

How children view their language learning just before and after moving to secondary school

What this study was about

[The study](#) looked at how children in their last year of primary school and their first year of secondary school viewed their language learning experiences, and how they viewed the 'transition' experience.

What the researchers did

The researcher recorded the views of 18 children learning a second language (L2) in their last year of primary school (year 6; age 10 to 11). He collected the views of the same children after a year's experience of language teaching and learning in their respective secondary schools (year 7; age 11 to 12). The children came from four different primary schools. There were 11 girls and 7 boys, of whom 14 were white British, 1 British Asian, 1 Pole, 1 Iraqi, and 1 Zimbabwean. The schools differed in location, size, and ethnic diversity. The children were selected on the basis of how willing they were to take part, and how well they might cope in a one-to-one interview. The interviews followed a structure, but allowed for on-the-spot follow-up questions. The interview questions were different at primary and secondary school, to suit the context. Each interview lasted about 15 to 20 minutes. Interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded according to themes.

The researcher wished to find out how consistent L2 teaching is across the primary sector, as reported by children experiencing it. He also wished to discover how aware children were of their progress and achievement at primary school, whether their enjoyment of the lessons changed after transition, and if so, what factors impacted on the change; how effectively children were prepared for transition to language teaching and learning in the secondary school, and whether the children were aware of any exchange of information between the primary and secondary schools to help continuity.

What they found

French or German was taught in the primary school by the usual class teacher, a support teacher from the secondary school, or a language assistant (native speaker). Three of the four primary schools offered one lesson of 60 minutes each week (two lessons if two languages were taught); the fourth school offered one lesson of 45 minutes each week. The lessons comprised games, quizzes, watching DVDs, songs, and occasionally cooking and tasting food (one school). There was very little, if any, writing, although one class wrote to penfriends in a partner school abroad. There was an inconsistent use of the target language. None of the children received any formal feedback on their progress or achievement, and had little awareness of their progress. Although all children had general preparation for transfer to secondary school, none had any specific preparation for transition to the secondary language classroom. None were aware at primary level of any liaison regarding languages between the school levels, and only two of the eighteen children felt after the move to secondary school that the teacher there was aware of what they had done and learned at primary. 15 of the 18 children continued with at least one of the languages they had learned at primary school.

On the whole the children enjoyed their primary-school learning (three out of four schools), but experienced greater enjoyment at secondary school. They enjoyed the challenge of more and harder work, liked to know they were progressing and achieving, and were pleased to be taught by teachers with L2 competence and specialist training. For the children, specialist teacher equated with better teaching. The teacher appeared to be a key influence on the children's attitudes. All the children saw some value in learning languages for later life and careers.

In short, all eighteen children preferred the secondary school with what they perceived as its more serious approach to languages, and the awareness they were given of their own progress. There was little evidence of much meaningful collaboration between the primary and secondary schools, and no specific preparation for transition to the more formal language-teaching classroom. Teachers should perhaps prepare more for this formal style by including (more) writing in the last year of primary school.

Child interviewee: "Well, at primary school we were kind of doing a lot more kind of simple and easier stuff but now because we are going to be learning it for the whole year, it has kind of progressed us on to doing some more challenging stuff like learning the time and learning bigger numbers and just generally harder stuff than what we were learning at primary school D. (9, R2)" (p.9)

Things to bear in mind

The study was small and limited in scope. Children's responses were sometimes single words, or short sentences. Children's reflections from their more mature secondary school age and experience might have coloured some of their recollections of the primary school.