

## Evaluating a language awareness programme at primary school

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

The paper reports on an evaluation study of the 'Discovering Language' project that was undertaken in 7 state primary schools in England, involving 374 children in Years 5 and 6 (ages 9-11). The evaluation included interviews with teachers, headteachers and a sub-sample of pupils as well as questionnaires completed by pupils and parents. The 'Discovering Language' project fits into the context of the languages strategy for England that the UK government published in 2002. It was conceptualised as a language awareness programme to be delivered not through teaching a single language for a longer period of time, but by introducing children to the basics of a number of languages. The aims of the programme were to increase motivation among pupils to learn languages, enhance their linguistic sensitivity to languages, make links with L1 literacy, and improve intercultural awareness. The project also aimed to offer a practical solution to the issue of non-specialist language teachers at primary level. The 'Discovering Language' programme required the class teacher to learn the rudiments of a language alongside their pupils, with one hour per week (usually broken down into 2 or 3 shorter lessons) as the recommended teaching time. The project team provided teachers with all necessary resources for a cross-curricular approach, linking in with geography, history and citizenship. The linguistic syllabus itself was very basic: numbers, colours, animals, greetings, family, home and classroom objects, etc. The project exposed children to 5 different languages: French, German, Spanish, Latin and Japanese.

### What the researchers did

- In order to evaluate the 'Discovering Language' project, questionnaires focusing on children's views and attitudes were handed out to all 374 participating pupils; 336 were returned.
- Questionnaires were also handed out to parents; 148 were returned.
- The researchers conducted follow-up interviews with some of the pupils, teachers and all 7 headteachers.

### What the researchers found

- 56% of pupils reported enjoyment of the 'Discovering Language' lessons; learning languages was seen as fun.
- 51% reported being keener to learn languages than at the start of Year 5.
- Enjoyment and interest in continuing language study were significantly related.
- 55% of the children stated that they had learned a lot from the programme.
- 90% thought it was important to learn different languages, mostly for travelling abroad (70%).
- 63% of the children thought that they understood how languages borrow words from each other.
- 64% said they had learned to listen carefully when learning languages.
- 46% claimed that they understood that grammar helped them with learning languages.
- However, teachers had difficulty in assessing the impact of the programme on children's metalinguistic skills.
- The pupils who were interviewed generally expressed positive opinions about the existence of different cultures.
- It is not clear whether these positive attitudes had arisen from the programme or from the fact that the majority of children had travelled abroad (77%).
- Teachers were not certain whether the programme had broadened pupils' cultural understanding, but they were very much in favour of teaching languages within a cultural context.
- Most of the teachers and headteachers felt it was better to teach several languages rather than just one.
- Among the parents, 60% thought that a range of languages should be taught at primary school, while 40% thought a single language would be best.

### Things to consider

- None of the participating schools had had any formal language teaching on offer prior to participating in the programme, so they were enthusiastic about taking part.
- The teachers had been somewhat apprehensive about language teaching, but afterwards all agreed that the programme did not require specialist language teachers for its successful delivery.
- It must be borne in mind that the evaluation was based on perceptual data only and that children's actual knowledge was not assessed.
- It is not clear to what extent the programme was interpreted and implemented as a language awareness programme by the teachers, rather than as a multilingual programme per se.