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Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS)

Languages in Primary Schools in Northern Ireland

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Key Policy Recommendations

1. *The inclusion of additional language learning as a statutory part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum.*
2. *The development of a funded specialist qualification in Primary Education with modern languages in Initial Teacher Education.*
3. *The development of appropriate curricular guidance and resources to support teachers in primary schools including Continuing Professional Development.*
4. *Funded research into flexible pedagogical approaches including Content Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) and Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths with Languages (STEM-L).*
5. *Further funded research into models of collaboration between schools to ensure progression in learning and a positive transition from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3.*
6. *More effective area based planning to ensure effective linkage between languages offered in primary and post primary schools.*

"It really is time that primary school pupils had access to language teaching and the opportunity to become proficient in a second language. The benefits educationally and socially would be enormous over a period of time." Northern Ireland Primary School Principal

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Introduction

If the limits of our language mean the limits of our world, as Wittgenstein argued, then learning a new language should foster a richer, fuller and more balanced view of life. Learning a new language opens up new perspectives on the world and, in so doing, cultivates an enhanced degree of tolerance and cultural awareness. As Northern Ireland's demographic evolves, fostering such understanding between cultural groups in primary schools, is of increasing importance (Richardson and Gallagher, 2011; Purdy and Ferguson, 2012; Jones, 2015). Furthermore, the development of skills in languages is vital for any region in terms of economic growth; this may be particularly important in the light of Brexit (British Academy, 2016; British Council, 2017). Recent concerns about a UK language skills deficit are reflected in Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce, 2014).

Younger children seem to be well equipped to learn new languages (Lenneberg, 1967; Jones and Coffey, 2006). The experience brings cognitive benefits, has a positive influence on developing first language literacy skills, and can strengthen phonological awareness (Bialystok *et al*, 2009; Cheater and Farren, 2001; Murphy *et al.*, 2015). Importantly, learning a new language in childhood develops language awareness also (Hawkins, 1974; 1999). This prepares pupils for positive future language learning experiences, fostering the confidence required for success (DfES, 2002; Jones and Coffey, 2013). The length of time spent on language learning is directly proportional to levels of proficiency as well as the potential for increased attainment, so, the earlier learning begins, the better (Driscoll *et al*, 2004; Kirsch, 2008). It's important to note too, as Muijs *et al.* (2005) argue, that learning a new language is inclusive.

Despite such compelling arguments, learning a new language is not yet a statutory part of the primary curriculum in Northern Ireland (Purdy, Siberry and Beale, 2010). In Europe more than 80% of primary pupils were learning an additional language in 2013 (Eurostat, 24 September 2015). In England since 2014, all pupils aged 7-11 have been required to learn a modern or ancient language (Department for Education, 2013), and in Scotland it is hoped that the *Language Learning in Scotland: a 1+2 Approach* will be fully implemented nationally by 2020, thus ensuring every child has the opportunity to learn two languages by Primary 5 (Scottish Government, 2012). The British Council (2015) reported that Northern Ireland is one of the countries 'with the shortest period of compulsory foreign language learning in Europe.'

The regional Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP) was established in 2007, following a positive evaluation of a Foundation Stage primary languages pilot (CCEA, 2007). The central aims were to 'offer an enjoyable experience of languages for young pupils (Foundation/ Key Stage 1), with a view to encouraging more to continue with languages at post-primary level and beyond; develop pupils' language skills, particularly listening and speaking skills; to support the development of communication skills and associated areas of the revised curriculum; and enable primary teachers to develop interest and confidence in teaching modern languages' (SEELB, 2015). The PMLP focused on Spanish, Irish and Polish, and was based on a specialist peripatetic teaching model. This model has come under some criticism; Sweeney (2007) argues employing the skillset of a qualified primary classroom teacher with a high level of linguistic competence is more effective.

54% of the total number of primary schools in Northern Ireland took part in the PMLP (SEELB, 2015). In an evaluation of the programme (ETI, 2009) strengths highlighted included the enthusiasm in schools, high levels of motivation and good

progress among the children. Areas for improvement included the need for time for teachers and programme tutors to plan together, and for schools to demonstrate a commitment to capacity building for the development of modern languages provision. The PMLP ended in 2015 due to budgetary constraints within the Department of Education (BBC, 2015).

How We Conducted the Research

The research study under consideration was commissioned by the Northern Ireland Languages Council, established with the support of the Department of Education to work towards achieving the outcomes of *Languages for the Future: The Northern Ireland Languages Strategy* published in 2012. This report made clear recommendations for the development of language learning provision in primary schools. The aims of our study were, firstly, to gather information on the Primary Languages Programme (PMLP), evaluating possible improvements, and, secondly, to map the extent of primary languages provision outside the PMLP. We sought to identify opportunities and challenges presented by learning a new language in primary schools in Northern Ireland and make recommendations for policy and practice.

In order to be as inclusive as possible, information was sought from all primary schools of all types across all areas in Northern Ireland. So that we could ascertain the views of school leaders and classroom practitioners, research participants included primary school principals and class teachers, and, given the importance of pupil voice since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in particular Article 12, (Noyes, 2005; Lundy, 2007), we sought the views of pupils too. The study, conducted over ten weeks from January 2016, conformed to the ethical principles of beneficence, respect and justice (Lapan *et al.*, 2012). Ethical approval was sought from the Research and Ethics Committee of Stranmillis University College. In line with BERA (2011) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research*, and the College Code of Ethics (2015), all participants were informed in advance of the purpose of the study, were voluntary participants, and were assured of anonymity and confidentiality. Participants were made aware of the right to withdraw at any stage of the study. All efforts were made to explain to participants the focus and purpose of the research and the role and requirements of the participants. As with any research involving children, the study complied with Articles 3 and 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). When collecting data in schools, research personnel closely followed all child protection policies and procedures in place in the schools as well as Stranmillis University College's Child Protection and Safeguarding Policy. All information was held and processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998).

The research activity encompassed three strands. Strand One involved a desktop analysis of literature relating to language learning in primary schools. This provided the foundation for the project. In Strands Two and Three, data was collected in schools from principals, teachers and pupils. Sampling was purposive, and an effort was made to gain insights across the region. Strand Two involved collection of survey data from school principals, teachers and pupils. Letters of introduction included a link to access the online questionnaire survey for principals and teachers. This incorporated a range of question types, including multiple choice questions, Likert-type scales and open-ended questions to elicit valuable qualitative data. 101 schools participated in this aspect of the study. We also conducted a child-friendly paper survey of Key Stage 2 pupils in a range of primary schools across Northern Ireland, administered and supervised by teachers in class time. 165 pupils returned surveys.

Strand Three began with in-depth face-to-face interviews with school principals and teachers in a sub sample of eight schools. In addition, small groups of three to eight Key Stage 2 Pupils in four schools (total number of pupils n=24) participated in focused discussions about their experiences of and opinions about additional language learning. Principals were requested to provide groups of children that reflect the demography of their school population in terms of gender and ethnicity. Both the interviews with school principals and teachers and the pupil focus groups were digitally recorded. After transcription of the qualitative data the research team completed a thematic analysis of interview transcripts and the interpretation and reporting of the findings. Qualitative data produced by the surveys was also analysed.

Key findings

The majority of **school principals and teachers** in this study believed that learning a new language is important, valuable and enjoyable for pupils in primary schools in Northern Ireland. They recognised the advantages of an early start, reporting high levels of pupil motivation, and believed that offering additional language learning raised the profile of their school in the community.

The majority of the participating school principals and teachers stated that additional language learning should be included in the statutory curriculum in primary schools in Northern Ireland; this was deemed essential for schools to take language learning seriously. The questionnaire survey response rate suggests that not all schools view language learning as a priority, given its absence as a statutory element of the Northern Ireland Curriculum, the strong emphasis on improvement in literacy and numeracy, and the termination of the PMLP. As the opportunities additional language learning affords are not open to all pupils, there is a lack of equity in provision.

The languages taught in primary schools across Northern Ireland vary. The most popular are Spanish and French, but German and Mandarin are also offered. There is a similar lack of consistency regarding the Key Stage at which language learning takes place. There is a further lack of consistency between schools in terms of time allocated to learning a language. The majority of the schools reported an absence of assessment of language learning. Furthermore, modes of assessment implemented in the remaining minority of schools varied in nature and regularity. It was pointed out that absence of assessment results in a low level of prioritisation. Schools had developed a range of partnerships with external stakeholders to provide opportunities in additional language learning for pupils, but these also varied from school to school. Some schools found the application processes for these partnerships off-putting.

A preference was expressed in some schools for additional language learning delivered by the classroom teacher due to greater flexibility, teacher knowledge of developmentally appropriate methodologies, and an enhanced understanding of differentiation and inclusion in the primary classroom. The development of specialist provision in ITE and in teacher CPD, together with more careful area planning, were suggested as ways to make progress.

The majority of **pupils** involved in the study viewed additional language learning at primary school as enjoyable, challenging and useful. The opinion of the majority of the pupils was that *all* pupils in *all* primary schools should have the opportunity to learn a new language. The majority of the pupils expressed a desire to continue their own additional language learning in the future. Most of the pupils involved stated a preference to learn French or Spanish in the future,

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but they demonstrated an interest in a wide range of European and non-European languages including German and Mandarin.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings of our research we recommend the inclusion of additional language learning as a statutory part of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in primary schools. To facilitate this we recommend the development of levels of progression and other appropriate curricular and cross-curricular guidance for teachers and schools, together with related resources. We strongly advocate the development of a funded specialist qualification in Primary Education with modern languages in Initial Teacher Education. In addition, we recommend development of funded modern languages support in Continuing Professional Development for teachers, in collaboration with Initial Teacher Education providers, the Education Authority, and The Northern Ireland Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (NICILT).

Further funded research into flexible, cross curricular approaches to additional language learning such as CLIL (Content Language Integrated Learning) and STEM-L (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics with Languages) is needed to address concerns about space for modern languages in the primary school timetable. Further funded research into possible models of collaboration between schools, both at primary level and between primary and post-primary schools, would be helpful in addressing progression in learning and promoting a positive transition between Key Stages 2 and 3. Finally, more effective area-based planning would ensure better linkage between the languages offered in primary and post-primary schools. In short, we contend that the government in Northern Ireland should afford the opportunity to learn a new language to all pupils in all primary schools, thus planning for prosperity, broadening horizons, and opening minds.

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