

Evaluation of Key Stage 2 language learning Pathfinder projects

What this research was about and why it is important

The 2002 National Languages Strategy for England proposed a foreign language learning “entitlement” for children aged 7-11 in the upper primary school (Key Stage 2). From 2003-2005, funding was provided by DfES for 19 local authorities (LAs) to support the development of primary languages through “Pathfinder” projects. Researchers at Warwick University were commissioned to evaluate these innovative projects. The evaluation showed that there was considerable enthusiasm for the introduction of primary languages, though most Pathfinder schools were not yet providing languages to all KS2 learners. Instruction was provided by a mix of class teachers, secondary school specialists, foreign language assistants (FLAs) and others. To achieve sustainability, curriculum planning and assessment needed to be improved, and all teachers needed ongoing professional development to develop their language competence and/or specialist pedagogy.

What the researchers did

- The evaluation ran alongside the Pathfinder projects, starting in spring 2004.
- The research team interviewed specialist language advisers in the 19 LAs, on two occasions, concerning aims and implementation of local Pathfinder models; they also collected LA Pathfinder documentation.
- Questionnaires were sent to 500 participating schools, on two occasions, to collect details of implementation at school level, with a response rate of c40 percent.
- Eight LAs were selected as case studies for more detailed investigation. Within those case study LAs, 41 schools were each visited twice.
- During the school visits interviews were conducted with head teachers, languages teachers, and a pupil sample; the research team also collected relevant school-level documentation.
- Two languages lessons were observed in each school, and coded using a “good practice” checklist.
- The team undertook a cost benefit analysis for different models of primary languages provision.

What the researchers found

- Languages were generally received enthusiastically by children, teachers and parents.
- Within individual schools, provision was patchy, with few schools making consistent provision for all KS2 children; lack of staff expertise and limitations of time available were significant constraints.
- A wide variety of staff were teaching languages, including most frequently non-specialist class teachers, FLAs and outreach teachers from secondary schools.
- French was the main language being taught; most class teachers delivering languages possessed a GCSE or A level qualification.
- Pedagogy for languages was largely focused on oracy, though awareness of the Key Stage 2 Framework for Languages (2005) was increasing, and this was leading to greater attention to literacy.
- Non-specialist class teachers often lacked confidence, and needed ongoing support and professional development regarding both their linguistic competence and pedagogy for languages.
- Many schools still lacked policy statements on languages and overarching schemes of work, leading to a disjointed curriculum and limited progression.
- LA advisers and outreach teachers from secondary school were key in supporting the development of good practice and locally relevant resources, e.g. collaborative schemes of work and assessment tools.
- Sustaining continuity and progression at transition to secondary school was acknowledged as a “real challenge”.

Things to consider

- The evaluation paints a sympathetic picture of an innovation in progress, and the challenges attaching to introducing a new curriculum subject.
- The main threats identified to sustainability and expansion of primary languages were to do with availability of staff with appropriate linguistic competence and pedagogic skills; substantial ongoing professional development would be needed to ensure sustainability.
- LA advisers and outreach specialist teachers were key to promotion of a strategic approach to curriculum design, resources development and assessment, as well as for CPD.