

The challenges for MFL during transition from primary to secondary school

What this research was about and why it is important

The UK has a policy of a non-statutory *entitlement* for all primary school children in England to learn a foreign language in primary, which differs from other countries in Europe which make study of two foreign languages compulsory in the primary curriculum. Beyond the fact that the four countries within the UK operate differently in their implementation of the entitlement, modern foreign language (MFL) teaching in England includes a range of implementations, including language tasters, after-school language clubs, language awareness programmes, and fully-integrated language teaching in the curriculum; this variation in primary provision results in major challenges across transition to secondary school. Specifically, the authors observed a noticeable difference in levels of interest, experience and competence amongst children in their first year of secondary. Whilst continuity is an important question across the curriculum, it is particularly crucial for MFL. Recommended ways to improve this transition include better communication between primary and secondary, covering, for example, the language experiences of the children and their level of proficiency in the foreign language(s) they have been taught.

What the researchers did

- Identified eight case study schools to explore the operation of the *Pathfinder in England* programme which piloted the introduction of MFL teaching at KS2 during 2003-5.
- Interviewed head teachers, teachers and pupils.
- Observed lessons of MFL in primary and secondary schools.
- Collected documentary evidence of policies in the *Pathfinder* schools.

What the researchers found

- Most secondary schools received pupils from various primary schools; as a consequence, they were not always able to adjust in order to provide continuity in the level of proficiency for all students.
- Changes in offering a specific language was a common concern, especially in cases where secondary schools changed the Year 7 language on offer from year to year (though some thought this might help improve general language-learning skills).
- There was little consistency in how primary and secondary schools communicated during transfer, and a wide range of approaches to this led to varied outcomes for students across different schools.
- Some relationships between primary and secondary schools relied upon inter-personal links, which were assumed to be vulnerable due to the potential for staffing changes.
- Reciprocal observation was valuable for understanding the other's context and needs.
- The methodologies for teaching languages differed amongst schools; some schools focussed on oral skills, whilst others focussed on literacy.
- Repetition of material in secondary was pointed to as a strong demotivator for students.

Things to consider

- Transition between primary and secondary can vary considerably depending on the specific context, and such variation can lead to difficulties in the transition for children.
- Reshaping the KS3 curriculum is needed to ensure progression in learning.
- Assessment of pupils (and sharing this information) can help contextualise the knowledge that primary children have, which can in turn be used to minimise redundancies in content.
- Allocating time for primary and secondary teachers to have reciprocal visits and mutual observation can help maintain continuity and help children build on previously gained skills.