Languages Learning at Key Stage 2
A Longitudinal Study

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WHAT IS THE BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH?

In 2006, The Open University, the University of Southampton and Canterbury Christ Church University were commissioned by the then Department for Education and Skills (DfES), subsequently Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to conduct a three-year longitudinal study of languages learning at Key Stage 2 (KS2). The qualitative study was designed to explore provision, practice and developments over three school years between 2006/07 and 2008/09 in a sample of primary schools that were already teaching languages and explore children's achievement in oracy and literacy, as well as the possible broader cross-curricular impact of languages learning.

The then government had undertaken to provide all children in Key Stage 2 in primary schools in England with the chance to learn a foreign language by 2010/11. This commitment was set out in the National Languages Strategy, *Languages for All: Languages for Life A Strategy for England* (DfES, 2002) as part of an overall commitment to quality languages provision for children and adults.
In advance of languages becoming a statutory requirement the then government wished to collect research evidence to ascertain the current situation in a sample of schools and inform future developments. The key aims of the research study were to:

- review existing evidence on the impact of languages learning on children;

- investigate the nature and quality of the provision of languages learning at Key Stage 2 in a range of schools;

and

- assess its impact on children’s learning in languages and across the curriculum.

**WHAT WERE THE OUTCOMES OR IMPACTS?**

**Key findings**

- Head teachers, languages co-ordinators and most teachers involved with languages were enthusiastic and committed. In addition to their intrinsic value, they saw languages as enriching and broadening their overall curriculum provision. They also perceived that learning languages makes a substantial contribution to children’s personal and social development and to their literacy development in English.
• Children were enthusiastic about their learning experience in most case study schools and appreciated the interactive teaching, and the wide variety of game-like activities, which made learning languages fun. Children indicated they were motivated by the language learning process itself as well as by their perceptions of the wider value of languages.

• French was the most commonly taught language, followed by Spanish and German, with minimal evidence of the teaching of other European or world languages. A discrete lesson of 30-40 minutes was typically timetabled for most Key Stage 2 year groups.

• Staffing for languages was a key concern for head teachers and influential in determining delivery models. These involved specialist teachers, class teachers or a combination of both.

• Teachers and schools valued the training opportunities and support available, and these were impacting positively on provision. However, there was an ongoing need for the development of teachers’ personal language skills; further training was also needed for the teaching of literacy and intercultural understanding, developing cross-curricular links, and ensuring progression in children’s learning and assessment.

• Schools were drawing increasingly on the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (DfES, 2005) and QCA schemes of work (QCA, 2007, 2009) to inform planning; Framework learning objectives for oracy and to a lesser extent literacy were being incorporated into local schemes of work. The development of intercultural understanding was seen as an important underlying rationale for languages, but there was little evidence of systematic reference to Framework objectives in this area.

• Where children had been taught languages throughout Key Stage 2, there was some evidence of progression in their learning. However, whole school curriculum planning and assessment practices remained areas for further development.

• Children’s performance in the assessment activities carried out by the research team was variable, but findings
indicate that children can achieve levels in listening, speaking and reading in line with national expectations (equivalent to Year 6 outcomes in the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (DfES, 2005) and/or Asset Languages Breakthrough) after four years of learning one language. Writing remains the most challenging area for these learners; the best performances were found where children had received consistent provision, and where teachers’ linguistic skills were strong.

- A school-wide vision for the learning and teaching of languages was important for successful provision. This originated with the head teacher and, in the majority of cases, was mediated and taken forward by the languages co-ordinator, and by class teachers willing to engage with teaching and training opportunities, especially languages upskilling.

- Funding for training and for physical and human resources has been significant in enabling the development of provision. Schools had an expectation that funding for ongoing professional development would be maintained and that training to teach languages would become an integral part of initial teacher education.

WHAT WAS THE INTERVENTION/TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS?

From the study as a whole, it was possible to identify key aspects of sustainable provision, as suggested by head teachers, languages co-ordinators and class teachers:

- a committed head teacher with a clear whole school vision for languages;

- a positive school ethos, which acknowledges the place of languages in the curriculum;

- appropriate staffing, with competent and confident teachers who are committed to the subject;

- a recruitment policy which includes the ability to teach languages, or at least the willingness to be involved in languages teaching, as essential or desirable criteria;

- sufficient funding allocated by government, local authority and school;
• relevant and accessible training;
• availability of appropriate resources, which are used well;
• secondary sector links and support;
• international partnerships, links and visits.

The head teacher of one school in particular, where many of the characteristics listed above had been developed over time, expressed strong confidence in the sustainability of provision in his school:

*Well in this school at the moment, it has got everything in place for it to be completely sustainable. You have got a fantastic subject leader, you have got a history of it being in place, there is a lot of motivation, there is a lot of enthusiasm. Most of the staff are teaching and there is not a huge drain on the resources in terms of the budget, it is not as if we have a specialist teacher who goes and teaches everyone. So from that point of view, I think it is completely sustainable.*

(Head teacher interview 2008/09)

**HOW WAS THE RESEARCH CARRIED OUT?**

The methodology had three strands corresponding to the three aims detailed above.

**Strand 1 - Literature Review**

A literature review provided a backdrop to the research study, concentrating on what is known about languages learning and teaching in primary schools in Anglophone contexts. The review investigated rationales and aims for languages learning in the primary phase; the organisation of languages provision; learning and teaching; assessment and recording; factors influencing provision; and impact on children’s learning.

**Strand 2 - The nature and quality of languages learning provision at Key Stage 2**

For this strand, qualitative case studies were conducted of 40 primary schools in England. These schools were already teaching languages to some or all Key Stage 2 year groups and were prepared to commit themselves to the research over a three year period. They were selected to reflect a range of school types in terms of size, location, economic affluence (in terms of socio-economic indicators such as numbers of children
eligible for free school meals) and ethnic makeup. Other criteria included: different models of languages provision; and different lengths of experience in teaching languages. In each year of the study, the research team carried out lesson observations, interviews with head teachers, language co-ordinators, class teachers, teaching assistants or foreign language assistants, and focus group discussions with children in Years 3-6 in these schools. Children also completed a questionnaire about their attitudes to languages learning. Documentary evidence relating to languages teaching was collected where available.

**Strand 3 - Impact on children’s learning in languages and across the curriculum**

This aspect involved exploring and documenting children’s achievements in oracy and literacy in the target language as described in the *Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages*. A subset of eight schools participated in this aspect of the study. In each year of the project, specially devised group assessment tasks (in French, Spanish or German, depending on the school) were administered by trained assessors to small groups of children. Some Year 6 children also completed Asset Languages Breakthrough tests.

**WHAT MIGHT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH BE FOR POLICY MAKERS/ PRACTITIONERS**

Drawing on the research findings the research team sought to raise issues for consideration by a range of stakeholders in moving towards an entitlement to languages learning for all primary aged children.

**Schools at an early stage of introducing languages**

- Establishing a school wide commitment and strategy towards teaching languages which draws on and validates local knowledge and expertise (children, staff, parents, community members);

- Selecting the delivery model (specialist teachers, class teachers or a mixed
approach) which best suits the current situation and which takes into account existing and potential staff expertise and confidence;

- Supporting teachers in language upskilling and developing basic skills in languages pedagogy;

- Identifying local and national funding and using this to support training, resource selection and the development of international links and partnerships.

**Schools with established provision**

- Ensuring a secure place for languages in the curriculum and on the timetable and the provision of 60 minutes per week teaching time across Key Stage 2;

- Ensuring that progression in children’s learning is built into schemes of work and that arrangements are in place to monitor and assess children’s learning and development;

- Supporting teachers, through training if necessary, in developing their knowledge and skills in teaching literacy and intercultural understanding;

- Developing cross-curricular learning of languages and links with other areas of learning including literacy;

- Establishing effective relationships with secondary schools to exchange knowledge and expertise in languages teaching and learning and support children’s transition from one phase to the next.

**Local Authorities**

- Maintaining high quality support for languages teaching in primary schools through a range of training, advice and networks;

- Facilitating collaboration through cross phase partnerships and cluster groupings;

- Supporting the employment of Foreign Language Assistants and involvement in international partnerships.
Secondary schools

• Entering into learning partnerships with primary school colleagues to share and develop knowledge and expertise;

• Reviewing the school’s languages curriculum in the light of the objectives for children’s learning in primary schools;

• Deciding how children’s prior achievements in languages can be built on in secondary schools to maintain children’s enthusiasm for languages learning.

Initial Teacher Education providers

• Ensuring that teachers are adequately prepared and trained to teach a language as part of their initial teacher education, including language upskilling where needed;

• Reviewing both general and specific programmes of study to ensure teachers are enabled to develop the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to develop children’s intercultural understanding;

• Enabling teachers to explore the links and synergies between literacy and languages teaching.

Policy makers

• Ensuring adequate long-term funding for the ongoing training needs of staff in primary schools, including language upskilling;

• Establishing a common and agreed approach to the languages training needs of teachers with other government agencies e.g. QCA, TDA with respect to initial teacher education (ITE) in particular;

• Ensuring that all ITE trainees have a basic understanding of the requirements of teaching languages before they qualify;

• Promoting further research and development in key areas such as transition, intercultural understanding and assessment for learning in languages.
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Key Publications

Carrie Cable¹, Patricia Driscoll³, Rosamond Mitchell², Sue Sing¹, Teresa Cremin¹, Justine Earl³, Ian Eyres¹, Bernardette Holmes², Cynthia Martin³ with Barbara Heins¹ (2012): ‘Language learning at Key Stage 2: findings from a longitudinal study’, Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education, 40:4, 363-378.

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