

Developing the four capacities through modern languages: focusing on successful learners in primary schools

Introduction

Following on from the *Improving Scottish Education* (ISE) report, published in February 2006, HMIE evaluated attainment in social subjects, physical education and modern languages in a representative sample of primary schools across Scottish education authorities. Inspections took place between May 2006 and June 2007. The sample classes included pupils at the early, middle and upper stages of each school. Schools benefited from constructive oral feedback and pointers for improvement during the one day inspection.

These inspections of pupils' attainment in social subjects, physical education and modern languages took place in the context of primary school staff giving increased consideration to the principles of *Curriculum for Excellence*. By stimulating debate about attainment and learning and teaching, the visits and this report aim to challenge those involved in teaching modern languages to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in young learners.

Information gathered from the sample schools has been collated and presented in the form of brief reports on the HMIE Good Practice website as part of the broader set of *Improving Scottish Education* related data. The outcomes will inform national developments. The main findings of each of the three reports should be used by staff in schools and local authorities to bring about improvement in practice.

During the inspections of primary pupils' attainment in modern languages, inspectors observed lessons and assessed pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding in this area of the curriculum. Teachers' plans were examined. Inspectors also discussed learning and teaching in modern languages with pupils and teachers.

Attainment in modern languages: what do we do to develop successful learners?

In September 2001, the then Scottish Executive's response to *Citizens of a Multilingual World*¹ accepted that pupils in P6 and P7 in Scottish primary schools had an entitlement to study a modern language. Over 98% of pupils at these primary stages now have that entitlement met. Many pupils begin their modern language learning earlier than P6. Where primary schools have multi-stage classes or where the school benefits from a number of appropriately qualified teachers, then pupils may be taught a modern language earlier than P6. In one education authority, all pupils study modern languages from pre-school right through to P7 and beyond.

The Scottish Centre for Information on Language Teaching (SCILT) recently published an evaluation² of the early partial immersion project at Walker Road Primary School in Aberdeen. This project, funded by Aberdeen City Council and the

¹ report of the Ministerial Action Group for Languages, SEED 2000

² <http://www.scilt.stir.ac.uk/projects/evaluationwr/documents/EPPIsummary.pdf>

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then Scottish Executive, began in 2000. Pupils from P1 to P7 receive some of their education through the medium of French, and some through the medium of English. SCILT concluded that “In the era of *Curriculum for Excellence*, the initiative has prepared pupils very well for true international citizenship, not only through their outstanding proficiency in another major language but also in their confidence and international outlook.” The success of this project will inform debate on the potential benefits to pupils of an earlier start to modern languages learning and of alternative models of delivering modern languages education. Where an early start is planned, it will be important to consider how to ensure a high quality, progressive learning experience for pupils throughout the primary stages.

Annual returns to the Scottish Government from local authorities indicate that the modern language taught most commonly in Scottish primary schools is French. It is taught in around 90% of all primary schools. German is taught in around a fifth of primary schools nationally. This proportion is showing a decreasing trend. Spanish and Italian are taught in less than ten per cent of primary schools. In response to parental and pupils’ interest, the number of pupils studying Spanish is increasing. Overall, pupils in primary schools receive a valuable experience in modern languages.

Modern European languages and Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)

How can modern languages help to develop successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors? Teachers in primary schools are increasingly recognising the potential of CfE to improve learners’ achievement. The range of experiences offered within a quality programme in modern languages offers a strong platform to build on. The ability to use languages lies at the centre for thinking and learning. By the time pupils begin to learn a modern language, they will have acquired their home language(s) and will have begun to study English language in the school context. In the schools visited for this report, pupils enjoyed opportunities to be involved in modern language activities. The active, supportive approach used in many primary schools encouraged pupils to use language confidently when they were ready to do so and to make good progress. High quality experiences often encouraged pupils to become effective contributors, individually and in groups and to develop knowledge, understanding and skills across a range of experiences. Their understanding and respect for different cultures and lifestyles developed through their learning of a modern language contributed to their development as responsible international citizens. There is a particular focus in this report on the extent to which pupils are becoming successful learners in the context of modern languages in primary schools.

Attainment in modern languages: what do we do well to develop successful learners?

“The study of any modern language plays a central role in the development of literacy skills. ... It also provides the opportunity for interdisciplinary work by providing a global dimension to a variety of curriculum areas, and, particularly, to the areas of active citizenship and cultural awareness. Making connections between

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different areas of learning and developing relevant course content will be important in attracting our young people to learning a modern language³. Pupils' learning in a modern language was most effective where teachers used the target language during modern languages lessons and for daily class routines. Most teachers also used English during modern language lessons where they judged this to be necessary to meet pupils' learning needs.

In a modern language, most pupils in the schools inspected:

- attained an appropriate level of competence by P7;
- attained better in listening, speaking and reading than in writing;
- were able to listen to, and follow, classroom instructions and directions in a foreign language;
- could introduce themselves and give some information about themselves orally;
- could take part in a brief dialogue or role play, asking and responding to questions on a range of topics;
- could read a range of signs, captions and short texts; and
- could demonstrate an understanding of the culture of the country whose language they are studying.

Key strengths in modern languages included the following

- Pupils' attainment in listening, speaking and, to a lesser extent, reading.
- The sense of enjoyment of language learning, conveyed through positive relationships and attractive displays.
- Pupils' learning was supported by displays of current learning targets, key vocabulary and links between English language and modern languages.
- Many skilled teachers who were committed to developing their own modern language skills as well as those of pupils.
- In addition to standard good practice in learning and teaching, effective teachers of modern languages ensured that pupils:
 - had sufficient opportunities to speak in the modern language in the course of a lesson;
 - learned grammar systematically, enabling them to create and use language for themselves rather than learning by rote;
 - experienced opportunities to interact with each other, as well as with adults, for example in paired or group work;
 - made effective use of information and communications technology;
 - were able to make choices about how best to learn new language and reinforce their use of known language;
 - were able to extend their knowledge and practise what they had learned through challenging, interesting homework assignments;
 - could readily access any support they might need, for example, dictionaries or vocabulary notes; and
 - learned about the country whose language they were studying and developed a strong sense of cultural awareness.

³ CfE draft outcomes for Modern Languages, cover pages

Aspects for improvement

The ISE report highlighted a range of strengths in the primary sector including a supportive climate for learning and positive relationships between staff and pupils. It also stressed the need to improve learners' achievements and provide learning experiences that are more relevant, engaging and exciting. Whilst a number of strengths have been identified in this report, the following areas require further improvement in many of the schools inspected.

- **Achievement in writing:** improve pupils' progress in writing a modern language.
- **Learning:** provide a greater range of contexts which actively engage pupils in their learning and provide opportunities to speak the language, link sentences and make creative use of language. The quality of pupils' learning is still inconsistent and too often lacks relevance, engagement and excitement. Too many pupils still learn too much by rote and lack the ability to use the modern language they had learned in different contexts. The pace was too slow in some lessons and not enough of the new language had been learned.
- **Partnership:** ensure closer links with the associated secondary school. These are crucial in providing pupils with sustained, high quality learning experiences in modern languages.

Curriculum for Excellence: draft experiences and outcomes for Modern Languages

The CfE draft experiences and outcomes for modern languages are available on the LTS website⁴. The streamlining of existing guidelines 3-15 has provided the opportunity to create more space for relevant, enjoyable and enriching linguistic and cultural learning experiences. Teachers are provided with questions for reflection and response as well as feedback questions which will help the curriculum writers in refining the draft modern languages experiences and outcomes.

⁴ <http://www.curriculumforexcellencescotland.gov.uk/outcomes/languages/modernforeignlanguages/index.asp>