

Transition, and children's motivation for language learning

What this study was about

[The study](#) looked at the similarities and differences in language teaching between the last year of primary (Year 6, ages 10 to 11) and the first year of secondary (Year 7, ages 11 to 12) and at how these impacted on children's motivation and language progression.

What the researchers did

The study involved 26 children from two primary schools who later attended the same secondary school. Data were collected at three different times over a 12-month period: at the end of primary Year 6, three months after the beginning of secondary Year 7, and at the end of secondary Year 7. All the children had received four years of French at primary school, in other words over the whole of Key Stage 2.

The researcher observed lessons, interviewed the teachers, and held group interview sessions with 4 to 6 children at each of the three data collection times. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Children completed a background questionnaire, and a motivation questionnaire. This presented 18 questions and three open-ended questions. They asked about attitudes to language learning in general, and to France and speakers of French; the importance of language learning, and of learning context / situation (i.e. lesson content, teachers and resources); and children's own perceptions of their ability in French; example questions, see right.

I would like to visit France.

 Strongly disagree	 Disagree	 Agree	 Strongly agree

French is useful for getting a good job.

 Strongly disagree	 Disagree	 Agree	 Strongly agree

Children's language progression was assessed by the same three language tasks at each data collection point. These included a paired oral role play task, a photo to describe orally, and a free writing task (to measure the development of vocabulary and grammar). Data were analysed by a computer programme which isolated the number of words children used and the different types of words, for example verbs.

What they found

Similarities and Differences – primary-school children had covered the expected topics, such as self, animals, body, family etc. The secondary school had introduced a broader topic for Year 7 called 'your school' which allowed for the introduction of new vocabulary, helped sustain interest (new school situation for all children), and yet allowed for revision of vocabulary. Teaching was similar in both primaries and included oral revision, songs, games, flashcards etc. but there was little formal writing, and little direct grammar teaching. Teaching in the secondary school was much more formal, and literacy-based. Teachers rarely made use of songs. Explanations of grammar were common, and there was a greater emphasis on accuracy.

Children's attitudes remained generally positive, especially so at the end of Year 6, but there was no significant difference over the three data collection times. There was a significant difference with a small effect size for learning context / situation over the transition (end Year 6 and beginning Year 7). 77% enjoyed learning French at the end of Year 6, but this dropped to 68% after transition, rising only slightly to 69% at the end of Year 7. Year 7 children did not like the emphasis on writing / copying off the board and found it boring and unchallenging, although most children thought they had improved in Year 7. They felt the pressure of assessment at the end of Year 7, which may have resulted in a less favourable comparison with Year 6 learning.

In Year 7 the learners became increasingly critical of their language learning experience and whether it was "fit-for-purpose": it would seem that for many their goals seemed to be at odds with those of the teacher and curriculum. p. 473

Children's language proficiency improved. Children made significant progress (large effect) for vocabulary and word types. There was significant increase in the use of verbs (> 50% in Year 6 – 80% Year 7).

Things to bear in mind

The study was small-scale, and children were from schools with significantly below-average numbers of children with English as an additional language. There was a lot of variability across individual learners.