Accelerating the Access 3 French course

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Background

The work described in this article formed the dissertation project of a M.Ed. postgraduate degree in Chartered Teacher Studies at Paisley University (MacGregor 2007). It was carried out in a Scottish secondary school where French is a core subject for S1 to S4. At the start of the project French was the sole foreign language taught, although teachers in the school were also qualified in German and Spanish. With two years experience of teaching and developing the Access 3 French course the question arose why pupils with four years of learning French, including two years at Primary, were taking two further years to achieve Access 3, since much of the required content had already been covered.

The project addressed the question: "Can accelerating the completion of the modern language Access 3 course improve the learning experience of S3 and S4 pupils?" Its specific aims were to:

1. review and revise current Access 3 material and presentation in order to tune the material better to the needs and abilities of the pupils and accelerate the completion of the course.

2. assess whether these changes to teaching methodology lead to improvements in pupils' interest and confidence in using a foreign language.

3. investigate whether these changes to teaching methodology raise pupils' self-esteem through reaching attainment goalposts earlier.

The intention was to provide fresh material and a more interactive teaching style with the aim of completing the Access 3 course more rapidly. It was hoped that this would raise pupils' motivation, confidence and self-esteem, which are strongly correlated with performance and achievement. For instance, Hallam and Deathe (2003) found that the longer pupils experienced being in a lower section their self-esteem and attitudes towards school deteriorated. Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) found that pupils' enthusiasm waned between the ages 11 – 14 with the repetition of subject content and rote writing of vocabulary exercises. They noted that challenge can enhance subject enjoyment in early secondary school, but once pupils realise that certain grades are unachievable they are at risk of demotivation and there is a danger that pupils of low ability may give up.

The project

Four Access 3 French classes, with between 8 and 11 pupils in each class, taught by two teachers, were involved in the project. Two S4 classes had already spent one year on the Access 3 course. The aim for these classes was a modest acceleration of the course delivery in order to complete the course early. The aim for the S3 class was to complete the whole Access 3 course during one school year. Performance data from a class who completed the Access 3 course the previous year was used as a standard for comparison.

The French Access 3 course has 17 internal assessments of which 8 are speaking tests. Each test is short, but the large number of assessments places a significant burden on both the teacher and the student, as each speaking test is conducted individually.

Making quick and steady progress on completing these assessments was crucial to the success of the project.

Teaching materials and methods were adapted to enable a quicker rate of course delivery and pupil learning. Worksheets containing core vocabulary for each topic were issued to pupils to avoid the labour of copying out. Pupils added more words and phrases during class work. They took both their word lists and jotters home, whereas previously these had remained in the classroom. When the first unit, Personal and Social Language, was completed the remaining two course units, Transactional Language and Language in Work, were combined so that each of the major topics (eating out, travel and tourist office, shopping and accommodation) was taught concurrently. This gave pupils continuity of vocabulary and added to the coherence of the course. For instance, the Transactional Language unit approached each topic from the point of view of a customer or tourist. This is the most likely role which pupils would use in practice. However, much of the same vocabulary was then reused in the Language in Work unit which addressed the topic from a worker's perspective. Teaching both units simultaneously was efficient and reinforced pupils' learning.

An increased use of ICT in the classroom provided fresh material and a more concentrated focus on each topic. This enhanced pupils' learning experience by providing more innovation and variety than was possible using the traditional textbook and worksheet approach. Worksheet tasks were kept to a minimum and only used to provide focused practice for tests. Use was made of a new interactive whiteboard to present teaching materials to the class. An interactive pen allowed pupils to actively participate by writing directly on the projected display or using "click and drag" techniques to complete tasks. An example, which was frequently used, was to type phrases in separate places on the whiteboard. Pupils were then asked to use the interactive pen to move the phrases and rearrange them to form a sensible conversation. In practice pupils enjoyed the active involvement of constructing a number of different possible dialogues.

The interactive IT facilities also allowed the teacher to display modern language websites to the whole class. The East Renfrewshire teaching website, "CurricuLinks" (East Renfrewshire Council 2006) acts as a portal to many other language websites which provide a wide range of content, resources and interactive activities. Extensive use was made of Linguascope (2006), Languages Online (2006) and BBC Languages French (2006). Pupils were reminded that the purpose was to reinforce vocabulary and they were not allowed to become "click-happy" in pursuit of a correct answer.

Young (2006) noted that the use of ICT in modern languages was highly motivational for pupils: "The advent of the interactive whiteboard can be said to have revolutionised the teaching of modern languages and revitalised the approach of those who use it on a regular basis." The advantages of whiteboards were also noted by British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (BECTA 2003) who claimed that their use "increased engagement and motivation, especially in whole-class settings".

Due to the large number of speaking assessments an increased proportion of class time was spent on this. Dialogues were prepared in advance with commonly asked questions drawn up together with suggestions for possible replies. Copies were printed for pupils to study and take home. The regular class routine used examples which were followed by paired work with another pupil or with an adult. Greater use was made of the classroom assistant who generally co-teaches with the class and there was also significant input from the foreign language assistant. Variations in answers were encouraged as this increased confidence and improved conversational skills.

Assessment of each topic took place as soon as pupils indicated that they were ready. It became an integral part of teaching and learning and was used to help raise pupils' sense of achievement. Pupils clearly knew what their goals were, there

was regular informed feedback and pupils were keen to complete the next assessment as soon as they could.

Renton (2006) reviewing the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) initiative refers to the huge impact "Assessment is for Learning" can have on producing "successful learners" through the development of formative assessment. She emphasises that this is not complicated, "It's just to do with good learning and teaching, of which assessment is part. So it's to do with being clear about what you want pupils to learn - not just doing activities but being clear about what the purpose of these activities is; sharing that purpose with pupils and then, once they've learned something, give them a wee bit of feedback on what they've done really well, and what they next need to do and how to improve."

In Access 3 the emphasis placed on assessment leads to the situation that assessment is sometimes driving rather than supporting learning, almost turning it into "learning is for assessment". Despite the large number of tests, pupils saw these as a challenge and incentive and gave of their best to achieve another milestone. They saw themselves as "successful learners" as they accomplished the next task, and in turn became "confident individuals", another of the main tenets of the CfE initiative.

Surveys were conducted to determine the effects of this new approach on pupils' interest, motivation, confidence and self-esteem. A questionnaire was issued to record attitudes at the beginning of the Access 3 course. The same questionnaire was reissued in March. A comparison of the two questionnaires allowed changes in pupils' views during the project to be determined. Self-esteem was assessed using a standard Rosenberg (1989) scoring system. A final general questionnaire was issued at the end of the project to assess the overall impact of the changes to the course. For most questions a graded set of options was offered which allowed the answers to be treated numerically and the average response of each class could then be determined. Comparisons were made between the first two questionnaires and between the four classes in the project. Some gender specific analysis was also carried out. Full details are given in MacGregor (2007).

Teaching records were used to compare the progress of all four classes. Unit completion dates provided information on pace and the amount of time spent on each topic. Academic NAB scores provided a measure of the final standard achieved by each class. There was a separate survey of support assistants and teaching staff. Pupils were asked to keep a diary in which they periodically wrote comments on their work during the project.

Achievements

The two S4 Access 3 classes completed the course in February 2007, a month quicker than the S4 class in the previous session, while the S3 class made much more rapid progress, completing the whole Access 3 course by May 2007, well within the target of one school year.

A comparison was made between these three classes and the previous year's S4 class, using English 5-14 levels and Standardised Reading Scores obtained at the end of S2, to establish whether their quicker progress was because they were more able. The abilities of all four classes were found to be similar. From this it is concluded that the acceleration achieved is due to changes in teaching materials and presentation and not because the S3 class was more able to cope with the faster presentation.

Having confirmed that the course could be completed quicker, two key questions are: "Has the material has been learned as well as previously?" and "Have the pupils achieved greater levels of interest, confidence and self-esteem as a result of the accelerated course? "

The S3 class required more retests in order to reach the required pass standard for each assessment, suggesting that they were being pushed hard to make the pace. Listening required more retests than reading. This pattern is common in language tests at all levels, primarily because pupils can use a dictionary during reading tests, but not in listening. They have more thinking time during a reading test and can return to answers again.

Considering evidence from final test scores and staff observations, the S3 class has learned the reading and listening material to a similar standard as the other classes, but their speaking performances are much better. They appear more confident and willing to participate. There is also evidence from the questionnaires of some increase in interest and enjoyment of the course. However, the results of the Rosenberg self-esteem survey showed no observable changes in self-esteem for any of the classes during the project.

The pupils appreciated the new teaching style. The questionnaires showed they enjoyed their work more at the end of the course than at the beginning. They appreciated the use of IT in the course. Pupils reported a modest increase in confidence speaking French, while staff observations noted a more substantial advance in this area. Staff also noted a greater willingness to participate and tackle more challenging work. Of the three classes which experienced the accelerated approach, the S3 class reported the largest improvement in their own view of how well they were doing. They claimed the largest increase in confidence in speaking. When faced with work which was proving difficult, a very small minority said that they would tend to give up. Pupils reacted positively to the large number of assessments, saying that tests helped them know how they were getting on or that tests helped them learn. The S3 class appreciated the help provided by the classroom assistant with a large number highlighting the need for the assistant when the teacher is conducting speaking tests.

Progression or language diversification?

When pupils completed the Access 3 French course there was an open question as to what pupils should do next. The original plan had been to start pupils on a new language. For the S4 pupils this was to be an introductory course, but for the S3 class the aim was to do some of the Access 3 German course. Alternatively this class might progress to Intermediate 1 French.

When the S4 groups completed the course in February there was a time-gap of three weeks between the pupils who finished first and those who finished later. Those who had finished regarded their French studies as complete, but it was not possible to start a new language until everyone was ready. One S4 class then started learning German and the other Spanish, according to their teachers' language. The Spanish group were slightly more enthusiastic, saying that they may use the language on holiday, whereas the German group did not see the point. They also felt that there was little point studying something new, since they would not reach an assessable standard in the time available.

The decisions for the S3 class were more serious, given that they had over a year of further timetabled language study. Pupils were asked their views. The options offered were to start Access 3 German, to do more French at Access 3 level or more French at Intermediate 1. Half of the boys expressed a preference for learning German compared to only a third of the girls, with the remaining girls wishing to push on to Intermediate 1 French. This gender difference could be due to a more determined attitude amongst girls willing to take on a new more demanding challenge. Alternatively the difference in response could be due to subtle differences in perceptions of the two languages.

Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) discuss whether the choice of language taught affected boys' and girls' engagement. Their study revealed a strikingly higher motivation to learn German than French, which was even more marked when only the boys were considered. Pupils provided explanations for their preferences. These included French being considered feminine, it not being 'cool' for boys to be seen to make an effort at French, and the tendency for boys not to try at anything that appears to be tedious. A year 9 boy explained, "French is the language of love and stuff" while German is "the war, Hitler and all that". Williams, Burden and Lanvers observed that German is also viewed as more useful by boys for industry and commerce. A preference by boys for German is also noted by Barton (1997) who explained that German has a masculine image, and that boys found the gutteral pronunciation more accessible than girls.

If the class switched to German but found this too hard it would be difficult to revert to French as they would have lost valuable time making it difficult to complete the next level. This would also have a negative effect on their self-esteem. On the other hand, if they continued French but found the higher level too difficult, this would reduce the time available for Access 3 German.

The decision was taken to start work on Intermediate 1 French in June 2007. The standards for Intermediate 1 are considerably higher than for Access 3, especially the speaking tests which required pupils to remember significantly more. By early September 2007 it was clear that Intermediate 1 was too difficult for most pupils in the class and the switch to studying German was made.

There were mixed reactions to this, with a month of repeated reference to French by a few pupils. However, once they started to pass German internal assessments, pupil morale and determination increased. The same methodology was used and teaching materials from the French course were simply translated into German. Although German was a completely new language to all the pupils, they were older and more mature than when they started the Access 3 French course and they approached the task with a positive attitude. Their previous experience of learning French facilitated their new language learning as there are many similar elements in European languages, including some grammatical structures and common vocabulary roots.

By March 2008 one pupil had left the school and another was on a restricted timetable, but the eight remaining pupils completed the German Access 3 course in May 2008. They did so with pride because they had completed the study of something their peers had not.

Some reflections

In order to accelerate the course it is essential that the process commences at the very beginning of S3. By the time this project started too much time had already elapsed for the S4 classes to make up ground and complete the course very much ahead of the standard schedule. If pupils are jaded or disillusioned at the end of S2, after being in a low section for a year, the challenge of an early completion date at Access 3 has been shown to provide high motivation. The teaching materials need to be appropriately focused. The use of IT at an appropriate level and the issuing of separate help sheets are preferable to the use of a textbook which may contain additional material which is too difficult for Access 3 level.

The sharper focus on each topic area for a short time means that pupils remain interested and do not get bored by spending too long on the same topic. On average around a month, was spent on each topic area. The constant feedback, which accompanied the successful completion of course assessments, kept pupils motivated. However, the high number of speaking tests is very demanding on both teacher and pupil time. A reduction in the number of assessments required would be

beneficial, providing more time to engage the pupils in the language and increase their interest.

In view of the high number of speaking assessments it would be difficult to accelerate the course successfully with classes significantly larger than those in the present study. In addition, the presence of an additional helper who is willing and able to work with the pupils on their speaking was instrumental in the early completion of the course. It would be much more difficult if the classroom assistant had little or no foreign language knowledge or lacked the confidence to help.

Time has to be allocated for regular speaking practice. If conversation becomes a routine for pupils every day, any initial awkwardness should disappear and there should be little anxiety because they are being assessed. An increase in confidence is central to pupils' success and their willingness to tackle any task in a positive frame of mind is essential. Where a pupil is willing to speak there is a high probability that the associated learning outcome can be successfully achieved, whereas lack of confidence, resulting in silence or great hesitation, detracts from successful oral communication.

This study has shown that increased use of IT resources can help motivate pupils as well as providing variety in teaching methods. This approach has helped with accelerating the course, but is an area requiring further development to match the needs and interests of pupils.

There is a mismatch between the structure of the Access 3 French course, with its 17 assessments and the next level, Intermediate 1, which only has four internal assessments. If pupils of the ability level in question were to aim directly for Intermediate 1 level, this would leave them with no safety net if they experience difficulty passing the internal assessments at Intermediate 1.

In other subjects there is better articulation between Access 3 and Intermediate 1 levels and the smaller number of assessments they require present fewer organisational difficulties in transferring pupils upwards from Access 3 or downwards from Intermediate 1. Indeed, the switch from Intermediate 1 to Access 3 can be made in other subjects relatively late in S4. Consequently, in most other subjects at the author's school, the policy is to teach nearly all pupils at Intermediate 1 level and there is little specific teaching at Access 3 level. If this is typical of practice in other Scottish secondary schools there will be limited opportunities to accelerate Access 3 courses in other subjects following a similar approach to the current project.

With the proposed introduction of CfE, the organisation of the Scottish secondary curriculum is likely to see major changes and greater flexibility. Pupils will continue with their S1 studies as at present, but they may then be offered choices of subjects at the end of S1 and again at the end of S3. Prior to this study an important question posed by CfE was whether less able pupils would end their language studies without reaching a recognised level. Whereas most S4 students now complete Standard Grade, Intermediate 1 or Intermediate 2 by the end of their fourth year, this project has shown that Access 3 French is an achievable standard for all pupils, providing a recognised qualification by the end of S3.

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