

## The role and nature of the cultural dimension in primary modern languages

### What this research was about and why it is important

The 2013 National Curriculum stated: 'A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world' (p.147). There have been few studies, however, which have looked at the teaching and learning of intercultural understanding in the primary school. This paper draws on information gathered during a three-year study (2007-10) which was commissioned by the government to provide an in-depth overview of languages provision and teaching at Key Stage 2 (ages 7 to 11) in English primary schools. The researchers visited a sample of 40 diverse and representative schools in the UK. They found that although schools consider the cultural dimension of languages lessons to be important, there was little systematic planning in place to make sure that there were opportunities for children 'to question, explore or reflect upon the impact of culture either on their own lives or on the lives of others'.

### What the researchers did

- The researchers observed lessons, interviewed teachers and head teachers and arranged small group discussions with children. Over 550 children across Key Stage 2 (ages 7 to 11) completed a questionnaire.
- French was the most common choice of language taught, followed by Spanish. A few schools taught German.
- All interviews were audio recorded, and anonymised.

### What the researchers found

- **Schools, head teachers and teachers** were committed to developing children's awareness of other cultures. Over 50% of teachers felt that intercultural understanding (IU) was a core aim of teaching languages.
- Many of the schools had a global vision and a broad cultural curriculum. They saw the establishment of authentic contexts for developing IU as important. Contact with partner schools was mentioned in just under half the schools.
- Schools looked for common reference points to help children appreciate and compare experiences rather than focus on cultural differences. Learning was most effective when teachers drew on their own knowledge and understanding.
- Almost one third of schools had arranged trips abroad. Teachers highlighted the benefits of these trips in developing both intercultural understanding and language knowledge, and a range of other skills such as independence, adventure, etc. Although driven by teacher enthusiasm, the researchers found that these required teacher confidence and expertise.
- Almost one quarter of the schools included cultural references during their language lessons, briefly interwoven (covering about 5 minutes for ages 7 to 9, and 10 minutes for ages 9 to 11). Teachers reported *ad hoc* references or comparisons with English during language lessons, or mentions, e.g. in Geography, about rivers, mountains etc.
- In conclusion: The researchers found a lack of systematic medium- and long-term planning for IU, and limited opportunities for children to explore, reflect on and refine their knowledge and skills.
- **Children** were positive and enthusiastic. Over 94% of children wished to visit the country where the language was spoken. Over 80% of children aged 7 to 9 enjoyed learning about another country, but only 65% of children aged 9 to 11 said the same. Children enjoyed the range of cultural activities, including meeting visiting adults, and trips abroad.
- Children had a wide range of experiences such as whole school intercultural events, collaborative projects with schools overseas, trips and exchanges, international themed weeks, traditional other-culture songs as part of wider events, etc.
- Children revealed a random quality to their cultural and intercultural knowledge including a focus on differences as well as some misconceptions and generalisations; these did not appear to be discussed or challenged.
- Children were curious and interested in other countries but needed time with informed adults to explore questions of cultural difference.
- The level of reflection needs to be raised for children to develop greater empathy, tolerance, and understanding.

### Things to consider

- The data was collected before the introduction of statutory language teaching (September 2014), but few studies have looked at this aspect of MFL teaching in primaries since then.
- This paper has relevance as a bench-mark for teachers, academics and policy-makers both in England and internationally to evaluate progress and inform the future.