegistration/Routes/GainingRegistrationtoTeachS1S2/Registration%20to%20Teach%20S1%20S2%201.asp) (accessed 16.06.06)

Ho Sui-chu, E. & Willms, J.D. (1996) 'Effects of parental involvement on eighth grade achievement'. *Sociology of Education*, 69, 126-141

Hudson, D. (1998) *Linguistics at school: A discussion paper*.

<http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/ec/lagb-las.htm#MFL>

Hume, C. (2006) *Schools language decline in Wales*.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/4791062.stm>

Johnstone, R. (2003) *Evaluation Report: Early Partial Immersion in French at Walker Road Primary School, Aberdeen The First Two Years: 2000/1 and 2001/2*. Scottish CILT

Johnstone, R., MacNeil, M., Stradling, B. Harlen, W., Thorpe, G. (1998) *The Attainments of Pupils Receiving Gaelic-medium Primary Education in Scotland. Interim Report*. Scottish Office Education and Industry Department.

Macmillan, A. *Scots 'non' to languages will make people poorer*.  
<http://news.scotsman.com/education.cfm?id=617232005>

McConnell (2006) First Minister's New Year's Message:  
<http://www.scottishlabour.org.uk/fmnewyearmessage/>

Moore, I (2006) CILT response to CBI statement on Languages.  
[http://www.cilt.org.uk/news/latest/1708\\_CBIstatement\\_resp.htm](http://www.cilt.org.uk/news/latest/1708_CBIstatement_resp.htm)

Morgan, C. (1999) *Evaluation Report of the VBS Wendtgasse*, University of Bath

Royal Society of Edinburgh (2006) *Languages in Scotland: What's the problem?* Conference 24 March 2006; <http://www.royalsoced.org.uk/international/events.htm>

Scottish CILT (2006) Newsletter May 2006.  
<http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/newsletters/2006/May%20Newsletter.pdf>

Scottish Executive Arts and Culture: *Gaelic Medium Education*.  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/ArtsCulture/gaelic/gaelic-english/17909/10656>

Scottish Executive Education Department (2001a) *Guidance on flexibility in the curriculum SEED circular no. 3/2001*.  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/circ3.pdf>

Scottish Executive Education Department (2001b) Action group for languages: response.  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/library3/education/cmlw-00.asp> (20.06.06)

Schütz, R. (2005) *Stephen Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition*.  
<http://www.sk.com.br/sk-krash.html>

Simpson, S. (01.07.2006) Discussion with the author

Stadtschulrat für Wien Europabüro: [europabuero.ssr-wien.gv.at](http://europabuero.ssr-wien.gv.at)

Torrance, E. Wu, J., & Allioti, N. (1970). 'Creating functioning of monolingual and bilingual children in Singapore'. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 61, 72-75.