

# Learning French in the UK setting: Policy, classroom engagement and attainable learning outcomes

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

The paper describes the recent evolution of policy and practice regarding foreign language education in England, with a particular focus on early language learning. It uses evidence from a classroom study of L2 French to illustrate primary school instructional practices and children's engagement and learning outcomes. The complex interaction between central top-down policymaking and bottom-up pressures against a background of diverse language initiatives and strategies (e.g. unified National Curriculum, 1990; reduced compulsory secondary FL teaching to 3 years only, 2004; primary language entitlement for ages 7 to 11, 2014) has resulted in numerous challenges. Conclusions are drawn concerning sustainable approaches to the teaching of languages other than English in the early school years in an English-dominated linguistic landscape.

## What the researchers did

- Analysed a subset of data from the project 'Learning French from ages 5, 7 and 11' (Myles & Mitchell, 2012) which compared starting ages, rates and routes of learning among 3 intact beginner classes for 38 hours each.
- This project looked solely at data for Year 3 (ages 7 to 8; n = 26); children were taught by a specialist FL teacher using age-appropriate activities (largely oral, including games, role plays, stories, songs, crafts).
- All lessons were video recorded, and transcribed; all language input was documented.
- Children were tested on 3 occasions (mid-test after 18 hours instruction; post-test after 38 hours; delayed post-test after a further 3 months (without instruction). Tests repeated each time included a receptive vocabulary test, an elicited imitation test (measuring general proficiency), and a role play activity (measuring productive abilities).
- Additional tests included: working memory, interview about attitude and motivation (individually and in focus groups), and classroom engagement.
- For classroom engagement, the researchers profiled 6 children (3 boys, 3 girls) in terms of L1 literacy scores, working memory, and their attainment in French; children's classroom engagement was tracked and coded.

## What the researchers found

- There was no significant difference between receptive vocabulary test scores over the three testing times.
- On the elicited imitation test there were differences noted over time, with large effect sizes.
- Between the mid-test and post-test role-play times, children showed increases in word and utterance counts.
- From mid-test onwards, children were able to reproduce a range of set expressions heard repeatedly in the classroom.
- On the other hand, nouns were beginning to be isolated from set expressions and used separately as single words or coupled with an article, e.g. *un lapin – a rabbit*.
- With regard to classroom engagement: of the 6 children profiled, the highest achievers spent more time focussed on the sources of the language input (teacher, screen etc), making it 'highly likely that children's ability to sustain attention to French input sources is related to their learning' (p. 86). Restless behaviour (body movement) did not seem to adversely affect learning, unless excessive.
- Here-and-now 'fun' activities and teacher approval were found to be important stimuli for emotional engagement.
- Only the more successful learners showed evidence of cognitive engagement and proactive behaviour, e.g by planning their turns privately, producing extra language beyond what the teacher expected.

## Things to consider

- The study provides important evidence on the kind of linguistic proficiency that primary-age children can be expected to develop over one year with one lesson per week (38 hours total).
- Good classroom engagement can compensate for less strong literacy and working memory.
- Children should be taught 'how to learn', i.e. development of learning strategies. However, this must be supported by age-appropriate reflection on longer term goals.

Teaching and testing materials available at [www.iris-database.org](http://www.iris-database.org)

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