

Pupils highly motivated and enjoy language learning opportunities in Pathfinder programme

What this research was about and why it is important

This research examined pupils' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, language learning in Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11). The study focused on the experiences of pupils in Pathfinder programmes in England. Pathfinder programmes are schemes delivered at the local authority level before being rolled out nationally. The study was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills in order to evaluate the 19 Pathfinder local authorities that were taking part in the pilot for language learning in KS2. A total of 319 pupils were interviewed across all 41 case study schools. The findings indicate that the majority of children were positive about their language learning experience and teachers reported that they were enthusiastic and engaged. However, there were also signs that increased differentiation might be helpful – in addition to whole group classes – as lessons progressed. Pupils also expressed a wish for feedback on their own progress, which had not been incorporated into the Pathfinder scheme.

What the researchers did

- A survey study of all 19 Pathfinder local authorities and 41 case study schools was conducted.
- A mixed methods approach involving telephone interviews, questionnaires and the development of case studies.
- The case studies involved lesson observation, interview with head teachers, teachers, foreign language assistant and pupils, as well as looking at Ofsted reports, school improvement plans and local authority plans.
- Pupils were also interviewed and were asked to complete a questionnaire aimed at understanding their attitudes.
- Pupils interviewed covered Year 3, 4, 5 and 6 and in some instances were part of mixed year classes.

What the researchers found

- Most teachers said that the children thoroughly enjoyed their language lessons and felt that motivation was high.
- The children were also generally overwhelmingly positive about their language-learning experiences across all year groups, regarding their language lessons as both fun and useful.
- Pupils particularly liked learning specific topics such as days of the week, numbers, as well as understanding similarities and differences between languages.
- Children enjoyed a range of activities, such as songs and games, as well as working in pairs and groups.
- Children noted a number of positive reasons for language learning: helped with spelling in English, listening skills, memorising, communication and self-confidence.
- Pupils also explained that it is an advantage to learn when younger and many were keen to take a different language, with Spanish being suggested based on favourite holiday destinations.
- Pathfinder has made a significant contribution to either building on existing foreign language provision or to the introduction of language.
- Pathfinder generated a great deal of enthusiasm amongst participating pupils, teachers and head teachers.

Things to consider

- While many pupils appreciated whole class teaching, some were beginning to express frustration at the lack of differentiated group work.
- Language learning had also been integrated successfully in one special school where pupils were enthusiastic and a foreign language assistant had made a very positive contribution.
- Towards the end of the evaluation, there was a trend evident in some Pathfinders towards developing more challenging work for higher ability pupils.
- Although assessment schemes were provided for in some instances, in many instances children and teachers indicated that their performance was not marked in any way other than through general encouragement to the class as a whole.