

Modern Languages in the multicomposite primary classroom: Meeting the challenge

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Abstract: This small-scale practitioner enquiry explores why some primary multicomposite class teachers from two local authorities perceive that teaching a modern language in multicomposite class is more challenging than in a 'straight' class. We examined and assessed previous research findings on teacher pedagogies, practices, values and beliefs within non modern language contexts in the multicomposite class. Building on those, we invited teachers to reflect on and compare how their own pedagogy and beliefs influence teaching and learning of literacy and modern languages in their multicomposite classes. In our analysis we explore local literacy as well as modern language challenges and opportunities, such as transferability. This enquiry provides a Scottish perspective on the topic and opens a dialogue about modern languages in the multicomposite class, a hugely neglected area.

Keywords: Modern Languages in the primary school; multicomposite classes; literacy

Introduction

The purpose of this enquiry was to examine some of the perceptions, issues and strategies employed in the teaching of modern languages (ML) in multicomposite classes (MCC). We (the researchers) had identified this as an area of concern and one where there seemed to be little research and few opportunities for further professional development. We were keen to conduct this research in order to identify ways of improving the teaching of ML in MCCs and to use our findings and recommendations to support colleagues and to start discussions on what appears to be an area that has been somewhat neglected. We decided to collaborate to increase the sample size and to widen the geographical spread of the research as we were interested to know if there were regional differences. We started by examining previous research on the pedagogy of multicomposite classes and then invited MCC teachers to compare their approaches to the teaching of Literacy and ML. Taking into account both the literature review and our findings, we make recommendations for both further research and strategies to support MCC teachers.

Research questions

- What pedagogies and practices underpin the effective learning and teaching in primary multicomposite classes?
- In the case of ML, to what extent do these pedagogies and practices meet the current needs of learners and reflect the professional values and beliefs held by practitioners?

Rationale

Quail and Smith (2014) observe that, given the prevalence of MCCs throughout the world, it is remarkable that relatively little research has focused on its impact on teaching approaches and learner outcomes. Birch & Lally (1995) and Little (2001, 2004, 2006) call for greater levels of research into the methods and techniques of multi-composite teaching. Little (2001, 2004) suggests that multicomposite teaching is invisible to policy makers so training is neglected. The need for research remains in 2017.

Most research indicates that pupil outcomes are of a similar level whether pupils are in 'straight' or MCCs (Mulyran-Kyne, 2004; Veenman, 1995).

However, findings show that many teachers perceive the multicomposite context as more challenging and there are concerns about delivering for all pupils. Mulyran-Kyne (2004) reports that most teachers find MCCs very difficult and less satisfying, or an added burden on the teacher and an inferior education for pupils. UNESCO (2015) highlights how MCC teachers find their work particularly challenging when teaching a curriculum designed for 'straight' classes.

Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence, however, is expressed in stages across year groups thus somewhat facilitating / encouraging multi-grade working more than other curricula. Berry (2013) advocates curriculum frameworks based on themes and proposes changes in instructional materials for teachers.

Some research suggests that very little difference exists between 'straight' and MCCs and that multicomposite organisation is more "natural". Pratt (1986) expresses the anthropological view that the natural way children are socialised is in mixed age groups. On leaving school, people are rarely organised by age.

Wilkinson and Hamilton (2003) argue that the nature and quality of instruction in the classroom are more important than the type of class. Veenman (1995) observes that teachers in MCCs tend to stick to the same practices as 'straight' classes and Little (2004) argues that knowledge of multicomposite teaching strategies is needed by all teachers.

Some support for MCC teachers currently exists. Veenman (1995) advocates cooperative learning, popular today in all class types. Using this can improve productivity as it develops higher order thinking and encourages positive social behaviour – a possible strategy for ML in a MCC. UNESCO's 2015 publication provides practical approaches. They are, however, generic with no focus on teaching ML in MCCs.

In Scotland, Crichton & Templeton (2010) concluded that models of training and continual professional development for PLL should be developed to ensure that primary teachers develop appropriate teaching methodologies and sufficient competences in the target language to provide an effective model to learners at this crucial stage in their language learning. It is unclear whether multi-composite approaches would be part of this. Anecdotal evidence suggests this is not the case, and there is little reference to multicomposite teaching in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and no offering for multicomposite classes in career-long professional learning (CLPL) programmes or at

national languages events and conferences. This research is, therefore, an initial attempt to identify what is actually happening when a ML is taught in a number of Scottish primary MCCs.

Methods

Terminology

Most literature defines multicomposite classes as two or more stages taught by one teacher. Some break it down into composite two stages with one teacher, and multicomposite, more than two stages with one teacher.

Research Design

An online questionnaire was selected as the most effective tool as it would obtain a lot of information from a large group of teachers in a non-threatening way. It was also inexpensive to administer, suitable for easy comparison and analysis and could be used to record behaviours as well as opinions, attitudes, beliefs and attributes. We had hoped to follow up the questionnaire with small group interviews with respondents but time constraints meant this proved impossible.

Once our research question and objectives were clear we created questions based on the strategies identified in UNESCO's "Practical Tips for Teaching Multigrade Classes" (2015). Respondents were asked for information on their use of each strategy when delivering Literacy and ML. Literacy was chosen as the comparator curriculum area because of the strong links and significant overlap between it between Literacy and ML. Teachers with experience of multicomposite agreed that these strategies were relevant to the Scottish context and demonstrated excellent awareness and understanding of the challenges and opportunities relating to multicomposite teaching. We were, however, aware that including explicit strategies might influence the nature of responses so we also provided the opportunity for respondents to describe any other strategies they used. The questionnaire was in 3 sections, set out clearly in table form with plenty of space for written comments. A combination of open questions and multiple-choice were produced in order to generate mainly qualitative and some quantitative data. Before emailing the questionnaire to our sample, it was trialled on two multicomposite primary teachers from different LAs and their feedback was incorporated into the final design.

In Local Authority 1, the questionnaires were emailed to 150 Language Ambassadors regardless of whether they were teaching in a multicomposite class. The intention was that they would forward the questionnaire to multicomposite colleagues. In Local Authority 2, the questionnaire was emailed to all six members of the Multicomposite Self Help Group and an additional 20 schools with multicomposite classes.

Responses

We received responses from ten teachers across the two Local Authorities. Responses related to eleven multicomposite classes (four with two stages, four with three stages,

one with four stages and two P1-7 classes). There are eleven responses in terms of classes because one respondent was teaching in two different schools.

We expected a low response rate but were disappointed that it was so low. This may have been because we carried out the research at a particularly busy time in the school year. Different timing might have produced more responses.

Findings

My multicomposite class and me

Background in Modern Languages

Respondents possess wide- ranging experience, qualifications and skills, from those with absolutely no ML prior knowledge, skills, training or teaching experience of ML in primary school (4), to those with ML qualifications at Honours Degree level (6), who had also participated in additional professional development, e.g. the Modern Languages in the Primary School programme of the early 1990s, as well as more recently in the ‘Training the Trainer’ programme and other sessions in support of the Scottish Government’s 1+2 language policy.

Table 1: Teacher confidence

very confident	1
confident	3
quite confident	4
somewhat lacking in confidence	2
not confident at all	1

Table 2: Approaches to ML Delivery

Embedded	1
Discrete	2
Topic related discrete	1
Discrete and embedded	6

Pedagogical Approaches – Teaching Literacy

Teaching Literacy: Differences between ‘straight’ class and MCC

Four out of nine respondents saw few or no differences between teaching literacy in a “straight” and a MCC. Perceived differences referred to the wider range of pupil ability, prior knowledge, ages, maturity, pupil needs and increased requirements around planning and differentiation. Respondents also reported that there was more scope for pupils to peer support and that it can be easier to provide appropriate challenge for pupils in the multicomposite setting.

Approaches for effective learning and teaching of literacy skills in MCCs

Respondents employed a wide range of strategies in teaching Literacy, differentiating by ability and learning style. Teachers used varied tasks and approaches including Interdisciplinary learning (IDL) and ICT. There was significant reference to pair and group work and self and peer assessment.

Challenges: teaching literacy in a MCC

Respondents identified 2 clear categories of challenge – “within the class” and “more structural”. In-class challenges focused on meeting the needs of all pupils, ensuring all kept on task whilst making progress. There was also a need for a variety of stimulating resources “to keep learning fresh and motivating”. Structural challenges were around the lack of support in a small school and issues around sustainability, especially as the precise make up of a MCC can change yearly.

Opportunities: teaching literacy in a MCC

Six out of ten respondents completed this section. The MCC was seen to provide better opportunities for buddying, scaffolding, developing independence, providing appropriate challenge, peer tutoring etc.

4.3 Identified Teaching Strategies

Table 3: Use of UNESCO strategies in teaching literacy and ML (No. of respondents)

	Strategy	TD/IL*	Regularly		Sometimes		Occasionally		Never	
			Lit.	ML	Lit.	ML	Lit.	ML	Lit.	ML
1	Teach all stages together	TD	3	8	4	1	2	1	0	0
2	Teach 1 stage while others work independently	IL	4	2	3	3	2	0	0	5
3	Teach 1 topic to all stages and at varying degrees of difficulty	TD	4	5	3	0	2	1	0	4
4	Develop activities for non-taught groups	IL	3	2	3	2	2	0	0	4
5	Develop peer, cross-age and cross-class teaching strategies	IL	3	2	4	3	0	0	0	3
6	Relate learning with daily life	TD	7	3	1	4	0	1	0	0

* TD = Strategy that is primarily teacher directed; IL = Strategy that promotes independent learning. NB: Totals vary because 1 respondent did not complete the literacy section and not everyone responded fully to every section.

In this sample all strategies are used at least occasionally in teaching literacy. However, four out of six are never used in ML by up to 50% of respondents. Strategy 1 is used most frequently in ML teaching. Strategy 2 is used in Literacy to varying degrees by everyone but 50 % never use it in ML. Half of respondents use Strategy 3 regularly in ML. One respondent stated that it is the most common strategy she uses in ML but many never use it. Strategy 4 is used by everyone when teaching literacy, whereas 50% never use it in ML. Similarly, everyone reported using strategy 5 regularly or at least sometimes in literacy, but almost 40% never use it in ML. However, one respondent recorded under “never” in ML, actually responded “Not yet”, indicating that she anticipated using it in the future. Strategy 6 is used regularly in literacy teaching by most respondents and is widely used in teaching ML but not as frequently.

Examples of how each strategy is used in the teaching of literacy and modern languages

Respondents provided wide- ranging examples, particularly for Literacy where examples cluster around the skills of Reading and Writing, with specific references to spelling, punctuation and grammar. Some respondents refer to discussion and using ICT, music and visual prompts. ML examples frequently refer to games, classroom routine, ICT, songs and vocabulary with little specific reference to the 4 skills common to both Literacy and ML.

Analysis

My multicomposite class and me

Teacher confidence

Most respondents had some ML training. Generally confidence mirrored levels of prior knowledge and / or experience in the ML / teaching of ML, with some non-confident teachers already using some of the familiar multicomposite literacy strategies for ML e.g. using Strategy 1 to teach songs and games. However, the teacher with an Honours degree in French felt only 'confident' in delivery of ML.

Approaches to ML Delivery

We tried to relate approach to teacher confidence level but the small response rate did not provide enough evidence. With the "discrete and embedded" approach sometimes the respondent is the discrete teacher and another teacher embeds or vice versa. Sometimes the respondent does both. However, it is positive that the combination of the discrete and embedded approach is the most common, reflecting uptake of the 1+2 rationale.

Pedagogical Approaches – Teaching of Literacy

Teaching literacy: differences between 'straight' class and MCC

The findings that almost 50% of teachers perceived there to be no difference reflects results found in the literature. One respondent stated that the knowledge of the child is what is important rather than its age or stage that we should teach. This implies that strategies are needed to meet learner needs regardless of type of class and that differentiation is key to teaching in either type of class. The P5-7 respondent believed that differentiation and organisation of tasks and resources are essential. A teacher's ability to differentiate effectively is one of the most demanding skills and becomes heightened with the extra variables that often need to be addressed in the multicomposite class (UNESCO, 2015)

Approaches for effective learning and teaching of literacy skills in MCCs

Results indicate that respondents are highly skilful at delivery of literacy. Most respondents state clearly a range of approaches that literature outlines as effective in meeting learner needs for literacy. All approaches could also be used in a 'straight' class emphasising again that meeting individual learner needs are paramount and that the nature of the class is not the overriding factor in successfully meeting those needs. This has implications for teaching ML. Those teachers who are confident at teaching Literacy can use most of the identified strategies to teach ML. Transferability of strategies is key here.

Challenges: teaching Literacy in a MCC

These match the generic multicomposite literature in terms of the challenges that teachers identify. Veenman (1995) stresses the importance of pupils developing independence and interdependence through cooperative learning. This is a key challenge for teachers ensuring that pupils can cope when the teacher has to manage multiple groups at different levels. The implication here is to ensure that there is availability of resources for different levels, also applicable to ML.

Opportunities: teaching literacy in a MCC

These match the opportunities identified in the generic multicomposite literature and this enquiry's results, demonstrating that teachers are aware that using the identified multicomposite strategies is effective for teaching Literacy.

Identified Teaching Strategies**Use of UNESCO strategies**

In this sample it is clear that a wider range of teaching strategies is used when teaching Literacy than when teaching ML - all of the strategies identified by UNESCO are used by all respondents at least occasionally in the teaching of Literacy whereas 2 /3 of them are never used in ML by roughly half of the respondents.

Classification of the different strategies into those which are primarily teacher directed (TD) (Strategies 1, 3 and 6) and those which promote independent learning (IL) (Strategies 2, 4 and to some extent Strategy 5) reveals that ML lessons tend to be more teacher-led whereas independent learning strategies are used more widely in the context of literacy. All respondents use IL strategies at least occasionally in literacy (apart from Strategy 5 where 2 respondents stated they never used this in literacy). Significant numbers reported that they never use these strategies in the ML context. This analysis is confirmed by the fact that the most TD strategy (Strategy 1) is the one which is most widely used in ML. On closer examination of individual responses, those who identify as "somewhat lacking in confidence" or "not at all confident" are more likely never to use IL strategies than those who describe themselves as more confident. This tendency should however not be overstated as the more confident respondents also answered with "never" for some of the strategies.

Examples

Examples of how the strategies are used also point to some significant differences. Literacy examples tend to be linked to the different skills of literacy whereas there is much more reference to content and activities (vocabulary, games, song etc.) in ML. Although the teachers do not refer to them, the skills are, however, necessarily present in the ML activities cited: "creating and delivering presentations" involves writing and talking, and probably also reading and / or listening; songs, games and classroom routines involve listening and talking etc. Further investigation could identify why teachers use different terms to describe what they do in the different contexts.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Key Findings

- Respondents are clearly aware of effective ways to deliver literacy. They are less aware of how to apply these ways in the delivery of ML.
- Respondents have plenty of experience of differentiating resources in literacy but are less confident in doing so for ML.
- All of the UNESCO strategies are employed in the teaching of literacy but the range is much narrower when teaching ML
- Teacher-directed strategies rather than those which promote independent learning are more widely employed in ML compared with literacy.
- There may be some correlation between level of confidence and the use of strategies which promote independent learning in ML but this is not conclusive.

Recommendations

There is a need for:

- increased awareness about how transferable literacy multicomposite strategies are for ML
- teachers to be shown how to break down resources, especially different genres, in ML in order to differentiate for those who need challenge and for those needing support. This could be incorporated into initial teacher education and career-long professional learning
- increased understanding of how the existing ML activities link into the skills which are common across Literacy and ML
- support for teachers to develop their use of Independent Learning strategies in the ML context
- further research into the different challenges posed by the nature of Literacy and ML in Scotland today, e.g. the fact that (the majority of) pupils come to the classroom with extensive prior knowledge of English so the teaching of basic vocabulary is not necessary. This is clearly not the case for most pupils in ML. Teachers need support and resources to help pupils acquire vocabulary in such a way that they are moving beyond the word/phrase level and are developing the 4 skills through an ML experience that is as varied, differentiated and meaningful as that which is provided for Literacy.
- support that is specifically targeted at teachers of MCC to help them with the challenges presented by planning and differentiation in particular.

Concluding Thoughts

Some Scottish primary teachers perceive that teaching ML in a MCC is more challenging than in a 'straight' class. Previous studies clearly describe those challenges in non-ML contexts and identify pedagogies and practices used to underpin the effective learning and teaching in primary MCCs to meet those challenges.

Most respondents in this enquiry describe similar challenges, especially for ML. Results have enabled the researchers to gauge more locally to what extent pedagogies and practices in each context (literacy and ML) meet the current needs of learners and reflect the professional values and beliefs held by local practitioners. Many opportunities for teachers, already experts at delivering literacy, have been highlighted, especially transferability of good practice from established curricular areas such as literacy to ML.

Where a MCC teacher lacks confidence in a ML and in order for effective ML learning and teaching to take place, training and support in how to use ML resources for planning and differentiation in all four skills is essential. More research into how best to deliver such ML training is strongly recommended.

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