

## **Use of Arabic online translation to provide a route into the curriculum**

The pupil, a newly arrived Y6 boy, was admitted to school in the spring term of his final year. His brothers and sisters had arrived in school some time previously and were well settled after receiving early support, but A had been attending another primary school in the city whilst waiting for an available place. On arrival, he found it difficult to settle into a class of pupils all preparing diligently for their SATs, and was not eligible for the additional funding needed to employ an MLA. He received support from the school in the form of small group withdrawal work whenever an additional adult was available in class, but was frustrated both by his inability to communicate effectively in English and by the lack of work at an appropriate level.

At the time of the study, A had begun to settle in and make friends with one or two other pupils. All the pupils were working on an end-of-year history project – ‘The ‘70s’ – to encourage independent study skills in readiness for transfer to secondary education in September, and the intention, initially, was to use online translation to support A’s project work. However, as is often the way, end-of-year preparations made it virtually impossible to find a time when the pupils were not rehearsing for their leavers’ assembly. As A enjoyed the singing, dancing and acting involved, and had a (rare) opportunity to work effectively with his fellow pupils, it was decided, instead, to use whatever ‘spare’ time was available to improve his skill at reading in English.

By this time he was able to understand simple conversational English and respond with one or two word answers. Longer responses could be elicited in a more supportive environment than a busy Y6 classroom. He was not able to produce independently written texts in English, but could decode text at a relatively high level, although often without understanding.

For the purposes of the study, we selected a text at a significantly higher level than he would be expected to read normally (Ginn Level 7 as opposed to Ginn Level 3 – his school reading book). We used the online translation engine to support A’s understanding of the text when his English comprehension – although not decoding – skills were not sufficient for the task.

The website, Sakhr, was easily found using the search facility, and it was not difficult to register to use the free translation service. We used it a number of times and there was no problem either in accessing the site, or in experiencing delays due to heavy demand on the service. It was straightforward to use and A quickly understood how it worked.

We read a paragraph at a time from the text, after which A would indicate which word or group of words he had difficulty in understanding. We then used the translation engine to work out what these words meant in Arabic, rather as if we were using a standard dictionary.

In many ways this was a surprisingly efficient way to operate. A had to monitor his own understanding of the text and make decisions about which words needed translation. This meant he was able to choose to translate only those words that were central to his understanding in order to maintain the pace of the story. Similarly, having an adult at hand to type in the words meant that distraction from

the task was minimal. A was deeply engaged in the task (to such an extent that he failed to notice all the other pupils leaving for lunch!) and expressed great satisfaction when clarification was obtained quickly and easily. He read at speed, appeared to have understood the text, and enjoyed an opportunity to work productively at an appropriate level.

On balance, I would say that this way of using online translation was an effective way of supporting older, more able pupils in the classroom, but there were also disadvantages to this way of working too.

There needed to be an adult supporting the activity, as typing in an unfamiliar language can be laborious and time-consuming. Particular difficulties include un-noticed spelling mistakes and attempting to translate unfamiliar English names – ‘Andy’ ‘Kate’ and ‘Jill’. Additionally, it is often necessary to re-word or shorten a phrase in order to receive an adequate translation, something that can only be done by an already-competent speaker of the language. The principal difficulty, of course, is that without even a basic knowledge of written or spoken Arabic, it is almost impossible to judge whether or not a translation is accurate enough to make sense.

In order to ensure, as far as possible, that the translation engine was producing an adequate result, I asked A to explain some of the words that we found and, for many of them, the result was good. Equally, it was sometimes possible to tell from his spontaneous comments whether or not the translation made sense. However, without constant interrogation, it would not be possible to ensure that the meaning of the text was, in fact, being accurately conveyed by the translation engine. See examples below:

Word or phrase to be translated	A’s response
twins	Two. There’s two.
to decide	He have to say ‘This? Or this?’
narrow yard	At the back. Like this. (Appropriate gesture)
to pick up	He cut?
treasure hunt	*
nest	Bird (Pointing to tree)
branches	Ah! Tree up again!
nodded	*
nod/s	*

- Not able to find an adequate translation for this

We did attempt to translate from Arabic back into English, both in order to clarify whether or not the translations made sense, and also to enable A to communicate more effectively than he could using English alone. This was not particularly successful unfortunately, and was abandoned fairly quickly.

The online translation service had a pop-up keyboard screen using Arabic script, and words could be formed by simply clicking on the appropriate part of the screen. A at first attempted to write his name using the keyboard, but had extreme difficulty in

seeing the letters as they were much too small. He found it necessary to guess which might be the right one, and could only read accurately what he was trying to write once it had appeared on screen. This was extremely frustrating and made the whole process very slow. Additionally A, a confident computer user, was of the opinion that the letters did not appear in the order he would have expected, based on his keyboard knowledge prior to coming to England.

Again, because I have absolutely no knowledge of Arabic, I am not able to say whether or not this is the case. Equally, I suspect that Arabic does not use vowels in the same way that English does, explaining why the eventual translation was somewhat bizarre, but I cannot state this with any degree of certainty. Certainly, the whole process would have been made much easier if we had had access to an actual, as opposed to virtual, keyboard, and some time spent on becoming familiar with the basic principles of Arabic grammar would have been helpful too.

What was abundantly clear to me however, was the delight and relief experienced by the pupil on discovering 'his' language in school. He spent some time avidly reading the homepage before translating parts of it for my benefit, and was pleased and proud to be able to demonstrate his knowledge of the language and aptitude for reading.

Although online translation has many shortfalls, and certainly could not be used reliably by pupils in a primary classroom, I believe that it offers an opportunity for schools to look at language in a more focused way. It encourages us to look much more closely at the language demands of the curriculum and allows us to develop some flexibility in responding to the needs of bilingual pupils. It provides a vehicle for linking languages and for exploring similarities and differences. Most important of all, it gives much needed status and prestige to 'other' languages – something that matters as much to white monolingual children as it does to children who already speak and value those languages as part of their life and culture.