Edinburgh International City of Learning
Modern Languages Pilot 2012

Evaluative Report

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Background

The project, driven by Dr Judith McClure in partnership with the University of Edinburgh, was designed to trial language learning in the early stages through the support of an international student of languages working within a pre-school or primary class for one session per week. The aims of the project were:

- To give children an opportunity to hear another language;
- To help children develop skills and dispositions which will support future language learning;
- To create links and contacts between schools and universities which have the potential to have a positive impact on children's learning and willingness to learn; and
- To provide a positive learning experience for children.

In addition, it was hoped that the project would allow class teachers to use their pedagogical skills to make best use of the student resource and that resources would be developed and shared.

Setting up the project

All interested schools were invited to send a representative to an introductory session in January 2012, where the aims of the project were shared, some practical advice on the use of a native speaker was given by SCILT, and Professor Antonella Sorace from the University of Edinburgh, presented on the personal and cognitive benefits of early language learning.

Thereafter, interested schools were invited to say which language or languages they were interested in and which class or classes would be involved. A student job specification was provided and 30 international students initially declared an interest. 14 were interviewed subsequently by a representative from the University of Edinburgh. A further two students were nominated by their department. All attended a twilight training session provided by SCILT and representatives from the university. Originally, the project involved 10 primary schools and one primary school nursery class. Two of the primary schools pulled out of the project however, leaving 9 schools in total.

Almost all schools opted for one student to deliver to one primary class only. One school trialled five languages with five different classes. Some wanted the language children already studied as part of their MLPS provision. Others requested a language which linked in with a class project. It was not possible to accommodate all requests and schools demonstrated flexibility in their willingness to accommodate students of any language. Senior managers were very supportive of the project and were instrumental in getting it off the ground. In total, ten languages, including Gaelic, were represented. The pilot was to last six weeks. A list of the schools involved is provided in Appendix 1.

Evaluating the project

All schools were visited by one of Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools, specialists in modern languages. In almost all cases, visits involved observation of a pilot project lesson, separate discussions with the class teacher and with the student, talks with children involved in the pilot and a brief discussion with the headteacher.

What has worked well?

Making links across the curriculum

Practice across schools and classes was variable. Where the project was most successful, and most likely to have a lasting impact, the school had been able to link the language into the curriculum through project work. For example, one school had linked the study of Gaelic to a project on the Highland Clearances. Children in the nursery class learned a French nursery rhyme as well as rhymes in English.

Using national advice on Curriculum for Excellence

A few schools planned for progression and identified clear outcomes linked to the Curriculum for Excellence experiences and outcomes for modern languages amongst others. In such cases, children were enjoying well-planned lessons and were developing basic language skills over a very short period of time. In some cases, there were plans to continue with the language in some form, or to continue to extend children's knowledge of the country where the language is spoken, following the pilot. This was a direct result of children's enthusiasm for continuing with this work.

Children leading learning

In almost all cases, children had been involved in decisions about what they wanted to learn in terms of the language and culture. This gave them greater ownership of their learning and greater interest in lessons. In all schools, the student has been a natural resource for teachers to explore another language and culture along with the children. Where the class teacher showed that he or she was learning with the children, there were was a real sense of discovering and learning together.

Students and class teachers working together

In a few lessons, the class teacher worked as a team with the visiting student, ensuring that the pedagogical expertise of the class teacher was used to complement the language expertise of the student. The teacher was part of the lesson and was not there simply to monitor behaviour. In such cases, the class teacher had been involved in the planning of the lesson to some extent at least and was able to ensure that the work planned was of a suitable level of difficulty for the children. He or she encouraged an active approach to language learning and made suggestions for language games which engaged children. There were some very imaginative activities such as the paella game for naming food ingredients and the corners game for colours.

The teacher was there to make suggestions for adapting activities which had proven too demanding for children or had left them passive for too long. In those cases, the teacher was able to intercept with a task which supported the learning and divided the lesson into shorter sections. Occasionally, the class teacher took the lead and used the student as a resource. This joint delivery and responsibility worked well.

Resources

A few students produced very helpful resources such as background reading on their country and PowerPoint presentations for language practice. The schools involved now have these for future use. Teachers also provided resources to enhance lessons, such as basic materials for games and the use of technology. For example, one class enjoyed reading an e-book in German with the student. Inevitably, this was most successful when the class teacher was aware of the lesson plan in advance, through email contact for example.

Reinforcing the language

In a number of schools, the class teacher reinforced the language learned during the lesson over the course of the next week. For example, one teacher used basic greetings and took registration in the modern language every day. The children responded very well to this. In some cases, the student gave a list of vocabulary with linked phonetic spellings to the teacher after the lesson, to assist with reinforcement. One student left songs for the teacher to use during the week. Most lessons began effectively with a recap of previous work. Where there had been reinforcement by the class teacher in the interim, this recap proved much more successful and confidence boosting for both children and student. Understandably, where there was no such reinforcement, children retained very little from week to week.

Summing up

Across the schools, most children had coped well with learning aspects of another language and almost all had enjoyed the experience and were very enthusiastic about language learning as a result. Almost all class teachers were equally positive about the experience and would be prepared to become involved in a similar project in the future. However, they had constructive suggestions for making the project more effective.

Challenges

The project was not without its challenges. Most of these were practical issues which could be resolved in the future.

Linking the language to the curriculum

It is to the credit of the organisers that the project was up and running within a short space of time. However, there was limited time for schools and students to prepare. Where the school could not have the language of its choosing, staff had to insert

lessons on a language which had no links to the curriculum as it stood. This sometimes meant a last minute revision of plans to avoid having a 'stand alone' insert. For example, one school introduced a topic on the country where the language was spoken although time was short. Another was able to link the language to work on the rainforest.

Where the language was not linked to the curriculum in any way, and the teacher did not reinforce the language between sessions, children retained a limited amount of what had gone before. In such cases, the project had limited impact on children's skills and learning.

Timetabled commitments

Schools expected to have six sessions of language learning but this did not always happen. Students have other commitments related to their studies and that term was a busy time for students sitting final examinations and handing in final assignments. Where lessons could not take place every week, there was a long gap between sessions and the class teacher's role in reinforcing the work became even more important. In some schools, the student was unable to deliver six sessions and one school had as few as three.

Moreover, while most students were very conscientious, a few did not realise the implications for a school of calling off a lesson at the last minute or of turning up late for lessons. Schools are placed in a difficult situation when a volunteer regularly disregards timetabled commitments.

Length of sessions

Language learning at the early stages works best when lessons take place often, for shorter periods of time. The fact that the students had other commitments and that some of the schools were some distance away, made this unrealistic. Since there is a limit to the amount of new language which can be introduced at one time, very long sessions inevitably mean that children spend too long on one area of work and waste time doing 'filler' activities. Shorter sessions with reinforcement between each would work better.

Role of the student

Much depended on the student assigned to the school as the relationship between student and children was key. All of the students had joined the project for very positive reasons. They wanted to 'give something back' to the Scottish education system. Some wanted to go into teaching later while others simply wanted to work with children. For one student, the work linked in with research for her own dissertation. Almost all students found it to be a very positive and enriching experience.

In the classroom

Some students were naturally more outgoing than others. Some adapted very quickly to a more active style of learning. Others tended to be more didactic and

initially, spent too long talking to the children, using overlong PowerPoint presentations for example. Students are not teachers and most require considerable support in order to interact effectively with young children in a classroom situation. The training they received was necessarily brief and they were often unaware of how to 'chunk down' the learning into manageable pieces and how to adjust the level of difficulty of the language they used, particularly with very young children.

However, there was good evidence of some schools helping children make progress in all four skills of listening, talking, reading and writing, with the stress rightly on listening and talking. On the other hand, few students used the spoken language as much as they could have done, to develop children's language skills in a natural way.

Planning lessons

There was limited time for the teacher and student to plan the next lesson, given the constraints of time and distance. Some teachers were able to spend time with the student at the end of each lesson, to begin planning for the next. Most teachers kept in email contact with the student between lessons. While not ideal, this helped both student and teacher be ready for the next session.

Impact of the project

Understanding of other cultures

Most staff felt the project had opened the eyes of children who otherwise had limited knowledge of lifestyles outwith their own community. They felt it linked in well with 'big concepts' such as equality and discrimination and global citizenship. They felt it had helped children gain a better understanding of their place in the world.

In discussions with HM Inspectors, almost all children said they had enjoyed the experience and, most importantly, were positive about learning another language in future. They were enthusiastic about the things they had learned about another culture, including information on exotic foods and different religions for example. The pilot had encouraged them to consider language and cultural differences in a positive and open way.

Developing language skills

In such a short space of time, we could not expect children to have made huge strides in learning another language. The language and cultural content of the various pilots are listed in Appendix 2. Individual schools covered a selection of these during their involvement in the project. In most cases, children learned language at word level, although most had also learned some basic phrases such as giving their name. A few schools had challenged children in their learning.

Language activities

Children enjoyed the opportunity to learn enough to hold a simple conversation in addition to learning individual words like numbers. They particularly enjoyed role-play in the modern language and this helped them learn the value of language for real communication. Where the language had been reinforced by the class teacher, children had good recall of basic words and phrases. Some children had begun to address some of the experiences and outcomes for modern languages such as:

'I explore simple songs and rhymes and I enjoy learning with others as we talk and listen together.' (MLAN 2-05a)

'I can listen to and show understanding of familiar instructions and language from familiar voices and sources.' (MLAN 2-01c)

Experiences and outcomes, modern languages.

Language learning strategies

Some children were supported by their teacher to recognise similarities between their own language and the modern language. A few had also linked this to the MLPS language they had been learning in school. One group of children explained that learning another language had made them think about their own language and had made them realise how hard it would be to learn English as another language.

Some children were able to identify strategies they could use to help them work out the meaning of words they didn't know, such as using the context and recognising gesture and expression. These are important skills for literacy development and personal and social development. Children were happy to 'have a go' in the modern language and felt confident that they could go on to learn other languages. They enjoyed comparing sounds. Some had made suggestions as to what would help them remember words, such as the use of pictures.

Views of teachers, parents and children

Teachers were very positive about how children were coping with learning another language. Even very young children, including those with EAL, were coping with basic sounds and words. One teacher recognised that everyday exposure to another language, albeit at a simple level, meant that children accepted the new language quite naturally as part of their life in school. Teachers also felt that they themselves had learned a lot about another country and its language.

Parents have welcomed this opportunity for their children. What the project has clearly achieved is that almost all of the children involved are very positive about their experience. They have developed a positive attitude towards learning about others and learning other languages. They want to learn more.

How might the project be improved?

The project could be made more effective by addressing some key practical and pedagogical issues.

Integrating lessons into the curriculum

With support from the class teacher, lessons could be planned to integrate into the curriculum and develop children's skills and attributes in a progressive manner, through the experiences and outcomes. This would mean earlier notification of the student to be assigned to the school and earlier contact between the school and the student. Although the experiences and outcomes in modern languages begin at second level, they are appropriate for beginners. In this way, project lessons would help teachers address aspects of the curriculum, rather than being viewed as something extra to fit in to an already busy schedule.

Challenging learners

There is scope to challenge some children more. Lessons should continue to aim to go beyond word level, moving into simple sentences and conversations. The use of songs and rhymes helps to address this too. More use could be made of the spoken language during lessons and staff should consider carefully the merits of some 'time filler' worksheets. While children should be exposed to all four key language skills, reading and writing need to be handled in a realistic and interesting way. Lessons for very young children should still have a major focus on speaking the language, enjoyment of the language and encouraging positive attitudes to language learning generally. A few schools have done this very well.

Training

There is a need for more pedagogical training for students to give them strategies for delivering language and cultural messages more effectively to young children. In addition, teachers would benefit from training in how to make best use of the students as a resource. Teamwork and planning between the student and class teacher would help ensure lessons are effective and engaging.

Students would benefit from a mentor to discuss progress and concerns. These students are volunteers doing something quite different and they require support within and outwith school.

Planning

There should be time for teacher and student to discuss the previous lesson and plan for the next lesson together. Schools should be mindful of the length of each input from the student, bearing in mind the attention span of young children and the needs of the curriculum.

Almost all schools felt that the project had been too short and that they would have welcomed a longer engagement with the students. Some even felt that input over the school year would be more beneficial.

A few teachers have evaluated the work covered, as have a few students. In some cases, a member of the senior management team has been given responsibility for overseeing the project. If this kind of insert were to become the norm, it would be important to have clear outcomes which could be used by the school to evaluate clearly the impact of the work.

Lastly, and particularly if these projects were to be extended, consideration has to be given to disclosure checks on students.

Which questions remain?

Sustainability

As it stands, the project has provided many benefits for teachers, children and the students themselves. The project has benefited from the goodwill and support of headteachers, university staff and other organisers. However, the question of sustainability remains.

Issues of time, planning, training, finance and evaluation of impact would have to be addressed if this work were to be extended. There would have to be clarity over which body had overall responsibility for the work. Local authorities may wish to be involved.

Rationale

The rationale for the work needs to be clarified. Partnership working between the university and schools has enabled this project to take place. Such collaboration is to be welcomed. A short input such as this has the potential to enrich the learning experience for children while it lasts and can encourage positive attitudes towards learning other languages. Where the project has worked well, this has happened. This was not always the case, for the reasons outlined in this report.

In order to be fully effective, language learning should offer children the opportunity to develop their language skills in a way which allows for progression and depth in learning. It would be possible to develop a model which would contribute more effectively to this aim. What this project has done is demonstrate the potential of partnership working between schools and universities and of opportunities for young children to engage in language learning. It has shown the potential of such work to enthuse children about learning another language

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Appendix 1

The following schools took part in the pilot:

Dirleton Primary School, East Lothian Council

East Linton Primary School, East Lothian Council

Loretto Junior School, Musselburgh, Scottish Council of Independent Schools

MacMerry Primary School, Tranent, East Lothian Council

Musselburgh Burgh Primary School, East Lothian Council

Pinkie St Peter's Primary School, Musselburgh, East Lothian Council

St Martin's RC Primary School, Tranent, East Lothian Council

Sighthill Primary School Nursery Class, Edinburgh City Council

Whitecraig Primary School, East Lothian Council

Appendix 2

Language and culture addressed during the project overall:

Content – language

- Register in Spanish
- Numbers 1-10
- Alphabet, including Chinese/Korean
- Colours
- Parts of the body
- Songs in ML
- Rhymes
- Games
- Greetings
- Days of the week
- Personal language
- Gaelic names and signs
- Family
- Developing basic language skills.
- Some character writing in Chinese.

Content – culture

- Geography of the country
- Food
- Fairy tales
- Dances
- Costumes/uniform
- Religion