

East Lothian Early Chinese Learning Project

Evaluative report

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HM Inspector**

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Background and rationale

The project was driven by Dr Judith McClure, Convener of the Scotland China Education Network (SCEN) and led by Simon MacAulay, former Chair of the Scottish Government Languages Working Group which produced the report *'Language Learning in Scotland: a 1+2 Approach'*. The project was delivered in conjunction with a number of East Lothian primary schools and facilitated by an officer of East Lothian Council. Advice and support were available from Scotland's National Centre for Languages (SCILT) and the Confucius Institute for Scotland's Schools (CISS). The project was designed to:

- investigate the outcomes of learning Mandarin and learning about Chinese culture at the early level.
- investigate the impact of Chinese student facilitators from The University of Edinburgh working with teachers and children at P1, to deliver the above.
- link with research into early language learning through association with Professor Antonella Sorace of the University of Edinburgh.

The university has carried out separate research on the project and the impact on early language learning.

In essence, the project involved native speakers working in conjunction with class teachers to deliver Mandarin lessons to children at P1. All of the schools involved had volunteered to take part in the project. The Mandarin speakers were students at the University of Edinburgh. They were all volunteers and most were postgraduate students. All had declared an interest in working with children.

Setting up the project

The number of schools involved did not remain constant throughout the project. Initially, there were ten schools and 24 Chinese students, with some schools allocated as many as three students. There were over 20 P1 classes and a few children at P2 across the volunteer schools. The final number of schools involved in the project by June 2014 was seven.

Work began in September 2013 with an introductory meeting of teachers from the volunteer schools. The meeting included presentations by Professor Sorace and the researcher attached to the project. Staff from SCILT/CISS gave an initial presentation on the pedagogy of working with a student and of introducing Mandarin to children at the early level. A few of the teachers involved had been MLPS trained but almost all had no knowledge of Mandarin.

Student volunteers were selected by interview to determine their suitability for working with very young children. SCILT/CISS staff provided a helpful supporting paper with student roles and responsibilities. The students were to work with the schools once each week, for between one and two hours per session. East Lothian Council agreed to refund student travel costs and provide schools with a fixed sum of money for resources.

Work in schools began in November 2013. A number of schools arranged an initial visit from their appointed student(s). This allowed the native speakers to meet the children and discuss with the class teacher what they would teach and how they would work together.

There followed an evening training session for the students in October, supported by SCILT/CISS staff. The next and final meeting was a sharing session for students and teachers in March 2014. The latter allowed schools and students to present what they had done and share experiences. This proved popular with students and staff alike and would have been a useful addition earlier in the project. SCILT/CISS sought the views of teachers and students on the experience at this point and distributed information on useful online resources.

In June 2014, the pilot schools showcased their learning to parents, friends and interested professionals at a dedicated concert in Musselburgh. This concert proved motivational for the children and was well received by guests.

Evaluation of the project

All schools were visited by an Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, specialist in modern languages. In almost all cases, visits involved observation of a Mandarin lesson, separate discussions with the class teacher(s) and with the student(s), talks with children involved in the project, the study of relevant documentation and a brief discussion with the headteacher. One of the seven schools could not be evaluated due to staff absence.

Place in the curriculum

The teaching of an additional language from P1 is a key recommendation in the Scottish Government's report *Language Learning in Scotland: a 1+2 Approach*, commonly known as the '1+2 report'. The pilot schools began the project when their school improvement plan was already in place so the teaching of Mandarin was not part of a long-term council plan to introduce the 1+2 policy. Rather, it was an addition to the curriculum which offered an opportunity to develop children's language skills and their knowledge of Chinese culture. There were examples of staff making links to other areas of the curriculum such as social studies, the expressive arts, early literacy and early numeracy.

Mandarin lessons with the students took place once per week and varied in length from 40 minutes to a whole morning. The availability of the students dictated the times of lessons. This was not always the most suitable time for language learning, such as late afternoon. In most cases, the students were involved in discrete language lessons and activities during their time in school. Understandably, due to other commitments on the part of the student, the number of sessions delivered from November 2013 to June 2014 was variable. In one school, the student finished at Easter. In a few cases, the student returned to the school on different occasions to be part of school events.

Learning about China and Chinese culture was an important part of the project. In particular, events such as the Chinese New Year were a focal point for learning.

In some classes, a Mandarin corner with items and words linked to Chinese language and culture proved an effective reminder of what children were learning.

Programme of learning

There was no formal programme for the project so schools were able to choose the themes they wished to teach. This meant they could link Mandarin lessons to themes they were covering elsewhere, such as 'the world around us' and jobs. However, there was a lack of clarity over the expected language outcomes.

In most cases, the students remained at the end of each lesson to discuss what would be covered at the next visit. In addition, email was used for communication about lessons and resources during the week. A few schools had engaged in planning on a termly basis although these plans were subject to alteration if the student was unable to attend.

Resources

Schools had a pack of cultural material with some language input from the British Council, some materials from SCILT and artefacts and books bought with funding from East Lothian Council. Useful websites with resources were also made available but these can be difficult for staff to judge without some knowledge of Mandarin. The students themselves sought out materials on the internet, such as film clips and songs and prepared PowerPoint materials. However, technological problems meant that these could not always be shared in advance of the lesson.

What went well?

Lesson planning and resources

Despite the practical difficulties noted above, the lessons observed were well planned. Many involved consolidation and revision of previous learning. Children were encouraged to work in groups to consolidate their learning and there were good examples of activities which engaged children and encouraged them to participate actively in language learning. Games and songs were used well to help children practise vocabulary and phrases. Teachers and students demonstrated enthusiasm for the language and most children responded very well to this.

In a few cases, Mandarin was linked to other areas of the curriculum. For example, one school had included Mandarin in the school's plans for storytelling. Children developed their listening skills by listening to stories in Mandarin and picking out words they recognised. In this way, learning Mandarin contributed to the development of generic language skills. The stories had the added bonus of teaching children more about Chinese culture.

The teachers themselves are to be congratulated on their willingness to prepare resources and indeed study to support lessons. They were imaginative in their use of activities and resources to teach writing, such as using real materials like pasta to make the shape of the characters. The use of a panda toy to encourage children to

share their home learning about Chinese culture was very successful overall and allowed parents to contribute to the learning of the class.

Teamwork

Initially, some students were asked to prepare and deliver lessons. This proved inappropriate due to the students' lack of pedagogical experience, particularly in working with such young children. In almost all cases therefore, the class teacher took over most of the lesson preparation and worked with the student to deliver lessons.

This ensured that the teacher's classroom experience could complement the language skills of the student and make the work more accessible to children. The teacher maintained classroom management, learned with the children during the presentation of new material, provided activities to engage the children better and worked with the student to support groups during consolidation activities. This teamwork allowed teachers to support the students, and hence the children, better. There were some very good examples of successful teamwork although much depended upon the individual student's personality and level of fluency in English. Nonetheless in all schools, the student has been a natural resource for teachers to explore another language and culture along with the children

Progression

All schools introduced traditional themes for primary language learning such as greetings, dates and animals, with some variations. Some schools introduced the tones. Some introduced the writing of characters and this proved popular with most learners. However, the variation in inputs makes research into the impact on children's learning overall more complex.

A few teachers were very proactive in finding ways of supporting children in their learning between lessons. One school filmed the student in class for use during the week, in order to ensure correct pronunciation. One teacher had written the Mandarin words in *pinyin* on the back of flashcards so that she would remember the words during the week. Such strategies helped those teachers ensure Mandarin lessons were not seen entirely in isolation. However, for this to be fully effective teachers have to be confident in their use of language and understandably, most were not.

Progress

As would be expected at this stage, children engaged mainly in talking and listening activities. They had begun to recognise some numbers in character form however and some had begun to copy characters. Many were able to recognise words in *pinyin* written on cards to help them say words or give their name.

In the absence of a progressive programme of learning, discrete topics were covered. While these were of value in their own right, it is important to move children from words into short phrases and sentences, including mini conversations. This was an area for development.

Children developed a good understanding of what it means to live somewhere else and experience a different culture. For children from rural areas who are unlikely to meet children from another country in their school environment, this is an important aspect of their development. They had come to understand that different languages and cultures exist and were learning to accept these as part of life.

What were the challenges?

There were many challenges for the project, mainly linked to practical concerns which were difficult to overcome within the confines of the project.

Mandarin in the curriculum

Planning was an issue. While students and teachers were almost always willing to meet together after lessons, there was limited time for this. Planning was generally on a 'week to week' basis which did not support forward planning and links with other areas of the curriculum. There were additional difficulties when students occasionally had to cancel lessons due to other commitments. In one case, having set up classes for three students, a school found itself with none as all three pulled out of the project. This is always a possibility with volunteers and makes sustainability a concern.

In order to be fully effective, language learning must help children develop their language skills in a way which allows for progression and depth in learning. A progressive and flexible framework based on the experiences and outcomes for both modern languages and literacy would have helped the schools plan for Mandarin as part of the whole curriculum.

It is worthy of note that the teaching of an additional language to children at P1 is new to most schools. Little and often is best at this stage. The fact that the students came for an extended period of time once a week made that impossible. Sessions lasting almost two hours are over long for one single area of the curriculum and for young children's concentration span. Where children are involved in long sessions of Mandarin learning, there is necessarily an impact on other areas of the curriculum. In at least one case, the formal Mandarin input was shortened because of this and the student assisted in other areas of the curriculum such as physical education during some of the time in school. This had the benefit of allowing the language to be used in real situations and was a good use of student time.

Programme of work

There was a sense in all schools that the work was supporting and enhancing children's listening skills and communication skills. However, this was not necessarily planned or assessed. A few teachers had planned work using the experiences and outcomes for modern languages and literacy. This gave greater focus to the work and enabled them to share with the headteacher what children were learning. Although the experiences and outcomes in modern languages begin at second level, they are appropriate for beginners and offer a structure for the development of language skills.

In addition, it is important that the language be embedded into the curriculum where possible to become a natural part of school life. In best practice, teachers use the language as often and as naturally as possible throughout the school week. However, almost all of the teachers had no previous knowledge of Mandarin and were learning with the children. While this is a very positive feature for children to witness, the complexities of the language and the difficulties involved in pronouncing Mandarin correctly meant that most teachers were not confident in using the language throughout the rest of the week. In addition, teachers found there was a lack of appropriate resources in Mandarin for very young learners.

Timing and pedagogy

Where students were asked to prepare lessons, they often expected too much of children in terms of concentration span, particularly at the start of the project. In some cases, despite interventions on the part of the class teacher, children were still being expected to sit and listen for long periods of time. Language learning at this stage requires approaches which meet the child's need for exploration and engagement, in the same way as schools would approach any other area of the curriculum.

Some basic training for students in the methodology of language delivery would have supported them better. For example, almost all of the students could have used Mandarin more readily for most classroom interactions. This would have helped make the language more real.

Overall, there was no differentiation in learning although children received additional support from the class teacher or student as appropriate. Children who needed more support in their learning often found that learning Mandarin was a level playing field for everyone at the start. Some found the characters helpful. However, if learning were to develop beyond word level, greater differentiation of task and approach would become an important issue.

Despite these difficulties, the students enjoyed being part of the class and almost all began to take their lead from the class teacher and built very positive relationships with the children. In one case, the student became very much part of the whole school community.

Impact of the project

Progress

As stated above, Mandarin language learning was contained in the weekly lesson in most cases. There is a limit to the amount of new language which can be introduced in a lesson so, despite the length of some sessions, progress was necessarily limited.

Although there was good use of recap at the start of lessons, children's pronunciation was variable and their recall by the end of the year was restricted in most cases to a few words of vocabulary such as numbers. Where children learned

vocabulary or phrases through songs, or where they linked Mandarin to other areas of learning, they found it easier to remember new language.

Skills

As a result of this experience, children have been able to explore sounds, word patterns and symbols in a very different language. They were learning to pick out particular sounds amongst others. Teachers feel that talking activities in groups have increased children's confidence in communicating and improved their ability to share. The children are open to learning other languages and spoke of wanting to find out about other countries and cultures. Most had enjoyed their experience of learning with the students, although some were clearly ready to move on to something new. Most became confident learners who felt that they could succeed in learning other languages in the future. This is an important development and there is scope to capitalise on this and encourage more in-depth learning in future.

Impact on students and teachers

Although the students found the pace of learning frustrating at times, they all felt they had benefited greatly from the experience and had learned much about the Scottish education system and our approaches to teaching and learning. A number of them intend to become educators themselves in the future. All felt that they had been given the opportunity to give something back to Scotland and had learned new skills in doing so.

Class teachers worked hard to make the most of the students' input. Despite the frustrations caused by the issues described previously, they felt that the children had benefited from being introduced to another culture and from exploring a new language. They remained positive about introducing Mandarin again in the future, with adequate training and support.

How might the project be improved?

Language learning has real benefits for the development of children's literacy skills. Learning a language at such an early age, before children have preconceptions or inhibitions, allows them to explore differences between other languages and their own. The introduction of an additional language with the support of a native speaker has the potential to provide a very rich experience of primary language learning. However, the following key aspects must be addressed:

- Students require more training in working with young children and in the kind of pedagogy they should expect to see in Scottish primary schools.
- Class teachers require some training in Mandarin if they are to follow up on weekly lessons with the children and begin to embed correct use of the language into the rest of the week. The '1+2 report' is clear that primary language learning involves embedding the language into the curriculum.
- Teachers and students need support to build in planning time. They would benefit from regular opportunities to share ideas, resources and expertise with their peers in other schools.
- More resources in Mandarin, suitable for young children, are needed.

- There needs to be a clear progressive programme of learning which allows children to build on their language learning skills and develop their ability to use the language in context, going beyond word level. Even at this stage, children could have been introduced to phrases and short sentences, so that they could begin to work with the language. Some clear objectives for progress by the end of the programme are required.
- Guidance on delivering an additional language at P1 is available on the Education Scotland website. There is also a framework for the teaching of an additional language from P2 to P7. These documents include sound files to help primary teachers check on pronunciation as required and Mandarin is one of the languages featured.
- While a prescriptive programme would not normally be appropriate, nor in keeping with Curriculum for Excellence, more prescription than normal would have been advantageous given the circumstances quoted above. This would have avoided classes spending long periods of time on vocabulary only. However, any programme must still be flexible enough to respond to local circumstances.
- Learning an additional language should be part of children's whole experience at the primary stages. The fact that the students can only come to school once per week should not dictate that children spend a large proportion of time working on Mandarin. Using the student to contribute to the rest of the school curriculum, whilst using the language, would help children recognise and practise the language in different ways.
- Attention should be paid to assessing children's progress.

Finally, consideration must be given to sustainability. Under the recommendations of the '1+2 report', the language introduced at P1 should continue to the end of P7. That could only be done with a progressive programme of learning, delivered by teachers with training in the language. Waiting for a second student to retrain each successive year would not deliver this. On the other hand, where the above recommendations can be met, the use of students to support trained teachers in delivering a flexible programme of learning could offer a very positive model and a rich learning experience.