

Springboard to Languages Project

Summary of the Phase 2 report by Dr Amanda Barton and Joanna Bragg, School of Education, University of Manchester.

Introduction

The report on the second year of the project focuses on the main case-study school, School A, a Community Primary School. The rationale for this had been outlined in the Phase 1 report:

“It is now clear that any direct comparison between samples is invalid; each school sample is too small and too disparate, given the mix of age groups in each, to render any such comparison valid. Additionally, the two schools embarked on the programme at different times of the year: School A at the beginning of the academic year 2006, and School B after at the beginning of the spring term, 2007. For evaluation phase 2, 2007-8, it looks likely that a further two schools will join the project. School C began the project in September 2007 and the other, School D, on the Isle of Man, began in June 2007. Although, in principle, it would be possible to identify neighbouring primary schools who are not participating in the Springboard programme as comparable schools in which to administer the pupil questionnaire/test next year, these could never be true ‘control’ groups unless a complex exercise of pupil matching were carried out. It seems sensible, therefore, to adopt a case study approach for the remainder of the evaluation.”

The phase 2 report focuses on 33 Year 4 (Y4) children, now in their second year of the Springboard programme, and 61 Year 5 (Y5) children who have also completed one year of Springboard and are now learning French. School A is on the outskirts of a major town, with 240 pupils aged 4-11, from a modern village community which includes a significant number of families recently arrived in the UK. Most of the children are of White British origin, but a small and growing proportion are from other ethnic backgrounds, mainly Eastern European. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is below average, indicating that the school enjoys a relatively advantaged socio-economic intake. An Ofsted report in 2008 had reported an increase in the proportion of pupils with learning or other difficulties, now about the national average. The Ofsted report was complimentary about the school's curriculum, making specific reference to the Springboard project.

Methodology

The study employed questionnaires, interviews and classroom observation. The Y4 children completed a two-part questionnaire: part 1 set out to assess their attitudes to learning languages and their awareness of how languages borrow words from one another; part 2 set out to assess their knowledge of Esperanto and their metalinguistic skills. The Y5 children completed a similar questionnaire but with a few items relating to their experience of learning French. The questionnaires were similar, but not identical, to those used in Phase 1 and were administered by the class teachers during class time. Interviews were held with five pupils from Years 4 and 5, all of whom had been interviewed the previous year; and with the Esperanto teacher, the two Y5 teachers, and the headteacher. The Y4 class teacher was interviewed by telephone. The interviews were designed to shed light on the teachers' perceptions of the pupils' learning, their enjoyment of the programme and the teachers' previous experience of teaching languages.

Pupils' enjoyment of languages

80% of the Y4 pupils, in their questionnaire responses, indicated that they had enjoyed their Springboard lessons, 20% were unsure, none had 'not enjoyed' them. This represents a major improvement on the previous year (respectively 47/ 50/ 3%). Pupils'

enthusiasm was evident in the lessons observed; 80% also agreed that 'learning languages is fun'. By contrast, only 15% of the Y5 pupils had enjoyed their French lessons, 58% were unsure, 27% had not. Only 22% of the Y5 children responded positively to the statement 'learning languages is fun' (55% unsure, 23% no). There is thus a very clear disparity between the attitudes of the children on the Springboard programme and those who have progressed to learning French. Possible explanations are a) the Esperanto teacher is an enthusiastic specialist, while the French teachers of French are not, and b) the Springboard resources are considerably better than those for teaching French. Similarly, when asked how much they had learned in their Esperanto lessons, 49% of Y4 said they had learned a lot, 42% 'a bit' and only 9% 'not much' (last year, 53/ 40/ 7%). The Y5 teachers reported that their pupils felt that they were not learning much; again, the Esperanto teacher felt well supported, unlike the French teachers.

79% of the Y4 children were looking forward to learning another language next year (last year, 56%); by contrast, only 12% of the Y5 children were looking forward to learning French next year. In interview, the Y5 children were lukewarm about their experience, while the previous year (after Springboard) they had been enthusiastic. When asked whether 'we need to know other languages', 60% of the Y4 children responded positively, 27% were not sure, 13% no; the corresponding figures for Y5 were 75%, 27%, 3%. The Y5 children, of course, are 1-2 years older and have themselves been through a year of Springboard. The Y5 children, in interview, revealed some awareness of the expectations at secondary school.

Cultural awareness

When asked whether they enjoyed meeting people from other countries, 87% of the Y4 pupils agreed, compared with only 60% of Y5, despite the fact that 92% of the Y5 children had been abroad, compared with 76% of Y4. Nine of the Y4 children, however, were looking forward to a trip to Herzberg in Germany that summer, as part of the Springboard programme. Y4 had also corresponded more with children in other countries than the Y5 children.

Learning other languages

Pupils in both groups were asked to assess their own ability in languages. Only 14% of Y4 thought they were 'good at languages' (57% not sure, 29% no), compared with 22% in Y5 (and 52/ 27% respectively). When asked whether they understood how languages borrow words from each other, 29% of Y4 said yes (Y5 38%), 43% were not sure (Y5 also 43%) and 29% said no (Y5, 18%). The same question last year elicited a 38% positive response from the Springboard pupils, but last year the question had been read aloud, with some clarification, so it is possible that the younger children were unsure of the meaning of the question.

Interestingly, when children were then asked to identify words in various languages, which resembled the Esperanto equivalent, and to select sentences from different languages, that meant the same, the Y4 children did rather better! When presented with three sentences to translate into English (one each in Esperanto, French and German), the Y5 children performed slightly better than Y4, although not much. This may be due simply to the better literacy of the older group? Similarly, in a question designed to test pupils' grasp of grammar (i.e., independent of a particular language), the Y5 pupils outperformed Y4, again by only a small margin.

Pupils' knowledge of Esperanto/French

Several questions in the questionnaires were designed to test pupils' performance in the language they were learning at that time. The Y4 children performed significantly better in Esperanto than in the French/ German sentences in the earlier question, while 69% of

the Y5 children got 4/5 answers correct, roughly corresponding to Grade 1 in the Asset Languages Breakthrough scheme.

Teachers' perceptions

The most striking observation on the part of the teachers was the 'levelling' effect of the Springboard programme: the gap between more and less able children was less than they would have expected, less able children having progressed surprisingly well. The classroom teachers were inclined to think that the programme also enhanced children's general literacy, although this should be clearer after another year. One teacher thought that children's *numeracy* might also have benefitted, because number-formation in Esperanto is so much simpler and consistent than in English. All were agreed that the children were enthusiastic about the programme.

Conclusions

The most obvious finding was that the enthusiasm of Y4 children in their second year of Springboard had increased perceptibly since the previous year, while the enthusiasm of the Y5 children, now learning French, had declined perceptibly. The most likely explanation is that Springboard is taught by an enthusiastic specialist, with excellent resources, while French is taught by generalists, whose motivation is mixed. Also, the Y4 group had been set by ability, unlike the Y5 pupils when they had been doing the Springboard programme. Whether the lesser enthusiasm of the Y5 pupils for meeting people from other countries is due to their experience of French, or to the lesser emphasis on multi-culturalism, compared with the Springboard programme, is not immediately clear. This year's results are richer and more diverse than last year's; next year's should be richer still.

As for the effectiveness of the Springboard programme as a propaedeutic, all the indications are positive: where comparisons with last year are possible, the progress is apparent, albeit quite slight in some cases. The attitudes of the teachers remain positive. Next year's results should be even more interesting, when the two non-specialist teachers will be delivering Springboard on their own for a year - and the children will have moved on another year.

Summary by David Kelso and Angela Tellier
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