

## Primary French in the Balance – the ‘Nuffield’ Pilot

### What this research was about and why it is important

The Nuffield Schools Council Primary French Project (1964 to 1974) was the first systematic long-term investigation of L2 (French) teaching in primary and secondary schools which also tested L2 outcomes. It aimed to “discover whether it would be both feasible and educationally desirable to extend the teaching of a foreign language to pupils who represented a wider range of age and ability than those to whom foreign languages had traditionally been taught” (1974, p.11). Participating schools (England and Wales) varied in size and composition; classes were intact. Three cohorts of primary-aged children, each with between 5 to 6,000 children were followed for five to eight years. The project recognised and attempted to take into account external factors commonly affecting L2 learning, such as socio-economic status, parental education, size, location and type of school (1970, 1974). Primary teachers received training in France and the UK. Secondary teachers were trained to teach pupils arriving with different abilities and competences from primary schools. Specific teaching methodology was left to individual teachers (Rowlands, 1972).

### What the researchers did

Beginning at age 8, each cohort received 3 years primary instruction in French; a daily lesson was recommended; age-appropriate materials were provided. Children were periodically tested, e.g. at age 11 children were tested in listening, reading and writing; speaking tests were administered individually. Time for overall testing about 1 1/2 hours, excluding speaking. Comparisons were made with children who had not participated in the project.

#### What the researchers found

- The introduction of French did not exert any significant influence on children’s other attainments.
- In the beginning, all pupils seemed to take advantage of the L2 experience, but became more selective as more demanding skills and activities were introduced; no single method was appropriate for all pupils; despite minimal input, children’s knowledge of the L2 improved over time.
- There is little advantage to an early starting age in the long-term, except perhaps in listening: “other things being equal, the older children tended to learn French more efficiently than the younger ones did” (1995, p. 87). By age 16, there were no noteworthy differences in proficiency between early-starter children and later-starter non-project participants, except for minimal differences in listening comprehension which “although statistically significant, were hardly of a substantial nature ... a fairly minimal return for the extra years spent learning French in the primary school” (1995: 87).
- Girls performed generally higher than boys; children rated lower ability on general attainment made “very good progress and score[d] highly” in speaking and listening in the initial oral stage, but only a small percentage maintained this level of performance when reading was introduced (Rowlands, 1972a: 17).
- A positive attitude may lead to greater L2 proficiency: “the development of attitudes towards foreign-language learning during later years may be powerfully influenced by the learner’s initial and formative experience of success or failure in the language learning situation” (1974, p. 235).
- Problems not solved: e.g. provision of suitably qualified teachers, primary-secondary continuity, children with different aptitude and achievement levels being taught to achieve the same goals; mitigating factors included children beginning the L2 again on transfer; a lack of control over teacher input at primary (1974).

### Things to consider

- Concluding statement: “the weight of the evidence has combined with the balance of opinion to tip the scales against a possible expansion of the teaching of French in primary schools” (1974, p. 246); despite suggestions that the evidence did not support some of the conclusions (Bennett, 1975; Buckby, 1976), the Nuffield report effectively delayed the introduction of widespread L2 provision in primary schools for around forty years.
- Conclusions still highly relevant: a child’s L2 performance may be gender and ability dependent, vary across skills, family (socio-economic level, parental opinion and education), and school demographics important influences, positive attitudes and higher L2 proficiency linked, possibly influenced by external factors, children reacting more positively or negatively to different languages for subjective, societal, familial or cultural reasons.
- This research was highly influential in shaping policy, even though it had problems in its design and has been criticised/misinterpreted later.