

Scottish Trainee Teachers in a French Primary School: Getting Ready for 1+2

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Abstract: This article reports on a pilot project involving eight students enrolled on the Bachelor of Education Primary Teaching Programme at the University of the West of Scotland, who undertook a short outward mobility placement in a French primary school. The project was specifically aimed to address the Scottish Government's commitment to the 1+ 2 language policy and was designed to enable participants to play a full part in this development after the completion of their studies. Participants observed a different educational system while being immersed in the French language and culture. They also contributed to guided activities involving English and Scottish culture to French Primary School children. The author used qualitative content analysis of participant logbooks to evaluate the impact of their experience. Overall, the importance and added value of increasing language proficiency as part of a greater engagement in the wider world beyond Scotland as well as developing cross-cultural sensitivity skills whilst being immersed in another culture were acknowledged as most noteworthy assets.

Keywords: 1+ 2 language policy; language learning through immersion; language teaching pedagogy; cultural awareness; primary school

We will introduce a norm for language learning in schools based on the European Union 1 + 2 model - that is we will create the conditions in which every child will learn two languages in addition to their own mother tongue. This will be rolled out over two Parliaments, and will create a new model for language acquisition in Scotland. (Scottish Government manifesto commitment, 2011)

Background

In January-February 2014, following up on an Erasmus staff mobility trip to the French region Rhône Alpes, the author, lecturer in modern languages at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS), made contact with the Head Teacher of a primary school in that region with a view to set up a short outward mobility pilot project. The rationale behind this pilot project was to encourage Education students enrolled on the Bachelor of Arts in Education Primary Teaching at UWS to undertake a short study/work-shadow placement abroad whilst engaging actively with the practice of a Modern Language through the communicative and immersed approach so as to encourage interest in further French learning opportunities. As key co-ordinator of this initiative the author collaborated closely with the French Head Teacher and the Programme Leader for Education in UWS to carry out this initiative.

The project was specifically designed with the Scottish Government's 1+ 2 language policy in mind. As such, a key element was to convince these potential new primary school teachers of the importance and added value of increasing language proficiency as

part of a greater engagement in the wider world beyond Scotland as well as developing cross-cultural sensitivity whilst being immersed in another culture.

Design and methodology

In January 2014, it was agreed with the French Head Teacher that eight BEd students were to be selected to go to the French primary school for one week at the start of June 2014. During the whole duration of the visit, participants would be hosted by French families to ensure a valuable experience of an immersion education in a French environment. It was hoped that by being fully immersed in French language and culture students could lay claim to gains made in cultural awareness and appreciation.

Participating students were briefed about the French primary school expectations. Students would be assigned to one specific class under the guidance of the relevant school teacher acting as a mentor. It should be noted that the mentors chosen took an empathetic approach to deliver effective support and were highly committed to the task of helping participants through significant investment in time and energy. Mentors provided instructional support to discussions based on varied shared experience in class. Some participants indicated that mentors also shared their own struggles and frustrations in a most positive and caring manner that engendered trust and communicated hope and optimism.

Secondly, it was agreed that participants should contribute to guided activities with regard to teaching English to French Primary School children and Scottish culture. Prior to departure, participants were invited to plan for some Scottish culture workshops with a view to celebrate Scotland's cultural heritage adding to the perception of Scotland across the world. When asked what kind of workshop participants would set up, indicative responses included:

I am planning on doing my session on the Commonwealth Games as they are held in Glasgow this year [...]."

I am going to talk to them about our national dress. I will get them to design their own kilt using paper and colouring pencils which hopefully they could wear during the ceilidh.

Prior to the visit, students were asked to create an individual development plan that would include a statement of their concerns and expectations as well as their aspirations, strengths and competences. They were invited to write a letter of introduction in French to their host family and to make a video-recording of themselves in order to let them see how they looked and interacted with others. The latter task was in itself daunting and uncomfortable for some participants. Finally, students were requested to keep a logbook during their stay to reflect upon and evaluate their own learning experiences with regard to French language, culture and different educational teaching pedagogies. It was hoped that they would be able to recognise and critically assess their experience of developing a greater understanding of French language and culture as well as their personal and social development. The author used qualitative

content analysis of these logbooks in order to find recurring themes, to gain insight into students' attitudes, behaviours, concerns, lifestyles and aspirations.

Recruitment

Students from the Bachelor of Arts in Education primary teaching undergraduate programme at UWS were invited to take part. Students did not have to have teaching experience at the time of recruitment for the pilot project since one of the primary aims of the pilot project was for them to acquire and observe different teaching methodologies applied in a French primary school. However, all students were required to have listening and speaking skills in French approaching the B1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). This was to ensure that they would be able to rise to the challenge of being taken outside of their comfort zone when confronted with an unfamiliar environment.

Selection criteria adopted for recruiting students to the pilot project were agreed between the key coordinator and the programme leader and focused on identifying:

- good interpersonal/communication skills;
- drive and commitment;
- emotional intelligence including self-awareness, confidence and motivation.

It was felt that these skills and attributes would facilitate students' integration within their new learning environment.

In February 2014 and prior to trip, students got assessed before getting enrolled in a French class so that they were assigned to the right level. Tuition was delivered from February till May 2014 using face-to-face tuition, with a series of online tasks being provided for self-study and consolidation of learning. The mode of delivery was intensive i.e. three-hour class over one trimester and total immersion in French was adopted with an emphasis on listening and speaking practice during class rendering the course a firmly communicative one. Students were strongly encouraged to be active participants in the French class and had plenty of opportunities to work either in pairs and/or groups to practise their oral/aural and written skills. The Moodle Virtual Learning Environment was integral to the student learning experience, enhancing the use of external links for independent study and exploring the medium of the Discussion Board facility.

Eight students, all female, were successfully recruited in April 2014 to the pilot project to go to the French primary school. Unfortunately, as the pilot approached, one of the students had to withdraw for personal reasons. It should be noted that despite adequate internal advertising and non-negligible incentives, the demand for this pilot project was not over-subscribed with only 11 students requesting to join.

Funding

In late February 2014, the key project coordinator sought funds from UWS Corporate Marketing, with which to finance the outward mobility trip. The amount of support

funds donated was £1669 and all funds were spent on the cost of transport to Lyon airport, France. It should be acknowledged that for this particular project, the French Head Teacher and his team embraced this international opportunity with open arms and supplied additional funding towards transport, food and accommodation. There were no further costs incurred by the students as they were all provided with three meals a day free of charge and were accommodated with the relevant primary school teachers during their seven day stay (except for one student who was accommodated with a Parents Association French family). The French Head Teacher in collaboration with staff from his local authority provided a minibus to welcome the group on arrival at Lyon airport and to take them back at the end of their observation week.

Furthermore, no costs were incurred by students for the provision of French tuition, the production of French teaching materials or delivery of the course prior to departure as all was embedded within the responsibility of the key coordinator who was teaching this particular cohort within the BA Education programme that embed language provision as a compulsory element in the first year of study.

Pre-departure students' concerns and expectations

Prior to their departure students were asked not only to describe their main worries about going to France, but also to note down steps, if any, they had taken or were considering taking to help them cope with anticipated difficulties. According to data, language proficiency figured most prominently in the list of concerns as indicated below, thus strongly emphasizing a lack of self-confidence on the part of the participants.

Worries about the work-shadow placement also surfaced frequently. None of the students had any formal teaching placement prior to departure as their first placement is not until well into their second year of study. However, three participants had taken part in volunteer teaching hence showing an awareness of the problems they might be exposed to.

I am worried that I will be given too much responsibility and that I won't be able to deliver what is expected of me. I hope to confront this worry by forcing myself to step outside of my comfort zone and not being afraid to ask for help.

Worries with respect to family French immersion were also highlighted. Students were expected to share accommodation with a French family they had never met before hence requiring good problem-solving skills and drawing on personal resources. The more confident ones used their own initiative and willingly embraced this new learning opportunity, whereas the more vulnerable ones had to make a real individual effort in order to get out of their comfort zone and adapt. Other anticipated difficulties such as 'homesickness' and 'meeting new colleagues/people' appear to be a testimony of students' worries with social integration and isolation.

When asked what their expectations were, the main responses from students indicated a high degree of consensus, with linguistic objectives most important, personal and professional objectives not far behind. Students' expectations appeared to be closely connected with their worries. Achieving good linguistic skills was by far the most

important objective: A substantial number of respondents highlighted the fact that getting to grips with the target language would be conducive to building their confidence on a personal / professional level as well as to helping their social integration.

The discovery or the exposure to a new culture was an equally significant expectation although not many of the participants had any cross-cultural experiences prior to the trip. The desire to 'meet new people' reinforces the idea that respondents were particularly positive about developing cross-cultural sensitivity whilst being immersed in another culture. It showed willingness on their part to build in opportunities for a better integration. Sharing and exporting a bit of Scottish culture was another important expectation.

Participants' comments suggest that they were ready to engage with learning about themselves as well as experiencing the world of work. Indeed, they were willing to not only learn and practise teaching skills, but also learn to develop strategies on how to cope with work-related situations.

Added-value of short outward mobility

The first interesting point to note from the analysis of the logbooks is that overall students identified improved language skills as a positive outcome of the trip. In the feedback comments, students disclosed that interacting with the primary school children via playing during break times, having lunch at the canteen and contributing to/observing guided class activities or workshops was not only challenging, but also compelled them to practise frequently their listening, reading and speaking skills. Similarly, it was felt that experiencing family French language immersion and being 'put on the spot' whilst interacting repeatedly with members of the family further contributed to increased language proficiency. Additionally, participants increased their knowledge and understanding of how French and their mother tongue function.

The children in the class spoke little English but that didn't stop them chatting away to you in French. I found it was harder to understand the children than the adults as they speak very fast and mumble a lot of the time. On the first day I understood little of what the children were saying but it got better as the week progressed. It took time for my ears to tune into the language. Through playing with the children in the playground I found that we were chatting together in English and French and learning a lot from each other. If I did not understand something the children would repeat things in different ways until I did and I would do likewise for them. I found it helped a lot with learning certain vocabulary and structures of the language.

The insight into French primary education and the teaching experience gained was also valued. Participants' recurring comments referred to the theme of increased confidence as one of the main gains from the work-related learning experience. It is worth noting that the seven participants really involved themselves in the various set guided activities although they had no prior teaching experience. Planning ahead and researching in terms of designing a lesson plan was an important skill acquired during that week. Also, the role of the appointed teacher and the support given within that observing placement was instrumental to an effective teaching and learning experience; participants indicated that some observed tasks could be applied through the medium

of another language in a Scottish learning environment i.e. the teaching of mathematics, geography, songs or poetry.

It was commonly acknowledged that the school was quite a traditional one where discipline, respect and homework were highly valued despite large size classes, and where wearing school uniform was not the norm. Opinions were divided with regard to the length of a normal school working day whilst the lack of good ICT resources was commonly regarded as a weakness that might affect pupils' performance in the long run.

The ethos of the school as a Catholic community with regard to the rights of disabled children was generally viewed as an asset: There were a significant number of disabled children who had equal access to the curriculum, extra-curricular and other services and who were supported by specialised staff within and outwith taught classes. One participant successfully connected with a child with autism and got first-hand insight into support provided: it was noted by head teacher and supporting staff that this particular child thrived and responded positively whenever interacting with participant hence creating a positive learning experience for both.

One participant positively highlighted the contribution of the Languages coordinator for EMAP (Enseignants missionnés pour l'Aide Pédagogique), who gave a presentation on a number of supportive approaches and helpful web-links, along with examples of how primary teachers are delivering modern languages in the classroom in France. It contained suggestions on the integration of modern language activities such as songs, poems, rhymes and games with a view to provide a very strong linguistic basis for children's learning into everyday classroom situations. Participants were encouraged to share what they were planning to deliver in their respective class and given suggestions on how to make their activities more engaging, motivating and purposeful.

Given that the discovery and the exposure to the French culture was a most definite expectation prior to departure it is gratifying to note that cultural awareness appears to be the most significant development that has taken place during this short visit even though adjusting to another culture proved challenging for some participants and stretched their comfort zone. Participants were thrown into the deep end upon arrival when welcomed by the French families with French usual informal greetings i.e. kisses on the cheek and immediate immersion into French. The feeling of 'culture shock' experienced by some was quite disorientating and overwhelming. The French language being a source of pride for French people, one challenging aspect of being accommodated within a French family environment was the effort to speak French all the time. One participant felt that poor attempts at speaking French would occasionally be met with some degree of indignation and incomprehension. At the same time participants linked speaking French with culture learning benefits since it enabled them to enjoy a good range of sports and recreational activities. Participants were in a position to integrate better into the French culture whilst interacting with their host family and respective extended friends and relatives. All participants got actively involved in the family weekly routine hence contributing towards their social integration.

Another significant and recurring theme highlighted was the traditional French meal pattern, consisting of breakfast, a three course lunch at the school canteen and a family dinner. Some participants fully embraced the routine whilst others had difficulty to cope with and took time to adjust. Despite growing consumption of frozen and pre-packaged foods in contemporary France, participants were served elaborate meals and got the opportunity to enjoy a number of local French dishes, thus reinforcing the French food clichés. Fine food and refined drinks and healthy eating were identified as an important part of the French way of life in that particular region.

I learned a lot culturally from constantly being in a French environment. For example, the eating arrangements are largely different from Scottish eating culture [...]

From my short time of being in France I have seen a few differences with regards to families, meals etc. In France, a lot of time is allocated for being with your family, doing things together [...]

Concluding thoughts

Overall, the importance and added value of increasing language proficiency whilst being immersed in another culture as well as developing cross-cultural sensitivity were perceived as a most noteworthy personal development by the end of the week. In addition, when taking into account the richness of feedback comments, participants demonstrated that they were able to recognise and to critically assess how they had developed an awareness of their self-belief during that very short residential stay abroad.

Improved language skills were acknowledged as a positive outcome of the trip. It appears that language proficiency strengthened, but also knowledge and understanding of how the modern language as well as their mother tongue function, were enriched. Further, participants felt that experiencing family French language immersion and being 'put on the spot' whilst interacting repeatedly with members of the family contributed to increased language proficiency. Other highlighted benefits included the valuable insight into French primary education and the teaching experience gained.

It is hoped that this pilot initiative will encourage the participating students to develop further their own language skills by embracing other international learning experiences such as the teaching assistantship abroad organised by the British Council. This modest pilot project gave them a taster of what they could achieve and inspire them to play their part in the implementation of the 1 + 2 language policy. Finally, due to the success of the pilot initiative we have now secured funding to take another 14 students to France and 8 to Spain in spring 2015.