

Modern Languages in Scottish Primary Schools: An Investigation into the Perceived Benefits and Challenges of the 1+2 Policy

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Abstract: This article reports on the views regarding the key benefits and challenges of the Scottish Government's 1+2 language policy as expressed by primary school teachers across Scotland via an online questionnaire (n=243) and five staff in a large primary school in Scotland through semi-structured interviews. Interview participants believed that the policy would help raise the profile of languages and increase the number of languages taught at primary school. They were also in favour of starting language learning at an earlier age. The challenges identified by questionnaire respondents were feeling incompetent in teaching languages and a lack of available training. A key challenge of the policy is sustainability in the long term as the allocation for training and resources in support of the 1+2 policy is gradually being withdrawn.

Keywords: 1+2 language policy, Scotland, critical period hypothesis, transition, language proficiency

Introduction

Scotland introduced Modern Languages in the Primary School (MLPS) almost 30 years ago, in 1989 (Tierney & Gallastegi, 2011: 483) and the importance of learning foreign languages has always been stressed by Scottish ministers (Crichton & Templeton, 2010). As a Scottish languages student, who learnt languages throughout my primary and secondary school stages, this subject area was one of great interest.

In 2011, the manifesto of the Scottish National Party (SNP) restated its support for languages:

“We will introduce a norm for language learning in schools based on the European Union 1 + 2 model – that is we will create the conditions in which every child will learn two languages in addition to their own mother tongue. This will be rolled out over two Parliaments, and will create a new model for language acquisition in Scotland”.

After the re-election of the SNP to government, the above manifesto commitment led to the introduction of a new language policy in 2011, *Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach*. The aim of the policy is offer every child the opportunity to learn an additional language from Primary 1 (age 4-5) a further additional language from Primary 5 (age 9). Two key rationales for the introduction of the policy, according to the Scottish Government Languages Working Group (2012) were the belief in the importance of having a second language in today's increasingly globalised world, and in the benefits of learning from a younger age.

Research question, aims and objectives

The overall research question of this study was: 'What are the perceived benefits and challenges of the 1+2 policy, according to the perceptions of teachers?'

The study was initially informed by the evidence provided in the Scottish Government Languages Working Group report. After consulting additional literature, several sub-questions arose which guided the investigation of the main research question. These were:

- 1) What are the perceived benefits of learning an additional language from a younger age?
- 2) To what extent is transition from primary to secondary school being considered?
- 3) To what extent do primary school teachers feel qualified enough to teach the additional language(s)?
- 4) What are the potential benefits of the 1+2 policy?
- 5) What are the benefits of using Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)?

Data Collection

The author chose a large primary school that was easily accessible, and employed both face-to-face interviews and an online questionnaire for the data collection. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) consisted of open response questions, multiple choice questions, and rating/scale questions, which allowed quantitative analysis of a large number of responses. This method was also chosen as, due to participants being able to complete the questionnaire in a short time, it was felt this would improve the response rate (Kumar, 1996). A convenience sampling method was used to recruit participants in the questionnaire survey. In order to maximize the sample size, the questionnaires were aimed at teachers in all primary schools across Scotland. An online survey method (SurveyMonkey) was used to allow easy access and completion of the questionnaire. Participants were recruited by sharing a questionnaire on a Facebook group for Scottish primary school teachers. A total of 243 responses were collected and analysed.

The quantitative data was complemented by semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 2). Three primary teachers were interviewed, as well as a head teacher, and a parent who was assisting teachers with language classes and had a key role teaching the language within this school. In terms of their language proficiency, one of the teachers had studied French at university level, however was teaching German to her class. The other two teachers had high school level French, and were both teaching French to their classes.

In order to respect the anonymity of the participants, codes were assigned to each participant, in the form of 'P1', which are provided in the following table.

Table 1: Interview participants

Participant	Role
P1	Parent, who also volunteers in the classroom with language classes
P2	Primary one teacher, also in charge of implementing the 1+2 policy
P3	Primary two teacher
P4	Primary four teacher, who also teaches private French classes to young children
P5	Head teacher at primary school

Discussion of Findings

Critical period hypothesis

According to the Scottish Government Languages Working Group report (2012)

There is a considerable body of evidence which indicates that young children learn languages more easily than older learners in terms of mental flexibility and the ability to focus on the input they receive. It is also true that children need to be exposed to sufficient quantities of 'engaging' input in order to learn (and maintain) another language..

In line with the literature review findings, interview and questionnaire respondents differed in their views regarding the 'best' age to begin language learning. There was unanimous agreement from the interview participants that the introduction of a language at a younger age would be beneficial. This was mostly due to the belief that children have fewer inhibitions at a young age, and therefore are not embarrassed or nervous when speaking in another language, thus being more receptive to language learning. In addition, one of the interview participants commented on the fact that learning a second language can improve the child's mother tongue, with one adding that they have noticed improved phonological awareness in some of the pupils. She suggests that this could be related to language learning. This finding seems to support Murphy et al.'s (2015) theory that the introduction of L2 improves the child's L1 as it enables children to view language in a more systematic way. Furthermore, in line with Driscoll and Frost's (1999) research, some participants commented that by introducing languages at a younger age, pupils will be at a much more accelerated stage when they reach secondary school. However, one interview participant felt that older learners would actually pick up languages a lot faster as they are better at listening and taking in information. This view reflects the findings of Abello-Contesse (2008) that older children are in fact more efficient language learners.

In addition, when questionnaire respondents were asked about the main benefits of the policy, the most frequent response was that children are learning from a younger age and that young children learn languages more easily than older learners. The majority of questionnaire respondents disagreed that language learning is not suitable for

children with additional support needs (ASN). This opposes Wire's (2005) belief but to some extent agrees with van Wengen's (2013) findings, although respondents gave no details as to why they felt that language learning was (not) suited to children with ASN.

The transition to secondary school

Regarding the transition to secondary school, it seems that there is no specific national guidance or clear expectation of local arrangements for cluster working to establish effective transition practice from primary to secondary school as per Rec. 8 in the Report by the 1+2 Working Group:

that primary and secondary schools work effectively together to ensure articulation between the sectors in terms of content, skills and approaches to learning and to enable effective transition, progression and continuity between P7 and S1, particularly for the L2 language.

The literature highlights that this could be problematic. As cited by Bolster (2004), if there is such a large focus on language learning in the primary school, the hard work that has been put in is wasted when the pupils reach secondary school as they will fail to build on what has been achieved. In addition, Chambers (2012) argued that the secondary teachers will be unaware of what has been taught previously, leading the students to be taught repeated work, or work which is at too high a level.

The questionnaire responses are split in their views on the challenge of transition. 25% disagreed with the statement "The transition from primary to secondary school regarding languages will be problematic", 29% were not sure either way, and 33% agreed. These results perhaps suggest that transition arrangements depend on the school context of the individual respondent, e.g. whether or not their school has a transition strategy in place. Overall, however, transition to secondary school must be considered a challenge still to be overcome.

Language proficiency of primary teachers

Regarding teacher confidence levels, the interview participants at the primary school felt it depended on the individual teacher's language proficiency, and the stage/CfE level of learners. The parent helper commented that she found it difficult to maintain order and control when teaching, due to not being their allocated class teacher. This is in line with Martin's (2000) argument that pupils view non-class teachers as "outsiders".

The top challenge identified in the questionnaire was that teachers do not feel competent and/or confident enough to teach languages. This mirrors Barton et al., and Legg's research (2009; 2013) which shows that teachers feel uneasy about teaching languages due to their lack of knowledge on the subject. However, in another question, over half of the questionnaire respondents said they would feel confident enough to teach a second language to their class. This demonstrates that there is inconsistency in the views expressed.

Research by Barton et al. (2009) concluded that the best way to solve issues of confidence was to make resources readily available and provide teacher training, which is something that has been done at the primary school participating in this study. However, the most common challenges identified by the questionnaire respondents were indeed related to lack of resources and lack of teacher training available to help implement the policy effectively. Teacher training too has resource implications (Scottish Languages Working Group, 2012) and one of the participants warned that by 2020 the policy would need to be self-sustaining since funding allocated for teacher training in support of the 1+2 policy might no longer be available. Furthermore, 38% of teachers in the survey disagreed with the statement “There is adequate training available to help to train teachers” and a further 16% strongly disagreed. In addition, 76% of questionnaire respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the aims of the 1+2 language policy can only be achieved and sustained if sufficient funding is available. Loss of funding will also affect schools that have spent this on annual subscriptions to online learning platforms (31%), as those fees may no longer be affordable.

Economic benefits and job prospects

Only 45% of questionnaire respondents agreed that language skills boost employability, which was one of the perceived policy benefits cited by the 1+2 Working Group. There are also key documents in the literature that back up the claim that language learning improves job prospects and knowledge of languages helps the economy (British Chambers of Commerce 2012, CBI/Pearsons 2015, 2016, 2017). Since learners also have entitlement to career education perhaps there needs to be closer collaboration between language teachers on the one hand and careers advisers in schools on the other.

Increased cultural awareness and openness

The research conducted by the Nuffield Foundation (2000) found that language learning in the early years “enhances literacy, citizenship and intercultural tolerance” (p. 6). This view was reflected in the interview and in the questionnaire responses, with 65% of the latter agreeing/strongly agreeing with the statement that the policy will improve cultural awareness of the pupils. However some have argued that there needs to be a shift in the language teaching method if it is to have an effect on the student’s level of cultural awareness (Ben Maad, 2016; Ho, 2009). Similarly, one interview primary school teacher participant highlighted that raising cultural awareness through language learning would be dependent on the language pedagogy employed.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

There are a number of studies which comment on the benefits of learning content through another language, i.e. combining content and language (Dalton-Puffer & Smit, 2007; Dourda et al, 2014). However, only one questionnaire respondent and none of the interview participants considered this approach. This unexpected finding merits further investigation

Cross-curricular linking

It seems that although the recommendations of the 1+2 language policy state that language learning should be part of what is already being taught in the primary classroom, primary teachers still view the inclusion of the language element as another pressure on the timetable and curriculum. Certainly, all the interview participants at the primary school unanimously identified this aspect as a key challenge and 66% of questionnaire respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement “The curriculum is very busy and there are other priorities which must come before language learning and the 1+2 policy.”

Greater number of languages

It is interesting to note that one of the top benefits mentioned from the questionnaires, and the interviews was that the policy “will encourage more young people to speak languages.” Respondents related this to more languages being taught at their school. This particular benefit was not something that was revealed from the initial review of the literature.

Benefits and challenges of the 1+2 policy

Overall, more respondents viewed the policy as having more challenges than benefits (48%) rather than the other way around (31%), with 16% believing there to be an equal amount of benefits and challenges.

Research participants identified the following as benefits of the 1+2 language policy:

- children will be learning languages from a younger age
- children will experience greater enjoyment in language learning
- children will have increased cultural openness and awareness
- the profile of languages will be raised
- there will be a greater number of languages taught at primary school.

They identified the following as challenges to the implementation of the policy:

- the transition to secondary school
- the (lack of) language proficiency amongst primary teachers,
- pressure on the timetable and curriculum,
- lack of teacher training and resources to help implement the policy, and sustaining the ambitions and aspirations of the 1+2 language policy beyond 2020-2021.

Some Final Thoughts

The results of the questionnaire survey and individual discussions revealed that there were more similarities than differences between the findings of the literature review and the views expressed by the participants. It could therefore be concluded that the participants in this study hold broadly similar views to those highlighted in the current

literature. However, given the size of the study and the limited number of participants, the views of the participants in this study are not generalizable to the wider teaching population in Scotland. This was a small scale study with strict time constraints and it was difficult to gain access to many interviewees. Therefore, it would be interesting to repeat this study on a larger scale, where more teachers could be sent questionnaires and different schools around Scotland could be focused on, rather than one primary school in particular for the interviews. In addition, more representatives from relevant government bodies could be interviewed. This would allow a more generalizable conclusion on the perceptions of the benefits and challenges of the policy. The ability to generalise findings is further restricted due to the methodological approach used as this study is analysing perceptions of different stakeholder groups.

From a personal point of view, I believe that in order for the policy to be effectively implemented and sustained, a transition strategy between the primary and secondary schools should be considered. If this is not achieved, then the opportunities and benefits created by the policy are likely to be wasted. In addition, sufficient investment needs to be provided to maintain training and immersion programmes. Without appropriate amounts of dedicated funding teachers may no longer receive the appropriate training, this in turn would make it difficult to sustain the policy in the long term.

There are a number of uncertainties around the 1+2 language policy at time of writing. First, implementation is still in progress and L3 has not yet been properly embedded. Second, the policy was introduced before the Brexit vote in June 2016. It is still unclear in what ways, if any, the eventual outcome of the Brexit negotiations may affect the planned implementation process. Of course, it could be argued that an even bigger importance will be placed on language learning once Britain is no longer part of the European Union, and there may no longer be as much importance placed on the English language in Europe. This would indeed be an interesting future study!

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire and Summary of Responses

1. What is your position in the school?

For responses to Questions 2-5 and 8 see Table 2

6. In your opinion, what are the main benefits of the 1+2 policy?

7. In your opinion, what are the main challenges of the 1+2 policy?

9. How much do you agree with the following statements? (for responses see Table 3)

10. Is there anything else you would like to add or ask regarding the benefits and challenges of the 1+2 policy?

Table 2: Responses to Q2-5 and 8 (n=243)

2. How much do you know about the 1+2 Policy? I know...				
nothing about it 0%	a lot about it and how it is intended to work 35%	a fair amount about it 46%	a little about it 19%	Other
3. When did you hear about the 1+2 Policy?				
Before its implementation last year 70%	Only when it was being implemented last year 19%	More recently 3%	Other 7%	
4. Have you been directly involved in the 1+2 policy yourself?				
Yes, I have helped implement it at my school 16%	Yes, I have taught my primary class a language under the 1+2 guidelines 46%	Both of these 20%	Other 19%	
5. In your view, does the 1+2 Policy bring about...?				
More benefits than challenges 16%	More challenges than benefits 48%	An equal weighting of benefits and challenges 31%	Other 5%	
8. What did your school/local authority choose to spend the funding on for the 1+2 Policy?				
Online packs and resources 31%	Language specialist 15%	Teacher training & immersion programmes 36%	I don't know 43%	Other 12%

Table 3: Responses to Q. 9 (N=243)

0=Strongly Disagree; 1=Disagree; 2=neither Agree nor Disagree; 3=Agree; 4= Strongly Agree

How much do you agree with the following statements?	0	1	2	3	4
1. Language Learning should be an important part of the primary school curriculum	2%	10%	15%	41%	32%
2. The transition from primary to secondary school regarding languages will be problematic	4%	25%	29%	33%	9%
3. Language learning should be a priority in primary school	10%	28%	25%	27%	9%
4. The 1+2 policy will improve the cultural awareness of young people	3%	14%	18%	48%	17%
5. The 1+2 policy will encourage more young people to speak and study more languages	2%	16%	29%	40%	13%
6. 6. The 1+2 policy will in turn improve job prospects for future students as languages are vital in the workforce	2%	18%	35%	33%	12%
7. Younger children learn languages more easily	1%	2%	9%	48%	39%
8. Younger children pick up languages better as they have no inhibitions	2%	5%	18%	42%	34%
9. Younger children become more confused when they are learning a second language	13%	44%	25%	15%	2%
10. Learning a second language is not suited to children with additional support needs	13%	43%	28%	13%	3%
11. Children find language learning enjoyable	2%	5%	23%	50%	21%
12. The curriculum is very busy and there are other priorities which must come before language learning and the 1+2 policy	2%	13%	19%	35%	31%
13. I feel I am/would be competent enough to teach a FL	16%	22%	7%	34%	21%
14. There are enough resources available to help with language teaching	12%	34%	14%	31%	10%
15. There is adequate training available to help to train teachers	16%	38%	14%	28%	4%
16. There is enough support provided from senior managers and/or LA	16%	35%	26%	21%	2%
17. The 1+2 policy can only be sustained if funding is available	1%	10%	13%	38%	38%
18. I feel that my school has employed an effective strategy for implementing the 1+2 policy	8%	28%	28%	31%	5%

Appendix 2: Semi-structured interview questions with prompts

- What can you tell me about the 1+2 policy in general?
- How does it work in the class- can you briefly explain to me what an average lesson would involve? -prompts: CLIL
- Do you think 'younger is better' when it comes to teaching languages?
- What do you perceive the benefits of the policy to be? -prompts: cultural awareness, economic benefits/job prospects
- What do you perceive the challenges of the policy to be? -prompts: transition to secondary school, proficiency of language teachers
- what is your language proficiency?
- What resources/ training are you provided with?
- Is there anything you would like to add?

