

University of Reading

**Primary Modern Languages:
the impact of teaching
approaches on attainment and
preparedness for secondary
school language learning.**

Final report

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Background

A range of reports has been published on the provision of language teaching in schools in England (e.g. Muijs et al, 2005), but there is little research into the impact of such provision on pupil attainment. Internationally, there is little research-based evidence to indicate which teaching approaches might be most effective for young language learners (Macaro & Mutton, 2009). Learners in England tend to experience language teaching that emphasises oracy development more than literacy development and their reading and writing skills, as well as use of verbs, are less well-developed than their listening and speaking skills (Cable et al, 2010). In contrast, curriculum guidelines used in England since 2005 (DfES, 2005; DfE, 2013) suggest that learners should also receive literacy-based instruction. Whether such an approach does indeed lead to better outcomes for learners is, however unclear. In addition, the transition from primary to secondary school language learning is also an area of much concern in England and beyond. A dip in motivation levels at the point of transition has been noted in European and Asian contexts for young language learners (Matsuzaki Carreira, 2006; Mihaljević Djigunović, & Lopriore, 2011) as well as in England (Bolster et al. 2004; Evans & Fisher, 2009). There is also evidence of a dip in linguistic attainment internationally (summarised in Blondin et al, 1998). Yet little is known about the kind of learning in the primary school that best prepares learners for further language study in the context of England.

Project aims: In view of the paucity of research into the impact of teaching approaches on linguistic and motivational outcomes across the primary-secondary transition, this project sought to investigate whether oracy and literacy approaches for the teaching of French lead to different outcomes for learners in Years 5, 6 and 7 of schooling in terms of: use of grammatical gender, adjectival agreement, simple present tense; motivation and self-efficacy for learning French.

Research questions: What is the impact at the end of primary education and in the first year of

secondary school of two different teaching approaches on:

a) Children's knowledge of the underlying grammatical system of the foreign language (grammatical gender, adjectival agreement, simple present tense)?

b) Children's preparedness for language learning at secondary school, in terms of their confidence in foreign language learning and their level of motivation?

Methodology

Research design

The study was longitudinal in nature, tracking learners from Year 5 (Summer term, Time 1), to Year 6 (start and end of Summer term, Times 2 and 3), and into Year 7 (Autumn term, Time 4). A final round of data collection occurred at Time 5 (Summer term Year 7), with a sub-sample of learners. At Times 1, 2 and 4, learners completed a gender sorting task, a Sentence Repetition Task (SR) and a Photo Description Task (PT). At Times 3, 4 and 5, learners also completed a motivation/self-efficacy questionnaire (Table 1).

Table 1: Study design

Time 1 – Year 5, Summer	Language tasks
Time 2 – Year 6, Summer	Language tasks
Time 3 – Year 6, Summer	Questionnaire
Time 4 – Year 7, Autumn	Language tasks + questionnaire
Time 5 – Year 7, Summer	Questionnaire

To address which teaching approaches lead to better outcomes for learners, two different

approaches were investigated across nine schools, approximately divided into the two following approaches:

1. A general 'competence model' that aims to develop children's linguistic attainment (Cable et al, 2010: p.22), but which focuses primarily on developing oracy skills;
2. A more literacy-based approach, where reading and writing activities are integrated into a general competence model, alongside oracy skills.

The first of these was selected because it is the predominant approach in schools and the second because at the time of the planning for the study, it was an approach adopted by a growing number of schools (Cable et al., 2010), in line with the KS2 Framework (DfES, 2005). Since then, the new National Curriculum for Languages at Key Stage 2 has placed increased emphasis on literacy-based skills, namely that learners should be taught to 'link the spelling, sound and meaning of words (...) read carefully and show understanding of words, phrases and simple writing (...) appreciate stories, songs, poems and rhymes in the language (...) broaden their vocabulary and develop their ability to understand new words that are introduced into familiar written material, including through using a dictionary (...) write phrases from memory, and adapt these to create new sentences, to express ideas clearly (...)' (DfE, 2013, p.2).

Participants and oracy-literacy division

Learners were drawn from state primary schools in the south of England and were selected based on their schools' willingness to be part of the project. Prior to the start of the project, we distributed a questionnaire to local primary schools, with usable replies and a follow-up contact name from ten teachers who were interested in being part of the main study. The questionnaire items were created using the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages, drawing on the objectives from Years 3 to 5 to create items that asked about the oracy and literacy activities that teachers

might be expected to use with learners. Teachers were asked to indicate how often they used each activity with Year 5 French classes, and were also asked to indicate what proportion of lesson time was devoted to listening, speaking, reading and writing respectively. From these responses we allocated each school a literacy score from 1 to 5. We also observed a Year 6 lesson from these teachers once the study was underway and from this allocated a further literacy score out of 5 to the school, giving an overall possible score out of 10, with a score of over 6 indicating the school had more of a literacy approach. This gave us four oracy schools and five literacy schools. We decided to exclude a tenth school from the analysis, as the teaching observed seemed to give children very little input or opportunities for contact with French, on either an oracy or literacy basis.

Table 2: Number of participants – from 9 schools

	Oracy	Literacy	Total
Time 1 (Summer Year 5, tests)	102	152	254
Time 2/3 (Spring/Summer Year 6, tests and questionnaire)	97	146	243
Time 4 (Autumn Year 7, tests and questionnaire)	72	93	165
Time 5 (Summer Year 7, questionnaire)	46	53	99

Schools were matched on percentages of learners eligible for Free School Meals, English as an additional language and average educational attainment. Data on learners' English literacy levels,

parental education, teacher confidence, French proficiency, training and teaching time for French were also gathered. We endeavoured to keep these latter teacher and teaching factors constant, but this proved impossible to do entirely. Hence there was some variation in the amount of teaching time devoted to French across individual schools, in teachers' level of qualification in French and how much language pedagogy training they had received. This variation, however, provided important insights into factors that contribute to language attainment and motivation. Across the oracy-literacy division, however, schools were broadly matched on teacher and teaching time factors (e.g. of the two schools devoting 60 minutes a week to French, one was in the Oracy group, the other in the Literacy group).

Instruments

- Gender task (GT), a gender assignment game with all nouns used in the consecutive tasks (ten). This was scored out of ten.
- Sentence Repetition Task (SR) - 18 sentences, with six each for: Article-noun agreement; Adjective-noun agreement; Simple present tense; seven verbs, eight nouns, three adjectives. Sentences had between seven and ten syllables and were designed based on Marinis & Armon-Lotem (in press). Learners heard a sentence in French, saw an accompanying picture and were required to repeat the sentence verbatim. Sentences were then transcribed and scored for correctness of lexical and grammatical items under investigation. The maximum possible score was 56.
- Photo Description Task (PT – same items/structures as SR targeted); learners saw two sets of pictures and were asked to say what was in the picture. One set was based on nouns and adjectives, the other on present tense verbs. Again, sentences produced were transcribed and scored. The maximum possible score was 54.
- Motivation/self-efficacy questionnaire, asking learners about how much they enjoyed French lessons and their attitudes towards learning French. In addition, their confidence

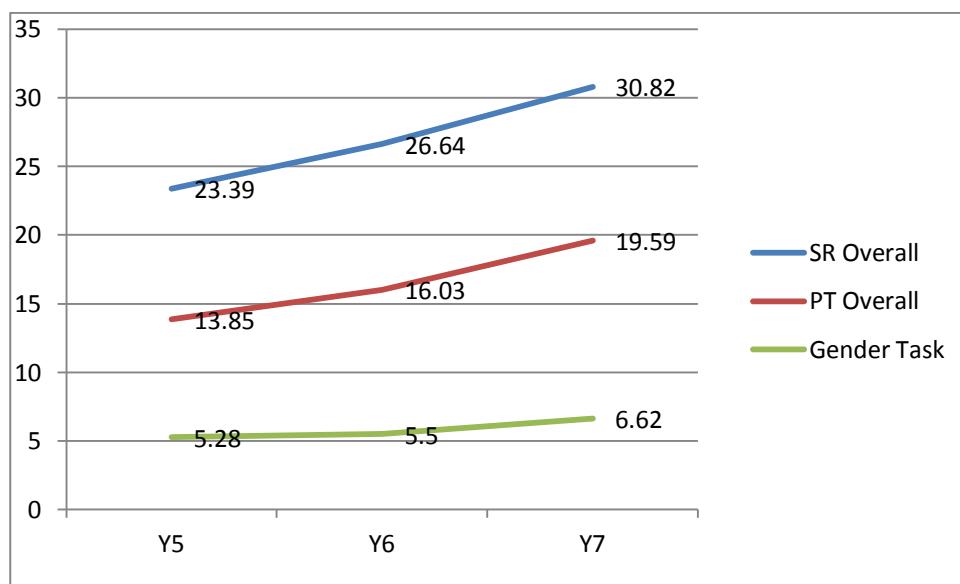
in certain French activities (e.g. reading, speaking), both now and in the future, was explored.

Results

Grammatical and vocabulary knowledge

Overall, i.e. considering data from learners from both teaching approaches, **mean task scores for the SR and PT showed a statistically significant improvement year on year** ($p < .001$ for both SR and PT at all time points), although they remained relatively stable from Years 5 to 6 with greater improvement between **Year 6 and Year 7**. Increases were however small as indicated in Figure 1, particularly for the gender assignment task between Years 5 and 6. There was also a great deal of variation within the scores, with Standard Deviations ranging from 7.77 to 9.79 for the SR and PT. Scores were lowest for adjectival agreement within the SR and PT tasks, and production of simple present tense verbs was a particular area of difficulty for learners.

Figure 1: mean scores for all language tasks Y5-7



NB. For the SR and PT tasks, grammar and vocabulary scores have been combined into a total score out of 56 for the SR and out of 54 for the PT. The gender task is out of 10.

Across all learners, **no statistically significant differences** were found for **teaching approach** for the GT, PT and SR overall at any time point, although the Literacy learners consistently outperformed the Oracy learners on the Sentence Repetition task whereas the Oracy learners performed best on the Photo Description task. When vocabulary and grammar scores were examined separately, there was some indication of a vocabulary advantage for Literacy learners, with teaching time controlled for, but not a conclusive one. Similarly, there was some evidence that Literacy learners had an advantage with some of the more difficult verbs included in the test but again this evidence was not conclusive.

Further statistical analysis showed that although teaching approach did not have any significant influence on linguistic outcomes when all learners were considered together, other factors did have a strong impact. Learners' level of English literacy was the most important factor, followed by school (teacher/teaching) factors and learners' levels of motivation. Specifically, teaching time available in the primary classroom showed significant (although modest) correlations with SR and PT scores, as did the primary school teachers' level of French. This was also true for the amount of training these teachers had received in teaching languages. The most highly-achieving learners across the Oracy and Literacy groups in Years 5, 6 and 7 received 60 minutes a week of French instruction in primary school and their teachers had native or degree-level competence in French, plus a post-graduate ITE qualification in MFL teaching. There was some evidence, however, that for the SR task, the progress of learners who had experienced 60 minutes of teaching a week at primary school slowed down once they reached secondary school. Nevertheless, in Year 7 they still outperformed other groups of learners in the study, albeit with a decreasing gap.

Importantly, however, **an effect of teaching approach** was detected for **learners with low levels of English literacy** for whom a literacy approach seemed more beneficial by the time they got to Year 7, helping them to make more progress than learners who had received an oracy approach in primary school.

Motivation and self-efficacy

Overall, motivation and self-efficacy for learning French were high in Year 6 and increased at a statistically significant level at the start of Year 7, contrary to previous studies. While some learners expressed a dislike of covering the same ground at secondary school as was covered at primary school, many learners commented that they liked learning French at secondary school because they were making more progress. By contrast, for Year 6 learners there was a sense from some that they disliked repeating the same content from lesson to lesson, as they saw it. Self-efficacy had increased again at the end of Year 7, but attitudes towards French had declined in comparison with the start of Year 7, with some learners wanting more ‘fun’, interaction and group/pair work in their lessons. A sense of making progress was important for learners at all time points.

Regarding **teaching approach**, Oracy learners had higher levels of current self-efficacy than Literacy learners in Year 6 but this difference had disappeared by Year 7. No other differences for approach were found for motivation/self-efficacy, but motivation did seem to be influenced by the kinds of activities learners experienced, considered more broadly, i.e. beyond the Literacy/Oracy division. Across primary-secondary transition, learners showed a consistently strong sense of valuing the learning of French because it would help them if they wanted to travel abroad, i.e. it would help them to communicate with native speakers. This value was reflected in the kinds of activities they liked and disliked, where there was an emphasis on learning French for purposeful communication and interaction.

In Year 6, learners expressed a liking for learning for its own sake, games, songs, learning about cultural aspects of the language, and writing for a purpose; they disliked covering the same material, writing more broadly, finding French difficult and not making progress. At the start of Year 7, learners still seemed to value learning for its own sake, enjoyed making progress/learning new things and speaking/interaction; they disliked writing (largely copy-writing and textbook writing), covering old ground and finding French difficult. By the end of Year 7, when attitudes were declining, as mentioned above, learners said they would like more fun, group/pair work and interaction in their learning. Thus there seemed to be a growing contrast between what they experienced in class and what they saw as the ‘value’ of language learning, i.e. learning to communicate with native speakers.

Conclusions and implications

Average test scores showed that learners made statistically significant linguistic progress at all time points, including across the transition phase. This was however small in real terms, confirming that progress in language acquisition takes a long time. This needs to be taken into account by policy makers and curriculum planners. If schools are expected to show that learners make ‘substantial progress’ during Key Stage 2 (DfE, 2013, p. 1), then very fine-grained assessment tools will be needed for schools to demonstrate meaningful progress.

The absence of a clear advantage for either teaching approach may be explained by the fact that the literacy activities in which learners were engaged were rarely what one might call ‘higher-level’ activities, i.e. they remained largely at the word and sentence level, rather than the text level. In only one class, where learners received 60 minutes of instruction a week, was there any sign of reading a text and writing at greater length. It may be that literacy activities that consist of word-level work are not sufficient to bring a clear advantage for a literacy-based approach. It

may also be true that a ‘full’ literacy approach requires a lesson of sufficient length, in order to give time for text-based work. There was also little evidence of instruction in grapheme-phoneme correspondences (GPCs), which, as discussed below, is an important part of literacy work and needs to be continued across Key Stage 2 and 3.

Indeed, more important than teaching approach for attainment across the transition phase were learners’ level of English literacy level, how many minutes of French instruction a week they received in primary school, and the level of French proficiency and training their primary French teachers had. It is therefore important that those teaching languages at primary level are provided with sufficient curriculum time, as well as linguistic and pedagogical training. These factors are also more likely to give learners a sense of making progress, both during primary school and across the transition phase, which the study found to be important for levels of motivation (as were activities that involved genuine, purposeful communication and cultural/creative aspects). Implications for literacy work in primary and secondary phases in foreign language classrooms arise from our findings regarding the importance of English literacy, and that including literacy-based activities in the foreign language may help learners with lower levels of L1 literacy as they move into secondary school language learning. It should be emphasised that such literacy work needs to be carefully designed and balanced with activities that promote oral communication. Where it is limited to lessons based on worksheets, copy writing or textbook activities, then it seems less likely to be beneficial to learners and to have a negative impact on motivation. While the present study did not specifically investigate different kinds of literacy work, evidence from other UK classroom-based studies suggests an important role for long-term work on grapheme-phoneme correspondences (Erler & Macaro, 2011; Porter, 2014; Woore, 2007; 2011) in both primary and secondary settings. Likewise, Porter (2014) demonstrates how oracy and literacy development can go hand in hand at primary level, through the use of creative activities based on imaginative text writing and script production.

Instruction in comprehension strategies also has an important role in literacy and vocabulary development for primary and secondary learners (Macaro & Erler, 2008; Macaro & Mutton, 2009).

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- Across Years 5, 6 and 7, learners make small but statistically significant progress in grammar and vocabulary.
- Teaching approach (Oracy vs. Literacy) has little impact on learners' linguistic development or motivation when all learners are considered, although there are some differences when grammar and vocabulary are considered separately.
- There is emerging evidence that for learners with low levels of English literacy, a literacy-based approach for French helps them to make more progress by year 7.
- The most important factors influencing learners' linguistic development are English literacy, school (i.e. teaching/teacher factors), and motivation, in that order.
- Teaching/teacher factors (teaching time, teacher's level of French, teacher's training in language pedagogy) are all positively related to learning outcomes.
- Learners have generally high levels of motivation and confidence for learning French at the end of Year 6, and this continues into the start of Year 7.
- In Year 6, learners seem to value learning for its own sake, games, songs, learning about cultural aspects, writing for a purpose; they dislike covering the same material, writing more broadly, finding French difficult, and not making progress.

- At the start of Year 7, learners still seem to value learning for its own sake, enjoy making progress/learning new things; they dislike writing, covering old ground, and finding French difficult.
- There is some decline in attitudes to learning French by the end of Year 7, although learners state that they prefer their secondary school French lessons, often because they feel they are now making more progress.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Expectations of what progress can be achieved in grammatical development by the end of Key Stage 2 need to be realistic.**
- **Fine-grained assessment tools are needed to show whether or not learners make ‘substantial’ progress during Key Stage 2 in grammar and vocabulary.**
- **Sixty minutes of foreign language instruction a week at Key Stage 2 rather than 30-40 minutes is more likely to enable learners to make ‘substantial’ progress in their language learning. This amount of lesson time may also facilitate the higher-level literacy activities that may better support grammar and vocabulary development.**
- **Detailed curriculum planning across Key Stage 2 and 3 is important to ensure a sense of progress in learners and to avoid a sense of repetition in either Key Stage. This should include suitable differentiation in Year 7 for learners who have made more progress in Key Stage 2.**
- **Teaching approaches and materials that better facilitate the acquisition of grammatical gender, adjectival agreement and simple present tense verbs should be considered. These should draw on evidence from previous research, as summarised on the project website at www.pmlresearch.com . For example, colour adjectives (in French) are generally taught in primary school but do not contain sufficient cues to learn adjectival agreement as they contain many invariant and phonologically indistinct forms; using other types of adjectives where the agreement is more salient would aid the inferring of patterns, which learners find difficult without explicit instruction (Harley, 1998).**
- **Systematic training in language pedagogy and language skills is recommended for teachers to achieve the desired outcomes for their learners by the end of Key Stage 2.**
- **Primary languages instruction that combines literacy with oracy work may prepare**

learners with lower English literacy skills more effectively for secondary school language learning. Again, such literacy instruction should draw on previous UK-based research regarding the role of GPCs, creative text-based work and comprehension strategy instruction (summarised at www.pmlresearch.com).

- Primary teachers should continue to include in their teaching those activities that motivate learners the most - those based on interaction, creativity, cultural contact and purposeful communication. These are most likely to promote the positive attitudes to language learning that are needed for successful learning in the secondary phase.
- In Year 7, learners' motivation for language learning would be better protected through activities that promote meaningful communication (especially those that prepare them for contact with native speakers of the language), and that involve interaction and pair/group work.

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