



Project 4: the organisation and use of ICT in the teaching of modern foreign languages in the primary school

Mape [www.mape.org.uk] undertook Project 4. Mape is now known as NAACE Primary.

Introduction

This project sought to examine the organisation and use of ICT in teaching modern foreign languages (MFL) in primary schools. It had the following objectives:

- to investigate what ICT may be able to add to language learning at Key Stage 2
- to track the effect of introducing ICT, and in particular a range of communications technologies, to language teaching and learning in 12 schools
- to investigate whether the use of ICT enhanced teaching and learning of modern foreign languages, and to seek evidence of increased confidence and competence in the use of ICT as a result.

Methodology

Twelve schools were chosen to take part in the project. The languages they taught were:

- German (two schools)
- Spanish (two schools)
- French (eight schools).

Initial discussions with each school identified which elements of ICT would best support their individual language teaching needs. Consequently, a range of communications equipment and software was provided by the project to the participating schools.

Schools teaching the same language were paired and provided with the same equipment so that they could work in partnership to investigate its potential. One pair of schools received video conferencing equipment, another pair video telephones, another pair fax machines, and another pair digital video recorders. The remaining four schools received a wide range of software (see Further information). The schools who gained equipment were made responsible for organising its installation.

In addition, all schools were given a selection of software titles and supplied with a digital camera and a digital sound recorder. These resources were distributed when teachers attended the project's one-day training conference. The purpose of the conference was to outline the project, explain the use of the equipment and software, and to introduce teachers to each other and to their 'partner' school. To facilitate future communication between the participants, a group mailing list was also established at this time.

Data collection process

The data collection process consisted of the following:

- An initial questionnaire designed to provide a baseline set of information about what was happening in each school, both in the teaching of MFL and the use of ICT throughout the curriculum.
- Initial visits to the schools by project staff.
- Second visits, which included classroom observations and informal interviews.
- A follow-up questionnaire which also enabled schools to make a concluding evaluation. (Project staff also completed a version of this final questionnaire.)

Overview of the participating schools

The initial questionnaire indicated that the participating schools had a wide range of characteristics concerning MFL teaching and learning. However, characteristics relating to the schools' ICT resources, and teachers' confidence and competence with ICT, appeared to be more closely matched. Some of the characteristics are outlined below.

- Location and demographics – the schools covered a wide range of geographic and socio-economic profiles. They were located in Bedfordshire, Bradford, Dudley, Ealing, Isle of Man, Kent (2 schools), Knowsley, Liverpool, Staffordshire, Surrey and Worcestershire.
- Experience of MFL provision – three of the schools had over 20 years' experience of teaching MFL, four schools had started their MFL work in the 2002-03 school year, and the remainder had up to ten years' experience.
- Impetus for language teaching - the reasons given for introducing MFL into the school curriculum varied. In some cases it was influenced by LEA policy, while in others it was more closely related to the personal interest of the teacher concerned. However, all schools believed in the value of teaching pupils modern foreign languages at an early age.
- Teaching time – six schools taught MFL only during lesson time, one only during an extra-curricular club, and the others used a combination of lesson time and extra-curricular activity. Curriculum time devoted to teaching MFL varied from 30 to 60 minutes per week.
- Provision and support for MFL - at one extreme, four peripatetic specialist teachers provided one school with 90 minutes of lessons per week for all children in Years 3 to 6. At the other, one school relied on an enthusiastic teacher to provide a one-hour lesson during an extra-curricular club attended by ten pupils drawn from Years 3 to 6. In approximately half of the schools MFL was taught (usually to all Key Stage 2 pupils) by a single member of staff who was given release time for this purpose. Just under half of the schools received some MFL teaching from 'external' specialist teachers.
- Teacher experience – ranged from those with a degree and/or specialist training in MFL to those learning the language alongside the children.
- Schemes of work – most of the participating schools used a scheme of work. Some used the LEA's scheme, others used adapted versions of the QCA scheme, while others used those supplied by commercial companies or public services (see Further information).
- Contact with 'native speakers' and community links - few of the schools made use of native speakers or community links, although many did have links with other schools both in the UK and abroad and email was used to support these links. Five of the schools used day trips to France to support MFL teaching.
- Sustaining progression – the schools did not appear to have any strategy for sustaining MFL teaching or for liaison with the secondary sector unless they were subject to a clear LEA policy about MFL teaching.
- MFL budget – the typical budget among the participating schools was £150-£200. Exceptions included a school that was designated a centre of excellence for teaching MFL in the primary phase and which received a substantial budget for its MFL activities (£10,000); and a middle school that benefited from a whole school budget for MFL of £1,000.
- Typical language teaching resources – these included videos, song tapes, flashcards, puppets, plus materials provided with the schemes of work followed by the schools (see Further information)
- ICT resources – all 12 schools reported similar levels of ICT equipment comprising one or two computers per classroom and computer suites of between 8 and 30 machines. Most of the schools had standard 'office productivity' software and presentation devices such as

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whiteboards, projectors, and digital and video cameras. However, only 6 of the 12 schools had access to a technician.

- ICT and teacher confidence and competence - all teachers reported that they were generally comfortable with the use of ICT. And that they used ICT extensively across the wider curriculum but only to a very limited extent in MFL teaching. Most teachers had completed New Opportunities Fund (NOF) training and had the support of the school ICT co-ordinator and LEA advisors.

Key Findings

Equipment installation, technical issues, technical mastery

It became clear that the project had underestimated the amount of time it would take for schools to install new equipment and get it working effectively.

Technical problems were more severe in some schools than in others. Even where there were no major problems relating to installation, or compatibility issues between new equipment/software and older computers/operating systems, it took longer for teachers to master a major piece of equipment than the project had anticipated. Thus, during the short lifetime of the project, little effective or significant use was made of video conferencing, video telephones or colour fax machines in MFL teaching.

Network access

Network access was a problem. In most of the participating schools, MFL lessons were not timetabled to use network facilities, therefore, when teachers wished to use ICT to support MFL teaching and learning, special arrangements had to be made to swap classrooms. In most cases, such arrangements seemed unlikely to continue beyond the life of the project.

Video conferencing

The technical problems with video conferencing were never fully resolved. One of the schools involved used a managed service for its ICT requirements and infrastructure. This service was not set up to support video conferencing between primary schools outside the local authority, and much technical support had to be provided by the managed service to overcome this limitation. Even after this had been given, only the picture (not sound) was available on the video-conferencing equipment, which meant that it could not be used. The partner school had devoted much time and effort to setting up its video-conferencing facilities and was very frustrated by the failure.

Another project school was very keen to establish more active links with a school in France and tried to set up video conferencing between the two. Incompatibility between the two systems meant that this was not achieved.

Video telephones

The video telephones were not used as one school had trouble with installation, and in the partner school the project teacher was absent for most of the project period due to long-term illness.

Colour fax machines

Although the colour fax machines (with dedicated telephone lines) were successfully installed in classrooms, they proved too noisy to use during lesson time. Photographs (taken with the digital camera) and pupils' work were faxed between the partner schools and the pupils enjoyed these exchanges. However, there was a mismatch between the MFL ability of the two groups of children (one had been learning French since September 2002 whereas the other had several years' experience), and this limited the possibilities for liaison. At times, the

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production of appropriate material to fax directed the teaching to the detriment of the MFL learning.

Digital sound recorders

A number of schools used the sound recorders in creative ways but these did not involve uploading the audio files to a computer or transmitting them to other schools. The software supplied for this proved difficult to install and use on older computer systems - only one school implemented this successfully.

The digital recorders allowed children to listen to their own spoken language and to record and re-record short question and answer sessions. Songs were also recorded. The potential was limited by the need to share a single machine. Some teachers felt that more recorders (for example, a class set) would have been very useful.

Some teachers were not able to spend the time required to master control of the hardware and associated software. Although the quality of the sound was deemed excellent, overall, the digital sound recorders were felt to have little advantage over a standard portable tape recorder.

Digital video cameras

The digital video cameras were used in a similar way to the digital sound recorders - recording question and answer sessions. One school used a word processor and a painting package to develop descriptive language: the children drew a simple puppet with the painting package and practised the vocabulary required to describe it. The plan was to send descriptions to the partner school using the digital video camera and ask the children there to reproduce the drawings from the descriptions. However, this work was not completed as liaison between the partner schools broke down.

The video cameras were also used to record whole-class teaching and various pupil activities. One school found that the children became self-conscious about speaking a foreign language in front of a video camera. Software to upload video to a computer was not supplied - one school said this would have been useful.

Digital cameras

The digital cameras were popular and were used by most schools. In one school, digital photographs were used to make a comic strip with speech bubbles in French. In another school, the digital camera was used to make a display. Children had taken photographs of each other and had then annotated the pictures with a few sentences in French. This was very time consuming as the pictures had to be transferred to each child's work area on the network. The display was impressive and the work was enjoyable but perhaps not a worthwhile investment of time in terms of the language learned.

Digital cameras were used widely by teachers to make resources for teaching, and by children to capture images used to make personal identity cards, presentations and displays. The digital camera was the best-received item of equipment in the project with many schools finding it 'very useful'. Generally, the camera with its docking system was considered very straightforward to use, however, one school was unable to load the camera software onto the school computers – the reason for the incompatibility was not identified.

Software and internet use

Most schools were observed using software or websites. Quite a range of specific language software was in use, including several titles supplied by the project. Some schools also made use of titles in the 'living book' series and most schools made use of websites. (For more information about the resources used, see Further information.)

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Working with language software and web-based resources was certainly motivating to pupils and supportive to teachers, but there were problems with sound quality in some cases. When headphones were not used, general noise levels were high and when they were used, many gave a crackly or distorted output. Schools rarely had headphone splitters; in a number of schools, pairs of children were observed sharing a single set of headphones. Problems were also encountered in trying to use the software titles on laptop computers that were not fitted with sound cards.

A further problem with software was that the project only supplied single copies. Many schools felt that they could have made better use of the software if multi-user licences had been supplied so that the same title could be run on all workstations simultaneously. At least two schools subsequently purchased a multi-user licence for software encountered through the project.

Few technical problems were encountered with software; one school had a problem with one software title that required Word '95 which the school did not have, and another had problems installing a software title and the teacher was unable to find time to learn to use the software. Uploading software onto school networks was a problem in some cases. Only half of the schools had access to technical support.

All but one of the schools used at least some of the software supplied by the project. A number of the schools were delighted with the software and were convinced that it had enhanced MFL teaching. However schools just starting MFL teaching found the level of vocabulary too high and unrelated to the scheme of work in use. Most schools used websites, although the lack of good Spanish websites for children was noted.

Generic software

Generic software tools were being used in many of the schools. For example children used a word processor to write letters in French to pen pals in the partner school and others used a word processor or presentation package to write evaluations of MFL software. A painting package was used to draw faces in response to instructions given by the teacher in French. EasiTeach (on a whiteboard) was used in one school as an effective teaching aid; and presentation, drawing and publishing packages were used elsewhere to create resources about colour words, numbers and animals. In some schools the teachers also used ICT to prepare worksheets and, in one case, a presentation.

Use of whiteboards and video

Whiteboards were well used in a number of schools to aid whole-class teaching. Use of the software supplied by the project with an interactive whiteboard was frequently mentioned, although less than half of the schools had access to these in the classrooms where MFL was taught. Video also was used to stimulate class discussion in some schools.

Working with partner schools

All schools reported that they were unable to work effectively with the partner school, mainly due to lack of time or technical problems with the hardware. (All schools had made initial contact and there had often been a single exchange of letters or emails but the link had never built up any momentum and/or had been curtailed by the failure of the communication technologies.)

Teaching

On visits, project staff observed some excellent MFL teaching using dialogue, games, songs with some pencil and paper activities such as word-search. Much of the most effective work

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involved whole-class teaching. This was especially true where the teacher was a fluent speaker of the chosen language.

With whole-class language teaching, it was generally thought important that pupils were seated in an arrangement where they could see the teacher clearly and watch the teacher's lips. However, many of the computer rooms in this project were small and cramped and thus not entirely conducive to whole-class teaching supported by ICT.

Lack of time to develop new skills or to create resources was a problem for most of the teachers in the project. In the context of a very crowded curriculum and the pressure to get results and meet targets, MFL teaching was afforded low priority.

In some schools, the children regularly answer the register in Spanish, French or German. In most schools children spoke fluently without embarrassment and enjoyed the work.

ICT and MFL

Most children (and teachers) appeared confident and competent in the use of the ICT. Nonetheless, the introduction of ICT in MFL sometimes seemed to get in the way of good teaching, increasing the focus on writing as opposed to talking, and necessitating lessons in which much of the teaching/discussion was not taking place in the target language. There were also the technical difficulties, and in a number of instances the ICT appeared to distract teachers from the language focus to the detriment of the MFL teaching.

The teachers in the project put much effort and creativity into looking for ways to make effective use of ICT in MFL. Nonetheless, the visits showed that, at present, the contribution that ICT can make to MFL teaching in these primary schools is limited. (Given the pressures on teachers and the small amount of curriculum time devoted to MFL in the primary phase, full integration of ICT into MFL teaching may be difficult without adequate prior planning and training, and some on-going technical support.)

A few teachers felt that their own lack of expertise with ICT was an obstacle. Certainly, where teachers were inexperienced in MFL teaching, ICT was often one extra burden rather than a solution. One teacher reported that as pupils' foreign language skills were not sufficiently advanced, children using ICT tended to communicate in English which reduced the amount of talk in the target language. The same teacher also felt that ICT slowed the pace of the lesson. A further problem was that existing schemes of work for MFL rarely made any specific reference to the use of ICT.

Despite technical and other problems, all the teachers could see some benefits of using ICT in MFL teaching, citing especially:

- access to the voices of native speakers through software
- increased motivation
- meeting the needs of individual learners
- providing opportunities for success, and the reinforcement of learning obtained through the use of a variety of resources.

The software gave support to teachers whose own competence with the language was shaky and brought native speakers into the classroom. All teachers were able to describe successful lessons making use of ICT in MFL, and several had purchased additional software titles.

Teachers' attitudes

Most teachers remained enthusiastic during the project. Many had found some worthwhile websites and software and had plans to integrate their use into the teaching programme in future years. (In most participating schools this will mean scheduling a couple of uses of the

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ICT suite during each term, but most MFL teaching will continue in classrooms under-supplied with ICT resources.)

Most teachers felt that the project had a positive impact on their teaching, but whether or not they envisaged much use of ICT in the future seemed to depend upon the individual teacher's ICT confidence and capability prior to the project. Those teachers who already had enthusiasm for, and a high level of competence in, the use of ICT had discovered new ways of integrating it into their MFL teaching. They planned to use online activities and CD-ROMs for group work and (where whiteboards were available) for whole-class teaching, and some also had plans to use video cameras, digital sound recorders and digital cameras. These teachers could also see the potential for links with schools abroad.

However, even at the conclusion of the project, some teachers reported that 'computers are not normally used in MFL teaching' and often rearrangement of the timetable had been made so that they could be used on the occasions of the visits by project staff. There was certainly no embedding of ICT use in regular MFL teaching except perhaps in project schools with whiteboards in every classroom. Where the MFL teacher had little expertise in the use of ICT, it proved difficult to find time to develop this expertise (for example, through liaison with an ICT co-ordinator). These teachers saw little value in the use of ICT in MFL teaching using the current technology.

Although many of the teachers reported that the project had filled them with enthusiasm some felt that the timescale had been too short for any clear benefits of the use of ICT in MFL to be observed. For these teachers the intervention of Christmas and the technical problems had put a brake on the initial momentum and enthusiasm. A summer term start might have been better, allowing autumn term timetables to be planned to accommodate the project. It may also have been that the project gave teachers too many resources. A narrower focus with fewer items might have been more productive. If the project had been able to pay for non-contact time for teachers, gains might also have been more tangible.

Successful use of ICT in MFL

Schools felt that the main obstacles to the successful use of ICT in MFL teaching were the cost of software licences, download times on standard school connections, the time wasted because of technical problems and the lack of the right equipment in the right place. It was clear that in the participating schools the technological infrastructure was not yet sufficiently widespread to wholly enable effective use of ICT in MFL teaching.

An interactive whiteboard in the classroom (with internet access) and readily available access to a computer suite with the appropriate software on all workstations were felt to be prerequisites. Laptop computers were thought to present an alternative, but the time taken to set them up and put them away is significant in the context of a short MFL lesson. Ready access to good technical support was also deemed necessary. Likewise, it is necessary for MFL teachers to be confident users of ICT across the curriculum and to be given time to plan and to prepare resources.

Conclusion

If the schools in this project are representative, the quality of MFL teaching in English primary schools is likely to be patchy. Observations showed that where there was an authority-wide strategy and teachers trained in MFL teaching were used, practice could be excellent. Where individual teachers were working unsupported, perhaps learning the language only one step ahead of the children, the quality of teaching was variable. Pronunciation was a particular problem where access to native speakers or qualified teachers was not available.

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There seemed to be little monitoring or assessment of MFL learning. Many project schools lacked the range of resources required to allow for progression and differentiation, and MFL work was rarely integrated into the wider curriculum. Language teaching was seldom co-ordinated with local secondary schools to ensure continuity and progression. But above all else most project schools were battling against the odds to increase the profile of MFL or to allocate time and resources to it, given the demands of the National Curriculum.

Against this background, for many schools the integration ICT into MFL teaching and learning was not a priority. Schools found it difficult to devote the time to work effectively with partner schools. MFL has only a small timetable allocation and primary school teachers have only so much spare time. Under these circumstances, the schools saw little value in 'partner' schools except, possibly, where one is a specialist (e.g. in video conferencing) or where one of the schools is abroad and can provide native speakers.

The difficulties of setting up communication technology (especially video conferencing) seem to be such that primary schools without technical support contracts (or technical support staff) are unlikely to achieve success. (As was observed, success is not guaranteed even with technical support.) Technical and compatibility issues also arise where the latest computer peripherals and software need to be installed on older computer systems. If the primary schools in this study are representative, it seems unlikely that video conferencing, video telephones, or the latest sound recording and image capture peripherals, will contribute much to MFL teaching without an investment in competent technical support and/or the latest computers with the most up-to-date operating system.

There is little software available for MFL teaching in the primary school. Most is too adult-oriented or is aimed at fluent speakers not those just beginning. However the few software titles and websites that do exist were well received and made a positive contribution to MFL work in the schools. The software seemed especially useful when it could be integrated into whole-class teaching.

However, most schools did not timetable MFL to use classrooms with ICT facilities, and where computer suites could be booked, they were rarely conducive to whole-class MFL teaching. Project schools felt, therefore, that the provision of interactive whiteboards in every classroom (with appropriate MFL software) would be the best way of using ICT to support MFL and observations at schools where whiteboards were used confirm this view.

ICT resources supplied by the project had limited impact on MFL teaching, mainly serving to supplement existing materials and extend current practice. There was no evidence of any radical change. A major factor here was the lack of time for teachers to master the use of new technology. In some cases, the use of ICT got in the way of good MFL teaching, diverting the focus from whole-class oral work and slowing the pace of the lesson. However, ICT did add interest and enjoyment (for pupils and some teachers), enhancing motivation.

Recommendations

The project makes the following recommendations:

- Communication technology, such as video conferencing equipment, is not yet 'plug and play' and primary schools cannot install and use it without technical support. Systems should be set up to ensure that every primary school has access to technical support, available when necessary.
- There is still a dearth of good MFL software appropriate to the needs and interests of children at Key Stage 1 and 2. More good MFL software aimed at primary pupils should be developed.

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- Much of the best MFL teaching observed involved whole-class teaching - where interactive whiteboards were available they were being used very effectively. Every primary classroom should be equipped with an interactive whiteboard to support whole-class teaching.

Further information

Software titles supplied to four schools in the study:

- Spanish staff development
- Vocabulary Builder, Spanish or French
- Smart Start Spanish deluxe
- My World (+ files)
- Clicker (+ files)
- Tales for Early Language Learning/Living Books
- Interactive Story CD-ROMs – 6 titles
- Three Little Pigs
- Musicians of Bremen
- Digalo
- Flags
- Depart

Some of the schemes of work used by participating schools:

- QCA [http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/schemes/primary_mfl/?view=get]
- Pilote [<http://www.earlystart.co.uk/about.htm>]
- En Avant
- Equipe
- Tu y Yo (Spanish) [<http://www.earlystart.co.uk/about.htm>]
- Ecity
- BBC-Le Club
- 3,2,1, Los! (German) [<http://www.earlystart.co.uk/about.htm>].

Language websites used by project schools:

Bonjour [<http://www.bonjour.org.uk/>]

Momes [<http://www.momes.net/>]

Literacy Center Net [<http://www.literacycenter.net/>]

Step Star Primary Spanish [<http://stepstar.esd101.net/k12/ps/default.htm>]

Channel 4 (*Chez Mimi* for French, *Hennings Haus* for German) [<http://www.ltscotland.com/5-14/c4modernlanguages/>]

The Voyage (German) [<http://www.the-voyage.com/>]