

Bennett, S. N. (1975). Weighing the evidence - A review of 'Primary French in the Balance'. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 45, 337-340; Buckby, M. (1976). Is primary French really in the balance? *The Modern Language Journal*, 60(7), 340-346; Gamble, C. J., & Smalley, A. (1975). 'Primary French in the balance': Were the scales accurate? *Modern Languages*, 56(2), 94-98; Kunkle, J.F. (1977). Conclusions from the British FLES Experiment. *Foreign Language Learning Annals*, 10: 3, 253-260.

## Primary French in the Balance – a critique of the Nuffield pilot

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

The concluding sentence of the Nuffield Schools Council Primary French Project (1964 to 1974: see summary: Primary French in the Balance – the 'Nuffield' Pilot) declared that “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”. It was a contentious, but very influential, conclusion which some thought based on “inadequate, questionable, statistical data (Gamble & Smalley: 94), and effectively put a hold on the expansion of language teaching in primary schools for nearly forty years. The authors quoted here studied the data and results of the pilot in the years immediately following its conclusion, evaluated them against the pilot’s stated aims and principles, and arrived at a different interpretation, questioning the directional swing of the ‘weight of the evidence’: “it is questionable whether the conclusions, particularly those contained in the last sentence of the report, are supported by the evidence contained in the report” (Buckby: 340).

### What the researchers found

- “[T]he report was not an evaluation of ‘Primary School French’ [although it was seen to be such] but was rather a survey of some specific aspects of French being taught in the rather special context of the Pilot Scheme” (Buckby: 340).
- The first cohort (5,700 pupils) was beset by unforeseen problems: Teachers absent for long periods for language training; no trained teachers in some schools; achievement tests requiring modification. As a result, the cohort made slower progress at primary, did not take the full range of tests, and were not always included in analyses.
- There was considerable sample loss down the years (e.g. cohort 3 lost 37% on transfer primary-secondary (Bennett). Cohorts 2 and 3 dwindled from 11,300 pupils at the start of the project to 1,227 by 1973 (Gamble & Smalley).
- Control and Pilot cohorts were not matched for the comparative design of the project, often varying wildly in composition, notably with regard to gender, type of school, and social class; even though these variables had been identified as necessary for control in the early stages of the project, this was not done.
- There were no pre-tests for attitude with which to compare later attitude responses, so although attitude and opinions are analysed, it is unknown whether there was improvement, deterioration or status quo.
- Primary schools followed many different French courses, the only commonality being that an audio-visual component was included; reading and writing were not introduced at the same time, so this aspect was common to all schools only in the final year of primary. This made comparisons difficult.
- There were differences in provision at transfer, despite efforts to provide continuity of experience; only 13% of secondary classes were specific to pilot pupils, as recommended; most joined mixed pilot-beginner classes. Causes: staff objections to separate classes, staff shortages, lack of effective liaison primary-secondary.
- There was “a tendency to quote evidence condemning methods and materials not unsuitable in themselves but unsuitable for the children quoted” (Gamble & Smalley: 97).
- The main organisational problem appeared to be a reduction in the flexibility of the primary-school curriculum, and the need for mixed intake (varied language learning experience) classes at secondary, however “If French were introduced on a larger scale this problem would progressively decline” (Bennett: 340).
- The question of which methods, incentives and motivations are most effective in fostering learning of a foreign language could not be answered because of the disparity in courses and teaching methods at primary.
- With regard to children achieving a substantial gain in mastery beginning at age 8, Burstall reported “unequivocally in the negative despite evidence to the contrary. The answer ... rests on how one defines ‘substantial’ and ‘mastery’ and at what stage the evaluation is made. If substantial is equated with statistical significance ... and mastery is equated with performance on specially developed French tests of unknown content validity, then after two years in secondary school the answer is unequivocally positive. Even after five years the experimental pupils performed better than one control group on all tests” (Bennett: 339-340).
- “Where Dr Burstall was perhaps mistaken is that, having completed a massive, thorough painstaking, and objective evaluation, she was reluctant, in a very human way, to limit her conclusions to saying that only when French was taught well in the primary school, with well-designed materials and adequately trained teachers, and only when continuity into the secondary school was assured were pupils’ achievements and attitudes such as to justify calling the experiment a success” (p259: letter to Kunkle from Sam Spicer).

### Things to consider

- The authors of the NFER report (Burstall et al: 1974) supported Carroll’s view that “total amount of time spent actively in the learning situation” is the most important factor to consider. ‘Younger is better’ was not a finding of the report; if ‘longer is better’, why did Burstall et al, even if they thought an early beginning not beneficial, nevertheless not conclude that the only way to gain time is by introducing languages in primary school?

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