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Evaluation of the FLA Project Initiative 2011-12

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Overview

Why a project initiative?

Main Findings (graphs with explanatory notes)

Discussion of Findings and Conclusions

Recommendations

Why a project initiative?

Working in partnership to support Scotland's FLAs

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Since November 2010 **The British Council Scotland** and **SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages**, have worked collaboratively to improve the experience of Foreign Language Assistants (FLAs) based in Scotland. The initial focus was on the organisation of the national FLA training day, with additional support from other bodies such as Education Scotland, the cultural organisations and local authorities**.**

However, despite the evident satisfaction with the support being given by all parties concerned we were faced with dwindling numbers of FLAs. We therefore decided to pull our joint expertise in marketing and promotion in order to raise the profile of FLAs and highlight the value they provide. At the FLA induction meetings in late August and early September 2011 we invited FLAs to consider doing a project. A separate FLA projects booklet provides further details of the successful projects by the FLAs themselves. This can be found on the British Council Scotland website: http://tiny.cc/FLA_projects2011

MAIN FINDINGS

FLAs in Scotland 2011-12 by language

Project participation by education sector

Profile of successful project participation

Completed project topics by language group
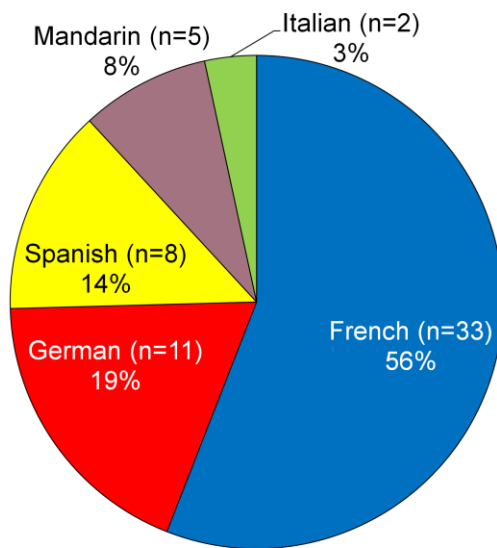
Age groups and pupil numbers involved

Non-completed project topics by language group
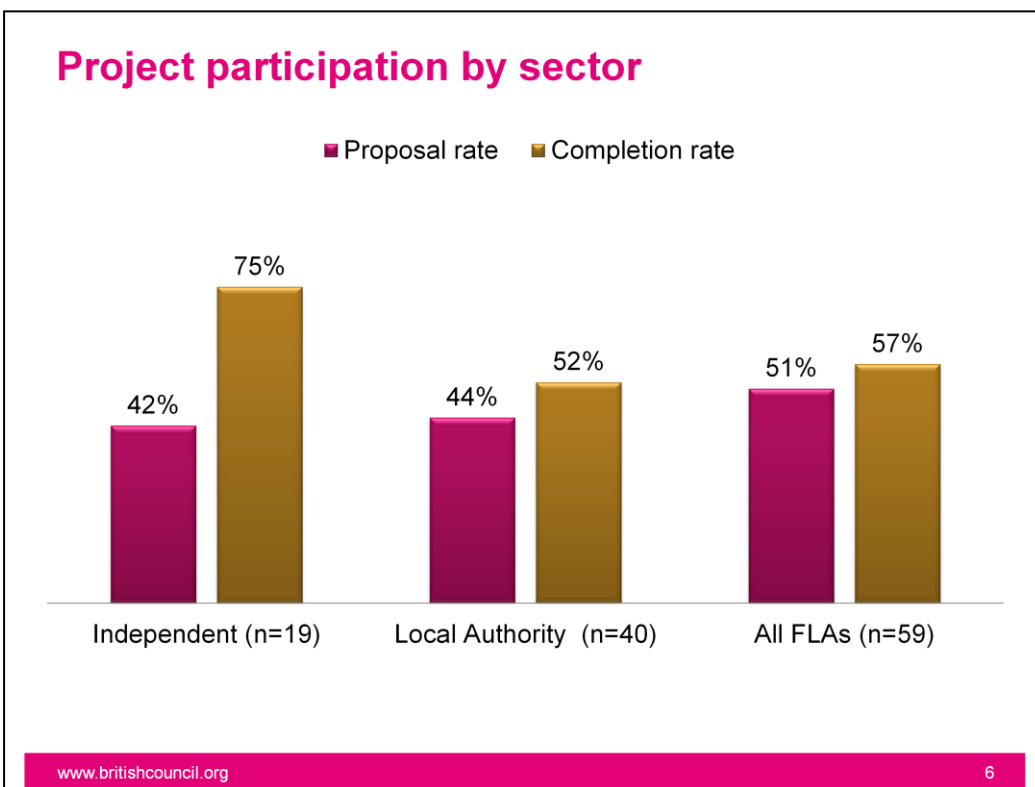
Target groups of non-completed projects

Impact of project initiative on FLAs

Impact of project initiative on schools

This slide shows the language distribution of the Foreign Language Assistant (FLA) cohort in Scotland during 2011-2012. There were a total of 59 FLAs, with just over half (33 FLAs) French-speaking from France and Switzerland, 19% German-speaking (11 FLAs) from Germany and Austria, 15% Spanish-speaking (8 FLAs) from Spain and Latin America, 5 Chinese FLAs (8%) and 2 Italian FLAs (3%).

Project participation by sector

■ Proposal rate ■ Completion rate

Independent (n=19): Proposal rate 42%, Completion rate 75%
Local Authority (n=40): Proposal rate 44%, Completion rate 52%
All FLAs (n=59): Proposal rate 51%, Completion rate 57%

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As this was the first time we operated the project initiative we were essentially just a couple of steps ahead of the project process ourselves, so it is difficult to make any concrete judgements on the importance of individual factors. Nevertheless, it will be important to track progress over the coming sessions and we have made a start by tracing project proposal and completion rates by sector. With regard to the deployment of FLAs the major difference between the two sectors is that FLAs in independent schools are normally shared by no more than two schools, and in some cases not at all, whilst FLAs in local authority schools are frequently based at three different schools, and very occasionally even more. However, our concern that FLAs in local authority schools might therefore be less likely to put forward a proposal turned out to be unfounded.

We received a total of 31 project proposals. As the graph shows the overall participation rate (i.e. the number of project proposals put forward in relation to the number of FLAs in each sector) in local authority schools was slightly higher than in independent schools although the overall completion rate was significantly lower. With regard to the independent schools there may be specific factors within that pre-dispose FLAs to non-participation (e.g. difficult to add a language project to the existing mix of already on-going projects) as well as to successful completion (e.g. more time to liaise with a relevant member of staff for guidance). Turning to the local authority schools, the lower frequency of contact may indeed have been a contributing factor to the lower project completion rate in some cases. However, a more detailed analysis of projects based in this sector revealed that completion rates varied significantly (20%-100%) which suggests that factors for project success, or failure, are more complex. It will therefore be important to monitor project progress and processes more carefully in future sessions in order to gain a better understanding of the way that certain personal and circumstantial factors impact on project completion.

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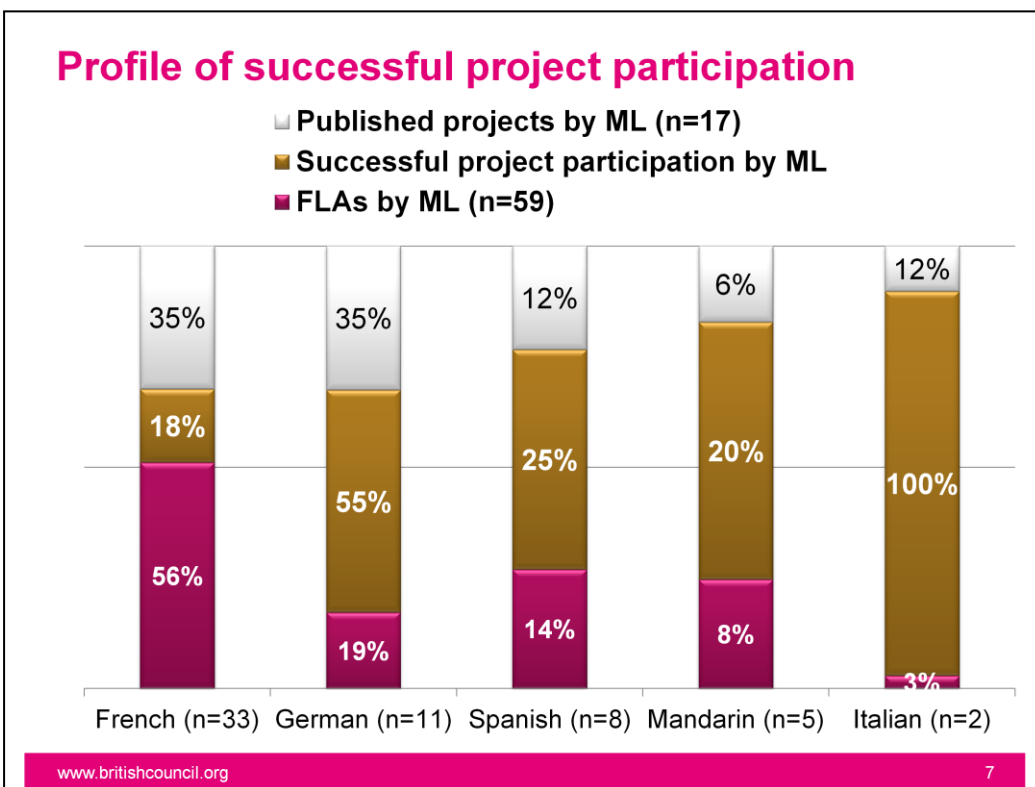
By successful project participation we mean that FLAs submitted a project proposal, provided tangible evidence of project activities (e.g. photos and/or video clips), and a project evaluation.

The purple-coloured bars indicate the percentages of all FLAs by language. The brown bars indicate the percentage of FLAs in the given language that successfully participated in the project initiative. The white bars indicate the distribution of projects by language in the project booklet.

For example, although French-speaking FLAs made up a little over half of the total number of FLAs in Scotland (33/59) during the 2011-12 session (the pink bar), only 18% of them in the end successfully completed a project (the brown bar). By contrast, both Italian FLAs (with 3% representing the lowest level of the FLA cohort) successfully participated in the project initiative. German- and Spanish-speaking FLAs made up 19% and 14% of the FLA cohort, but successful project participation was significantly higher amongst the former (55% compared to 25% respectively). Of the five Chinese Language Assistants, representing 2% of the FLA cohort, only one successfully completed a project.

The project booklet consists of 17 successfully completed projects: six projects in French and German respectively, two in Spanish and Italian respectively, and one in Mandarin. Because of the disparity in participation, there are proportionally significantly more German and Italian projects represented. Details of the projects themselves can be found here: http://tiny.cc/FLA_projects2011

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Completed project topics by language group

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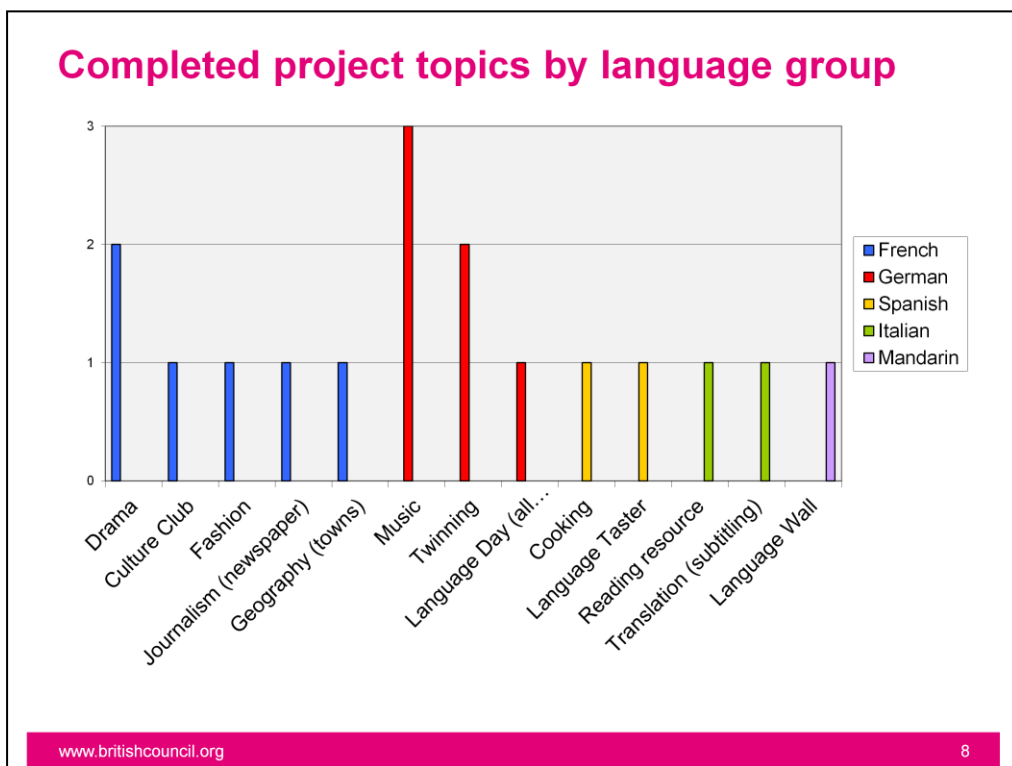
Interestingly, the successfully completed project topics in each language group are different, although this is probably more due to chance than design.

For the French topics, we make the assumption that the drama option was partly inspired by the fact that the *Institut Français* in Scotland runs an annual drama competition, and certainly both project groups participated in this. The journalism project is in fact a replication of a very successful project by the German FLA at the same schools during the previous session. The remaining projects appear linked to the interests of the FLAs.
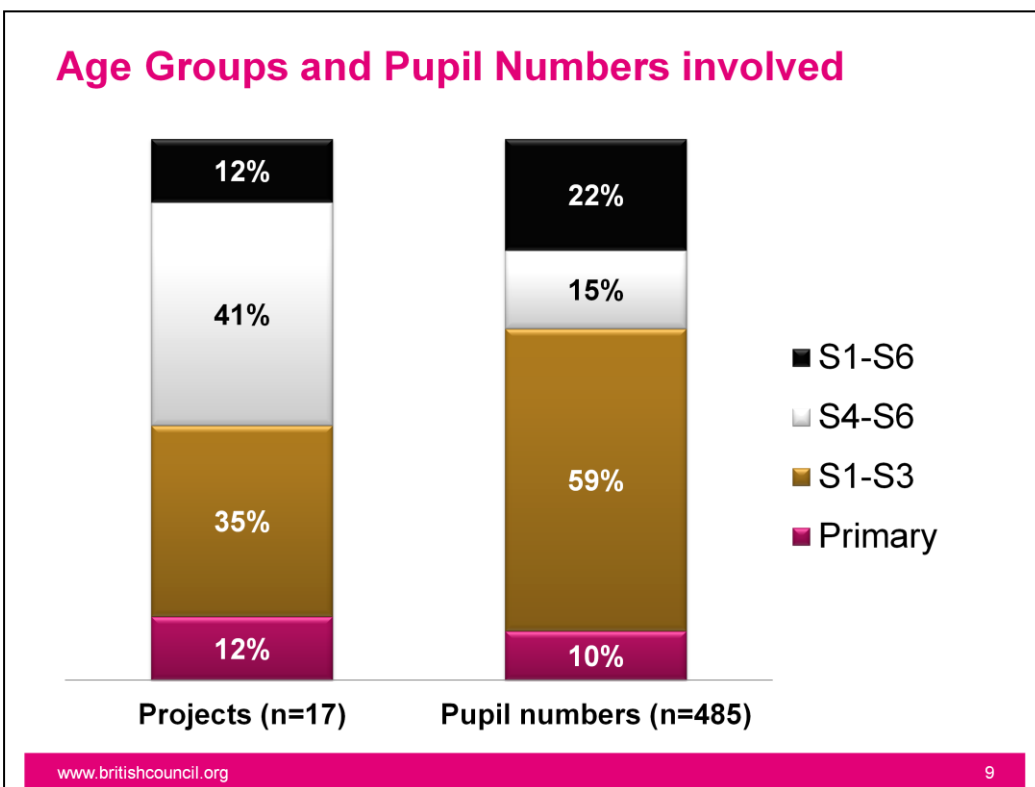
The strong musical preference amongst the German topics may have been partly inspired by the *Goethe-Institut* running a display on music although no doubt personal interest played a role too. The two twinning projects arose principally from the desire by the school to establish a contact abroad and the FLA in question having good links to a school in their home region. The interdisciplinary German language day was a personal FLA idea.

The Spanish cooking project was again linked to the personal interest of the FLA (cooking a regional Christmas dish), whereas the Language Taster session arose out of the language department's desire to introduce Spanish in the school, and to whet pupils' appetite for this.

The Italian reading resource similarly arose from a need expressed by the language department (after the initial idea of a song writing project did not motivate pupils), whereas the translation project arose from the specialist knowledge of the FLA.

Finally, the 'Language Wall' in Chinese was a visual representation of pupils' work, neatly showing their progress through the year.

Age Groups and Pupil Numbers involved

Projects (n=17): Primary 12%, S1-S3 35%, S4-S6 41%, S1-S6 12%

Pupil numbers (n=485): Primary 10%, S1-S3 59%, S4-S6 15%, S1-S6 22%

Legend: S1-S6, S4-S6, S1-S3, Primary

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From teachers' feedback in local authority schools we know that due to FLAs having to be shared between three schools, they tend to be deployed more frequently in the upper stages of secondary school. It is therefore no surprise that the majority of project were targeted at senior year groups.

With regard to the completed projects, just over 40% were aimed at the senior year groups (S4-S6), followed by 35% at the early secondary stage (S1-S3).

However, because the numbers in S1-S3 are much higher to start with, the quantitative involvement of the projects in these year groups was consequently also much larger (nearly 60% of pupils participating in successful projects). Since it is younger pupils in particular who need to be convinced about the relevance of language learning to their later lives, we propose to look more closely in the coming session at what kind of projects have the potential to maximise impact on the lower year groups.

Non-completed project topics by language group

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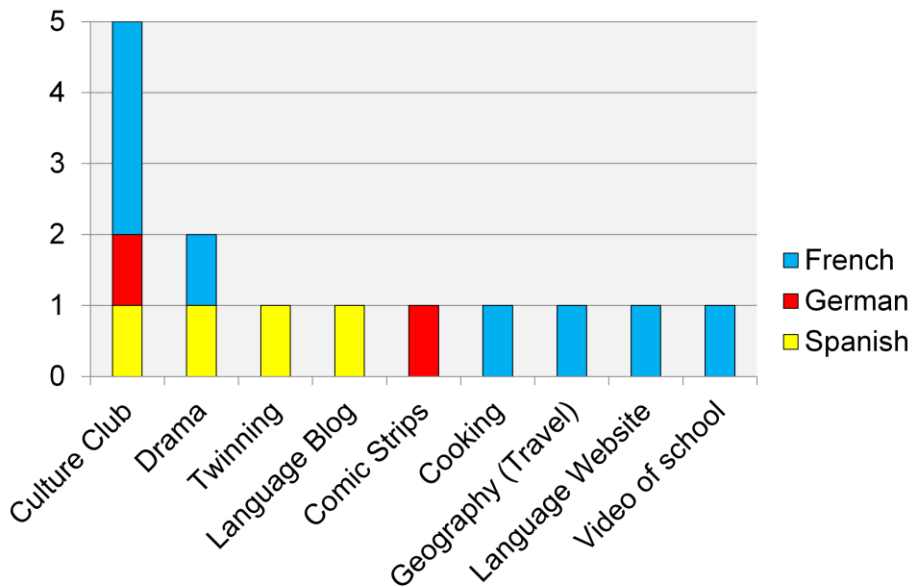
Because of time constraints we had to rely on feedback from the FLAs themselves as to why a certain project did not get implemented in the end. Unfortunately, of the fourteen 'non'-projects, seven did not provide us with any feedback in the latter stages so we don't know if they in fact did go ahead in some form or other. Of the remaining seven, the most common explanation provided by the FLAs (5/7) was lack of pupil interest. In the cooking project health and safety concerns were cited as a critical issue, and the failure of the language blog was put down to class and staffing changes.

Target groups of non-completed projects
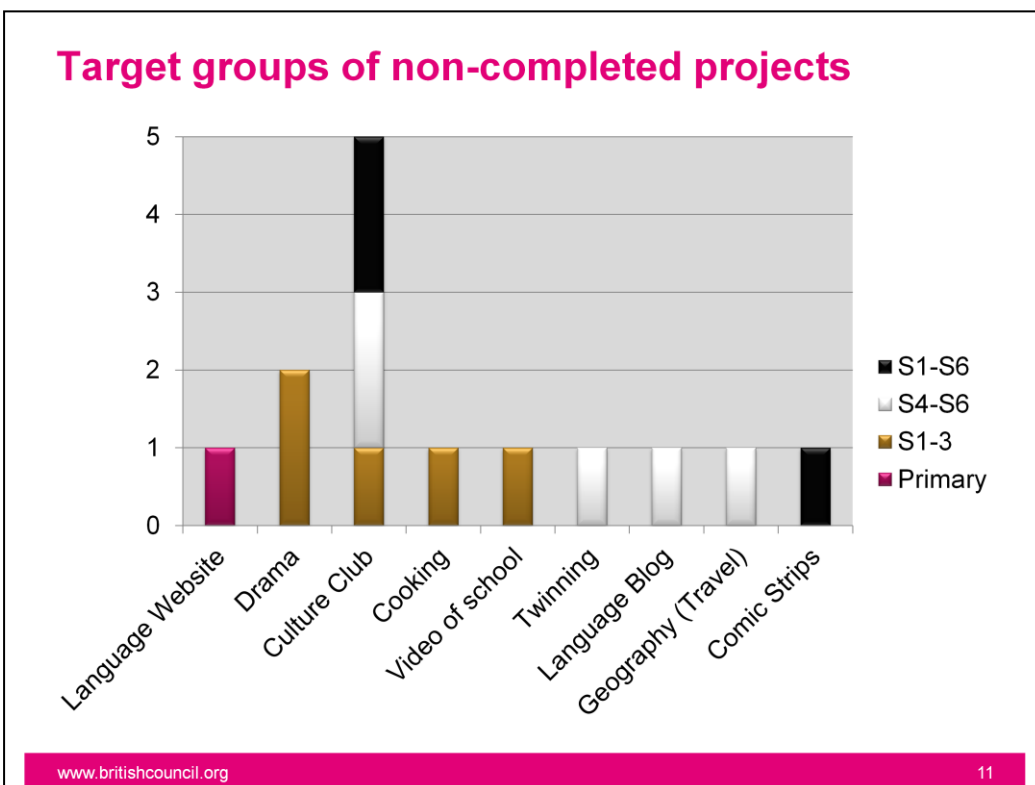
Any project implementation has inbuilt failure risks, some of which could be minimised by a little forward thinking. For example, both the culture club and drama projects would require pupils to volunteer some of their free time during lunchtime or after school, and this may not be the norm in some schools, or it may be difficult to introduce a new club. As we can see from the graph above, the unsuccessful culture clubs were targeted at different age groups, (and indeed the successful club had only 8 pupils) so possibly this type of project is too widely focused. However, teachers might also give some initial guidance to the FLA as to whether the pupils at their school would be receptive to club-type projects, or what kind of incentives might be required to gain pupil commitment.

The twinning project was successful elsewhere with the same age group so the local context may have played a role.

With hindsight we believe that the Comic Strips project, which showed a lot of promise at the start, may have been a little over-ambitious in trying to target all age groups. Perhaps with a little bit more careful forward planning it might have been possible to reduce the scope and objectives.

Impact of project initiative on FLA experience
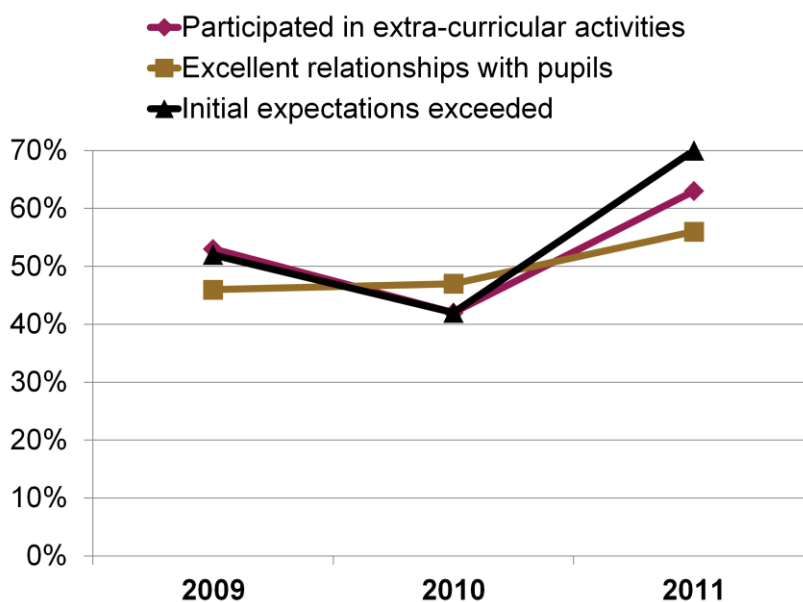
The feedback from the FLA cohort 2011-2012 suggests that the experience of their assistantship in Scotland was better for a greater number of them than in the previous two cohorts. However, as this was the first year of implementing the project initiative we cannot be certain to what extent the project initiative was a contributing factor to this. We certainly believe it will be worthwhile noting whether the three indicators:

- participation in extra-curricular activities
- excellent relationships with pupils
- initial expectations were exceeded

remain at a higher level in subsequent years whilst the project initiative is continued.
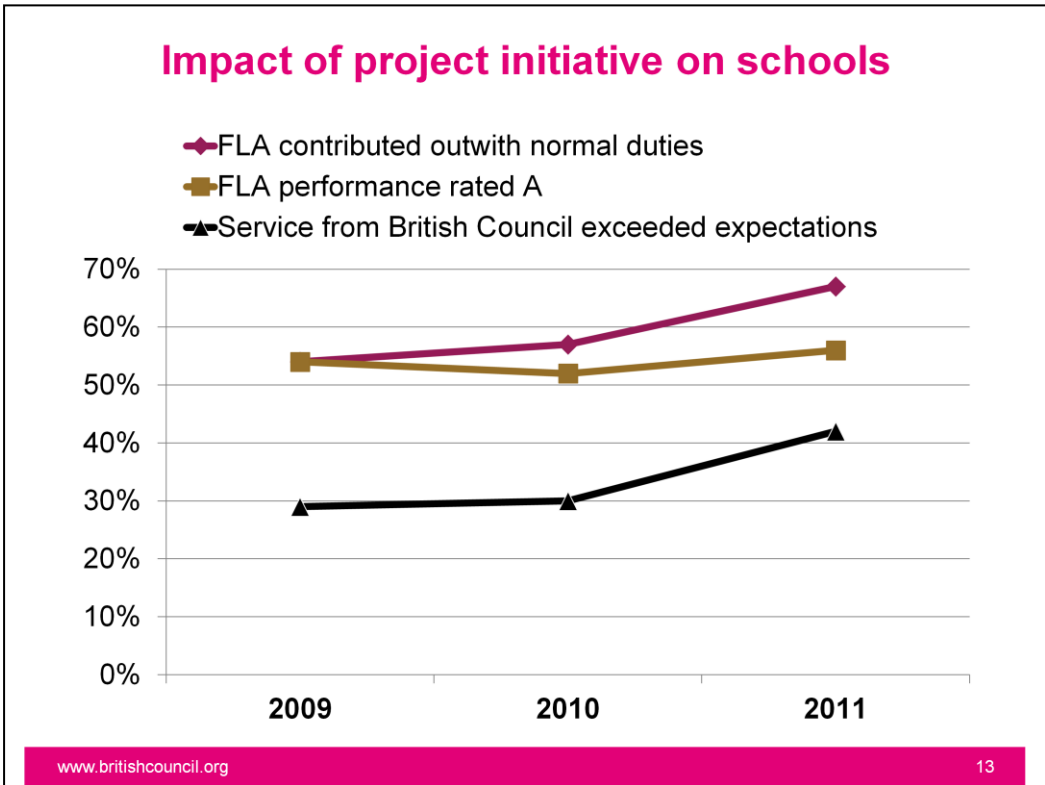
Again we cannot be sure that the project initiative was the main determining factor for the increased ratings in the three indicators:

- FLA contribution outwith normal duties
- A-rating of FLA performance
- Service from British Council exceeded expectations

Here too, we propose to track responses to these questions in subsequent years whilst the project initiative is continued.

This was our first year of implementing a project initiative and we have been very much encouraged by the results. Although the dropout rate for project completion was relatively high (43%), we did in fact expect this. Firstly, we deliberately wanted to inspire FLAs to 'think outside the box' in order to allow us to see where and how we should intervene in subsequent sessions. For this reason, we had to rely to a large extent on the FLA designing a project that would be realistically achievable within their local context. Secondly, although we provided individual feedback we were not aware of external factors that might impinge on the success, and this will be an on-going issue. Certainly, as a result of the project initiative we had more contact with the FLAs, and we believe they felt more engaged with their pupils as a result. It also allowed them to take more ownership of their lesson input.

The findings from the successfully completed projects suggest that those targeted at younger age groups have the greatest quantitative impact. However, some projects involving the senior year groups (e.g. the Italian translation project) could be used to showcase the relevance of languages to younger pupils. Indeed, showing the relevance of language learning in different contexts should be a key criterion for future projects.

Based on the findings we believe that some potential risk factors to project completion can be avoided or at least minimised by a more carefully considered planning stage and closer collaboration with the teachers involved in working with the FLAs. Our recommendations for the different stakeholder groups (the project support team at British Council and SCILT, the project mentors and the FLAs) are outlined in the final three pages.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

For the project support team (British Council Scotland and SCILT)

For project mentors

For FLAs

Recommendations (1)

For the project team (British Council Scotland and SCILT)

- Engage as early as possible with the diverse stakeholders (local authority development officers, school mentor representatives, cultural representatives, nominated mentor teachers, FLAs)

- Revise induction and introduction to project initiative

- Establish a regular contact mechanism with the FLAs, particularly for the early project stages

- Develop additional templates from this year's projects to support FLAs, e.g. a project risk assessment sheet, weekly forward planning and implementation records for FLA and project mentor use

Recommendations (2)

For the project mentors

- Establish strengths and interests of FLA early on

- Help the FLA complete their proposal and forward plan in order to identify potential risk factors to implementation

- Suggest ways in which identified risk factors could be minimised

- Encourage and remind the FLA to regularly record what actually happens during the implementation

- Support the FLA if they encounter unforeseen difficulties

Potential risk factors would include the timing of certain project activities with other school initiatives or events e.g. prelims, examination leave.

One way of minimising the above would be to include the project activities as part of the FLA's contracted contact time. This would preclude certain projects (e.g. preparation for drama competitions such as the *Rencontres Théâtrales*) but should enable the design of others e.g. a 'FLA' slot at the end of a lesson the content of which does not depend directly on what has happened in class.

During the academic session 2012-13 we aim to highlight what kind of topics FLA might be able to work on with their target pupil groups during such times. We believe that such a project approach would represent a win-win situation for all parties concerned – pupils, teachers and FLAs. It would also provide demonstrable evidence to senior managers in schools and/or local authority decision makers of the added value that the FLA contributes.

Recommendations (3)

For the FLAs

- Complete a skills and interests CV and show it to the relevant teachers in your school(s)

- Take a note of initiatives from other organisations

- Discuss possible projects with staff in each of your schools and decide which you want to take forward – seek to get there in small steps

- Be clear about objectives, suitability for target group, resources and other staff required

- Seek help when devising your weekly forward plan

- Keep a weekly record of what actually happens and the actions taken

During the 2011-12 school session the following organisations ran initiatives in which some FLAs participated and transformed into a project:

British Council	eTwinning
Consejería de Educación	Immersion Days for Higher students
European Commission	European Language Label (formerly European Award for Languages)
Goethe Institut	Music Generation X
Institut Français	Rencontres Théâtrales, Jour de la Francophonie
Routes into Languages	Spelling Bee
UK German Connection	UK-German Youth Ambassadors