

# SUMMARY

## Background

The focus of this review is a consideration of the characteristics of effective foreign language (FL) teaching to pupils between the ages of 7 and 11. It is timely, given the recent expansion of primary FL in almost all countries in mainland Europe and following the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) announcement in England that, by the end of the decade, every child in Key Stage 2 (KS2) will be entitled to study a foreign language (DfES, 2002). This review is therefore important in providing research evidence to inform initial teacher training (ITT) practices that might be introduced in the context of FL expansion in primary schools.

There is great diversity in primary modern foreign language (PMFL) programmes and major differences in the status and perceived value of foreign languages within different countries (Blondin *et al.*, 1998). Teaching programmes can be language competence, sensitisation or language awareness programmes, with different aims and purposes, requiring different amounts of time and imposing differing demands on the teacher in regard to subject knowledge and application (Centre for Information on Language Teaching (CILT), 2000; Driscoll, 1999; Johnstone, 1994). The identification of teacher variables has included a focus on language proficiency or 'being good at a language' and the notion of teacher competence has been expanded to include subject application and general pedagogical understanding (Sharpe, 1999). Knowledge of children's language development is a key factor as it is argued that metalinguistic awareness plays an important role in language development and thus has implications for foreign language learning (Partridge, 1994; Ponterotto and DeLuca, 2000). The use of learning resources is important in FL teaching. Audio-visual aids, for example, are prevalent in primary FL classrooms, as they play a useful role in developing pupils' cultural learning. There are clear training needs that include teachers' linguistic proficiency, cultural awareness as well as age-specific and subject-specific pedagogy.

The purpose of this review is to extrapolate from research evidence the characteristics of effective teaching in that they seem to be consistently associated with the achievement of language learning objectives in order to devise an evidence-informed framework for effective early foreign language teaching.

A systematic review of the research literature that can be updated, about the factors underpinning effective teaching, is needed in order to inform policy and practice for the future training and development of teachers.

## Aims of the review

The aims of the review are as follows:

1. To conduct a systematic review of research evidence about the factors underpinning the effective teaching of foreign languages to pupils in the 7 to 11 age range
2. To examine the conditions and processes associated with effective teaching
3. To make recommendations based on these findings
4. To identify questions that need to be addressed by future research

## Review question

The main review question was as follows:

***What are the characteristics of effective foreign language teaching to pupils between the ages of 7 and 11?***

which requires consideration of the following:

- What teacher competences are required to teach foreign languages effectively in the later primary phase?
- What are the conditions which impact on effective teaching?

## Methods

The review was carried out according to the procedures for conducting systematic reviews of educational research developed by the Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre).

Searches of electronic databases, websites, citations from other reviews and personal contacts identified potentially relevant studies. Their titles and abstracts were screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria and the full reports of the studies meeting the inclusion criteria were requested. After considering the full reports, those studies which did not meet the inclusion criteria were rejected. Theoretical reports were considered for the background to the report. The remaining reports were keyworded, using the EPPI-Centre *Keywording Strategy for Classifying Education Research (version 0.9.6)* (EPPI-Centre, 2002a) and review-specific keywords (see Appendix 2.3), so that a descriptive map of the studies could be produced. Considering the studies against the EPPI-Centre weight of evidence questions and carrying out data-extraction identified the studies for the in-depth review.

## Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In order for a study to be *included*, it must:

- relate to PMFL teaching
- focus on the characteristics of effective teaching of foreign languages
- be concerned with the 7 to 11 age range
- have been published between 1988 (when the Education Reform Act was implemented) and 2003
- be related to the teaching and learning of foreign languages taught inside curriculum time

Studies were **excluded** if:

- they were not directly concerned with the characteristics of effective foreign language teaching
- those studied were not children in the 7 to 11 age range
- they featured the instruction of foreign languages outside curriculum time (e.g. clubs)
- they focused on languages that were not taught as foreign languages but for another purpose (e.g. heritage language)
- they were non-evidential or non-investigative

These inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to identify reports that focused on the review question: 'What are the characteristics of effective foreign language teaching to pupils between the ages of 7 and 11?'.

The first three inclusion criteria specifically relate to the question; the fourth criterion was intended to narrow the search to reports that were published after the introduction of the National Curriculum in order to make the review both relevant and useful for teachers in England in the present day context. The last criterion refers to FL provision outside curriculum time, such as the commercial models of delivery or clubs that have been established in schools in recent years. Frequently, these are not subject to the same framework as the school curriculum and they are not taught by qualified teachers; as such, it was decided to exclude them from the review.

The first three exclusion criteria are the converse of the inclusion criteria. The decision taken to exclude heritage languages followed an intense discussion about the factors involved in learning another language. In the case of heritage languages, for example, the learners' exposure to learning their mother tongue is very different from that of a learner learning a language only in a timetabled slot in school time.

The final criterion was to restrict the review to empirical studies rather than to include theoretical works about primary foreign languages. The review methodology also included a discussion with end-users, namely a primary school headteacher and a focus group discussion with year 5 pupils.

## Results

Initially, the Review Group wanted to identify the teaching competencies required to teach foreign languages to primary pupils, but exploratory searches found few studies on this topic. Teacher competence is concerned with the knowledge, skill and ability of the teacher: it has been the focus of very little research.

Broadening the research question to consider the characteristics of effective teaching enabled other influences on teaching, such as the context, to be included. Initially, we undertook rapid 'crude' electronic screening, which identified 5,118 studies. Amongst these, there were duplicate studies, studies focusing on teaching Language 1 (L1), and studies focusing on the secondary phase of education. These studies were immediately set aside.

We then applied the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process indicated that there were 278 studies that could potentially be included within the review. From the titles or abstracts, it was impossible to establish their relevance to the focus of the review.

We requested 278 full reports to be sent to us. Only 203 full documents arrived in time; these were screened. The other 75 papers did not arrive in time to be considered in the review.

Of the 203 reports, 49 were opinion papers or theoretical reports, not based on empirical research. A number of these reports were referred to in the research background of this systematic review.

Following the full application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria, 54 reports remained. These were keyworded, using the EPPI-Centre (EPPI-Centre, 2002a) and review-specific keywords, so that a descriptive map of the studies could be produced.

Only 18 studies actually referred to teaching and learning but none of the studies had effective teaching as the main focus of the research or the reports. Applying the EPPI-Centre review-specific weight of evidence questions facilitated an assessment of the contribution of each study to answering the review question and produced four studies for the in-depth review. The synthesis of the review collated the findings of these studies and considered them against five themes – teacher knowledge, pedagogy, resources, training needs and whether foreign language learning is a whole school issue.

## Conclusions

As there was a dearth of evidence specifically focusing on the characteristics of effective teaching and as the four studies in the in-depth review are concerned with different aspects of teaching, it is not possible to arrive at definitive findings supported by a substantive body of research. A significant finding of the review is the lack of research on effective teaching in PMFL, which is to some extent an indication of a subject in its infancy. It may also be the case that the meaning of the term 'effectiveness' is so contested that it leads to a reluctance to focus on and attempt to define the concept in research. It is clear that further research should be undertaken in this area. Studies, which did consider teaching, tended to focus on topics such as the qualifications of the teacher or the teaching programme used; this may be useful as background but does not enable conclusions to be drawn about effective teaching. Nonetheless, the review findings are as follows:

1. Teachers' knowledge is important if PMFL is to be taught effectively. Knowledge encompasses knowledge about:
  - the subject
    - the foreign language content (e.g. verbs and nouns)
    - the skill to use the target language in clearly defined areas for communication
    - the target culture
  - subject-specific teaching methods
  - age-specific teaching methods
  - resources

- primary curriculum
- children as individuals
- children's learning needs

The evidence highlights the need for teachers not only to have the competence to teach, using the target language but also the confidence to use it spontaneously within clearly defined areas in a classroom situation.

2. Providers of teacher training need to include the above identified elements into the PMFL programmes as a means to support, promote and develop effective practice and coherence in schools.
3. Specialist language teachers may have an advantage in teaching PMFL as they are likely to be fluent in the target language, but there is a danger if they are secondary trained teachers, that they may import inappropriate methods into the primary school.
4. Primary trained class teachers have a number of significant advantages: they are part of the whole primary school culture; they know and teach across other curriculum subjects; they know the children and their capabilities and idiosyncrasies well; and, when appropriately trained, have the opportunity to use the foreign language incidentally throughout the day, thereby maximising learning time.
5. Purposeful use of activities, such as games and songs, provides enjoyment and reinforces children's learning. The ludic approach is an appropriate method that stimulates, motivates and provides challenge for learning. The repetitive rhythms of games and songs provide opportunities for extensive practice and consolidation as well as the exposure necessary for language intake to take place.
6. Audio-visual and other resources are useful aids to teaching and learning. They can also be a support for teachers' language and cultural knowledge but they are not a substitute for it. The evidence indicates a measure of dependence on such aids and the need to train teachers to use such aids selectively and as part of a planned sequence of learning.
7. The teachers' depth of knowledge of the language and culture, their fluency within the parameters of the programme taught, and their ability to answer pupils' questions, as well as to identify and correct errors as part of their teaching, are key issues in effective teaching.
8. Transition arrangements need to be in place to ensure progression and continuity of learning across the year groups but also between Key Stages.
9. The community of MFL specialist practitioners needs to extend the parameters of its community, which incorporates both practice and beliefs about teaching and learning MFL, to embrace and include primary school PMFL teachers.
10. The active support of the school's leadership is a crucial element in developing and supporting the teaching of PMFL practice in a whole-school framework that can sustain effective teaching.

The **strengths of the review** are its breadth of reference and systematic approach, and the membership of the review team, which provided a broad base of experience. In combination, these have resulted in an authoritative attempt to answer the research question by constructing an evidential basis. Given the importance and timeliness of the research, it is imperative that an attempt be made to identify and describe the characteristics of apparently effective practice or 'practice that works', and also the factors that are enabling and/or supportive of effective practice. The review has been wide-ranging and sensitive to the cultural contexts of research, and has provided the beginning of an evidence base for primary languages that will be a useful resource for PMFL teachers and others involved, such as those at the lower secondary stage, as training programmes develop.

The **limitations of this systematic review** relate to the fact that, although a large number of studies were found in the initial search, at the mapping stage of the review, few were identified as relevant to the focus of the characteristics of effective teaching. Many of the studies focused almost exclusively on pupils' learning, programme-planning or curriculum materials, with little, if any, references to teaching or research. The review had to be conducted within a limited timescale, so it is possible that other research is available but was not able to be included in the review. However, a rigorous interrogation of the studies in the map has enabled the team to make suggestions for policy and practice.

The suggestions below are derived from the research studies and methodology of studies, from discussions within the team and discussions with end-users.

## Policy

Suggestions for policy include the following:

- The provision of varied teacher training programmes and sustained professional development opportunities for primary schoolteachers to enable them to develop and maintain their subject knowledge, especially in terms of language proficiency and cultural knowledge, as well as language-specific teaching strategies for primary age learners.
- The identification of, and investment, in a range of quality resources, such as videos and CD-Roms, to support teachers and pupils in their learning endeavours. Teachers need to be trained to use resources selectively and as part of a planned sequence of learning. This curriculum development needs to be led by training, rather than by resources.
- To convince headteachers to be committed in their support of PMFL, and to provide the support and resources that are needed for them to be effective leaders in this curriculum area.
- To support mechanisms which facilitate links between primary and secondary schools to ensure progression and continuity of learning from KS2 to KS3.
- Linguistic and pedagogic training for primary FL teachers, with a need for teachers to be able to plan graded language learning objectives for pupils.

- Widespread ITT training programmes and ongoing in-service training is essential to the long-term sustainability of effective foreign language programmes.

## Practice

Suggestions for practice are that teachers should be encouraged and enabled to undertake the following, indicative of effective practice:

- Use the foreign language incidentally as part of normal classroom procedure.
- Encourage pupils' experimentation with the target language by capitalising on their talkativeness.
- Create extensive opportunities for listening and respect the need for a 'silent period' whilst pupils process the information heard.
- Understand children's errors as part of their interlanguage and use error to promote further learning.
- Make extensive use of total physical response (TPR) and interactive learning to enable children to 'breathe' the language.
- Create a secure and attractive learning environment that will encourage pupils to experiment with the target language and to develop confidence.
- Develop the children's cultural and intercultural understanding, making explicit links to the children's own culture.
- Develop metalinguistic awareness and, for example, make explicit links to L1 and to the Literacy curriculum.
- Make cross-curricular links to extend opportunities for language and cultural learning.
- Create and obtain a wide range of resources to support learning and use them selectively as part of the teaching sequence.
- Contribute to the creation of a whole-school policy to promote FL learning.
- Continue to engage individually and collaboratively in ongoing training opportunities to enhance and update their skills.
- Promote the creation of PMFL networks for support and training.
- Develop ways in which to draw upon the subject expertise of the specialist language teachers in the design of assessment instruments and then utilise the generalists' situated knowledge in the administration of assessment.
- ITT courses and publishers make explicit reference to culture and to the ways in which it can be taught to young learners.
- Use games and songs in a well-structured programme, so that language learning is creative and spontaneous, enjoyable, but progression of learning is ensured.
- There is a need to reflect on the structure of material in relation to the sequence in which pupils learn language skills, the teacher thus adopting a role more redolent of 'guide'. This clearly requires a shift in stance for the teacher and a re-articulation of role.

## Research

Recommendations for research are considerable and signal the need to investigate further the areas mapped out in this review, with both large-scale longitudinal research and small-scale studies. It will be particularly important to extend the evidence base regarding effective teaching. Topics for research would also include the impact of different training interventions and professional development on

teacher effectiveness and effective ways of promoting continuity and progression from primary to secondary school.

It will be very important to ensure that trainee teachers engage fully with these issues and have opportunities to experience and to reflect upon cases of effective practice in order to develop their own effective practice.