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Pupils learn Spanish by dancing

By Justin Parkinson

BBC News education reporter

All together now. Clap your hands. Let's hear it for... Spanish vocabulary?

Forget verb tables and grammar - if you want to learn a language, think turntables and grooving.

Classrooms across England will soon be looking more like discos, as children take to dance mats like those seen in amusement arcades.

The government wants schools to buy the Sonica software package - including the mat - which communicates in Spanish.

Children learn words by placing their feet on coloured squares to the orders of a cartoon character on a screen.

This, it is hoped, will give them a love of languages from a young age, helping to overcome the traditional British aversion to learning them.

Uno, dos, tres

Sonica Spanish, which also operates a sing-along feature - El Karaoke - and computer games, has been tested in several schools.

Alan Thompson, a teacher at one of them - Dereham St Nicholas Junior School, Norfolk - told the BBC News website: "The theory is that if they get excited they want to learn.

"They love the dance mat. No other piece of software excites them as much. They are learning and having a great time."

The pupils have to move their feet across the different coloured pads on the mat, according to the words shown on screen and shouted out.

These cover topics such as colours, directions, shopping items and numbers.



Jive-talking: dance steps teach children Spanish words

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Spanish has proved so popular at Dereham St Nicholas that a group of eight to 10-year-olds has formed a lunchtime learning club.

As the bell tolls for the end of morning lessons, the pupils rush into the classroom, remove their socks and dance.



Mysterious girls: pupils try their own moves

'Groovy'

One at a time they strut their stuff while the others clap, sing and cheer.

Rachel, nine, said: "I like dancing and it's really groovy doing it to Spanish words. It's a bit like being in Girls Aloud."

Nathan, eight, added: "I like the songs. You can sing along and it makes learning the words easier."

The best dancers - those quickest to respond to the software's promptings - win the most points, just like in arcade games.

Pupils jealously guard their scores and return to the mat as often as possible to improve on them.

The government is hoping to create more such interest in languages among the very young, having made them optional at GCSE.

Even before that, take-up was falling.

By 2010, ministers want all children aged seven to 11 to learn at least one language.



Teacher Helen Debbage shows how it was done 'in the old days'

The mat introduces Spanish informally, to make it fun before pupils get down to the serious business of grammar and spelling.

It is also aimed at helping teachers, many of whom cannot speak a word themselves when the Sonica arrives.

Helen Debbage, a member of staff at Dereham St Nicholas, has a go on the dance mat from time to time.



Pupils give Mrs Debbage's dancing a mixed review

She said: "I only started learning Spanish here with the children, so I go at a similar pace to them. It's been very good for me.

"I'm quite competitive on the dance mat. It's better having to put your foot on the coloured squares, rather than telling them to write the names of colours in a book."

Mr Thompson said: "Spanish is relatively easy for them to learn, as the rules and spellings are consistent. The kids see how straightforward it is compared to English.

"Most of what they need to know is spoken, rather than written, so music helps with pronunciations and accents, and it helps them remember words.

"They learn to talk about things like numbers, their ages, animals, food and drink: all the sorts of things they would discuss in conversations.

"More people go to Spain than anywhere else. French has got a strong foothold, as most teachers did some when they were at school, but not Spanish.

"One thing I do know is that the kids love to dance."

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