

Springboard to Languages Project

Summary of the Preliminary Findings from Phase 1 of the Project Evaluation by Dr Amanda Barton and Joanna Bragg, School of Education, University of Manchester.

Background

The Springboard to Languages Project was conceived in 2005, in response to the British Government's national Languages Strategy, which stipulates that every primary school in England should include a foreign language in its curriculum by the year 2010. Springboard contributes towards improved language learning at Key Stage 2 by developing language awareness in pupils through the learning of Esperanto which, because of its relative simplicity and regularity, is a suitable 'propaedeutic' language, particularly for those schools lacking specialist language teachers.

The Project uses three models of provision, each of which lasts for two years; at the end of this period class teachers will take over all teaching and run the project independently:

- Model A — the teaching programme is delivered for two years by a specialist Esperanto teacher, while the class teacher and assistants sit in on lessons;
- Model B — the Esperanto teacher and the class teacher share the teaching, with the class teacher consolidating and extending the work of the Esperanto teacher;
- Model C — the class teacher delivers the programme from the outset, with support and advice from an Esperanto specialist.

The programme materials have been developed from an earlier programme — *Urso-Kurso* — designed for parents wishing to teach Esperanto to their children at home. The Teaching Pack includes teaching plans, a reader, mini-dictionary, picture dictionary, graded assessment materials, games, songs, plays, worksheets, AV aids and blogs. Guidance notes are also provided on the development of language awareness and on cross-curricular applications.

The schools, and models of provision

- School A: a Community Primary School, in an area with a significant proportion of recent arrivals to the UK. The three classes involved are vertically grouped (Years 3 and 4 together) each with around 25 pupils.
- School B: a small Church of England Primary School where twenty children from Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 are taught together in one class. The catchment population is predominantly White British, and the school gives priority to children with special learning needs.

In both schools, provision consists of 2 × 30-minute sessions a week. School A commenced in September 2006, using Model A; School B in January 2007, using Model B. At School B, the pupils have been learning French since Key Stage 1; at School A, they will learn French in Year 5, after the Springboard programme.

Methodology

The Evaluation employs both quantitative and qualitative approaches, including interviews, questionnaires and a small amount of classroom observation. In January 2007, the Project development team (4 members) were interviewed, to provide information on the background to the Project, motives, rationale and objectives.

In June 2007, pupils, teachers and headteachers were interviewed in the schools. The pupil interview sample comprised 26 pupils: 6 from School A, 20 from School B; 15 from Years 3 and 4, 11 from Years 5 and 6; 14 boys, 12 girls. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher to all children attending; questions were read aloud because of the limited literacy of some children.

Part 1 of the questionnaire elicited data concerning pupils' attitudes to language learning and to learning Esperanto in particular, and invited pupils to assess their own language awareness (e.g. ability to identify patterns in languages). Part 2 assessed pupils' ability to apply those skills, including short translation tasks.

The pupil experience

- 41% of pupils said they had enjoyed the programme so far; 54% were not sure, 5% had not enjoyed it. School A children were generally more positive than School B, and more aware of the purposes of the Programme (which they had been doing for 8 months, compared with 5 at School B). Negative comments included the 'repetitive' nature of language learning and the limited 'instrumental' value of Esperanto (School B pupils).
- 54% of the children thought that they had learnt 'a lot', 41% 'a bit', and 5% 'not very much'. Older children were more positive than younger.
- 45% thought language learning 'was fun'; 43% not sure; 12% didn't. School A children were more positive than School B (who were learning French as well as Esperanto).
- 56% were enjoying or were looking forward to learning French; 28% not sure; 16% weren't.
- 53% thought that 'we need to know other languages'; 35% not sure; 12% didn't. Again, School A was more positive, perhaps because of the multi-ethnic catchment, and parental attitudes.

Does Springboard help to learn other languages?

Pupils were invited to decode the French sentence: 'Les oreilles de l'éléphant sont très grandes et le nez est très long.' The only children to successfully translate the whole sentence were, interestingly, from School A; these 2 children used interesting metalinguistic decoding strategies (cognates, punctuation, context). School B children, also learning French, performed only marginally better than School A children.

- 71% of the children were able to identify plurals in other languages in at least 4 out of 6 cases, but there was a high nil-response (n/r) rate.
- 53% were able to identify which 2 sentences (from 4, in Spanish, Romanian, Esperanto and English) meant the same. 9 n/r, all from School A.
- 55% were able to identify which words in other languages resembled the corresponding Esperanto word, but again there was a high n/r rate. School B pupils' self-assessment on this skill was 65%, School A only 38%.

Knowledge of grammar

Only 43% successfully identified the adjective in 4 word-pairs from 4 languages (33% n/r).

Knowledge of Esperanto

There was an overall 89% success rate in translating Esperanto words into English, and 85% for word pairs; only 63% success rate in forming plurals, but many misunderstood the question.

Teachers' and Headteachers' Perceptions

All the teachers involved in the Project were positive about its value, especially in aiding understanding of grammar, developing language awareness and developing phonics repertoire. Some initial concern had been expressed about possible 'interference' between Esperanto and other languages. This, however, had proved less of a problem than anticipated with French (School B), and no problem at all with bilingual children (those with 'English as an Additional Language').

Teachers had noted that children of below average ability benefited most, especially as regards pronunciation (compared with French) and their general level of self-confidence. As regards multi-cultural awareness, teachers at School B perceived no discernible effect, but at School A teachers detected more awareness and more tolerance of non-mainstream cultures. (School A, unlike School B, were already corresponding with schools in Benin and Germany.) Everyone was highly complimentary of the quality of the learning resources.

Conclusions

The majority of children had enjoyed the experience and believed they had learned a lot. Variations *appear* to be attributable to age, exposure to French, social/cultural background and the extent to which Esperanto

had actually been used for practical purposes, e.g. corresponding. There are *some* indications that teaching another language (e.g. French) in parallel may be less successful than teaching it sequentially (in Years 5 and 6). Pupils had made good progress in Esperanto in a few months, but it was less easy to discern significant gains in language awareness (perhaps because of literacy issues, wording of questions, etc).

It is impossible to evaluate how much the programme has contributed to pupils' perceptions of the importance of being able to speak other languages; these perceptions are also probably attributable to extrinsic factors such as parental values, gender, and socio-economic factors. Reactions of teachers and headteachers were very positive.

To carry out a controlled comparison study, it would be necessary to carry out complex pupil-matching exercises. It seems sensible therefore to adopt a case-study approach for the remainder of the evaluation. Such an approach will also enable more detailed study of such factors as gender, parental perceptions, and socio-economic factors. The questionnaire also needs some revision (because of some problems of understanding on the part of children).

Summary by David Kelso and Angela Tellier
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