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

Executive summary

**Project team: Suzanne
Graham (Principal Investigator)**

**Louise Courtney, Theo Marinis
and Alan Tonkyn**

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Project aims: 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

Grammatical knowledge and motivation/self-efficacy were assessed from Year 5 to Year 7, using a Gender Assignment task, a Sentence Repetition task and a Photo Description task.

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 |

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**