Progression in learning languages within and across stages: perceptions and experiences of primary pupils and secondary students in Perth and Kinross Council (PKC)

Caroline Gordon, 1+2 Staff Tutor, Perth and Kinross Council

The glossary of Educational Reform defines progression as the 'purposeful sequencing of teaching and learning expectations across multiple developmental stages, ages, or grade levels'.

Enquiry Focus

By 2021, all learners from P1 through to the end of the Broad General Education (BGE) will learn two additional languages under the Scottish government's policy, 'Language Learning in Scotland; a 1+2 approach'.

Bolster (2009) highlights the importance of continuity and progression in language learning, 'if the pupil's knowledge of the language learned is recognised and informs the scheme of work, motivation can be strengthened and the enthusiasm for languages maintained; where it is not, motivation can be lost.' This overlap of language being taught and a lack of challenge can both impact on progression which may hinder engagement with and motivation in language learning.

The process of implementation is underway with primary schools moving towards embedding language learning through classroom routines and across the curriculum and with secondary schools considering required adaptations to programs of study, taking in to account the increased exposure to language learning from a younger age.

My aim is to discuss progression in learning languages within and across all stages of the BGE, identifying perceptions and experiences of learners and teachers. The perceptions and experiences of learners will be deliberated here and those of teachers separately to allow for more focused analysis.

Since 2013, PKC has chosen to invest in the Power Language Platform (PLP). All PKC schools have access to this key resource and all schools have undertaken training in how to use it effectively. Ongoing training and in-school support by 1+2 Staff Tutors are linked to the PLP language planners and resources. Training encourages staff to link PLP language planners with Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes.

Enquiry Methods

- *Online surveys were issued to teaching staff and passed on to pupils*
- *Data collection between May – June 2017*
- *A total of 148 pupil responses were received* 134 primary, 14 secondary Modern Language teacher responses from one Local Management Group (LMG) and Modern Language Coordinators (MLCs)

French is Language 2 (L2) across PKC schools, therefore references to language learning for the purpose of this study, refer to French.

It is worth noting that the secondary sample of respondents is fairly small in relation to primary respondents., however reflects the views of two out of ten secondary schools across PKC.

The question wording in the primary and secondary learner and teacher surveys was differentiated, however the themes in each remained comparable and included:

- Supporting language learning
- Enhancing language learning
- Understanding progression
- Extending progression across the school community

KEY
Local Management Group (LMG) is formed of a secondary school and its feeder primary schools.

Modern Language Coordinators (MLCs) is the term used by Perth and Kinross Council to refer to those members of staff leading language learning within and across LMGs.

Findings

➢ **Learners across both primary and secondary have a clear view** on what helps their language learning. Whilst the majority of primary pupil responses favor a play based approach with 71% supportive of playing games, the majority of secondary responses indicate that use of technology best supports their language learning with 46% of pupils suggesting iPad and mobile phone apps as an effective tool. Interestingly, at 42%, the use of technology is the least preferred option selected by primary pupils.

➢ Both **primary and secondary learners value an interactive approach** to learning a language with 62% of primary pupils showing a preference for working with a partner and in secondary 38% of pupils identifying that 'listening to a native or fluent speaker' aids progression in language learning.

'What helps you to learn better in your language learning?' Pupil survey

➢ When asked to comment on what would **further enhance progression** in language learning, 31% of primary pupils make a voluntary reference to **repetition and the frequency of language inputs**. "I am progressing well because I do it lots every day", "I can remember the words and I do a little bit everyday", "I like French and I learn it a lot", "we keep practising, I am getting better at understanding and remembering words", "**I am progressing in French because we do it lots every day**", "I can say the words better and speaking in French more often", "I can ask questions now as well as answer some of the questions". Two primary pupils comment that learning French more often would help progression. "We don't do French that often and I find it quite hard to remember", "We need to do it more so that we can be better". By comparison, further exposure to the language is suggested by secondary pupils, "**classes being taught in the target language**" and "having a pen friend".

➢ In describing **how progress in language learning is known**, primary pupils tend to refer more to vocabulary than knowledge of structures i.e. beyond word level despite commenting that using the language in conversation showed progression in language learning. 24% of primary responses referred to the application of **vocabulary** used in conversation and 22% to the volume of **vocabulary** known. Interestingly, there are no primary responses relating to knowledge or application of language beyond sentence level. By comparison with secondary students, 42% identify progression in language learning in terms of **application of structures** and equally, 42% in terms of **application** of vocabulary. Fewer secondary pupils, 35%, believe that the term progression relates to volume of vocabulary known.

➢ Two **secondary learners** referred to detail and length of sentences, "**My vocabulary is improving and I am beginning to write more detailed sentences with accuracy**". "The variety of phrases I can use along with sentence structure is improving". One third of secondary learners comment that progression is indicated by formative and summative assessment such as test scores and teacher feedback to explain how they know about their progression in language learning.

➢ Some additional suggestions from primary pupils around how best to learn across the wider school community and at home, include hosting an event such as a fashion show, exploring creative activities, **parent language classes** or to send home labels for cataloguing objects. Secondary students' home study reflects some preferred aspects of learning within school as there was a **clear preference for use of technology**, with further reference to mobile phone and computer applications (apps).

Implications

As a whole, the data indicates that the 1+2 embedded and contextualised approach to language learning can provide a progressive experience.

Suggested is a strong preference for an active and collaborative approach to language learning in primary, both within the classroom and across the school community.

Secondary pupils' interest in technology may reflect exposure and positive experience to technology in language learning.

Pupil awareness and reflection of their own learning is evident particularly in primary and they are able to indicate ways in which this could be progressed.

Data affirms that primary pupils perceive their language learning at word level and yet can speak in sentences. This suggests that they haven't made the connection that the phrases they are using are the early stages of using sentence structures.

Learning beyond the classroom provides added value and opportunity to extend and progress language usage.

Next Steps

Findings from the data provide a snapshot of what this sample of learners think about an important aspect of their learning.

Explore opportunities to adopt the 1+2 embedded and contextualised approach into secondary by incorporating and extending language learning from and within other curricular areas.

Consider strategies for an active and collaborative approach to incorporating I.C.T. in language learning across both primary and secondary.

Continue to encourage pupils as they move from primary to secondary to reflect upon their own learning as well as gauging progression through formative and summative assessment.

Make explicit links between knowledge of native language and learning in the target language as a means of extending beyond word to sentence level.

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Caroline Gordon, 1+2 Staff Tutor, Perth and Kinross Council

The glossary of Educational Reform defines progression as the 'purposeful sequencing of teaching and learning expectations across multiple developmental stages, ages, or grade levels'.

Enquiry Focus

By 2021, all learners from P1 through to the end of the Broad General Education (BGE) will learn two additional languages under the Scottish government's policy, '**Language Learning in Scotland; a 1+2 approach**'.

Bolster (2009) highlights the **importance** of continuity and **progression** in language learning, 'if the pupil's knowledge of the language learned is recognised and informs the scheme of work, **motivation can be strengthened** and the enthusiasm for languages maintained; where it is not, motivation can be lost.' This overlap of language being taught and a lack of challenge impact on progression which may hinder engagement with and motivation in language learning.

The process of implementation is underway with primary schools moving towards embedding language learning through classroom routines and across the curriculum and with secondary schools considering required adaptations to programs of study, taking in to account the increased exposure to language learning from a younger age.
My aim is to discuss progression in learning languages within and across all stages of the BGE, identifying perceptions and experiences of learners and teachers. The perceptions and experiences of <u>teachers</u> will be deliberated here and those of learners separately to allow for more focused analysis.

Since 2013, PKC has chosen to invest in the Power Language Platform (PLP). All PKC schools have access to this key resource and all schools have undertaken training in how to use it effectively. Ongoing training and in-school support by 1+2 Staff Tutors are linked to the PLP language planners and resources. Training has also encouraged staff to link PLP language planners with Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes.

Enquiry Methods

- *Online surveys were issued to teaching staff and passed on to pupils*
- *Data collection between May – June 2017*
- *A total of 37 staff responses were received 32 primary, 5 secondary responses from one Local Management Group (LMG) and Modern Language Coordinators (MLCs)*

French is Language 2 (L2) across PKC schools, therefore references to language learning for the purpose of this study, refer to French.

It is worth noting that the secondary sample of respondents is fairly small in relation to primary respondents., however reflects the views of two out of ten secondary Modern Language departments across PKC.

The question wording in the primary and secondary learner and teacher surveys was differentiated, however the themes in each remained comparable and included:

- Understanding progression
- Supporting language learning
- Enhancing language learning
- Extending progression across the school community

KEY
Local Management Group (LMG) is formed of a secondary school and its feeder primary schools.

Modern Language Coordinators (MLC) is the term used by Perth and Kinross Council to refer to those members of staff leading language learning within their school and across their LMG.

Findings

- Teaching staff across both **primary and secondary demonstrate comparable perceptions in** progression in language learning. All staff comments include use of the following language to describe progression, "a logical flow", "building on existing knowledge", "developing", "improving", "extending", "applying".

Progression buzz words from staff responses.

- When considering what is meant by progression in language learning, 100% of secondary staff comments that an **understanding of language structure** is a key indicator, this is in comparison to 60% of primary staff responses. The **application** of vocabulary used in conversation is viewed by 80% of secondary staff as another important indicator in establishing progression; this is similar to the primary teaching staff response at 71%.

- When discussing the biggest **challenges** faced in ensuring pupil progression in language learning, four key themes emerge; **staff skill set and confidence, time, consistency of pupil experience and pupil engagement**.

- Just over one third of **primary** staff responses identify the **biggest challenge to be staff skill set and confidence** in teaching the language, "Staff knowledge of vocabulary, sentence structure and tenses", "My own limitations in knowledge of correct grammar in French, leading to lack of confidence beyond a certain point".

- Some suggested solutions included, "Mostly trial and error", "Doing little and often and trying not to put them (pupils) off by scaffolding the writing to give them confidence.", "Joint working across LMG's".

- This is followed closely by one third mentioning that a lack of time to teach 'is always an issue in an overcrowded curriculum'. However, one staff member noted the need to be creative in embedding new language in the curriculum, as a solution.

- One other primary staff member commented that there are, "No real challenges - children enjoy the opportunity to use French daily and the planners and audio files on the platform are extremely supportive to the teaching of French in the classroom".

- Secondary staff identify challenges around **pupil engagement** as the biggest challenge in progression of language learning at **80%**, by comparison, 17.5% of primary responses centre around pupil motivation.

- Both **primary and secondary staff share concerns around consistency of input**; this accounted for 30% of primary and 40% of secondary teacher responses.

- When asked to **highlight any challenges specific to P7-S1** teachers in ensuring progression and continuity from primary to secondary, comments from both sectors highlighted the importance of **communication**, although two staff noted that '**links are improving**'.

- "Having a standard way of tracking progression" is noted as being a challenge to ensuring progression, however the following are mentioned as strategies currently adopted to record progression; LMG/school traffic light tracking document, personal teacher records e.g. observations on post it notes, update on daily planner, notes taken in collaboration with pupils such as pupil dialogue and record of work.

- It was mentioned that the following approaches are used to report on pupil progress in language learning; annual reporting, parent contact, learner led sessions and profiling.

Implications

As a whole, the data indicates that the 1+2 approach to language learning can provide a progressive experience through its focus on 'purposeful' language use beyond word level.

Staff share an awareness and understanding of progression in language learning beyond word level particularly in secondary.

Data confirms that training and support for primary staff needs to focus upon both language and methodology.

Highlighted is a need to explore factors affecting secondary pupil engagement in language learning as perceived by staff.

Suggested here is a shared concern around consistency of input and tracking progression across both sectors and a need for clear communication in particular between P7-S1 transition.

Next Steps

Explore opportunities to adopt the 1+2 embedded and contextualised approach into secondary by incorporating and extending language learning from and within other curricular areas.

Make explicit links between knowledge of native language and learning in the target language as a means of extending beyond word to sentence level.

Incorporate feedback from both primary and secondary pupil surveys around preferred methods of language learning as a means of increasing engagement.

Access to framework tools such as Benchmarks and PLP Planners may support continuity of experience, recording and reporting.

Build on effective methods of tracking progress across primary and secondary to support consistency of approach.

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Abbott, S. (Ed.) (2013, August 29) 'Learning Progression' in The glossary of education reform [online] Available at: http://edglossary.org/learning-progression [Accessed 29.05.17]

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