

LANGUAGE LEARNING AT KEY STAGE 2: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

INTERIM FINDINGS FROM THE FIRST YEAR

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Introduction

The Open University, Southampton University and Canterbury Christ Church University are currently conducting research on behalf of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to:

review existing evidence on the impact of language learning on pupils;
investigate the nature and quality of the provision of language learning at Key Stage 2 (KS2) in a range of schools; and
assess its impact on pupils' learning in languages and across the curriculum.

The research began in Autumn 2006 and is due to report in Autumn 2009. It consists of a literature review, an examination of provision and practice in 40 schools currently teaching primary languages at Key Stage 2, and an examination of children's attainment in primary languages in eight of these schools.

This research brief reports on interim findings from the first year of this three-year project.

Key findings

Findings from the first year of the project indicate that:

There is considerable enthusiasm from headteachers, teachers and children in the case study schools for the teaching and learning of primary languages.

The teaching and learning of primary languages is perceived as beneficial by headteachers and teachers in terms of developing children's cultural understanding, language and literacy skills, and strategies and dispositions for learning generally.

Children are developing a range of oracy skills in the languages they are learning and the majority enjoy their experience of language learning and teaching.

Methodology

The project has three concurrent strands:

Literature Review (Strand 1)

The review focuses on indicators of effective language teaching and learning and it is an ongoing element of the study. It is exploring international as well as national research literature on language pedagogy. At the end of the project, the literature review will represent an up-to-date synthesis of the current evidence on language teaching and learning for primary school pupils.

The nature and quality of the provision of language learning at Key Stage 2 (Strand 2)

This part of the study involves a mixed methods research design drawing on qualitative and quantitative research methods.

A sample of 40 case study schools already providing language learning for pupils at Key Stage 2 was selected in Autumn 2006 / Spring 2007. The case study schools include a range of school types, from small rural schools to large, urban and suburban schools and those in more and less economically affluent areas. They have different staffing models and time allocations for languages and teachers have different lengths of experience of languages teaching.

Research tools have been developed by the research team specifically for this strand. These include observation and interview schedules for teachers and teaching assistants, an interview schedule for headteachers and a questionnaire and focus group schedule for children.

Assessing pupils' learning in languages and across the curriculum (Strand 3)

A sample of eight "enhanced case study" schools was selected from the 40 schools in Strand 2 to take part in assessments of children's attainment in languages. Tests and assessment activities were developed by the research team to assess children's attainment in languages in Years 3 to 5. For Year 6 pupils, Asset Languages assessments were used.

A further sample of eight schools not currently teaching languages was selected to act as 'control schools'. Every effort was made to match this sample with the sample of enhanced case study schools in terms of school and pupil characteristics; however, a match was only achieved for five of the eight schools.

Summary of main findings

The following is a summary of the findings for the first year of the project based on the initial analysis of the data gathered during visits to schools in 2007. This summary draws on data from the interviews with teachers, headteachers and teaching assistants, focus group discussions, classroom observations and scrutiny of available documentation.

1 Enthusiasm and commitment

There is considerable enthusiasm on the part of practitioners for primary languages teaching and learning and an overwhelming majority of Key Stage 2 children reported enjoying their primary languages experience in schools. Children's engagement and motivation in primary languages learning are strong. This is evident in the responses of teachers, headteachers, teaching assistants and children and in the lessons observed. Words such as 'passion' and 'fun' were used frequently by many respondents.

2 Pedagogic approach

The pedagogy employed places an emphasis on classroom interaction between teachers/teaching assistants and children, and also between children. Oracy is a key vehicle for enhancing competence in languages in the case study schools. This involves a substantial amount of whole class work, pair work and the provision of a range of motivating activities across all years including games, songs, rhymes, stories and role play. The language is usually taught as a discrete lesson although the length of lessons varies. Schools in the study are tending to teach French, Spanish or German; most children are learning French.

Immediate informal formative feedback is clearly evident as an element of this pedagogic approach. The majority of teachers are monitoring children's responses informally and providing immediate, supportive feedback to individual children and to the class as a whole. There is little evidence of systematic, formal assessment of children's learning.

The vast majority of children are positive and enthusiastic about learning another language. They are able to talk about the methods their teachers use to help them become effective language learners and about how these methods differ from teaching and learning in other lessons.

3 The Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages

The Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages appears to be having an impact on important aspects of primary languages pedagogy although explicit references to the Framework in planning are less common. Children are learning a range of knowledge and skills in the areas of oracy and knowledge about language and, to a lesser extent, literacy. Explicit references to language learning strategies and intercultural understanding were rarely observed.

4 The potential of languages learning

The emphasis on oracy and classroom interaction in language lessons is viewed by respondents as providing opportunities for creative approaches to teaching and learning, and these are perceived as beneficial for developing children's cultural understanding, language and literacy skills, and strategies and dispositions for learning generally. Both teachers and headteachers appreciate the potential of primary languages learning for contributing to the development of culturally aware, well-rounded citizens.

The vast majority of children perceive themselves as capable language learners and they appreciate both the intrinsic and extrinsic value of languages in their lives and their education.

5 Influences on provision

Provision is highly influenced by the quality of staff available to teach languages. The availability of confident, competent, enthusiastic, well-trained and well-supported staff is seen as very important by headteachers, primary language coordinators and teachers. Headteachers see their personal commitment, leadership and support for primary languages as important. Resources including funding for staff training and development as well as for the purchase of teaching materials, and local authority support and local networks are perceived as significant for building and sustaining the infrastructure for primary languages to flourish. Sustainability in terms of staffing, training, progression in learning, transfer to secondary school and finance are highlighted as concerns by many headteachers.

6 Language learning outcomes

Group activities in French, Spanish or German, as appropriate, were used to assess children's early achievement in oracy and literacy in language learning in Years 3, 4 and 5 in eight schools.

The analysis of the results suggests:

Oracy

All children could follow simple instructions given in the target language and recite short rhymes or songs, and all groups were familiar with basic vocabulary areas such as colours and numbers. Most could answer personal questions, using some full sentences, and older groups could role play simple conversations. Children's active vocabulary consisted mainly of nouns and adjectives, with a few verbs, mostly produced in fixed phrases. The quality of pronunciation varied, but did improve with length of primary languages experience.

Literacy

The older children used a good range of top down strategies to work out the meanings of simple language texts in the primary language. However, most children had a limited knowledge of target language phonics and often drew on English pronunciation when reading aloud. In most schools children were not confident about writing in the target language. At present, therefore, in the study schools children's oracy skills in primary languages are stronger than their literacy abilities. However, some schools demonstrated that pupils could develop literacy skills in the target language without detracting from their achievement in oracy.

Asset Languages

In the eight enhanced case study schools, some or all Year 6 children were entered for a range of Asset Language Breakthrough assessments, mostly Listening and Speaking tests. The results show that many children who have experienced Key Stage 2 language learning can achieve a recognised level in these skills, with high achievement especially in Listening.

Next Steps

In the second year of the study, the research team will explore the emerging findings and in particular the variety of teaching models, the pedagogic approach, children's learning, how languages are being integrated into curriculum planning and documentation, and issues of sustainability.

Additional Information

DCSF research briefs and full reports can be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Jenny Buckland, 4th Floor, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.