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‘Does age matter?’ - A study of Year 6 and Year 2 perspectives on learning Modern Foreign Languages as a new subject

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Abstract

This study investigates the impact of age upon children’s perspectives on learning Modern Foreign Languages as a new subject, using French as the focus language. French is introduced to a Year 2 and a Year 6 class as a new subject and their attitudes towards their preconceived ability, enthusiasm and confidence to speak the language as well as at which age children feel that languages should be introduced will be looked at in detail. Comparisons will be made between the perspectives of the Year 2 pupils and the Year 6 pupils who are aware that they will be expected to learn languages in secondary school. Currently, Modern Foreign Languages are an entitlement at primary level, however it will be discussed whether or not it would be beneficial to pupils and teachers to make languages a compulsory subject within the primary curriculum. Research was conducted in a large primary school in Peterborough and included a class of twenty-eight Year 6 pupils and twenty Year 2 pupils. Moreover, it will be shown through this study the dual impact of increased enthusiasm to speak the language as well as increased self-confidence in their own ability in the study of Modern Foreign Languages.

'Does age matter?' - A study of Year 6 and Year 2 perspectives on learning Modern Foreign Languages as a new subject

Children are often very enthusiastic and uninhibited learners, they “want to please the teacher rather than their peer group” and are keen “to have a go at an activity even when they don’t quite understand the why or how” (Cameron, 2001: 1). For the teacher, children are consequently often easier to motivate and influence in terms of their ideas, attitudes and feelings (Sharpe, 2001). With this in mind, the introduction of a new subject would perhaps be easier with younger children as the teacher can harness this enthusiasm for learning more efficiently.

Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) are currently an entitlement and not compulsory at primary level. In 2008, 69% of primary schools were fully meeting the entitlement for all year groups, which highlighted a rise of 15% from 2007 and 35% from 2006 (Wade, Marshall, O’Donnell, 2009). With the number of primary schools enacting this entitlement rising annually, MFL is a recent example of the introduction of a new subject. Introducing MFL at an earlier age, when children are often more spirited and keen learners, will hopefully influence pupils’ enjoyment of this subject at secondary level when languages are compulsory.

This study will focus on my experience of introducing a MFL as a new subject to Year 6 and a Year 2 classes, using French as the target language. The extent to which age is a contributory factor to children’s perceptions of their own ability, as well as their enthusiasm and attitudes towards language learning will be analysed.

Literature Review

The question of whether age matters when learning foreign languages as a new subject has been widely disputed. Penfield and Roberts (1959) proposed the ‘critical period hypothesis’ that was supported by Lenneberg’s (1967) later theory that there is an optimal age for language acquisition. They stated that during childhood the brain, which is not yet fully developed, can adapt itself to

allow for more successful language acquisition. This would not be possible after puberty when the brain is fully formed, therefore making language learning at a later age potentially more difficult. Teaching children languages earlier can therefore be more successful as children are easily influenced, making their attitudes towards a new subject more malleable (Sharpe & Driscoll, as cited in Field, 2000).

The idea that age is a contributory factor to how successful children are at learning a new language has also been attributed to by Lüdi (as cited in Jones & Coffey, 2006: 4), who completed research alongside neurobiologists and concluded that “the optimum age for the development of bilingualism is before the age of 3”. Clearly three is a very young age and the suggestion that this is the optimum age for a child to begin learning another language highlights that younger is better for language acquisition. This can also be linked to behaviourist theory, in which all new learning leads to new behaviour acquisition. In regard to language, if a child repeats sounds heard in their environment and receives a positive response, the child will repeat the sound. If there is no response or a negative reaction, repetition is unlikely to occur (Patten & Williams, 2008). As with any new subject, a positive response will indicate success to the child.

These theories all suggest that the younger the child is when learning a new subject, the more the learning has been embedded. If children have learnt languages at an earlier age and their experience of languages has been positive, the prospect of learning languages at secondary level will potentially be more exciting than fearful (Chambers, 1999). Sharpe (2001: 35) insists that MFL teachers “may find more fertile ground among pre-11 pupils than post-11 pupils, whose prejudices, albeit assimilated from the parental home, the media and general cultural background, may be more firmly established and consequently more difficult to challenge”. The younger children are, the less time they have had to establish preconceived ideas about MFL, thus making barriers to learning less likely.

As already mentioned, children’s enthusiasm for learning is another argument as to why the introduction of a new subject at primary level can lead to more successful learning. Brackley (as cited in The Nuffield Foundation, 2000: 41) states that we “are wasting precious years, where children are receptive to language physically and intellectually and are happy to learn for fun”. Cameron (2001: 1) asserts that this enthusiasm can consequently lead to more accurate

pronunciation in a foreign language, as children “often seem less embarrassed than adults at talking a new language, and their lack of inhibition seems to help them get a more native-like accent”. Younger children are less afraid to take risks in their learning, especially when they are provided with a safe learning environment, in which trusting teacher-pupil relationships have been formed. Martin (2008: 13) claims that due to the “uninhibited, unembarrassed and less self-conscious” nature of primary learners, they are superior at “mastering the development of the phonological or sound system” and “the ability to identify/imitate sounds closely without inhibition”. The suggestion here is that lack of embarrassment on the part of the younger learners contributes to successful pronunciation.

The Scottish Project (Low, Duffield, Brown & Johnstone, 1993) concluded that by introducing languages as a new subject in primary years, linguistic confidence has been developed. This contributes to an increased confidence to answer questions orally and take risks in using more sophisticated sentence structures in the foreign language when in secondary school. As children grow, they become more aware about the world and people around them and are therefore more likely to encounter anxiety about failing and making mistakes; consequently there are fewer barriers to learning when a new subject is introduced at an earlier stage. Anxiety is certainly a potential barrier concerning language learning, as ability level is perhaps made more visible due to the oral content of the subject (Horowitz, 2001).

However, it has also been argued that introducing languages as a new subject at primary level will have little impact on later learning. The research found in the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) report focusing on French in primary schools, concluded that children who began learning French in primary school were not more linguistically able than those who began learning languages in secondary school (Burstall, Jamieson, Cohen & Hargreaves, 1974). Jones and Coffey (2006) highlight that this data could be considered flawed as those children who had learnt languages at primary level were placed in the same beginner level class as those who had not, therefore halting their linguistic development.

Driscoll (as cited in Driscoll & Frost, 1999) highlights that older learners have a more sophisticated knowledge of their own language providing them with transferrable linguistic skills that can ease foreign language learning. The older learner is more likely to have a stronger background of

linguistic knowledge in their mother-tongue, particularly regarding word and information structure, as well as plural formation (Dimroth as cited in Philip, Oliver and Mackey., 2008), this knowledge places them in an advantageous position when learning MFL.

In regard to new subjects in general, older children have developed their own learning strategies that can be applied to all subjects making them more metacognitively aware. This enables them to understand how best they can independently tackle a new subject, self-assessing their own progress as they are learning (Johnstone, 1994). Younger children, who are still developing their independent learning strategies, cannot apply their own techniques to learning a new subject as efficiently as older children. Martin (2008: 12) claims that older learners have “more efficient learning strategies, a more mature conceptual map of the world” and “a clearer sense of reasons for learning foreign languages”. This can be linked to the conclusions of the aforementioned Scottish Review. Comparisons were made in this research between eight year-old learners who were being introduced to foreign languages as a new subject, and eleven year-old learners who had been learning languages for two years. The research indicated that within two years, the eleven year-olds had developed strategies for coping with ‘language anxiety’ and they had already broadened their knowledge of tense usage in the foreign language. This research indicates that older children are more self-reflective and therefore capable of evaluating their learning accurately (Low et al., 1993).

It has also been argued that “the amount of time a pupil spends learning a foreign language is a major factor in determining how much progress is made” (Sharpe, 2001: 189). The research taken from the NFER report highlighted that when learning is not continuous, then little or no progress in learning will be made. Mitchell, Martin and Grenfell (as cited in Sharpe, 2001: 188) claim that “investment of more hours, through an earlier start, has at least the potential to raise general levels of achievement, provided that issues of continuity and progression are properly addressed”. David Singleton (1989) has conducted much research concerning age as a factor of linguistic ability and has argued that there are four key areas which require consideration: younger is better, older is better, younger is better for accent and interpersonal skills and younger is better in the long run. His final conclusion states that “if one takes due account of the exposure time variable, one can plausibly extend the ‘younger = better in the long run’ interpretation to cover formal learning situations” (Singleton, 1989: 31). He highlights that for any significant difference in starting age to be made, the time spent learning the foreign language must be five years longer or more. Moreover,

the idea put forward here is that learning languages at a younger age is better for the simple reason that this should lead to more time being spent learning the language in total, thus time is the advantage here and not age itself.

Driscoll (as cited in Driscoll & Frost, 1999: 22) agrees that the “progression and continuity of language competence” are vital and “pupils who study a language for a number of years are expected to make a marked improvement in terms of fluency, accuracy and the complexity of language content”. Vilke (1988) calculated that more than 1000 hours are required to become fully competent in a foreign language. While Singleton (1989) focuses on the ‘time factor’ when considering age as a variable in ability to learn a new subject, Sharpe and Driscoll (as cited in Field, 2000: 80) assert that “the lack of liaison between primary and secondary schools, may inhibit pupils’ progression, and therefore could mask the advantages of the time factor”. They claim that the ‘time factor’ has been hindered by the many secondary schools teaching Year 7 beginner language level and therefore not allowing those children who have previously studied foreign languages to build on the current linguistic level.

Research Design

I will be researching children’s preconceived ideas about their ability, enthusiasm and whether they see languages as a worthwhile subject at primary level. I will consider if there is a significant difference in attitudes towards MFL at different ages to ascertain if there is a preferable year to introduce languages as a new subject. To maximise accuracy, data was collected in exactly the same way for the different classes. There were twenty-eight children in the Year 6 class, all aged ten or eleven and twenty children in the Year 2 class, all aged six or seven.

The introductory French lesson

Martin (2000) advises that children should be provided with an age-appropriate lesson that will maximise their enthusiasm thus encouraging successful learning. My introductory French lesson plan, (see Appendix 1) was designed to be both stimulating and enjoyable, as French was a new subject to both classes. The lesson needed to be appropriate to both age groups, as I had to teach the same lesson to ensure my data would not be influenced by different lesson content. Johnstone

(1994: 55) affirms that to control the 'teaching method' variable, "the different age-groups should be taught in much the same way". All children were at beginner level and the chosen topic was 'La Ville' (The Town). The topic was chosen carefully as both classes had been working on 'My local area' in recent weeks. Bell and Cox (as cited in Hurrell & Satchwell, 1996: 53) state that by integrating topics there is "no distinction in the children's minds, no switching on and off". In this regard, I hoped that introducing the new subject through this topic would seem more relevant. Introducing a new subject can be daunting for children thus I felt an inherent need to embed interactive, fun activities into the lessons. The use of games is required to "help generate an enjoyable motivating environment for foreign language learning" (Driscoll as cited in Driscoll & Frost, 1999: 12).

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview of a group of six mixed-ability children (three boys, three girls) was conducted both before and after the French lesson for approximately 10 minutes. These interviews provided me with qualitative data that would give me a deeper and more developed understanding of the information collected in the questionnaires. During the interviews (for questions see Appendix 2) I was able to investigate the children's feelings, asking for ideas to be developed and clarified whenever necessary (Bell, 2005). The use of interviews, used alongside the questionnaires, gave me a deeper analysis and more thorough idea about children's perspectives, therefore triangulating my results. According to Laws (as cited in Laws, Harper & Marcus, 2003: 281), "the key to triangulation is to see the same thing from different perspectives and thus to be able to confirm or challenge the findings of one method with those of another". The interviews developed into a discussion between the pupils, making a semi-structured interview more appropriate. Questions were open-ended as not to direct children's answers. I began the interview by circulating the group gaining responses from each participant before the interview gradually developed into a discussion; this eased all interviewees into the discussion and gave all children confidence to share their views. This, according to Laws (as cited in Laws et al., 2003), is a common technique in interviews, in which the researcher will create techniques to draw out opinions of each interviewee.

Questionnaire

Questionnaires were completed in approximately 5 minutes by all students in both classes both before (see Appendix 3) and after (see Appendix 4) the French lesson, giving me quantitative data which provided a broader view of attitudes towards MFL as a new subject. It was explained to the children that the questionnaires would be anonymous. I created my own questionnaire in order to collect the exact information required, which would be appropriate to both age groups and would facilitate simple analysis and interpretation when completed (Bell, 2005). My aim was to create a very simple questionnaire that would give me clear results and would be completed efficiently by all pupils. My questionnaires consisted of six brief sentences and children indicated if they agreed, were not sure or disagreed. To further limit confusion, there was a face in each box: a smiley face to agree with the statement, a straight face if unsure and a sad face if they disagreed. Children coloured in the appropriate face. It was imperative that children completed the questionnaires immediately before and after the lesson in order that their feelings about the statements were precise. It was also vital that the two questionnaires were very similar to give me a more accurate portrayal of the extent to which attitudes had changed following the lesson.

Ethical considerations in relation to my research

The consideration of ethics was fundamental to my research project. Burgess (1993) believes that there are four main ethical issues: that all aspects of the project are disclosed to all participants, that the information is clearly understood, that participants are able to make their own judgement of the project and finally, that all participants must agree to partake in the project. All four elements were taken into consideration when planning and completing my research project by completing the following procedures.

The ethics checklist (see Appendix 5) was completed carefully and signed off by my Personal Tutor to confirm that all elements of ethical factors had been addressed. Additionally, a research proposal form, including proposed research approach, methods and questions were completed and signed by both my Personal Tutor and Class Mentor to confirm that my methods of data collection were ethically sound. Prior to data collection, a copy of each questionnaire was given to my Personal Tutor and Class Mentor. My Class Mentor was also given a copy of the interview questions and

lesson plan, to verify that all aspects of my data collection would be understandable to the children and ethically satisfactory. I also discussed the project in depth with my Class Mentor who affirmed that all members of the class should be able to participate unless they choose to withdraw. The lesson plan, questionnaires and interview questions were also shown to the Year 6 class teacher. Adjustments were made where necessary and the final copy of the interview questions and questionnaires were given to the Headteacher to confirm that my research approach and methods were acceptable.

As Burgess (1993) asserts, it is imperative that all participants in a research project are made aware of all elements, are given the opportunity to decline participation and should be given clear information. My research was explained to children in a child-friendly, coherent manner. Children were also informed that they could ask any questions and remove themselves from the research project should they wish to. The issue of anonymity must also be addressed; Bell (2005: 48) states that “if you say that participants will be anonymous, then under no circumstances can they be identified”. She highlights that if anonymity is promised, it must be fulfilled. The only detail children were expected to contribute was the class number to allow me to distinguish which year group the child belongs to. It was made clear that all information would be anonymous and that they would not be required to write their names on the questionnaires. In the presentation of my data all information will remain confidential. The name of the school or area will not be disclosed, children’s names will be changed as will the name of the classes to maximise confidentiality.

Following the completion of The Faculty of Education ethical checklist, discussing my research methods in depth with my Class Mentor and ensuring anonymity of all participants, I feel confident that my research would be appropriately ethical, accurately following Burgess’ (1993) four aims.

Presentation of Findings

Bigwood and Spore (2003) highlight that graphs are appropriate when using data comparatively, explaining a point vividly and showing trends and relationships clearly. This idea has been taken into consideration in the presentation of my data as this was the most effective way in which comparisons could be made between questionnaire results across the two year groups. As the Year 6 class consisted of twenty-eight pupils and the Year 2 class consisted of twenty children,

questionnaire responses have been converted to percentages to facilitate accurate comparisons. My data has been divided into four sections and graphs have been made to show results from both before and after the French lesson encouraging further comparison as to how opinions had changed following the introductory lesson. According to Burgess (1993: 105), the combination of qualitative and quantitative data allows the researcher “to focus on different aspects of the same problem”. The analysis of data collection will therefore be interwoven with relevant responses extracted from the interviews.

Introduction of French as new subject

In most questions asked, there was a notable difference in opinion between the Year 6 and the Year 2 classes. However, it was interesting to learn that following the French lesson, the same percentage of children in both year groups (75%) indicated that they believed it would be preferable if languages were introduced as a new subject in primary school instead of secondary school (see Figure 2). A percentage rise of 15% can be noted for those in Year 2 preferring the introduction of MFL at primary level, while the number of children in Year 6 rose by 29% reflecting a significant change in opinion following the lesson (see Figures 1 and 2).

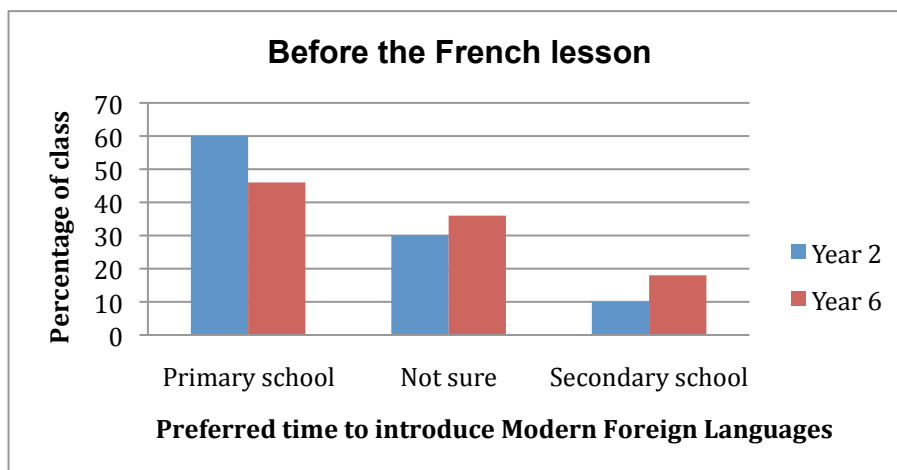


Figure 1: Results of questionnaire (question 6) before the French lesson

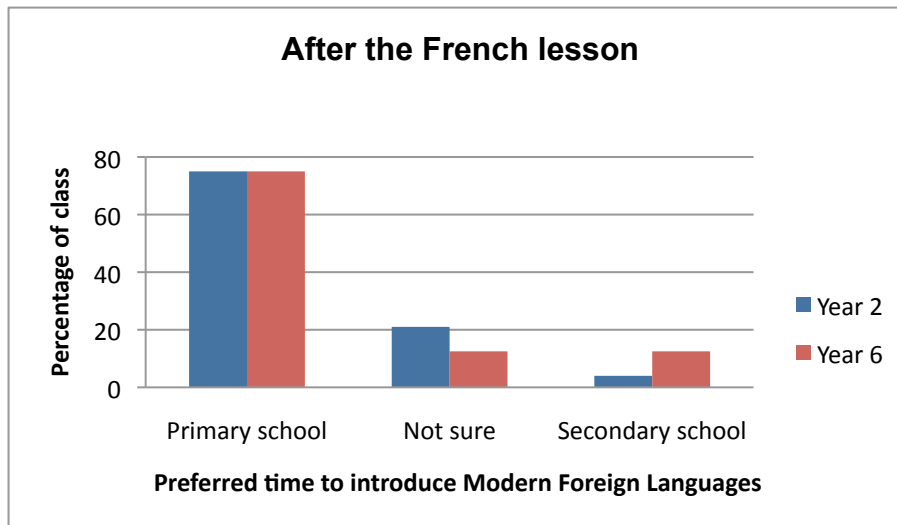


Figure 2: Results of questionnaire (question 6) after the French lesson

The percentage of children in both year classes who were unsure when languages should be introduced and those who favoured secondary school decreased and in the case of Year 6, the number of children who were unsure dropped by 23.5% which again is quite a significant change. The interviews can help highlight how such a change in opinion may have occurred, with one child commenting that “we’ll enjoy any subject if it’s made fun and colourful, we wouldn’t enjoy it if we just learnt words in French” (Dominic, Year 6). Perhaps then, the fact that games, colourful flashcards and a bright PowerPoint Presentation of words were included, children became more engrossed in the activities, as the learning and repetition of French vocabulary were placed in a more enjoyable, interactive context. Another child mentioned that “some people find learning another language hard, I think that it would be easier for everyone if we learnt it sooner” (Tommy, Year 6). Some children may seek explanation in age as a definitive factor as to why they may encounter difficulties in second language learning.

Of the six children being interviewed in Year 2, only one boy explained that he did “not want to learn languages because they are boring, maths and English are more interesting” (Jack, Year 2). However, following the lesson he stated that “French was a lot of fun; it wasn’t as boring as I thought it would be because I didn’t think we’d be learning with games” (Jack, Year 2). Again, the link between foreign language learning with monotonous vocabulary repetition was the expectancy here and children in both year groups were surprised that vocabulary and repetition of language can

be made enjoyable. It appears that simple games can completely change a child’s desire to learn a foreign language. When placed into an enjoyable context, children would prefer to learn a new language at an earlier age as their anxieties may be diminished. Indeed, Broner & Tarone (2001) assert that language play is imperative to children learning MFL and because of the enjoyable nature of games and play; children are essentially processing the language at a deeper level. Certainly, my research made it clear that learning vocabulary with visual aids and games can be seen to have helped cement the language learning more thoroughly and most children had memorised the majority of the vocabulary by the end of the lesson. The reason for such a dramatic change in opinion was that to the introduction of French was a positive learning experience, Chambers (1999: 72) claims “if their learning experience has been positive, perhaps they will come full of excitement at the prospect of yet further enjoyment”.

Enjoyment of French

My results show that while the majority of both year groups anticipated that they would enjoy the French lesson and in fact, did enjoy the lesson, the percentage of those enthusiastic about learning French as a new subject was higher amongst the Year 2 students (see Figures 3 and 4).

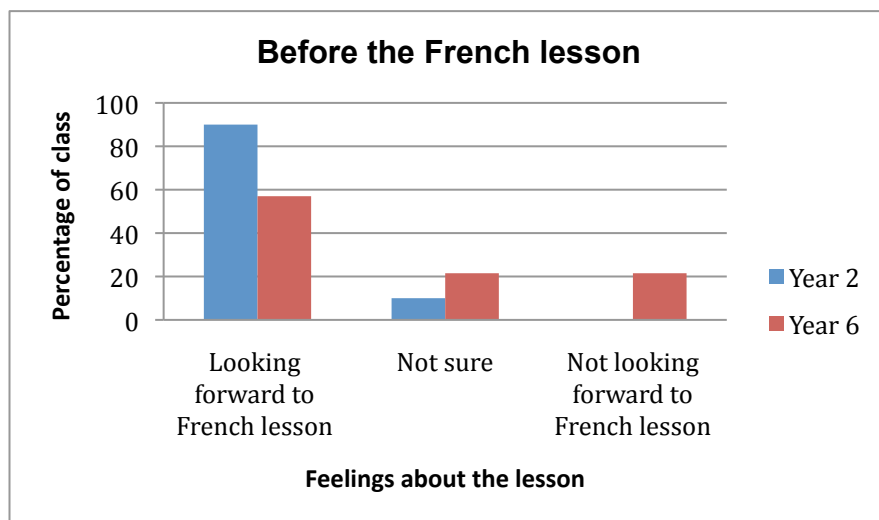


Figure 3: Results of questionnaire (question 1) before the French lesson

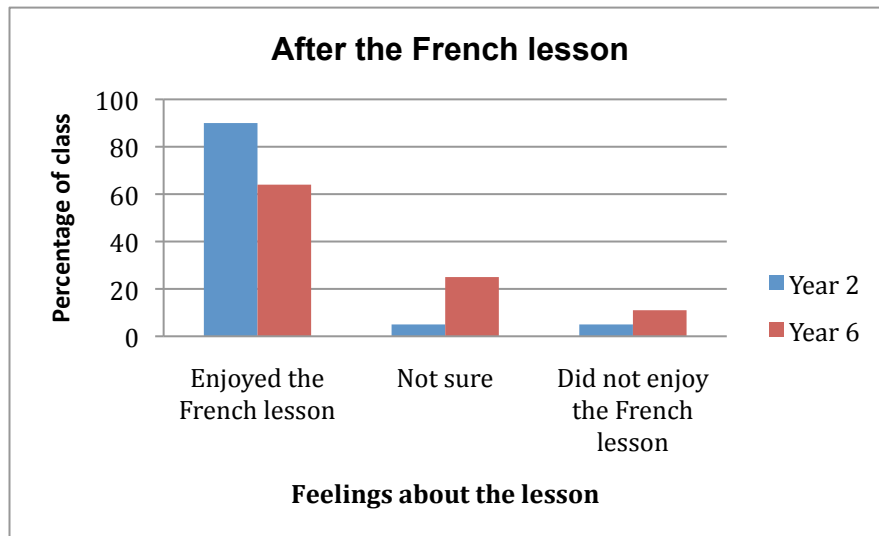


Figure 4: Results of questionnaire (question 1) after the French lesson

Prior to the lesson, there were no Year 2 children who were not looking forward to the lesson, however following the lesson, 5% of children stated that they did not enjoy the lesson. Having discussed enthusiasm for the subject during the interview, one girl stated that “some children were upset at the end because they really wanted their team to win the game” (Florence, Year 2), perhaps this could be the reason for the change of opinion. The number of pupils who enjoyed French in Year 2 did, however, remain consistent.

The Year 6 results show that children enjoyed the lesson more than they predicted and the number of children who were unsure decreased. One Year 6 student commented after the lesson that they “won’t see French as a proper subject until secondary school because it isn’t an important subject with a proper teacher like English and maths” (Lauren, Year 6), which may be some justification as to why more children in Year 6 do not anticipate an enjoyable subject, if it is not seen as learning which should be taken seriously. Both groups interviewed included students who were mostly very enthusiastic about the lesson that was about to take place and were equally enthusiastic following the lesson. One student summarised the general views of most pupils interviewed; “learning languages is very exciting because you get to learn so much about another country, not just the words” (Abigail, Year 2). Younger children are naturally enthusiastic and inquisitive learners, and this is certainly reflected in my results. Perhaps if languages were introduced at a younger age, where clearly younger learners anticipate enjoyment of the subject much more, then negative

attitudes will be diminished earlier, as these have clearly already formed amongst more Year 6 students than Year 2 students. Hood and Tobutt (2009: 3) insist that primary languages must be introduced “to ensure that children’s undoubted interest and enjoyment of language learning is opened up, developed and nourished”.

Ability in French

Preconceived ideas about ability in French mirror a similar trend as enthusiasm for French when comparing the different age groups. Enthusiasm seems to link with confidence as the majority of Year 2 children felt that they would succeed in French, with a lesser number unsure what their ability might be, and fewer still thinking they would not do well (see Figure 5). Most students interviewed in Year 2, with the exception of one, supported the statement that “learning languages will be really easy, because we all want to do well in it so we’ll make an effort to learn the words” (Molly, Year 2). One child, who admitted he was anxious about the subject, claimed that he felt “nervous about learning French, because it’s a new subject, I’m worried that I won’t be good at it straight away” (Jack, Year 2).

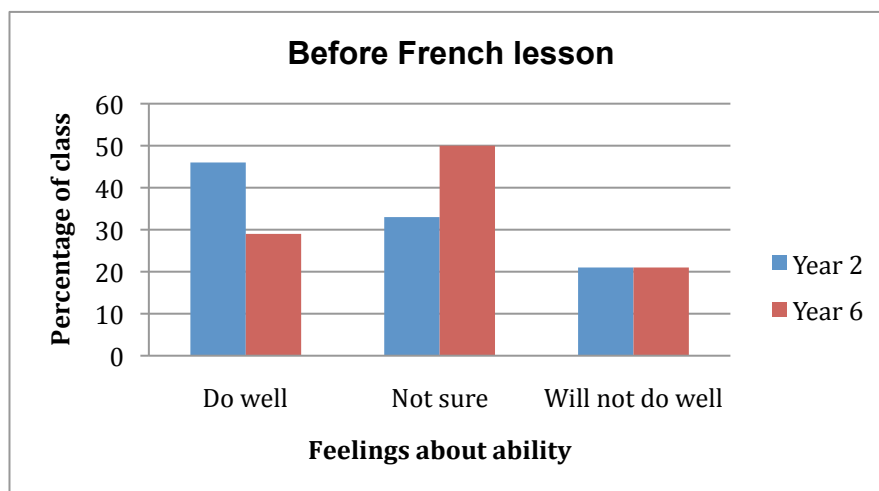


Figure 5: Results of questionnaire (question 2) before the French lesson

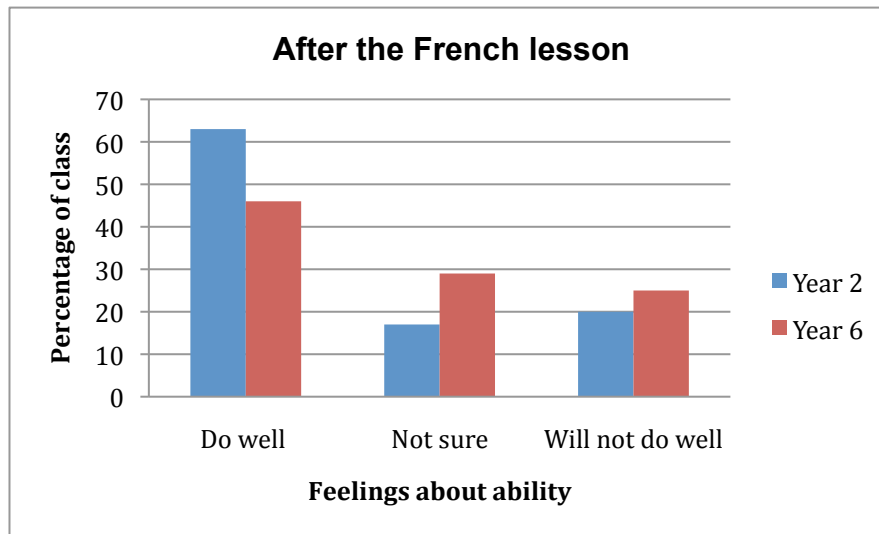


Figure 6: Results of questionnaire (question 2) after the French lesson

This idea was shared by more children in Year 6, with two interviewees agreeing with Tommy’s (Year 6) statement that “languages are difficult, especially the writing; I’m also worried that I’ll look stupid if I can’t say the words properly”. As the results show, the largest proportion of Year 6 children were unsure about how able they would be in French (see Figure 5). It is only after the lesson that the children seem to grow in confidence, with more children stating that they think they can succeed. However, the number of children who believe they will not do well declines by a mere 4% (see Figure 6).

While the confidence in ability in learning a foreign language seems to increase in both year groups and the number of those lacking confidence falling in both year groups, confidence levels of the Year 2 pupils is higher in both graphs. There was a clear difference in the interview to match these results, with more pupils in the Year 6 group admitting anxieties (3 pupils), and only one pupil in the Year 2 group confessing nervousness. Dweck (2000) puts forward a theory of intelligence in which learners are divided into those who feel they can alter their own ability to learn, and those who think they cannot do this and by accepting that progression is unlikely, learning will inevitably be more difficult.

This presents the idea that a barrier to learning has been formed by those individuals who feel they cannot succeed, and it is the role of the teacher to prevent such attitudes growing. This could

therefore explain why there was such a small decrease in the number of Year 6 pupils believing they would not succeed in second language learning; these children had created well-established beliefs that they would do well, hindering the learning taking place. The Year 2 class have not had such a long time in education to have developed such firm ideas by this stage, perhaps leaving them in an advantageous position to learn a new subject. In regard to language learning, “we must avoid harming good levels of motivation that we should find amongst our primary-age learners by avoiding creating those anxious circumstances when they experience the tongue-tied failure to communicate” (Hood & Tobbutt, 2009: 10). The clear increase in confidence amongst the younger learners should be embraced and used to prevent negative preconceived ideas about their language learning ability forming.

Use of French vocabulary

Enthusiasm for speaking French outside of the classroom is much higher with the Year 2 class than the Year 6 class, both before and after the lesson (see Figures 7 and 8).

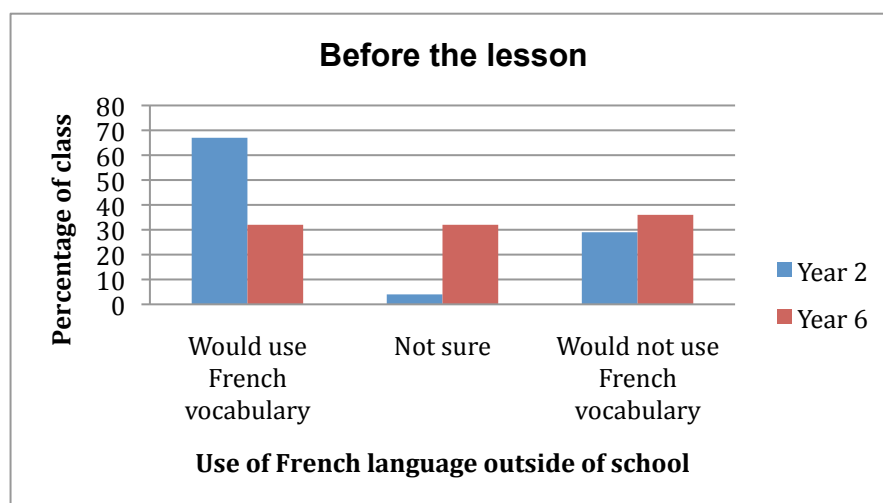


Figure 7: Results of questionnaire (question 4) before the French lesson

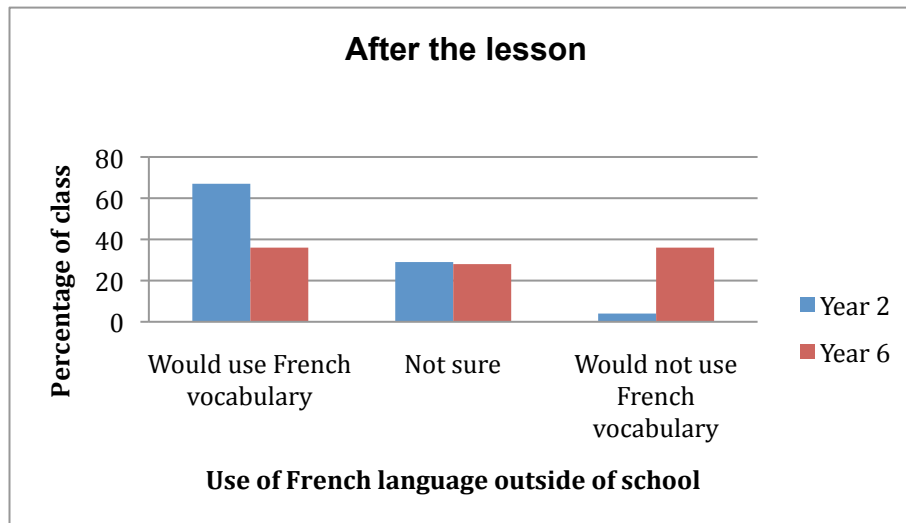


Figure 8: Results of questionnaire (question 5) after the French lesson

This can be attributed to by the increased confidence in ability of the younger Year 2 learners (see Figures 5 and 6). Jones and Coffey (2006: 3) explain that this is to be expected as this “natural, uninhibited use of language makes early learners particularly receptive in MFL and it is a foundation to build upon”. My quantitative results support this statement, as the Year 2 learners needed much less encouragement to speak in the target language than the Year 6 learners. However, both groups being interviewed were positive about using French outside of school, with one boy stating that “languages are very important to learn, if you know words in another language, it will help you when you go on holiday” (Freddy, Year 2), the children went on to mention how excited they would be to use French language abroad. Jack (Year 2) who had previously been nervous about learning French, asked me a few days later to teach him a French song that he could sing to his parents at home, reflecting his increased confidence. Another child commented that he “might want to live abroad one day so languages are very important, it is not just about the vocabulary, it is also about learning about other cultures” (Harry, Year 6). It is vital that this interest and thirst for knowledge which is so prevalent amongst younger learners is maximised, as children should learn about different cultures during their childhood; “cultural understanding is a long-term goal and primary schools can begin the process by developing pupils’ curiosity about other countries” (Driscoll, as cited in Driscoll & Frost, 1999: 17). While the interviews did not generate negative views about using French language outside of school, the results of the questionnaire highlight increased enthusiasm about applying knowledge in practical contexts amongst younger learners.

Year 2 learners can therefore be seen to fully appreciate the benefits of learning vocabulary in a foreign language in regard to an out of school context, to a significantly higher proportion than Year 6 learners.

Critical reflection on the research methodology

The use of both questionnaires and interviews has provided me with a clear set of results through which firm conclusions can be drawn, showing my research method to be an appropriate choice for this specific study. This follows Strauss and Corbin's (1998: 34) suggestion that both qualitative and quantitative data should be used effectively together to form a theory; "the issue is not whether to use one form or another but rather how these might work together to foster a development of theory". Whilst I feel that I have an accurate portrayal of how age affects perceptions about learning MFL as a new subject, I believe certain factors may have affected the accuracy of my results.

The rise in number of Year 2 children who did not enjoy the French lesson and had previously stated that they were either unsure or were looking forward to the lesson provided me with an anomaly in my results and this can be linked to the disappointment about their team losing the game. Florence (Year 2) commented that some children were upset about this, and two boys in particular were quite angry that their team was not given another chance. However, in Year 6, the children were more developed in maturity levels and the whole class clapped for the winning team. The Year 2 team, who have not yet developed these maturity levels perhaps could not see past the game and reflect on the French lesson as a whole when answering the questionnaire.

My data could also have been affected by the fact that I had already spent five weeks in the Year 2 class on a daily basis, teaching many lessons. This had enabled me to build positive, trusting teacher-pupil relationships in the class and the children had become accustomed to me as their teacher. However, I had only taught the Year 6 class four lessons and had spent two weeks in the class three months prior to the French lesson. This factor would have undoubtedly affected the French lesson, and potentially the accuracy of my results as not only was I introducing French as a new subject, I was also re-introducing myself as a teacher. In the Year 2 class, behaviour management strategies were well developed and a firm reward and sanction procedure was in place which the children were aware would be implemented whenever necessary. The Year 6 class saw

me more as a new, French-specialist teacher as opposed to a ‘proper’ teacher, Tommy (Year 6) mentioned this, claiming “because you’re a new teacher some people didn’t take it seriously and thought they could mess around”. I certainly spent more time on behaviour management prior to beginning the games in Year 6. Indeed, Driscoll (as cited in Driscoll & Frost, 1999: 43) states that “it is extremely difficult in some cases for the specialist teacher to penetrate the culture in the classroom and gain recognition by a significant number in the group”. Perhaps the fact that I was not a regular teacher in the classroom, and more time was inevitably spent reinforcing behaviour management in the Year 6 class minimising time spent learning French language, contributed to a lesser level of enjoyment or desire to learn the language.

Implications for my own Professional Development

It is important for me to use my findings to improve my future practice and I hope to enact the primary entitlement, teaching French to my class on a regular basis now that I am aware many young learners wish to learn MFL in primary school. I will also be keen to set up a French club either after school or during lunchtime to further support those children who have a particular interest in learning a foreign language, embracing their enthusiasm. Should I be working in a school where the MFL entitlement is not being enacted in all classes, if at all, I would certainly encourage other teachers to begin teaching this subject regularly, sharing resources and subject knowledge as much as possible. According to Jones and McLachlan (2009: 14), “teachers’ lack of confidence, or unwillingness to teach primary languages, are often directly related to their perceived or actual lack of subject knowledge”.

It became apparent in my research that I was at an advantage in the Year 2 class who were completely accustomed to me as their teacher, as opposed to the Year 6 class who did not see me as their regular teacher and consequently did not view learning French perhaps as seriously. Wherever possible, the main teacher should provide the teaching input of MFL because the “learning requires the pupil to make funny noises, to accept vulnerability, to risk getting things publically wrong...trust between teacher and pupil is crucial, and this does not automatically arise in the specialist teaching situation” (Sharpe, 2001: 116). Thus I will ensure that I will establish respectful, trusting pupil-teacher relationships within my class, as well as encouraging positive pupil-pupil

relationships. Hopefully this can contribute to openness in speaking the target language without the fear of embarrassment.

My research also reiterated how crucial it is to place the learning into an interactive, visual and fun context when introducing any subject for the first time. Indeed, many children are nervous about learning a foreign language and with this there is often initially a barrier to learning. However, if children are greeted with colourful flashcards, songs and games, anxieties will be diminished. Language learning should also be made relevant to the pupils, if the class is focused on a particular topic, it would be more relevant to incorporate the same topic into the language lesson.

Whilst I undoubtedly feel that introducing languages in primary school will be a benefit to pupils, my research has highlighted the need to communicate children's language levels and prior knowledge to secondary schools in order that learning can progress (Martin, 2008). If the children have a steady prior knowledge of MFL, and then revert back to beginner level in secondary school, then the learning will not be built upon, failing to take children to the next stage in the learning, which must always be a priority. Taking my future practice into consideration, I hope that strong links will be created with the nearby secondary schools, whereby progress and children's language levels will be communicated and built upon when the children begin secondary school. I am in agreement therefore with Martin's (2008: 105) statement that for primary MFL "to have a real impact, secondary teachers must have truly accepted what the children in Year 7 know, understand and can do"...in order to "continue to build on that learning and allow them to make real progress".

In sum, my research has revealed that age should be taken into consideration when introducing primary MFL, as it impacts greatly on preconceived ideas and attitudes. Generally speaking, my results show the Year 2 pupils to be more enthusiastic and confident language learners who would be eager to use the vocabulary learnt in an out of school context, than the older Year 6 pupils. It has been interesting to see that even within primary school years, children develop 'language anxiety' and establish preconceived ideas about their ability and negative attitudes about the use of MFL. Hopefully learning MFL at a younger age will prevent the likelihood of negative views and apprehension forming at a later stage. Indeed, "the early start is seen as a kind of immunization against later negative attitudes which might emerge after puberty...younger learners are easier to

influence in terms of their feelings, attitudes and values than older learners” (Sharpe, 2001: 35), thereby indicating that age does matter when learning MFL.

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Appendix 1: Lesson Plan for Introductory French Lesson.

Area(s) of Learning: Modern Foreign Languages: French	Date & time: 01/02/11 Length of Session: 45 mins	Number of pupils: 28 (Year 6) 20 (Year 2)
Pupil Information: (Eg. Numbers of SEN; EAL) N/A		
Lesson Summary: Children will be introduced to key vocabulary linked to ‘The Town’ in French. They will learn how to answer a simple question related to this topic.		
Learning Objectives (s) (EYFS/NC/PNS/QCA reference) To learn key vocabulary about ‘The Town’ in French.	Success Criteria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To be able to recognise key vocabulary linked to ‘The Town’ in French. • To be able to answer the question ‘Where do you live?’ in French. 	
Continuity and Progression of Learning (including assessments from previous lessons) The children will be learning about their local area in other lessons, linking the French vocabulary to a relevant topic.		

Key Vocabulary

L'école, le restaurant, le supermarché, la piscine, le médecin, la poste, la gare, la ville, Où habites-tu?
J'habite à

ICT Opportunities

The interactive whiteboard will be used for the PowerPoint slides with the key vocabulary written on.

Classroom Organisation (*including risk-assessment and behaviour management plan*)

It will be explained to the children if they behave badly during the game, points will be lost for their team. If the whole class become disruptive, the game will be terminated.

Resources:

PowerPoint presentation

Personal whiteboards, pens and rubbers

Worksheets for each child

Follow up worksheets

Flashcards, both with and without word

Timings	Activity	Teacher Role and Role of Other Adults
15 mins	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write the date in French and the title: ‘La Ville’ on WB. • Give children L.O. • Introduce new vocabulary: seven key words. Choral drilling activity – show flashcards with words. T says word once, children repeat. Repeat three times. • T holds up two flashcards without the words and says the word which corresponds with one of the images. Children must point to the correct image. Answer given and children asked for the word of the other image. Complete when all images have been used. • The vocabulary is written on the whiteboard using PowerPoint. Flashcard without the words will be held up. Children will find the corresponding word on the whiteboard and must write it on their whiteboards (in pairs). ‘1, 2, 3 show me’. • All flashcards put on front table. Class divided into teams. One member from each team chosen to come to the front. Give word in French for one flashcard, child who finds and puts correct flashcard in the air wins a point for the team. First team to 3 points wins. • Choral drilling using flashcards as a reminder. 	Teacher: controller

<p>20 mins</p>	<p>Main Activity (Including differentiation/details of groupings/work for early finishers)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children given worksheet. The first question, which will be modelled on the whiteboard, will be ‘Où habites-tu?’ They must answer, ‘J’habite à’ Children match the key vocabulary to the corresponding picture. <p>Children will then have to look at a picture of a map and write the correct vocabulary next to the correct building.</p> <p>Differentiation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For those children who finish first, they will be given another, more complex matching activity. They must first match the picture of a location, to a picture of an object used in that location, and then connect the pictures to the correct vocabulary. 	<p>Teacher: controller, monitor and resource</p>
<p>10 mins</p>	<p>Plenary (including key questions)</p> <p>Children split into two teams. Teacher will give a story of her day describing what she is doing, which will link to the keywords the children have learnt. The first to write the correct word on their personal whiteboard and hold up the answer will win a point for their team. The words will be put up on the interactive whiteboard and once the children are feeling confident about the vocabulary, the words will be removed.</p>	<p>Teacher: controller</p>

Appendix 2: Interview Questions

Interview Questions Before the French Lesson

1. How do you feel about being taught French for the first time today?
2. What are your views about how well do you think you will do learning French?
3. How much experience do you already have in learning another language?
4. How important do you think it is to learn languages in school, and why do you think this?
5. When might you use the vocabulary you have learnt outside of school?
6. How would you feel about learning languages in school as a proper lesson in your timetable?
7. When is the best time to begin learning foreign languages in school?
8. How would you feel about using the foreign vocabulary you will learn in another country?

Interview Questions After the French Lesson

1. How did you feel about the French lesson today?

2. How have your views changed about how well you think you will do learning French?

3. How important do you think it is to learn languages in school, and why do you think this?

4. How important do you think it is to learn languages in school, and why do you think this?

5. Do you think you will use the vocabulary you have learnt today outside of school? If so, where and with who?

6. How would you feel about learning languages in school as a proper lesson in your timetable?


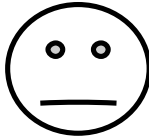





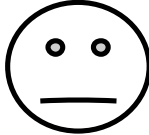


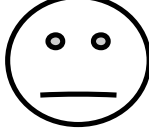

7. When is the best time to begin learning foreign languages in school?





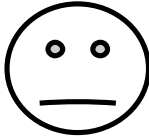

8. How would you feel about using the foreign vocabulary you have learnt in another country?

Appendix 3: Questionnaire Before the French Lesson

Questionnaire before the French lesson

I am in Class


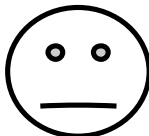





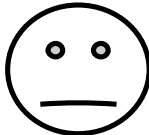


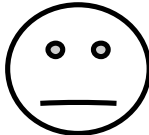

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
1. I am looking forward to the French lesson today.			
2. I feel that I will do well in French.			
3. I think that it is important to learn languages in school.			
4. I think that I might use French language outside of school.			







<p>5. I think that I will enjoy learning languages in school.</p>			
<p>6. I think that it is better to start learning languages in primary school than in secondary school.</p>			

Appendix 4: Questionnaire After the French Lesson

Questionnaire after the French lesson

I am in Class

	Agree	Not sure	Disagree
1. I enjoyed the French lesson today.			
2. I think that I will do well in French.			
3. I think that it is important to learn languages in school.			
4. I think that I might use the French words I have learnt today outside of school.			

5. I think I will look forward to French lessons in the future.			
6. I think that it is better to start learning languages in primary school than in secondary school.			

Appendix 5: Ethics Checklist

University of Cambridge - Faculty of Education
Early Years and Primary PGCE
Ethics checklist for research during PGCE placements

This checklist is intended for use ONLY by Faculty of Education students undertaking initial teacher education ('trainees') for classroom-based research carried during their formal professional placements as temporary members of school staff. The context of this research is that it will be undertaken with pupils in classes for which a qualified teacher has legal responsibility who acts as 'gatekeeper' and where the trainee's intended enquiry has been discussed with and approved by the responsible teacher(s) for the class(es) concerned.

Trainee name: _____

School/setting: _____

Questions to be answered by the trainee -please *clearly ring* the appropriate response.

1) Do you understand why educational enquiry must be scrutinized from an ethical standpoint before any research commences?	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes /no
2) Have you read and do you understand the current guideline on educational research ethics issued by the British Educational Research Association (available at http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/guidelines/ethica1.pdf)	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes/no
3) Can you confirm that to the best of your belief the research you plan to carry out will NOT be to the educational detriment to any pupils involved, and that there is no reason to expect it to cause any harm to any participant –including damaging any pupil's confidence, motivation, interest or self belief in school?	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes/no
4) Can you confirm that you will have sought any necessary permissions - for example to record lessons, or to work with pupils outside of timetabled lessons- in line with the school's policies and procedures? This might include seeking permission from parents, with guidance from school staff.	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes/no
5) Can you confirm that you have discussed your research plan with your mentor and other staff responsible for any specific class(es), and that they have approved your plan?	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes/no
6) Can you confirm that any substantial change to your research design subsequent to completing this form, will be discussed for approval with your mentor (and other school staff if necessary) and shared by email with your partnership tutor?	<input checked="" type="radio"/> yes/no

Trainee signature and date: _____

Partnership Tutor name: Bev Hopper

I have checked that the trainee has responded 'yes' to all questions above.
 I have discussed issues arising from the trainee not responding 'yes' to one or more of the questions above, and am convinced that this project is ethical (as explained in notes overleaf)

Partnership Tutor signature and date:
Bev Hopper 12.1.11