An investigation into teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school

Katherine Legg

Bridge Learning Campus, Bristol, UK

Published online: 21 Sep 2012.

To cite this article: Katherine Legg (2013) An investigation into teachers' attitudes towards the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school, Education 3-13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education, 41:1, 55-62, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2012.710100

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2012.710100

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &
An investigation into teachers’ attitudes towards the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school

Katherine Legg*

Bridge Learning Campus, Bristol, UK

(Received 5 July 2011; final version received 7 November 2011)

This research considers teachers’ opinions on modern foreign language teaching in the primary school, through questionnaires in two schools and interviews with four individuals. This study found that there were mixed opinions as to the importance of teaching modern foreign languages. Although time and subject knowledge were highlighted as barriers, the majority felt the provisions in place should be continued.

Keywords: modern foreign languages; attitudes; teachers; feasibility; importance

Introduction

The position of modern foreign languages in the curriculum has been in question for some time. In the 1990s, the government showed increased interest in the teaching of modern foreign languages (Hunt et al. 2005), and, in 1999, they decided to support an initiative which aimed to improve modern foreign language learning in the primary school. This interest in the status of language learning was emphasised by the government’s decision in 2000 to add non-statutory guidance on modern foreign language teaching to the National Curriculum. However, the Nuffield Foundation (2000) found that although languages were perceived as important in society, there were not enough language teachers and very few languages being taught in school. These findings led to the creation of ‘Languages for all: Languages for life’ (DFES 2002). This stated that, by 2010, all key stage 2 pupils should have an entitlement to learn a modern foreign language. This seemed to reflect a new idea of languages as a priority. As a result, many schools put provisions in place and made arrangements for language teaching. With the new coalition government, however, the future of the entitlement has been called into question. However, as the QCDA (2001) highlights, non-statutory teaching of modern foreign languages will always be at risk unless there is a strong demand to maintain the provision. Therefore, I will be investigating teachers’ attitudes towards the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school.

With the necessity of language learning called into question, I will be investigating the following main research question:

Do teachers feel that it is important and possible to teach all pupils a modern foreign language in the primary school?

*Email: klegg123@bridgelearningcampus.com


**Literature review**

The Nuffield Foundation (2000) conducted an investigation into the importance of modern foreign languages. They found that there was a firm belief in society that English is no longer enough in today’s global community. Furthermore, they discovered that while languages were perceived as important, schools were failing to offer a range of languages and that there was a great need for more language teachers. On the other hand, a study conducted by McLachan (2009) suggests that not everyone perceives the teaching of modern foreign languages as important. McLachan conducted interviews, observations and attended staff meetings in four schools over a school year, in an attempt to identify the staff members’ views on the teaching of modern foreign languages. This long-time scale allowed her to ensure that her results were representative of how the individuals felt overall; however, she did include informal conversations in her study which may have been misinterpreted and could be denied by the people concerned (Denscombe 2007). She included head teachers, deputy head teachers, subject leaders, teachers and teaching assistants in her interviews. She found that while some did perceive modern foreign language teaching to be of great importance, others did not prioritise it. Instead some felt that the time could be better spent on the core subjects. This suggests there is a need for greater research into the perceived importance of modern foreign languages in the primary school to identify if it is seen as a priority.

Even if the teaching of languages in the primary school is determined to be of great importance, the feasibility of language teaching is still an issue. Barton, Bragg, and Serratrice (2009) conducted a study into the success of a language awareness programme in seven schools. They conducted interviews with all the head teachers and 14 teachers and distributed questionnaires. They found that the teachers were apprehensive about teaching languages, as they felt they did not know the language well enough. They also learnt that there were concerns about where language teaching would fit into the already crowded curriculum. These issues are also highlighted in McLachan’s (2009) study. She found that, within schools, the priority of the core subjects left little space for languages in the timetable. Furthermore, she found that many teachers failed to see the possible links which could be made between literacy and language learning. Moreover, the QCDA (2001) conducted an investigation into the feasibility of introducing the teaching of modern foreign languages into the statutory curriculum. They conducted focus groups and interviewed head teachers, pupils and parents. They also sent questionnaires to 150 Local Education Authorities (LEAs). Their study included a large sample size of 2000 primary schools, 400 secondary schools and 86 institutions offering initial teacher training, making their investigation more reliable. They found that it was very rare that languages were taught by the class teacher, that teachers were concerned about curriculum overload and that there is a need for more investment in training and support. This highlights curriculum overload as a possible barrier to the teaching of languages. However, there may be a need to conduct research into the other barriers and how to overcome these. Therefore, there is a need to identify the barriers of language learning beyond curriculum restraints and how to overcome them.

The DFES (2002) outlines that there is a great shortage of teachers trained in modern foreign languages (Crichton and Templeton 2010; Dismore and Sykes 2004; Grenfell 2007). This is an issue as Woodgate-Jones (2008) explains that, to teach any subject, a certain amount of subject knowledge is required. Furthermore, through their study in 18 institutions offering Post Graduate Certificates of Education...
(PGCEs), they found that the students felt there was a strong relationship between the confidence of the teacher and the pupils’ enjoyment of languages. Barnes (2006) conducted a study into the feelings and concerns of new language teachers. She used questionnaires and interviewed the teachers about their feelings. She found that they were very concerned about their own subject knowledge even though they were specialists. Furthermore, Barton, Bragg, and Serratrice (2009) used questionnaires and interviewed head teachers and teachers in seven schools about the teaching of modern foreign languages, following the implementation of a language programme. They found that teachers were quite apprehensive about the teaching of languages, as they did not feel that their subject knowledge was secure and were concerned about having to model the target language. This suggests that lack of confidence is a large factor in teachers’ reluctance to teach modern foreign languages. However, the study took place after a language programme had been implemented and, therefore, may not be generalisable. Barnes (2005) conducted an investigation whereby questionnaires were sent to whole cohorts of new modern foreign language teachers 8 years in a row. They were asked about their motivation for teaching languages and how ready they felt to do so. They found that the teachers were motivated by a desire to share their knowledge and their understanding of the culture in question. It, therefore, appears that those who do choose to teach languages do so because they feel confident in their subject knowledge. Although it is clear that there is an issue with subject knowledge for new and trainee teachers, there seems to be little research into existing teachers’ concerns and, more importantly, how to help them overcome their issues.

In light of this research, several questions have arisen which will help me to investigate my main research question:

1. How important do teachers feel that the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school is?
2. How feasible do teachers feel that the teaching of a modern foreign language to all primary pupils is and what are the barriers to this provision?
3. What are teachers’ concerns about the teaching of modern foreign languages?

Methodology and methods

As this study is related to teachers’ opinions and concerns, I will be collecting mostly qualitative data (Wiersma and Jurs 2009) to allow the participants greater opportunity to describe and explain their opinions. Questionnaires can be very useful in gathering straightforward information (Denscombe 2007) and providing an overview of the situation (Wellington 2000); for this reason, I will be using questionnaires to gather information on the importance of modern foreign languages and interviews to extract the more sensitive and in-depth information (Opie 2004). I will be using all of the teachers in the schools to maximise the sample size for my questionnaires; however, Verma and Mallick (1999) explain that interviews require the researcher’s presence and, subsequently, are more time-consuming than questionnaires. Therefore, due to the time constraints in place, I will only be conducting four interviews. I will use purposeful sampling (Kumar 1996) to select those participants who can provide the best information for my study to interview; two participants who have indicated that language teaching is important, in the questionnaires, and two who indicated that it is not important. In order to analyse
the responses I receive, I will be categorising the responses to each question by identifying themes in the answers given as suggested by Wellington (2000), Marshall and Rossman (2011) and Evans (2009). These will not be predetermined but will be developed once the questionnaires have been completed (Cohen, Manion, and Morrion 2000). This should ensure that the themes come from the respondents’ thoughts rather than my own perceptions of the issues.

Results and discussion

**Teachers’ feelings on the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school**

Although the Nuffield Foundation (2000) suggests that the learning of languages is very important, McLachan (2009) explains that not all teachers see it as important. This has been reflected in the results of the questionnaires of 15 teachers (see Figure 1).

The results appear to be split with five participants (33%) stating that they thought the teaching of languages in the primary school was very important and five participants (33%) stating that they thought it was not very important. This data seems to suggest that there is not such a unanimous belief, that language teaching in the primary school is important, as the Nuffield Foundation (2000) suggests. Instead this seems to suggest that there is a great variety in the degree of importance teachers place on the importance of primary language teaching.

This research found that teachers had mixed opinions on the importance of modern foreign languages. Those who felt it was important suggested that it could broaden pupils’ experiences of the world and prepare them for today’s multicultural society, as cited by the Nuffield Foundation (2000) and Worton (2010). However, 40% of the participants explained that they felt it was less important, as many pupils struggle to master their first language and they felt that they would need to gain a better understanding of English before learning a new language. Furthermore, it was suggested by one participant that it would be inappropriate for pupils in areas with poor speech and language skills, as they would struggle to access the lessons. This view reflects the claim made by McLachan (2009) that teachers tend to fail to see the possible links between literacy and language learning. This, therefore, suggests that the teachers do not see the benefits of language learning for achievement in other areas and that there are concerns about the stage in a child’s education that languages should be introduced.

Figure 1. How important do you feel that the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school is?
Teachers’ opinions on the provision of a language entitlement in the primary school

Despite 33% of participants stating that they felt the teaching of modern foreign languages was not very important, 10 out of 15 participants said they felt that every child should be entitled to learn a modern foreign language, though the majority put restrictions on this claim. Several participants explained that there should be an entitlement, as they felt every child should be able to access language learning regardless of their ability. Furthermore, two participants highlighted that all of the children start at the same level with a new language, and, therefore, Special Educational Needs (SEN) and lower ability pupils can feel more able to access it. In addition, one participant stated that the SEN children can shine at modern foreign languages, as they start on an even footing. Conversely, another participant disagreed as they felt that the entitlement should perhaps exclude some SEN and speech and language pupils, whose time could be better spent working on other basic skills in their first language. In line with the suggestion of Barton, Bragg, and Serratrice (2009), several participants explained that they felt there were too many pressures already present in the curriculum and an entitlement to a modern foreign language placed too a high demand on teachers. This suggests that there would be a need to prioritise language learning over other subjects in order to find time in the curriculum.

In answer to the question of whether schools should continue to offer language learning for all pupils, 66% stated they felt that they should (Figure 2). This suggests that although the importance of modern foreign languages is in debate, the majority of teachers support an entitlement and think schools should continue with the provisions in place.

Teachers’ perspectives on the feasibility of teaching a modern foreign language to all pupils and the barriers to this provision

The interviewed participants had a mixed response to the possibility of teaching every child a modern foreign language. Participant 1 stated that they felt it was possible to teach every child the basic skills of a new language, and Participant 4 also suggested that this was possible but only if the school made language learning a priority. Furthermore, Participant 2 highlighted that they felt it was ‘very possible’ adding that pupils with SEN can flourish when learning a new language. This seems to contradict other participants’ concerns about the teaching of a modern foreign language to SEN pupils and suggests that issues with the feasibility of teaching languages to all children stem from factors other than the capabilities of the children.

![Figure 2. Do you think that schools should endeavour to continue offering language learning to all pupils?](image-url)
Participant 3 expressed their concerns about teaching languages to all children, as they felt time was a barrier. This idea is reinforced by Participant 4 who explained that it would only be possible ‘at the detriment of other subjects’ due to the lack of spare time in the curriculum. This is reflective of the QCDA investigation (2000/2001) which uncovered teachers’ concerns about finding time for language teaching in the curriculum. Furthermore, Participant 1 explained that they felt although it is possible to teach languages to all pupils, this is only the case if they are taught well and that primary teachers do not have the specialties necessary.

Many barriers to the teaching of modern foreign languages were highlighted in the questionnaires and interviews. Barnes (2006) found that one barrier to modern foreign language teaching is the teachers’ own subject knowledge. This concern was highlighted by Participant 3 in both their interview and questionnaire, as they were worried about the children asking questions they could not answer. However, other barriers not discovered by Barnes (2006) and the QCDA (2000/2001) but highlighted by the participants included a lack of perceived importance, time constraints, the provision of resources and teacher confidence. This suggests that the barriers to language provision are deeper than just a lack of time and subject knowledge.

**Teachers’ concerns about the teaching of modern foreign languages**

Barton, Bragg, and Serratrice (2009) show that many teachers are apprehensive about their own ability to teach languages. The results of the interviews show that most of the teachers feel confident about how to teach languages but that subject knowledge is a concern. Participant 2 stated that they felt ‘very, very confident’ about teaching languages at a primary level, including the teaching of a new language. They explained that they ‘would be happy to research the pronunciation, etc. and have a go’. However, by contrast, Participant 1 explained that although they also felt confident in the pedagogy of teaching languages, when faced with teaching a language they did not know very well, they felt that they did not ‘feel confident enough in the language’ and worried that they were teaching ‘bad habits’, which was also emphasised by Participants 3 and 4. This reflects what Barnes (2006) found when interviewing new teachers and suggests that experienced teachers have the same concerns.

Although Barton, Bragg, and Serratrice (2009) also found that teachers were concerned about their subject knowledge, they did not include in their study how teachers felt their confidence could be improved. Participant 3 highlighted that they would like greater training in modern foreign language teaching. Furthermore, Participant 2 agreed that training could help other teachers by allowing them to observe good practice. However, they did explain that there was an issue in getting teachers to attend, as they were affected by their sometimes negative experiences of language learning at school. Furthermore, Participant 4 suggested that greater access to resources would help and Participant 1 explained that they needed to improve their knowledge of the language to improve their confidence. This suggests that there is a need for more language training and for greater access to resources; however, it also suggests that there may be a need for training which can improve subject knowledge.

**Conclusions and recommendations**

Do teachers feel that it is important and possible to teach all pupils a modern foreign language in the primary school?
To conclude, this research has revealed teachers’ opinions on the importance and place of languages in the primary curriculum. Although there seem to be mixed opinions on the importance of language learning, the majority felt that there should be an entitlement and that provisions already in place should be continued. As this was a small scale study with strict time constraints, this study could be repeated with a larger sample size of schools and interviewees. This would allow a more generalisable assessment of teachers’ opinions towards modern foreign language teaching. Several issues have been highlighted in this study which may stand in the way of language provision. There appears to be concern about the suitability of language learning for pupils with SEN and for those who have not yet mastered their first language. As such there may be a need for greater research into how well these pupils can achieve and enjoy language learning and the impact it has on achievement in other areas. There is also a need for schools to decide whether language learning is a priority in their school and to create a clear place for it in the crowded curriculum if it is to be taught well. Furthermore, individual teacher’s subject knowledge is a concern and there may be a need for greater training in this area.

References
QCDA. 2001. QCA project to study the feasibility of introducing the teaching of a modern foreign language into the statutory curriculum at KS2 (June 2000–March 2001). Submitted to Secretary of State for Education in March 2001.

