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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Language in Education

Transition from Primary Language Programmes to Post-Primary Language Provision

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Introduction

As in England and Wales, entries for GCSE and A-level languages in Northern Ireland have declined annually since 2004 (JCQ). To redress this decline, languages are now compulsory from Primary 5 to Primary 7 in England and Wales. In Scotland, two languages will be compulsory at primary level from 2020. In the Republic of Ireland, Irish is compulsory at primary level and the study of a modern foreign language is strongly encouraged. This has led to a recent focus in educational research in Great Britain on transition in modern languages (Chambers, 2014; Courtney, 2014). In Northern Ireland, there is a patchwork of schools offering various modern languages at primary level (Purdy et al., 2010), but recent research (Collen, McKendry & Henderson, 2017) indicates that primary pupils perceive modern languages to have a low status, that there is no evidence of effective transition in modern languages between primary and post-primary schools and that there is a need to make language learning statutory at primary level, if our pupils are to be afforded the same opportunities as pupils in England and Scotland, and be prepared to compete in a globalised employment market. This KESS presentation draws on recent empirical research into models of delivery of primary languages, taking cognisance of the need for effective transition to post-primary education, and suggests ways in which statutory modern languages should be introduced at primary level in Northern Ireland.

Key Findings from Research

- There is no evidence of successful transition arrangements from primary to post-primary education for modern languages in Northern Ireland;
- Year 8 pupils in the study start their language learning from scratch, even when they have been taught a language at primary level;
- There is great variety in who is delivering primary languages, and the teacher's competence, leading to wide spread variation in pupils' experiences;
- Children perceive languages to have low status at primary school compared to their first year of post-primary education;
- There is appetite amongst head teachers to co-operate within cross-phase Area Learning Communities (ALCs) to develop primary teacher capacity. However, all principals state that conditions need to be right for this to happen; there needs to be adequate time allocation, quality of delivery and it is

important that head teachers are afforded the autonomy to drive primary languages in their ALC in a way that they see fit.

Key recommendations

It is recommended that:

- primary schools are best placed to deliver primary languages with support from neighbouring post-primary schools;
- modern language learning is made statutory at Key Stage 2 in Northern Ireland from 2020 onwards;
- a regional co-ordinating body for implementation is identified;
- background implementation work begins in the 2017/2018 school year, led by the co-ordinating body;
- the roll-out of primary languages should be phased, starting in Primary 5 in 2018/2019;
- schools work within their ALC to decide which languages are taught at primary level;
- a post-primary school or schools within each ALC is/are allocated money to release a specialist teacher of languages (0.6 FTE, for example) for the first three years of the roll out, depending on local context.
- language assistants support the specialist teacher of languages to develop capacity in the primary school.

The Language Learning Landscape in Northern Ireland

In a climate of economic austerity language learning in Northern Ireland has faced a number of challenges across all educational phases in recent years. In 2009 Queen's University Belfast closed its German department (after closing Slavonic Studies, Italian and the Classics). In 2015, funding was withdrawn for two key initiatives which offered support to language learning in schools: the Armagh-based European Studies Programme, which linked schools across Europe; and the Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP). These were followed by the announcement in September 2015 that Ulster University would close its School of Modern Languages and its Modern Irish courses in UU Belfast. This signalled the end of German degrees in Northern Ireland, and the end of Chinese, French and Spanish at Ulster University. This left Queen's University Belfast as the sole provider of languages degrees, in French, Portuguese and Spanish. UK government changes to higher education funding also

mean that studying in Britain is financially unviable for some students from Northern Ireland. The impending financial impact of Brexit on young people's chances of studying/ working in Europe is also uncertain.

Within this climate it is more important than ever that children have the opportunity to access meaningful language learning opportunities during compulsory schooling. If Northern Ireland is to allow children to develop competitive competence in languages and address the decline in languages that has gained momentum over the past decade then it is essential that we work to address the provision of languages, starting in the primary school. Two key aspects of doing this effectively are: to enhance cooperation between primary and post-primary schools; and to manage the language learning transition effectively.

Research aims and research questions

This research aims to access and document the views and experiences of key stakeholders in the language learning transition: children who have recently transitioned from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 language learning; and school principals or their nominated deputies who have knowledge and experience of the transition.

Arising from a review of existing research in the field, the following research questions were identified:

Children's perspectives

Which languages are children learning in primary schools?

Who is teaching primary languages?

What are children's views of additional language learning?

Schools' perspectives

How do primary and post-primary schools in Northern Ireland currently deal with transition in modern languages?

Could Area Learning Communities (ALCs) be involved in transition in modern languages?

Children's views of transition in languages from Key Stage 2 (KS2) to Key Stage 3 (KS3)

The views from the children's focus groups were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. Following data driven coding to put the children's voices at the centre of the research, one main, overarching theme was

identified to be ‘the status of languages’. Three sub-themes were also identified, namely ‘teacher’, ‘what children learn in languages’ and ‘how children learn languages’. This theme and sub-themes are closely related to the research questions. The KESS seminar will present further research findings.

Principals’ views of transition in languages from KS2 to KS3

Discussions with principals, together with our own professional practice and research to date, would suggest the following implementation of languages at Key Stage 2:

- staged implementation of Primary Languages, working towards statutory status, from the 2017/2018 school year for Primary 5, from 2018/2019 for Primary 5 and 6 and from 2019/2020 for Primary 5, 6 and 7;
- a scheme of work is written for Key Stage 2 modern languages;
- Area Learning Communities are awarded funding to release a post-primary languages teacher to deliver primary languages from 2017-2020 and capacity build with primary teachers. This may be 0.6 Full Time equivalent, for example;
- Area Learning Communities are responsible for how any funds for primary languages are to be spend;
- Language assistants could support the teaching of and capacity building for primary languages;
- There is no preferred single language for primary. Schools should be guided by their local ALC context.

Conclusion

Over the years, there have been marginal successes and significant shortcomings in our approach to Primary Languages in Northern Ireland. Given the recent seismic changes to tertiary modern languages education in the province, the now annual decline in overall entries for GCSE and A-level languages, and primary curriculum reform in England and Scotland, it is imperative that we move to improve the language learning landscape in our primary and post-primary schools.

We owe it to our pupils to ensure they are equipped with the language skills to take their place in a multi-lingual working environment, where competition for jobs will come from an international candidature.

Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series 2017-18

Our research shows that primary schools are best placed to deliver primary languages with support from neighbouring post-primary schools to develop teacher capacity within the primary school. We would also welcome a widening of primary languages pathways in initial teacher education.

We suggest that primary languages be made statutory at Key Stage 2 from 2020 onwards, or as soon as feasible, aligning our provision with recent developments in England and Scotland. To realise this vision, there is a need for a time-limited regional co-ordinating body for implementation to be identified. Background implementation work could begin in the 2016/2017 school year, led by the co-ordinating body. The roll-out of primary languages should be phased, starting in Primary 5 in 2017/2018. Schools would work with the co-ordinating body, but increasingly within their own ALC, to decide which languages are taught at primary level, or how the area can be progressed in a cross-curricular, language awareness model. A post-primary school or schools within each ALC is/are allocated money to release a specialist teacher of languages (0.6 Full Time Equivalent, for example) for the first three years of the roll out, depending on local context. Language assistants support the specialist teacher of languages to develop capacity in the primary school.

This is a radical vision, but it is one which could change the face of language learning in Northern Ireland.

References

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