

Leading Learning in Languages and Multi-Composite Classes

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Abstract: This article chronicles my professional development journey following participation in the 2017 1+2 Languages Leadership Programme, an initiative that aims to build leadership capacity to support the successful implementation of Scotland's 1+2 language policy. As a teacher of multi-composite classes, I wanted to identify a better way of delivering differentiated language learning activities to meet the diverse needs of my pupils. The General Teaching Council for Scotland Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning guided me as I responded to academic literature and policy papers and considered the views expressed in relation to my professional circumstances. An appreciation that working in the multi-composite setting requires teachers to adapt ideas at all times, whereas resources and training are often prepared with straight classes in mind, helped me to critically question aspects of 1+2 guidance and find a way to develop a programme appropriate to the schools in which I work.

Keywords: Scotland; multi-composite; progression; differentiation; curriculum development.

Professional Background

I currently work as a teacher in two small rural primary schools where I have responsibility for teaching French, amongst other subjects, and lead the 1+2 curriculum development for the multi-composite classes in these schools. I have a BSc (Social Sciences), an MSc in Information and Administrative Management and the PGDE in Primary Teaching. My languages background comprises proficiency in French and Spanish through study (6th Year Studies French and a Certificate in Spanish Studies) and periods spent working in France and Spain. I also have a Higher German from High School; a TEFL qualification which gave me the opportunity to teach English in Spain and in Scotland and the recently obtained Professional Recognition in Leading Learning in Languages from the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). In Scotland, all teachers have to ensure that their practice satisfies professional standards set by the GTCS. By seeking Professional Recognition, I wanted to develop my professional practice whilst reflecting on the Standard for Career-Long Professional Learning.

Rationale

I meet termly with two teachers who are also leaders of modern languages in schools with multi-composite classes and who teach French discretely. In Session 2017/18, we recognised common challenges on which we wanted to focus, two of which were the focus for my Professional Recognition submission:

1. ensuring that the four language skills (talking, listening, reading and writing) were covered;
2. how to engage our P1 learners while we progressed the learning of the other year groups in the multi-composite class.

My two colleagues both have university degrees in languages, one in German and Marketing, the other in French with History. The latter has a secondary qualification to teach French and History but is also qualified to teach in primary schools, which she has been doing since 2002. She maintains her language skills by attending practical courses and language immersion courses in France. The former participated in the ERASMUS programme, spending a year studying at the University of Bayreuth then another year in Rostock working as a language assistant. She has been teaching in the primary sector for 20 years, completed training for teaching modern languages in the primary school in both German and French and has completed the Train the Trainer course at the Goethe Institute in Glasgow. More recently, she has trained a small group of teachers to teach German as L3 (= second additional language). All of us worked as *au pairs* in our younger days – I was in France, my colleagues were in Switzerland and Austria, respectively.

Due to our own confidence in using French, we focussed a lot on talking and listening where we modelled and developed dialogue with pupils, encouraging good pronunciation and mimicking. I was, however, less confident about ensuring that the pupils had opportunities to read and write in French in a meaningful and progressive way which impacted on preparation of differentiated activities for the P4-7 and P5-7 classes. This concern about differentiation also applied to the infant classes where, with one P1 pupil in the P1-3 class and three P1 pupils in the P1-4 class, it was challenging to find independent activities for them to do while catering for the learning needs and progression of others in the class. Progression and differentiation were the key issues I chose to address to develop my practice and to show leadership in my dual role as “expert” French teacher and as “French curriculum developer”. As classroom practitioner, I wanted to identify a strategy that would allow all children to progress within their ability group rather than their year group. In developing the curriculum, I had to consider the barriers to this progression in the multi-composite setting.

In doing so I was actively considering and critically questioning the development of policy in education (GTCS 2012:10). Neither the national 1+2 languages policy nor the Primary Language Learning Framework of our local authority provide guidance on building the modern language curriculum for teachers of multi-composite classes. As a group, we had a common understanding of the complexity in which teachers of multi-composite classes operate and we all felt the need for new ideas to make sure all children in our classes were motivated, challenged and learning at their own level.

The professional dialogue with my two similar-minded colleagues motivated and inspired me to think innovatively about changes to my practice. They gave me confidence to contribute ideas from my experience and learning at the 1+2 Language Leadership Programme (LLP) that SCILT offers on an annual basis. I knew that they could assess the viability of my suggestions in the setting in which we work. A task to

create food SNAP cards for the next meeting gave me a starting point for the infant class and resources presented at the 1+2 LLP, such as sentence-building cards, rhyming poems, text and picture cards started off my thinking about how to include more reading and writing with the older children.

An analysis of language learning in multi-composite classes

As part of Scotland's 1+2 language policy (Scottish Government, 2012,) primary teachers are expected to embed an additional language (L2) across the curriculum, not just during allocated blocks of time. There must also be clear progression in language learning. The earlier observation by Martin (2000) that "a variety of curricular approaches and staffing models continue to co-exist, each valid for the local circumstances" and that there is no "right" way to implement a language programme, still holds true. I take solace from this as with the changing make-up of a multi-composite class each session I need to develop a language curriculum that takes into account the challenges of the multi-composite setting. However, most training courses I have attended and language programmes I have seen assume 'straight' classes. With reference to and adaptation of Martin's (2000) tripartite staffing approach, from session 2018/19, class teachers in my schools will embed certain routine language on a daily basis thus freeing me to progress language competence with the children in my weekly slot. McCrossan (2015) believes that embedding requires "spontaneity and therefore a higher level of confidence in using the language" which is why I will pre-teach certain vocabulary, phrases and themes at the start of each term and then provide the class teacher with a plan to follow.

I like the idea presented by McColl (2015) where she considers use of "classroom language" in French as "cause and effect" giving the children a purpose for using the language. By asking "*Je peux aller aux toilettes?*" they are choosing to communicate with the teacher in the target language and taking control of their learning, which will hopefully progress to more purposeful communication in French. This has really taken off in both schools and we have since added "*Je peux aller chercher de l'eau*" to continue with a similar structure and to respond to a natural request the children often make. The structure is reinforced in the answer – "*Oui, tu peux aller [...]*"

Clingan & Coles (2017) researched the use of the six UNESCO strategies for teaching literacy in multi-composite language classes, and as a research participant, I was interested in the findings. It confirmed my own experience, i.e. that in most cases modern languages delivery is through a mixture of discrete and embedded means and, in the case of discrete delivery, all stages are mainly taught together with a differentiated element. However, I wanted to reconsider my practice and reflect on how I could incorporate other strategies. It also made me think about my teaching of L1 (mother tongue) literacy, and how I could adapt it to prepare varied and differentiated resources to develop the four language skills in the first additional language (L2).

Other reading on using literacy techniques and strategies like decoding (Woore, 2009) and Talk for Learning (Couzens et al, 2013) inspired me try out some ideas that I hope to

develop further during the 2018-19 session. Other more recent literature that I found useful referred to the use of stories in Primary 1 (McCrossan, 2015), and Language Awareness and Metacognitive Skills (Kanaki, 2015). I agree with Kanaki that a primary teacher who is confident in using both their L1 and an L2 will be able to guide and support their pupils in making connections between the two languages, whether that be identifying cognates, understanding the positioning of adjectives and how they relate to the noun, or just basic sentence construction. Scaffolding and using simple structures to practice and develop L2 allows the pupils to question their use of the language and recognise errors. Working with phonics in L2, identifying sounds in words or using sounds to build up words consolidates similar activities in L1. Language awareness activities can be differentiated to suit the different ages and abilities within the multi-composite setting whilst still working within a theme for the whole class. A selection of resources I prepared is available in the Appendix.

As each school's circumstances are different, it is up to the teacher to respond to their own situation and critically engage with existing policy to make it work for them and their pupils. Working with the Professional Standards allows us to do this through reflecting on our practice and recognising the steps, small and big, we are making in our professional development.

Organising the Curriculum

Murray's findings (2017) raised certain issues with the 1+2 Languages Policy and I have considered these further as challenges in teaching languages in the multi-composite setting. A majority of Murray's respondents felt that "the curriculum is very busy and there are other priorities which must come before language learning and the 1+2 policy". 1+2 policy makers clearly believe that language learning should be part of what is already being taught in the primary classroom. However, the primary teachers responding to Murray - all working in 'straight' classes - saw it as another pressure so for teachers of multi-composite classes it could be even more of an issue.

When teaching any subject within the multi-composite setting, it is not easy to follow a programme that has been set for straight classes. In the case of a multi-composite class encompassing all primary stages (P1-7) the teacher is covering all Curriculum for Excellence levels from Early to Second (and sometimes Third if a pupil needs further challenge). A P1-P4 multi-composite class has to cover early level and first level outcomes, a P4- P7 multi-composite class has to cover first level and second level. Within each of those levels, you also have to differentiate. No multi-composite class is the same so there is no standard to follow. It is all about adapting to the children in front of you. Some classes I have worked in have had 17 children while others have had as few as nine and, in one case, there were only ten children in the whole school. In each case, I had to plan for different ages and levels. The skill all teachers need, to juggle groups, is really put to the test when working in a multi-composite class.

Programmes of study must be changed each year because the children are in the class for more than one year. This is where responsive planning in consultation with the

children really comes to the fore and knowing the children well helps the teacher choose themes that are of interest to them. In organising the French curriculum, I need to plan different things for each new academic year. There is no point following a programme that sets out the same subject headings like “clothes” for different year groups with certain amounts of vocabulary to be learned by the end of each session. This is not a very responsive approach. The most appealing idea I took from the 1+2 LLP was using an interdisciplinary learning approach to teaching modern languages. According to the Scottish Government’s initial publication on 1+2 (2012) this approach highlights the relevance L2 has in study and future work. During 2017/18, the academic session after the 1+2 LLP Summer School, I started to include this in my planning. I used French in sessions on animal classification in Science and, in Art, I tasked the children to research a French-speaking artist of their choice, create a piece of work in that artist’s style and use French to create a simple PowerPoint presentation sharing information and expressing likes and dislikes. I also included some classes on an Asterix resource from Education Scotland to link in with one class’s Roman topic and because one of the children was a huge Asterix fan. In doing so, I “deployed an enhanced understanding how constructive relationships with learners can be developed” (Standard 3(i)). I was surprised to read that many teacher respondents to Murray’s survey had not consider the Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). In my view, the CLIL approach has a huge role to play in organising language provision in the multi-composite classroom. However, the successful implementation would depend on teacher confidence and skill in teaching languages and access to suitable resources.

Materials development

Curriculum for Excellence’s focus on active learning fits in very well with language learning and my experience in teaching TEFL has helped me with preparing many materials. Extra work is required in multi-composite language classes because you cannot always use off-the-shelf learning resources and need to spend time preparing specific resources or adapting existing one to suit each age. This is especially the case if you are responding to the children’s interests. In order to appeal to the younger children (many of the older children too) resources like songs, stories, puppets are useful. This led me to use a song, animated programme, DVD or other stimuli to introduce the lesson and then develop differentiated activities to follow.

Teaching/Learning Strategies

Time and classroom management can be tricky within multi-composite classes - compounded by each additional age group you have. Therefore, teachers have to learn to understand and manage group dynamics carefully and imaginatively to get the best combination that allows them to cater for each child within the class. There is even more scope for the planning to be child-centred rather than curriculum-centred. Seeing the pupil in relation to pupils of different ages can help with an understanding of child development and finding out where particular children are on their development path. All children benefit from being with younger and older children - they either have the

opportunity to revise or consolidate previous learning or learn from exposure to learning beyond their level. In my L2 classes, I have learned to use different teaching strategies:

- whole class teaching to introduce the theme through different media;
- differentiated activities tailored to ability rather than age;
- mixed age and ability groups to encourage older children to share their L2 learning with younger children;
- peer instruction techniques; co-operative learning with collaborative tasks;
- differentiated independent activities while I introduce a language skill to another group.

All “demonstrate a critical understanding of approaches to teaching and learning, pedagogy and practice” (Standard 3(i)). I would like to develop a good bank of independent activities that allow pupils to decide which area they need to practice thus helping them recognise their development needs.

The teacher of a P1-P4 multi-composite class needs a lot of creativity to cover the four language skills and engage the different year groups at the same time. When introducing P4s to L2 phonics you consider other activities for P1s, P2s and others who are not yet secure in L1 phonics, recognising that these groups can enjoy the songs that include the rhyming sounds being practised. When P4s are beginning activities on sentence building, these can be differentiated for P2 and P3 but P1s may not be in the position to be writing much at all. They can be involved in building picture stories from the same stimulus. Stories, songs and puppets can be used to good effect with P1s, P2s and P3s but must be adapted for the P4s. Taking into account the pupils’ ages and, therefore, attention span is important when determining which activity works best for them. If you only have one P1 in the class that too can be limiting.

Teacher Training / CPD

Murray (2017) concluded that the sustainability of the 1+2 Language Policy could face problems due to lack of teacher training and resources when funding stops in 2020-2021. This is already an issue for small rural primary schools. According to the 2017 pupil census (Scottish Government, 2017), 19% of Scottish schools have a school roll of under 50 pupils, which means they may have either two or three teachers. Many teachers prefer not to teach in these small schools for a variety of personal and professional reasons. Teachers in such schools have reduced possibilities for CPD opportunities because there are neither colleagues nor supply staff available to cover them during the school day. Some CPD is available in twilight sessions, but this often involves substantial travelling time and has an impact on both school collegiate activity, preparation time and personal time.

Currently, universities offering an ITE programme leading to a primary teaching qualification are encouraged, but not required, to expect at least an SCQF level 5 qualification in a modern language (Memorandum on Entry Requirements to

Programmes of ITE in Scotland - June 2013). Therefore, we have a situation where future primary teachers do not need to have a qualification from school in a L2, may not have access to language training and may never be exposed to practice in a multi-composite setting. A triple whammy for rural schools looking to recruit new staff when experienced staff leave or retire.

Transition to Secondary

Murray cites a concern that all the work that has been put into teaching languages in the primary school may be wasted once the pupils arrive at S1 because there is no system in place to assess what they have already learned at primary school. I had a meeting with colleagues at my local secondary to discuss this. We agreed that ensuring those in P7 had a basic understanding of sentence building would be of great benefit, as once that had been introduced, S1 teachers could then develop sentences further with other aspects of grammar relevant to the L2 or L3. A knowledge of certain vocabulary sets like colours, numbers, routine instructions, the date and the weather would also be useful. The secondary school has a variety of different primary schools in the cluster, some with straight classes and some with composite and multi-composite classes. To set a required programme to be covered in P7 would not be feasible and would be difficult for those of us teaching in multi-composite classes. In the multi-composite setting, P7s are never in isolation and a P7 transitioning to S1 from a P1-P7 class will come from a different situation to a P7 coming from a P5-7 or a P4-7. In the P4-7 and P5-7 multi-composite class the focus may well be on the expectations for P7 transition. I do not find this problematic because any sentence building activity I have set for the P7s is adapted for others in the class to ensure differentiation.

Reflections on my professional development journey

Discussions with my multi-composite colleagues taught me that I should trust in myself as a professional as I have the experience, knowledge and creativity to adapt resources and ideas to suit my multi-composite teaching situation. With reference to the Leading Learning in Languages course, I realised that there are different leadership roles for me to consider:

- In the classroom, I am a confident and enthusiastic leader of learning because I have the language skills and am interested in language and culture. I like to motivate and make connections to what the children know and want to know, consolidating the language through different activities. I am deepening and developing my subject knowledge (Standard 2.2) through professional reading, reading authentic texts in French and visiting France. I am a responsive leader, changing practice after identifying a weak area, developing pedagogic knowledge through attending courses and observing and working with others.
- In the schools I am, amongst other roles, the languages expert working with the class teachers to embed L2 in a manageable way. I am an understanding leader, understanding the complexities of a multi-composite setting –

staffing/timetabling/multiple responsibilities/class dynamics. In developing the French curriculum, I am the Ambassador for Modern Languages integrating French as much as possible with other curricular areas through planning in partnership with colleagues.

- In the wider education community, I have a leadership role to share expertise in teaching multi-composite classes. I have “lead and contributed to the professional learning of colleagues” (Standard 3(v)) in several ways. After participation on the 1+2 LLP, I lead a CAT (Collegiate Activity Time) session on the 1+2 policy and shared my initial thoughts for the development of the languages curriculum. At a literacy event on Listening and Talking strategies I attended in February 2018, a participant suggested that teaching in multi-composite classes is no different than teaching different groups in straight classes. I disagree. Whilst all teachers should apply differentiation within their classes, maturity levels within a P1-4 multi-composite class require a different approach to a straight P1 or a straight P4. The added difficulty when teaching modern languages within a multi-composite class is that the children do not yet have the language knowledge for you to manage these differentiated groups easily. I had the opportunity to explain this and present some of the differentiated resources I use in my L2 classes at a seminar at Language Strathclyde 2018. Participation in the 1+2 LLP and addressing the issues raised with my primary ML colleagues enabled me to question, develop and account for my practice in critically informed ways and provide an informed rationale for my professional actions. (Standard 2.2)
- I learned the importance of collegiate working, and realised how much I enjoy it. Speaking to others at the 1+2 LLP and having my multi-composite group colleagues as sounding boards, gave me the confidence to lead and make changes in French. It also allowed me to exercise and defend my professional judgement. Meeting with secondary colleagues was very useful in terms of progression and planning for transition. I hope to build further on a meeting I have had with nursery colleagues.

Further Research / Inquiry

A talk I attended at *Language Strathclyde 2018* given by Professor Diane J. Tedick from the University of Minnesota (2018) on Content Based Language Teaching gave further evidence of the value of using an interdisciplinary learning approach to teaching modern languages. She highlighted the thought and planning needed to follow this approach and I would be interested in researching this further with a view to linking Outdoor Learning sessions to French and looking to include more contexts within Technologies, Health and Wellbeing and the Expressive Arts.

With regard to the Attainment Challenge, I would also be interested in investigating if, after adapting L1 literacy strategies to use in L2 (French) teaching, there is an improvement amongst children who need additional support in L1 (English) .

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Appendix: Resources

L2 resources linked to strategies used in teaching literacy in L1.



Differentiation and Progression

P1-3 and P1-4, P4-7

SNAP cards

Matching picture to text

Adjective position, article and agreement.



Differentiation - P1-3

Treasure Hunt inside school finding sounds and building the name of a fruit in French. Group 1: orange; Group 2: fraise.



Differentiation

P1-3

Treasure Hunt outside in school grounds finding sounds and building the name of a fruit in French.



Differentiation and Progression

All the children in **P4-7** and **P5-7** have a plastic wallet. After learning new words - nouns, verbs, adjectives, articles, conjunctions – they write them on a piece of paper.

As an independent activity, they group them by grammatical feature then try to form sentences correctly.

Differentiation is by difficulty of sentence:

- Simple sentence.
- Adding an adjective / showing agreement.
- Joining sentences.
- This also helps with L1.

Differentiation and Progression

All **P1-4** children watched the animated clip, “Trois Petits Chatons” and listened to the song/story.

P1+P2: Put into sequence the first four pictures. Teacher asked questions to elicit oui or non answers / either... or /colours / numbers.

P3+P4: Sequenced all pictures and then matched the text to the pictures. Teacher worked with P3 to support understanding.

			Maman est contente.	Une tarte délicieuse!
			Où sont les gants?	Les chatons tristes.
		Le petit souris.	Les chatons contents.	Les gants sales.