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Pupils' perceptions of Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3 transition in modern foreign languages

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Abstract

Modern foreign languages (MFL) are now established on the timetable of English primary schools. This study accesses the views of the pupils on the experience of learning this relatively new subject and of making the transition to secondary school languages classes. By means of semi-structured interviews with the same sample of 18 pupils in Year 6 (age 10 or 11) and again in Year 7 (age 11 or 12), we learn that, whilst they enjoy languages at primary school, the enjoyment is all the greater in secondary school. As pupils look back from secondary school on the primary school experience, they identify that they want to feel challenged by more, harder work and to know that they are progressing and achieving. They want to be taught by teachers with MFL competence and appropriate training. Limited resources mean that MFL learning and teaching and transitional arrangements are not perfect. The insights which the pupils provide raise questions about how schools might be enabled by policy makers to address the imperfections.

Keywords: primary modern foreign languages; transition; pupils' perceptions; Key Stage 2 MFL; Key Stage 3 MFL.

Background

The study which informs this article is one part of a four part project relating to modern foreign languages (MFL) Key Stage 2 (KS2, i.e. primary school Years 3-6, pupils aged 7-11) to Key Stage 3 (KS3, i.e. secondary school Years 7-9, pupils aged 12-14) transition. Reported below are the views of pupils, from one particular part of the UK, undergoing the transition experience. The other dimensions of the project relate to:

- The views of UK teachers on KS2 to KS3 MFL transition (Chambers, 2014);
- The views of teachers from Saxony-Anhalt on transition from primary to secondary school with special reference to MFL (Chambers, 2015);
- The views of pupils from Saxony-Anhalt on transition from primary to secondary school with special reference to MFL (Chambers, in preparation).

Rationale for the study

The national languages strategy, *Languages for All: Languages for Life* (DfES, 2002) marked a formal beginning to establishing the place of modern foreign languages on the primary school curriculum. Primary Modern Foreign Languages (PMFL) was to be in place as an entitlement in all primary schools by 2010 and by 2011 was to be a statutory requirement. This was put on hold with the change of Government in 2010 but, after a period of consultation, the obligatory place of one or more foreign languages on primary school timetables was confirmed as from September 2014 (Department for Education (DfE), 2014). This was and continues to be widely welcomed by the MFL profession (Stewart, 2013) and was seen to be a positive counterbalance to the change of status of MFL at Key Stage 4 from a compulsory to an optional subject, a move which was less well received (Sharma, 2009). A further underpinning of the enhanced status of MFL was introduced in 2010 when a foreign language was included as a core subject included in the EBac. This provides information on how pupils are performing in English, mathematics, history or geography, the sciences and a language at key stage 4 (Years 10-11) in any government-funded school. (DfE, 2015).

The general enthusiasm for PMFL (Ratcliffe, 2013) is, however, tempered by an awareness that the consequences of not learning from past experience has the potential to be damaging (Hunt, Barnes, Powell and Martin, 2005). Findings on the *Primary French* initiative in the 1960s (Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen and Hargreaves, 1974) and now more recent research (e.g. Bolster 2009; Hunt, Barnes, Powell and Martin, 2008; McLachlan, 2009) on PMFL teaching in schools, report the same serious challenges relating to organisation, staffing, teaching methods and, very importantly, transition. These issues, which question the extent to which policy makers are aware of, or take seriously, the experiences from the past, need to be addressed with the diligence and urgency they deserve, otherwise the latest iteration of PMFL is likely to be the same ‘damp squib’ of its predecessor.

Transition is recognised as the key factor on which the success of the PMFL initiative hinges. How transition is managed will influence whether time spent on PMFL has been time well spent or not. Burstall et al. (1974), reported how pupils, in the main, simply re-started their MFL experience in the secondary school from scratch, regardless of the knowledge and

experience they may have brought from primary school. More recent evidence (Bolster, 2009; Driscoll, Jones and Macrory, 2004; Hunt et al., 2008; McLachlan, 2009; Tierney, 2009) suggests that, although there are pockets of good practice in PMFL transition across the country, generally little appears to have changed since the late 60s: there is very limited exchange of information between primary and secondary schools; little acknowledgement in secondary schools of the work done or level achieved at primary school; evidence of pupils simply having to start from scratch, regardless of their subject knowledge.

The study reporting on the perspectives of a sample of UK-based secondary school teachers on KS2-KS3 transition (Chambers, 2014), identified uneven and ineffective practices across schools, with good practice found in one sample school only (n=12), a former specialist languages college. Communication and exchange of information between primary and secondary schools were generally poor, the result, more often than not, of secondary schools' large numbers of feeder primary schools. Lack of clear, shared objectives led to a wide variety of teaching provision. There was little or no focus on assessment or reporting of pupil progress in MFL.

The voices of pupils have been largely unheard on PMFL matters, not least on transition and yet this issue impacts on them most of all. Ruddock and McIntyre (2007: 3) stress the importance of consultation of this kind:

‘... in the present climate of unprecedented national and international support for the idea of listening to young people it is important to understand consultation's potential for strengthening learning and improving the conditions of learning.’

The purpose of this study is to give this sample of pupils from the north of England the opportunity to share their thoughts on how schools' practices in relation to transition impact on their MFL learning experience. This may then inform how primary and secondary schools might amend their practices to serve better the needs of pupils.

Research questions

Informed by the literature and current policy and practice referred to above, this study addresses the following issues relating to KS2 – KS3 transition in MFL:

- How consistent is MFL provision across primary schools, as reported by pupils?
- How effectively are pupils prepared for the transition to the KS3 MFL classroom?
- To what extent are pupils aware of their attainment in MFL as they leave primary school?
- To what extent are pupils aware of any exchange of information between their primary and secondary schools relating to their PMFL experience?

- Does pupils' enjoyment of MFL change in the course of years 6 (in primary school at age 10 or 11) and 7 (at secondary school at age 11 or 12)? What are the factors impacting on any change?

Research design and methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to find the answers to the research questions. It was felt that semi-structured interviews, conducted one-to-one, face-to-face, in a non-stressful environment was likely to produce more, better quality information than would a questionnaire, which would allow no opportunity for on-the-spot follow-up. A semi-structured interview (see Appendix 1 for interview schedule), would facilitate flexibility within a thoroughly considered question framework (Wilson, 2009).

The interview schedule accessed pupils' perceptions of their foreign language learning experience. Separate schedules were developed for each of the primary and secondary school contexts. Key areas of questioning were identified. These were based on issues raised in the review of earlier research and PMFL-specific publications, such as Kirsch (2008). They were also informed by the outcomes of the earlier study on teachers' perspectives (Chambers, 2014), especially the section relating to 'Consideration of pupils' PMFL experience'. The following were the headings for primary, for example:

- Languages provision (i.e. languages taught; number of lessons); lesson content (i.e. activities and tasks)
- Teaching of MFL (i.e. who taught the lessons; use of target language etc)
- Assessment; attainment; recording (including whether pupils were conscious of their attainment and how they were progressing)
- Preparation for transfer to secondary school (i.e. what transitional links did the primary school have with the secondary school; whether Open Evenings were offered; whether MFL-specific information and activities were provided; whether primary pupils felt anxious at the prospect of transferring to secondary)
- Likes and dislikes re: MFL (i.e. whether they enjoyed languages lessons and what factors impacted on this)

Under each heading were possible sub-questions, in the event of these being needed. (Appendix 1.)

Key to the success of the interviews would be the appointment of the interviewer / research assistant (RA). Key criteria for selection included: the ability to relate to and communicate with 10-12 year old children; a warm, approachable personality; a knowledge of PMFL and issues relating to transition; experience in teaching MFL at primary and secondary levels. A recently retired Head of MFL from a local secondary school met these criteria and was appointed to take on the data collection work.

The RA piloted the interviews involving three pupils in his former school to assess the comprehensibility of the questions. In the light of this experience, some minor changes were made to the wording of three of the questions.

Data were collected in two phases. A convenience sample (Brymon, 2008) of schools was identified. In phase one, September 2012, the research team contacted the headteachers of seven state primary schools known to them, inviting them to participate in the project. Four responded positively (Appendix 2). The headteachers then identified pupils in each school to be interviewed. This produced a sample of 18 pupils: 11 girls; 7 boys; 14 white British; one British Asian; one Pole; one Iraqi; one Zimbabwean. This purposive sample (Brymon, 2008) of interviewees was selected based on their willingness to participate and their teachers' assessment of how they might cope in the interview context. The research team wrote to the parents of the nominated pupils, outlining the purpose and nature of the research and seeking their approval for the interviews to be carried out. All of the parents responded positively. Phase 1 interviews took place in October / November 2012.

Phase two took place one year later. The 18 pupils who had been interviewed in primary schools in Year 6, were followed into their secondary schools. As had been the practice for phase one, the headteachers of the secondary schools were contacted in writing and their permission sought for the continuation of the research. Parents were also contacted and invited to confirm their agreement for their children to be interviewed a second time. All of the secondary headteachers and parents responded positively. Sample pupils were interviewed in November 2013, in their respective secondary schools.

Before the individual interviews took place in each of the two phases, the RA met the pupils in groups in their schools and explained the purpose of the research and how the interviews were to be conducted. He also made it clear that their anonymity was assured and that they could withdraw at any time without having to give a reason. (This had also been made clear in the letter to the headteachers and parents.) The duration of the interviews varied, in each phase between 15 and 20 minutes.

The sample of primary schools, was limited in size ($n=4$) but its diversity in terms of location, size and the ethnic diversity of intake had the potential to provide useful data. (See Appendix 2.) The same applied to the four sample secondary schools.

Analysis of data

Following the conduct of the interviews, the data were transcribed and read through a number of times. This led to the identification of themes (Wilson, 2009), predictably driven by the main question headings originally identified. Further data trawls led to the creation of a coding framework (Bryman, 2008; Heigham and Croker, 2009), informed mostly by the subquestions considered in the development of the semi-structured interview schedule. This gave this qualitative study a quantitative dimension, with the provision of some basic, descriptive statistics. A more detailed interrogation of the data, using MAXQDA (2010), was

carried out to facilitate differences between categories, such as those relating to sex of the pupils (e.g. would girls be more favourable to languages than boys?), the schools (e.g. would one particular primary school treat PMFL more seriously than the others?), primary and secondary schools (e.g. would the attitude and approach to languages, as reported by the pupils, be more serious in secondary than primary?).

Limitations

Before engaging in the presentation of the findings above, the limitations of the study need to be acknowledged.

Feasibility determined that study was limited in scale and the sample size small. Whilst it was the purpose of the study to give the pupils a voice and to access their views, this is no easy task with 10-12 Year olds (McCrum and Hughes, 2003; Ruddock and McIntyre, 2007). Often their responses are limited to single words or short sentences. Much is demanded of the interviewer to make the pupil feel comfortable in the interview context and draw out their thoughts in a stress-free manner.

In spite of the above caveats, I would argue that they do not invalidate the study's findings, which are useful and worthy of dissemination in their own right, provided their context is borne in mind.

Findings

- *How consistent is MFL provision across primary schools, as reported by the pupils?*

Languages taught in Primary Schools

Table 1. Languages taught in Primary Schools

The language on offer at the sample primary schools was determined by the language competence of the class teachers and whether they enjoyed the benefits of a local secondary school with a languages outreach programme which could provide a MFL teacher once a week. Of the 11 pupils who took French, five had a class teacher with French competence, three had a support teacher from the local secondary school and three were taught by a foreign languages assistant (i.e. a native speaker from the target language country spending a year attached to one or more schools). The four pupils taking German were taught by a teacher from the local secondary school. Where both French and German were offered, the French was taught by the class teacher and the German by a teacher contributing to the outreach programme.

Of the 18 sample pupils:

- nine who had been learning French at primary school, continued with French at secondary school;
- two who had been learning French at primary school, changed to German at secondary school;
- of the four who had been learning German at primary school, three continued with German; one changed to French;
- three who had been learning French and German at primary school, took French only at secondary school.

In summary:

- 15 of the 18 pupils continued with at least one of the languages learnt at primary school;
- three pupils did not continue with the only language they had learnt at primary school;
- four pupils continued with only one of the two languages they had learnt at primary school.

The figures above, where only three pupils at secondary school did not build on the same foreign language they had learnt at primary school, suggest that secondary schools may have acknowledged the MFL learning experience their new pupils had in primary school. It also reflects the dominance of French as the most common foreign language learned in English schools, primarily because French is the most likely language in which the primary school teacher will be competent.

Timetabled provision for MFL

Previous studies (Bolster 2009; Driscoll et al, 2004; Hunt et al., 2008; McLachlan, 2009) reported variation in the frequency and length of MFL lessons across schools. The sample in this study suggested some consistency. All of the schools had timetabled allocation each week. Three of the four primary schools offered one lesson a week of one hour's duration for each language taught (a significant increase on the 2004 findings of Driscoll et al.). The fourth school provided 45 minute lessons. Whilst consistency is a positive, one wonders how much can be achieved in lessons of appropriate length but such low frequency. One session per week is hardly sufficient if a feeling of progress is to be achieved. In practical terms, however, primary schools would find it challenging to accommodate the additional MFL in the already overflowing primary school timetable. A compromise, albeit not entirely satisfactory, might be to divide the time available into two or three teaching sessions across the week. This would, of course, cause organisational challenges in relation to staffing and timetabling, especially in those schools which do not have their own MFL specialist. Each session would be short and would have to be intensive but the frequency might support the consolidation of learning and the pace and sense of progress. Having said all of that, however, one lesson per week of 45 or 60 minutes is the provision for young learners of English in many countries across the world (Enever, Moon and Raman, 2009).

Lesson content

The primary school pupils described lessons consisting of games, quizzes, DVDs and songs. In one school, pupils enjoyed the experience of cooking and tasting French food. Little writing appears to have been done and, when this was part of the lesson, it took the form of filling in worksheets.

We did German bingo. We learnt the names of our family in German; we learnt how to spell our names in German. (4,R1, i.e. pupil 4, in round 1, the first phase of data collection which took place in the primary school. R2 refers to the second round of interviews which took place in the secondary school.)

Well, we do like worksheets and things like that. We go on games on the computer and we listen to German words and then we have like a wordsearch or something like that. (8,R1)

An exception to this was a school which had a link with a partner primary in Dijon to which pupils sent emails and other materials:

Well, we either receive or sometimes write letters to our penpals and they come from Dijon. I've got two penpals that live in Dijon and we write back and forth and they write to us in English and we write to them in French and we just get to know each other. (5, R1)

A predictable area of inconsistency across the primary schools was the teachers' use of the target language (see Chambers, 2013), as reported by the pupils. Teachers from local secondary schools seemed to use a substantial amount whilst class teachers relied much more on English. One pupil noted this and remarked on some deficiency in his teacher's competence:

Miss A definitely does [*i.e. use the target language*] but Mrs B, I think, she comes from *country C*, so I think she's just learned French herself [*i.e. and, as a result, does not use the target language*]. (15,R1)

This may be an indicator of a PMFL initiative implemented in haste, with little thought given to appropriate resourcing, not least in relation to training. It is true that newly qualified teachers are coming through having undergone varying levels of training in MFL (some even with MFL specialisms) but primary teachers in post have had few, appropriately substantial and sustained professional development opportunities in this area. It may be unreasonable, therefore, to expect them to teach with competence and confidence.

- ***How effectively are pupils prepared for the transition to the KS3 MFL classroom?***

Provision for transition from primary to secondary was consistent across all of the schools in the sample. All of the pupils attended Open Evenings hosted by their preferred secondary school. In two of the four schools, pupils had the opportunity to engage in activities but these focussed on science and food technology. There was no MFL-specific provision on any of the Open Evenings attended. All of the pupils interviewed said that they were looking forward to challenges of 'big school', with the demands of 'proper, formal lessons' within a 'more grown up' environment. At the time of the interview, none articulated any fears or anxieties as a result of feeling under-prepared or ill-informed.

- ***To what extent are pupils aware of their attainment in MFL as they leave primary school?***

All of the pupils in primary schools reported little formal feedback on their attainment in MFL. At no stage were they awarded any grades or marks for their performance. Feedback

tended to be informal with lots of verbal praise. They had no clear understanding or appreciation of progress they may have made:

No, we don't really know how we're doing because Mr C sometimes says that we're doing well and that was really good. But we don't get reports or anything on how our German is doing. (12, R1)

One pupil referred to a tracking system on which pupils could record their own perceptions of their progress:

We have a tracking thing where you go into your book and write down what you can do. (11, R1)

Pupils were asked about two assessing and recording tools which were thought might have been usefully exploited by PMFL teachers. *The Languages Ladder* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2007) is designed to assess progress across listening, speaking, reading and writing at all levels of competence for all ages in a wide range of languages. *The European Languages Portfolio* (ELP) (Council of Europe, 2011) allows users to record their language learning achievements and their experience of learning and using languages. None of the pupils interviewed had any knowledge of either of these. Interestingly, the teachers interviewed in the north of England in the earlier study (Chambers, 2014) did report an awareness of these tools but little or no usage. This may represent an opportunity missed for pupils to get a sense of the progress they are making and the level of performance they are achieving.

- ***To what extent are pupils aware of any exchange of information between their primary and secondary schools relating to their PMFL experience?***

The pupils in the sample had no awareness of any liaison having taken place between their primary and secondary schools. This may be contradicted, however, by evidence that only three pupils were not continuing in Year 7 with the language they had learnt at primary school. This may suggest some sort of consideration given to their earlier MFL learning experience. On the other hand, it could be coincidental.

In terms of their perceptions of their secondary MFL teacher's awareness of what they had learnt at primary school and how they had learnt it, only 2/18 felt that their prior experience had been taken into consideration and even they were not entirely certain:

I'm not sure. I think they know the topics that we mainly covered. Otherwise we'd just be learning the same thing over and over again. (11,R2)

Well, I'm not sure because a lot of us have come from different primary schools and we have learnt different things so our teacher started not at the complete basics, but she kind of built on them. (15, R2)

For the other pupils, starting again from the beginning seemed to be the norm, and a strategy which they seemed to understand and appreciate:

No, she's kind of started us all again because she obviously didn't teach some people in their primary schools and they aren't as progressed as some of the other people in our form. (9, R2)

Well we sort of started again at the basics which was good. (12, R2)

No. I'm not very good at French and some people are really good at French, so now we're starting on the same level; people are just repeating the things that they learnt before. (14, R2)

This seems to belie the idea that starting afresh has a damaging impact on motivation (Bolster, 2009; Burstall, 1974) but rather seems to bolster pupils' confidence. Were this repetition not to take place, then perhaps the progress of those who are experiencing going over old ground, may not be quite so rapid in the early weeks of secondary school.

- ***Does pupils' enjoyment of MFL change in the course of years 6 (in primary school at age 10 or 11) and 7 (at secondary school at age 11 or 12)? What are the factors impacting on any change?***

Year 6 views on MFL

In three out of the four primary schools, the pupils in the sample enjoyed the MFL learning experience in Year 6. They liked games, quizzes and hands-on activities such as cooking (also found by Graham et al., 2014):

Well, we usually start with say numbers or colours or something. We might do a small activity and then that activity lasts until the end of the lesson and it just feels like five minutes. (10, R1)

They were grateful for the virtual absence of writing. Girls tended to be more enthusiastic and positive than boys.

The pupils interviewed in the fourth primary school were markedly less enthusiastic about languages lessons. It appears that a number of factors impacted on this. In two cases, their less than positive attitude may have been influenced by their perception of their parents' view of the place of languages on the school timetable:

No they think you can do what you want to do and if you don't want to do it [*i.e. learning a foreign language*], they won't push you. (4, R1)

This contrasted, however, with pupil 16 (see also below) whose mother and grandfather both spoke French and this may have played a role in his appreciation of the value of foreign language competence for his chosen career (navy engineer).

Unsurprisingly, the teacher was a key influence on pupils' attitude:

Because I don't like my teacher. She's not very good. (4, R1)

The pupils' estimation of the teacher and value of the subject may have related, at least in part, to their perception of the amount they learned and the progress they felt they were making:

We don't do much. We only do a little bit. We've only learned how to say our names and things. (12, R1)

They also seemed less than impressed by their teacher's use of the target language and her teaching methods:

She doesn't really [*use the target language*], she just sort of speaks the words and then we copy her and say them. (12, R1)

None of pupils (0/18) reported awareness of how well they were doing in French. Any feedback received took the form of on-the-spot praise for answering a question well. They did not receive any reports on progress covering, for example, a number of weeks of learning or an individual unit of work. Based on their answers, they appear not to have provided any assessed work which might have informed such reports. This can have done little to enhance their view of French learning or their perception of its seriousness.

In spite of the pupils' apparent indifference towards, and, in some cases dislike of French, they saw its value for their future working lives. Pupil 16 wanted to be an engineer in the navy and appreciated the need for foreign language competence because he "would travel all around the world" (R1). Pupil 12 regarded it as useful for those with a career in business:

Well maybe if you own a business and you are on a business trip and you are going somewhere like France or Germany or anywhere like that, then you would need to be able to speak that language so that you could talk to the other business and do anything to do with them. (12, R1)

Pupil 4 struggled to see the point of French, unless some link with future career could be made:

Well unless you are doing lots of stuff in France, then no. If they have not contact or anything with anyone in France, then there isn't much point. (4, R1)

Year 7 views on MFL

In Year 7 more pupils (16/18) articulated their enjoyment of MFL lessons and that enjoyment seems to be even greater than it had been in Year 6:

Like the other day, we watched this really funny video and they were singing a song of how to learn the alphabet in French. (14, R2)

Two pupils did not enjoy MFL. One had gone off languages completely:

I don't really like the French language. I don't think I'm doing very well. I just don't like languages at all. (7, R2)

The other found it too difficult:

I find it quite complicated to learn because some of the words there are feminine and masculine and it's just that, and also for plural I just get mixed up and it's just hard. (10, R2)

Pupils identified some interesting factors relating to the difference between MFL teaching and learning in primary school and that in secondary school, which contributed to their increased enjoyment. They seemed to appreciate an increase in seriousness and formality and a move away from games and a focus on fun. This took the form of more, 'harder' work, use of textbooks and more writing: 'We don't have to sing cheesy songs.' (11, R2)

They felt that having a specialist teacher led to better teaching, including more meaningful, interactive activities:

Because the lessons are much more interactive and we don't just say stuff. (2,R2)

Yes, they are a lot better [*ie MFL in secondary school*] because the teachers are better at teaching them.... Like I said, they are a lot more fun than they were at *primary school D* and the teachers are like they've been trained properly to teach that exact language. (12, R2)

All 18 Year 7 pupils expressed a preference for secondary school MFL learning over their primary school experience:

Yes, because at primary school all we did was sing a few songs but here we've learnt quite a lot and we get a lot more done in one lesson. (1, R2)

Well, at primary school we were kind of doing a lot more kind of simple and easier stuff but now because we are going to be learning it for the whole year, it has kind of progressed us on to doing some more challenging stuff like learning the time and learning bigger numbers and just generally harder stuff than what we were learning at *primary school D*. (9,R2)

What becomes clear from the Year 7 pupils' responses is their wish to feel that they are learning more and progressing. 'Fun' has its place but, essentially, they want to move forward with their learning. This may be an indicator of learners maturing and looking back at the primary school experience with a more responsible attitude, the product of a year of growing up. Their primary teachers' focus was likely to have been on making MFL a positive, enjoyable experience. Had they changed the focus more towards progress and achievement, it is difficult to know whether the primary school pupils would have responded positively to this, as they do one year later, or negatively because MFL might be perceived as too much like hard work.

Discussion

The views of the small sample of young language learners contributing to this study on transition give rise to a number of important impacting factors worthy of note: PMFL

provision and teacher development; pupils' sense of progression; monitoring, assessment and reporting; communication and collaboration between primary and secondary schools; preparation for transition to secondary school.

PMFL provision and teacher development

As was the case in other studies (Bolster 2009; Hunt et al., 2008; McLachlan, 2009), the primary school pupils' responses suggested diversity of language on offer and how it was taught. There was also diversity in who taught the foreign language. It might have been the class teacher and/or a teacher from the local secondary school and/or a foreign language assistant. The class teacher may have had foreign language competence or not. S/he may have had training in foreign language teaching or not. Some consistency existed, however, in relation to the amount of time spent on foreign language learning and teaching.

Graham et al (2014) identify a correlation between the teaching time available, the training the teacher has had and her/his level of French, with test scores. Kormos and Csizér (2008) stress the relationship between the quality of the teaching experienced by the pupils and the attitudes to language learning that they form.

The consistency of teaching provision in English primary schools has improved since the time of the research referenced above with the introduction of the *National Curriculum in England* (DfE, 2014a) and the *Key Stage 2 Languages Programmes of Study* (DfE, 2014b). In addition, the training of newly qualified teachers too has improved with the advent of specialist primary MFL courses (Ofsted, 2003). However, there is still much to be done in the light of pupils' critical comments in relation to perceived lack of progress. It is dubious how much progress can be made with one lesson per week. Most newly qualified teachers will not have taken a course of training offering an MFL specialism but rather will have had something like three half-day MFL sessions over a 38 week course of training. This is unlikely to give them the confidence and competence that they need.

Pupils' sense of progression

The sample Year 6 pupils in this study pointed to a shared focus on fun, with little time spent on writing. Most seemed relatively happy with these activities but, looking back, one year later in Year 7, they articulated some disgruntlement on going over the same material repeatedly, with little sense of progression.

In their 2014 study on the impact of PMFL teaching approaches on attainment and preparedness for secondary school language learning, Suzanne Graham and her team identified a similar 'sense of stagnation' (Graham, 2014, slide 49) and that repetition of subject matter was a potential problem at primary level. Primary pupils had little appreciation of any progress they might be making.

The pupils in this sample, when interviewed in Year 7 (age 11), made it clear that foreign language learning became more serious in KS3 than it had been in primary school, with much greater emphasis on writing. They regarded this as 'real work'. Although none said that this was an area where they felt unprepared, it is perhaps strange that writing played

such a minor role in their primary school experience, not least given the underpinning support and consolidation it can provide to listening, speaking and reading. Cameron (2001) has concerns about writing being introduced too early, in relation to learners in the 5-7 age group but suggests that 8-9 year olds are likely to be ready to cope with writing to support their learning. This is supported by Swain (2000), who identified how collaborative writing enhanced the learning of young pupils in Canada. It might well be the case, therefore, that, at the time of this research, primary school teachers were missing an opportunity to support learning and prepare pupils better for the transition to the Year 7 classroom by not including more writing activities in lessons. This may well have been the sort of activity which the secondary school pupils were crying out for, as they looked back critically on their primary school experience. The appropriate implementation of the *National Curriculum in England* (DfE, 2014a) and the *Key Stage 2 Languages Programmes of Study* (DfE, 2014b) might have done much to address this issue in the interim.

Monitoring, assessment and reporting

Year 6 pupils claimed that they had little or no knowledge of what they had achieved in primary school foreign languages or of the progress they had made. They did not refer to any form of monitoring, assessment or reporting. Rea-Dickins' and Rixon's (1999) survey, based mostly on mainland-Europe, found, by contrast, that most teachers did assess young learners' achievement, albeit in a way which was far from perfect. Graham et al (2014) identify an ignorance of progress and the undermining impact that this can have on motivation. Regular monitoring (which need not take the form of formal tests but could include portfolios, observation, quizzes (O'Malley and Valdez-Pierce, 1996)) and feedback could help address this. This is where *The Languages Ladder* and *The European Languages Portfolio* (ELP), referred to above, could be usefully employed. Again, this could help give MFL the seriousness Year 7 pupils seemed to appreciate in secondary school and missed at primary school as they look back at their learning there.

Communication and collaboration between primary and secondary schools

There was very little evidence to suggest much meaningful communication between primary and secondary schools. Cameron (2001), Pinter (2006), and more recently Robinson, Mourão and Kang (2016) stress the importance of continuity between work done at the primary school and the secondary. It is possible that secondary schools know which language/s pupils have learnt at primary school, but little beyond this. Experience in the Year 7 classroom did not suggest to pupils that secondary school teachers knew what they had learnt in Year 6 and how they had been taught. They were not aware of any attempt by their Year 7 teachers to build on their PMFL experience. If pupils' perceptions are a reflection of the reality (and this is confirmed in the study on teachers' perceptions (Chambers, 2014)), this seems to question PMFL as a serious undertaking.

Given the absence of assessment, recording and reporting in primary school, there was little or no information on attainment which could be passed on to secondary schools (see Pinter, 2006). This is an area which was also identified in the interviews with teachers (Chambers, 2014). It needs to be addressed if pupils' experience of transition in MFL is to be smooth, their learning enhanced and their progress at least maintained. It has to be recognised, however, that this involves considerable investment, not least in terms of time. Where this time is to come from is a major concern. Secondary schools may receive pupils from a large number of primary schools. Teachers in both phases work under great pressure with little thinking-space, let alone time for liaison with other schools and thoughtful, imaginative collaboration. Much of the pressure they feel is driven by the demands of Ofsted inspection. (Office for Standards in Education: inspects and regulates services that care for children and young people, and services providing education and skills for learners of all ages). Data on pupil performance have to be 'Ofsted-ready', given that the inspectors can appear at any time. The price of Ofsted failure is very high. Teachers can lose their jobs. Schools can be closed. In primary schools, in particular, foreign languages play a small role in these inspections. Little wonder, then, that the provision, assessment, recording and exchange of information on MFL learning and teaching between primary and secondary schools are not always given the attention they require. This returns to the point made at the conclusion of the preceding paragraph, in that it calls into question whether MFL is treated with the seriousness it needs and deserves within the UK education system.

Preparation for transition to secondary school

Primary pupils attended Open Evenings held at their future secondary schools. The pupils did not report any MFL specific inputs or activities at the Open Evenings. They did not say that they had met their languages teachers. Nonetheless, none articulated any anxiety or disquiet at the prospect of foreign language learning in their new school. Rather, they were looking forward to the general challenge which secondary school would pose. That pupils were not anxious about transition to secondary school is a good thing. Anxiety, for the most part, is a barrier to language learning (Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). That nothing MFL-specific is offered at Open Evenings is a missed opportunity. Especially given that not all pupils are positive about the PMFL learning experience (although most are), I suggest it would help all pupils to look forward to Year 7 MFL lessons, were some MFL activities or some organised contact with MFL teachers and current secondary pupils to be included.

Conclusion

The pupils' voice has been heard. Much of what this admittedly small sample of interviewees say, ties in with the views articulated by secondary school MFL teachers in an earlier study (Chambers, 2014). Their thoughts support the view that KS2-KS3 transition in MFL requires some attention before it can be judged to be the well-oiled machine it needs to be. It is recognised that welcome changes have been made since the time of this study. The

introduction of the new *National Curriculum in England* (DfE, 2014a) as well as the *Key Stage 2 Languages Programmes of Study* (DfE, 2014b) has led to significant changes in PMFL, especially in relation to spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG) and when and how writing should be introduced.

Pupils want to feel that they are progressing. They want to do ‘real’ work. The statutory guidance above, especially in relation to writing, helps to address this. Interviewees identify that primary schools need teachers trained to teach foreign languages. It may be concluded from how they describe their transitional experience that secondary MFL teachers need more information on what pupils have learned, how they have learned it and how well, in order to prepare schemes of work suited to the needs of the new Year 7 intake (Chambers, 2014). This has implications for monitoring, assessing and reporting and the exchange of findings between primary and secondary schools. These outcomes could also be usefully shared with learners and their parents/carers.

The Year 6 and Year 7 teachers of MFL should feel encouraged that learners generally enjoy what they do in class and see the importance of learning the foreign language. This provides a foundation on which to build. This foundation would be so much stronger if policy makers played their role by giving PMFL the seriousness it requires, creating the space and providing the resources for teachers to undergo the necessary training (see Murphy and Evangelou, 2016) and facilitate the transitional experience that will ensure the smooth continuation of progress in pupils’ MFL learning. Currently primary school teachers in particular have little choice but to *make do* with the very limited time, funding, MFL competence and thinking space which they have at their disposal. This is unfair to them and their pupils at a time when they are expected to work to the highest standards and pay such a heavy price for not being able to do so.

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