An early start to foreign language literacy in English primary school classrooms

This study investigated the systematic and principled teaching of foreign language (FL) literacy in two young learner classrooms in England. Over the course of 23 weeks, two classes of 9-11 year olds (N=45) learned spoken and written language through an integrated pedagogy. The underpinning rationale was to explore principled ways of teaching FL literacy to beginner, young learners. The study also set out to document the nature of linguistic progression and potential attrition in primary school foreign language classrooms through measuring a range of FL outcomes: receptive vocabulary and elicited imitation (general proficiency); reading aloud and reading comprehension (literacy). It was found that the 45 participants made slow but statistically significant and long-term progress, the latter evidenced by limited attrition, across both FL general proficiency and FL literacy constructs. Qualitative data showed that children enjoyed aspects of the literacy instruction and opportunities to experiment with FL use. Findings have the potential to inform young FL learning empirical and pedagogic evidence, particularly relating to the teaching and learning of FL literacy in primary school settings.

Keywords: young foreign language learning, foreign language pedagogy, foreign language literacy

**Introduction**

The introduction of instructed foreign language (FL) learning for younger learners is widely expected to deliver enhanced linguistic outcomes (Copland and Garton, 2014), yet research has shown that age-related benefits in the form of FL learning gains cannot be assumed for instructed learners (e.g. Jaekel et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2006; de Bot, 2014). It is therefore important to investigate classroom factors such as pedagogy to explore how the classroom can bring about progression for younger language learners (de Bot, 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Lambelet and Berthele, 2015; Muñoz and Singleton, 2011; Murphy, 2014).

Important contributions to this agenda have been made by classroom-based studies, for example, examining the role of storytelling in primary FL classrooms (Kirsch, 2016) or the effectiveness of songs in early FL settings (Davis, 2017). Often these evaluate affective (self-esteem and confidence) and motivational perspectives rather than discrete linguistic outcomes and they typically involve investigation of specific teaching tools rather than holistic pedagogies. On the other hand, larger, programme-level evaluations of teaching approach offer important evidence of outcomes but understandably involve less control or direction over specific classroom activities (Graham et al., 2017; Pladevall-Ballester, 2016; Tragant et al., 2016).

This small-scale, classroom-based action research study (N=45) set out to address this gap by investigating linguistic outcomes and progression following a longitudinal, 7-month programme of oracy (speaking and listening) and literacy (reading and writing) French as a foreign language instruction. Progression was measured at three test points: pre-test before the programme, post-test after 23 teaching weeks and a delayed post-test seven weeks after the teaching finished. The study also captured evidence relating to pupil evaluations of the teaching activities and pupil confidence relating to foreign language learning.

**Background**

***FL learning in primary schools and FL outcomes***

Improved linguistic outcomes are often anticipated from early FL provision due to widespread perceptions that young children are better at language learning and that an early start provides longer instruction time (Enever and Moon, 2009). The ‘better’ argument is, however, notoriously problematic for classroom foreign language learning. Despite mainstream beliefs, younger, instructed language learners tend not to show clear advantages in rate of learning when compared with late starters, arguably due to older learners’ superior cognition and insufficient input to trigger implicit learning mechanisms preferred by young learners (de Bot, 2014; Larson-Hall, 2008; Jaekel et al., 2017; Muñoz, 2011, 2014). Studies have in fact explored differences in outcomes after input up to a maximum of 800 hours in total, with findings showing that young learners do not outperform older starters during this timeframe (e.g. Muñoz, 2006). Lambelet and Berthele, (2015: 63) suggest that to fully explore the potential for increased input, future studies should examine the effect on outcomes of (a) increased extent, i.e.beyond 800 hours’ instruction and/or (b) increased input intensity. The latter is likely to be an important issue (potentially for policy) as intensity in early FL provision worldwide tends to be limited with global settings offering between 400-500 hours in total spread across 5-8 school years (Rixon, 2013). In England, both intensity and extent of input are particularly problematic, with FL provision fixed between half an hour to one hour per week in most primary schools (Graham et al., 2017).

Despite no apparent advantage for age or increased input (up to 800 hours) it is important to clarify that young FL learners across Europe do typically make steady, meaningful progress (de Bot, 2014; Cable et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2017; Enever, 2011). Longitudinal, large-scale studies have found development in oral vocabulary (Cable et al., 2010; Enever, 2011), progress in morpho-syntax (Enever, 2011; Graham et al., 2017), reading comprehension (Cable et al., 2010; Enever, 2011) and listening (Cable et al., 2010; Enever, 2011). However, a pattern across some studies is emerging which suggests wide intra-sample variation in attainment (Cable et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2017) and that multiple contextual and individual factors are likely to influence outcomes (Courtney et al., 2017; Enever, 2011). For example, individual factors research has noted the importance of first language (L1) literacy (Courtney et al., 2017; Sparks et al., 2012), verbal working memory (Porter, 2017), learner attitudinal factors (Courtney et al., 2017; Enever, 2011) and non-linguistic cognitive abilities (de Bot, 2014; Jaekel et al., 2017). Contextual issues have also been linked to FL progression in young learner classrooms with the importance of teaching time of at least one hour/week and teacher linguistic ability being noted (de Bot, 2014; Graham et al., 2017; Larson-Hall, 2008).

Whilst large-scale research usefully documents FL outcomes and influential factors, classroom-based studies can provide a supplementary lens for the exploration of young FL progression by evidencing outcomes and learning processes from multiple perspectives in both the short- and long-term. This, alongside larger-scale experimental studies and surveys could result in a broader and deeper evidence base to inform policy, curricula and practice.

***Younger foreign language pedagogy***

There are clear imperatives in the English primary FL curriculum to develop progress in one foreign language including the early development of both spoken and written skills (DfE, 2014; DfES, 2005). Internationally, curricula for early FL learning tend to promote FL literacy but in some instances, there is a more nuanced stance, stating that FL literacy should follow FL spoken language development (Ministry of Education – Ontario, 2013) or that the written form should be presented after its oral form (Ministère de l’Enseignement Supérieur et de la Recherche, 2007).

In practice, FL literacy instruction tends to be used as a means of consolidating oral development rather than being systematically taught and learned (Jones and Coffey, 2006). This is potentially based in historic advice that the introduction of reading and writing adversely affects pronunciation and FL achievement (Burstall, 1970: 81; Hurrell, 1999: 80, 83). Observations of practice in England report limited evidence of creative, imaginative and independent FL literacy practices in primary and secondary schools (Cable et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2014; Ofsted, 2011) characterised by uninspiring and formulaic literacy resources (Woore, 2014). However, this is not a uniquely English problem. In young learner classrooms in Norway, FL reading and writing are practised less and remain an ‘unexploited potential’ (Drew, 2009: 110) while integrated skills (literacy and oracy) instruction was found to be challenging for Taiwanese and Korean primary FL teachers (Wu and Yang, 2008; Wu, 2012). ‘Unstructured’ language learning opportunities such as creative writing were rarely practised in Korea, although this is possibly due to time constraints and curricular demands (Garton, 2014: 213). From the pupil perspective, Courtney (2014) noted that English primary and early secondary school children appeared to dislike FL literacy-based classroom activities.

***FL literacy and its role in school-based FL learning***

FL literacy is believed to support FL outcomes. In English secondary schools, FL phonological recoding/decoding or “print to sound translation” (Share, 1995: 152) was linked to linguistic progression and motivation to continue learning languages throughout secondary school (Macaro and Erler, 2008). There is also a strong instrumental narrative to developing FL literacy, as FL literacy skills are deemed highly relevant in the digital age (Macaro, Graham and Woore, 2016) and literacy practice has the potential to facilitate the development of language awareness and learner autonomy through reflecting on and evaluating target language use (Little, 1997). Global literature is also considered a useful tool to support international and intercultural understanding in US schools (Corapi and Short, n.d.). There is tentative evidence that FL literacy instruction enhanced FL spoken outcomes in secondary school for ‘at-risk’ FL learners (i.e. those with weak L1 literacy) (Graham et al., 2014; Ravid and Ginat-Heiman, 2014) and could act as another modality, in other words another source of input, thereby creating richer, deeper memory traces (Porter, 2017). It is important, however, to recognise that these kinds of perceived benefits for FL literacy are likely to be influenced by language distance such as the extent to which languages share similar orthographies and percentages of shared cognates (Lindgren and Muñoz, 2013).

Despite a range of perspectives supporting FL literacy, recent evaluation of a literacy teaching approach in UK primary FL classrooms (children aged 9-12 years) did not show superior gains in FL oracy outcomes when compared to an oracy-centred approach (Graham et al., 2017). Rather than eliminate any potential impact for FL literacy per se, the authors suggested that the relative quality of literacy instruction including limited opportunities for learners to engage in ‘higher level literacy activities’ could have mediated the effect of a literacy-focused approach (Graham et al., 2017: 31). Smaller-scale research has indeed shown that a rich and structured foreign language programme involving a range of literacy-based activities, within and outside the classroom, led to gains on all literacy and oracy FL measures for the intervention group (8-10 years old) (Drew, 2009).

***A principled FL pedagogy for the young learner classroom***

This small-scale, action research study was designed with the overarching premise that FL (French) oracy and literacy would be taught systematically and simultaneously. Due to a paucity of classroom research on young FL learners, the pedagogic principles were derived from a range of L1 and L2-related theoretical and empirical evidence. The research questions for the study were as follows:

1. To what extent, if at all, do learners make progress in French general proficiency (receptive vocabulary, elicited imitation) and French literacy (reading aloud, reading comprehension) following a 23-week teaching programme involving systematic and simultaneous French oracy/literacy instruction?
2. To what extent, if at all, is general French proficiency and literacy learning sustained seven weeks after the teaching programme has ended?
3. How did the learners perceive the teaching programme and report their FL learning confidence?

**Method**

***Participants***

The sample consisted of 45 children (school 1 *n*=23; school 2 *n*=22) whose mean age was 9.98 years (minimum 9.01, maximum 11.0). They were taught in mixed-year classes (England Years 5 and 6 – US Grades 4 and5). All the children spoke English as their L1, although some had exposure to other languages at home (e.g. Nepalese, Arabic, Dutch), although these were not spoken as home languages. The two schools were in relatively socially advantaged communities. Each school offered FL instruction once a week for 50 minutes and the researcher was the visiting French teacher in both schools (for 2 years previously in school 1, for 6 years previously in school 2). Prior to pre-test, the children had received at least two years of oracy-focused FL teaching with ad-hoc literacy activities. Parents and guardians were approached for informed consent and the children’s verbal consent was sought to conform to ethical requirements for school-based teaching and learning research.

Reflecting the exploratory nature of this investigation to develop a holistic oracy and literacy pedagogy, this was an action research study with the principle aim of finding ‘creative solutions to educational problems’ (Mertler, 2009: 19). It was also intended to bridge the research/practice gap through practice shaped by research which might give ‘new direction to educational theory and research’ (Mertler, 2014: 22; 24). Active teacher engagement and the quest for ‘educational change from the bottom up and inside out’ (Pine, 2009: 26) may be considered to render it ‘relevant’ and more ‘authoritative’ for practitioners (Mills, 2007: 11). Nevertheless, action research is acknowledged to be highly context-specific and as such lacks generalisability. Therefore findings drawn from the study will be interpreted cautiously (Mertler, 2014: 30).

***Materials and Activities***

Relevant theoretical and empirical evidence was identified and operationalised in the form of the following pedagogic principles:

*Principle 1: Simultaneous and systematic oracy (speaking and listening) and literacy* Literacy was operationalised as the development of language skills focusing on ‘mastery of the fundamentals of speaking, reading and writing’ (García, Bartlett and Kleifgen, 2009; Reyes, 2001: 98). The English FL curricula and its attainment targets tend to adopt this view of FL literacy development (e.g. DfE, 2014; DfES, 2005).

Learning to read in additional languages has recently been theorised as a ‘repeated process’ (Koda, 2008: 74). L1 automatized reading-related skills are therefore invoked when a learner encounters L2 text (Koda, 2008). This study adopted the premise that young FL learners are not a ‘blank canvas’ (Porter, 2014: 338) and that, in line with Koda’s hypothesis, they may have access to some automatized, oral skills such as phonological awareness, which underpin word reading (Koda, 2008). Practically speaking, this implied that some aspects of literacy might not need explicit instruction, for example specific, shared sound/spelling links and syllable identification (part of phonological awareness).

The systematic element of Principle 1 was operationalised through attempts to balance instruction between phonics activities and higher-order literacy skills such as reading for meaning, identifying genre and reading strategy practice. Simultaneous instruction involved, for example, the development of French core vocabulary in both spoken and written form, such that literacy was an equal partner in the learning process to oracy. Full details of the FL programme are included in Appendix A.

*Principle 2: Focus on FL sounds*

The pedagogic programme recognised that learners could benefit from explicit focus on producing and discriminating novel FL sounds, as L2 phonemic awareness is implicated in L2 word reading and L2 reading comprehension (Verhoeven, 2011; Walter, 2008; Yeong and Liow, 2010: 400). Despite shared writing systems, several French phonemes do not exist in the L1 (e.g. nasal vowels /ɔ̄/, /ɑ̄/, /ɛ̄/, /ɶ̄/) whilst others are relatively close phonetic neighbours and, therefore, could be particularly hard to distinguish (e.g. French front rounded vowel /ʏ/ versus the similar English back rounded vowel English /u:/). This principle was operationalised as part of a phonics instruction component by focussing on the articulatory properties of novel FL sounds and practising their production and discrimination (for example, using minimal pairs activities and exemplar words). Children were presented with the graphemes relating to each novel FL sound through the phonics instruction presented in principle 3.

*Principle 3: Systematic and explicit phonics instruction*

An integrated approach to reading instruction supports explicit instruction in phoneme (sound)/grapheme (spelling) links as one strand of an overall literacy instructional package (Adams, 1990). As both English and French are relatively ‘deep’ orthographies with limited 1:1 consistency in the relationships between letter/s and sounds, the pedagogy allowed for learners to utilise a range of sub-lexical and whole word recognition strategies. In practice, this meant that the children had opportunities to apply developing sound/spelling link knowledge through sounding out and blending regular words (where each letter related directly to a sound) but also to practise reading whole words (where it was impossible to make 1:1 links e.g. “monsieur” - Mr) and a direct association was therefore made between a whole written word and its sound form. This is also in line with L2 reading research which states that the L1 reading experience tailors and shapes linguistic and cognitive resources which are then privileged (by the learner) for L2 reading (Geva, 2006). In other words, having already learned to read an irregular orthography, these learners could utilise a range of word recognition skills rather than relying solely on sub-lexical strategies such as phonological decoding. The FL phoneme/grapheme links taught are itemised in Table 1. These links were taught using exemplar words and gesture to aid memorisation and act as retrieval cues as per commercial phonics teaching packages (e.g. Jolly Phonics, Lloyd and Wernham, 1996).

[Insert Table 1 here]

*Principle 4: Experiencing FL sound and print*

Finally, building on two theoretical perspectives, this study proposed that learners’ encounters with spoken and written language should be both engaging and focused around active, meaning-centred communication. This was supported by integrated reading instruction which recommends ‘an early opportunity to do meaningful connected reading’ (Adams, 1990: 45) and blends decoding with comprehension activities, writing, reading practice and motivation to read (Snow and Juel, 2005: 511). Phonics activities and meaning-related work were counterbalanced on a weekly basis (see Appendix A). In addition, Principle 4 was implemented to reflect decades of established language learning evidence supporting ‘active (language use)….for purposes that matter’ (Hawkins, 1996: 30), learner autonomy through target language use, reflection and evaluation (Little, 1997) and the ‘reinstatement of creativity, imagination and risk-taking’ (Mitchell, 2002). These principles were operationalised through the creation of individual texts in the form of book chapters (exploring animals and insects, a topic chosen by the children themselves) which were then combined to create a whole class book. Oracy skills were developed simultaneously through vocabulary and sentence building which culminated (every six weeks) in small group video documentary episodes relating to each book chapter.

***Procedures***

The teaching programme based on the four principles outlined above was delivered for 50 minutes every week over a period of 23 weeks. To assess outcomes, a formal test battery targeted specific FL variables and bespoke test items were designed by the teacher/researcher, due to limited existing resources for younger learners of languages other than English. As the FL assessment tasks were already closely aligned with classroom activities, reliability and validity were given less emphasis (Murphy, 2014; Porter, 2017). The tests were not piloted due to the lack of an available sample with similar language learning experiences. To maintain ecological validity, discrete skills were examined as the English FL curriculum focuses on skills-based outcomes with teachers expected to measure and report on progression against specific attainment targets. Individual scores were obtained across four core FL variables: FL receptive vocabulary, FL elicited imitation, FL reading aloud and FL reading comprehension.

***Research instruments – quantitative data***

*General FL competence: receptive vocabulary.*

This variable reflects curricular FL attainment targets such as: ‘recall, retain and use vocabulary’ (DfE, 2014; DfES, 2005: 19).The test used to measure it was was based on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (Dunn and Dunn, 2007) and the ELIAS British Picture Vocabulary Scale (Dunn, Dunn, Whetton and Burley, 1997). Participants were asked to circle the correct picture corresponding to an oral cue and marking was dichotomous (right/wrong). For example, children heard the word “une jupe” (a skirt) and had to circle the correct picture from a choice of four: skirt, dress, trainers, and t-shirt) Target lexical items were chosen from a range of topic areas taught by the teacher/researcher over the preceding years. Individual worksheets were completed in a whole class setting with no conferring.

*General FL competence: elicited imitation.*

This test was designed to shed light on ‘stored knowledge (L2) represented subconsciously’ (Erlam, 2006: 465). Test takers are required to repeat (after a short gap) spoken utterances which exemplify grammatical knowledge. The length of these sentences is controlled so that they cannot be temporarily stored in verbal working memory. Instead, the test taker is required to successfully reformulate the sentence by a) understanding the presented sentence and b) reconstructing the form of the sentence by re-mapping meaning onto form. This, researchers believe, will access internalised, developing language (interlanguage) and therefore be reliable indicator of the state of a developing grammar. Twelve sentences were devised with particular syntactic or morphological demands. These were matched to curricular objectives such as: ‘ask and answer questions’; ‘express like and dislike’ and ‘notice and match agreements’ (DfE, 2014; DfES, 2005: 45, 57). For example, the sentence *Xavier, il n’aime pas aller à l’école* (Xavier does not like going to school) was used to assess command of negation and had been taught as a means of expression of dislike. Despite reservations that elicited imitation does not reflect communicative pedagogical aims (Campfield, 2015), the decision to use this test was supported by practical constraints concerning amount of available test time and the limited extent of spontaneous oral ability skills in the young classroom FL learners participating in the study (Campfield, 2015). A dichotomous, syllable-based marking system was adopted (Chaudron, Prior & Kozok, 2005) which had been trialled for oral production accuracy (Lonsdale, Graham, Kennington, Johnson and McGhee, 2008). This allowed for a maximum score of 4 regardless of utterance length with errors leading to the deductions of point/s (e.g. sentence production with 2 syllable errors would score 2 marks). A small sample of post-test scores were second-marked by the same rater with a reliability score of 67%. The discrepancy was largely due to discerning and counting recorded utterances in exact syllables.

*FL literacy: reading aloud (text).*

This test involved reading aloud short sentences illustrated with pictures such as *Monsieur Laurent travaille au marché* (Mr Laurent works on the market) through which specific, sound/spelling links were targeted (such as those underlined in the text above). This operationalisation of reading aloud reflected curricular objectives which referred to the ability to ‘identify and read familiar words and pronounce accurately most commonly used characters, letters and letter strings’ (DfE, 2014; DfES, 2005: 19). Individual words (containing instructed FL sound/spelling links) were then rated for target-like recoding from written to spoken form and a scoring scheme was established to improve rater reliability. For example, recoding of the French‘*on*’ needed to reflect a degree of nasality, /ɔ̃/ rather than the English pronunciation of this written form /ɒn/. Accurate production of novel FL phonology was an integral part of the instructional programme and thus the scoring criteria aimed to reflect the extent to which taught FL phonology was reproduced when reading aloud. Second marking by the same rater yielded a reliability score of 83%. This test was conducted on a one-to-one basis in the staff room and participants were audio-recorded.

*FL literacy: reading comprehension.*

The FL reading comprehension test was based on learning outcomes specified in the Primary FL Framework for England including: ‘understand the main points and some detail from a short, written passage’ and ‘reading texts for enjoyment or information’ (DfES, 2005: 57). The task set required the participants to read a description of the perpetrator of a crime and to select the correct photograph from a range offered and answer questions in the L1. The task thus did not involve TL production and focussed on meaning and detail (McKay, 2006: 106, 186). Eleven words (8% of the 137-word text) were unknown but six of these were cognates with English. Questions in the L1 were designed to test reading for main points and some detail. To mitigate prejudicial effects for children with weaker L1 literacy, multiple-choice responses were used. Scoring was dichotomous. The test was conducted using individual worksheets in a whole class setting without conferring. Children were allowed approximately 15 minutes to complete the test.

***Research Instruments – qualitative data***

Observation and reflection are integral components of action research (e.g. Kember, 2000) and research-led practice development (Maughan et al., 2012). In this study, a range of qualitative, contextual data were collected. Firstly, the teacher-researcher kept a weekly diary which was written up between 12-24 hours after each lesson. Next, as part of the planned teaching intervention, the children worked in small groups (maximum 5 children; 14 groups in total) to rank 20 teaching/learning activities in order of preference using colour-coded, laminated cards. which were colour-coded according to emphasis e.g. red for reading; green for writing; yellow for phonics; green for listening and speaking and purple for higher-order skills (such as planning and researching). The children were asked to arrange the laminated cards in a hierarchical manner (“I really liked doing this!” at the top and “I didn’t like doing this!” at the bottom). They could organise the cards horizontally so that two or more activities could be ranked similarly. At the end of the teaching programme, the children were asked in a questionnaire to evaluate their confidence levels against specific FL outcomes. To gain deeper insights into the teaching programme, this paper will report on the children’s evaluations of activities and their reported FL confidence.

**Results**

A Shapiro-Wilk test (as *n* equalled <50) showed that assumptions of normality were violated for 50 per cent of the pre- and post-test FL variable measures, therefore subsequent statistical analyses were conducted using non-parametric techniques.

Differences between schools at pre-test were investigated using Mann Whitney *U*-tests to identify whether any subsequent gains could be related to prior attainment. Both schools were largely similar across FL test scores and underlying measures known to affect FL achievement (such as L1 literacy and verbal working memory). However, there was a significant difference between schools at pre-test on the read-aloud scores (*p*= .004; mean rank school 1 = 28.34; school 2 = 17.32) although this disappeared by post-test.

***RQ1: Do learners make progress in FL general proficiency and FL literacy during the teaching programme? FL constructs – pre- and post-test performance***

Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests were conducted to evaluate the extent of improvement in students’ scores on all FL variables (Table 2) with a Bonferroni correction applied for repeated tests (*p*=.0125). Bearing in mind arguments that Null Hypothesis Significance testing principally answers whether a null hypothesis can be rejected, descriptive statistics and effect sizes (Tables 3 and 4) will also be examined to further illustrate the nature of differences detected (Norris, 2015).

[Insert Table 2 here]

The data show that there were statistically significant differences across three FL variables between pre- and post-test (FL reading aloud, FL reading comprehension and FL elicited imitation) with moderate gains. However, it is also important to note that, when compared to the maximum possible scores for each test, all tests showed gains were made from a low starting point.

[Insert Table 3 here]

At pre-test (Table 3), skewness values confirmed that FL scores (literacy and receptive vocabulary) tended to cluster at the lower end of the score range. Only FL elicited imitation showed scores centred around the higher score range. By post-test (Table 4) skewness values showed that FL reading aloud scores were clustered at the upper end of the scale while FL reading comprehension scores still centred around the lower range. FL elicited imitation and FL receptive vocabulary were clustered within the upper score range.

[Insert Table 4 here]

Statistical analyses showed that the teaching programme, which aimed to develop both FL oracy and literacy simultaneously, led to generally moderate but statistically significant increases on most FL tests. In other words, during the 23-week teaching programme learners made slow but meaningful progress in both FL general ability and FL literacy.

As the FL outcomes data tended to be skewed and the sample size was small, Spearman’s correlation coefficients were used to determine relationships between pre- and post-test results (Field, 2018: 344). The results showed generally moderate and positive relationships both inter- and intra- FL general proficiency and FL literacy constructs. At pre-test, FL receptive vocabulary showed significant, moderate, positive relationships with: pre-test FL elicited imitation [ rs .352\*], pre-test FL reading aloud [rs .470\*\*], and pre-test FL reading comprehension [rs .334\*]. Similarly at post-test FL receptive vocabulary again showed significant, moderate, positive relationships with: post-test FL elicited imitation [rs .407\*\*], post–test FL reading aloud [rs .311\*], and post-test FL reading comprehension [rs .620\*\*] (\* = .05 alpha; \*\* = .001 alpha).

***RQ2: The extent of FL learning attrition: FL variables – post- and delayed post-test performance***

Scores between post- and delayed post-test were compared using a Wilcoxon Signed Rank test to evaluate the nature of improvement in students’ scores on all FL variables (Table 5).

[Insert Table 5 here]

These data show that there were no statistically significant differences across the four FL variables between post- and delayed post-test. However, the general ability variable (FL elicited imitation) showed a gain in median scores despite no French instruction in between. FL receptive vocabulary scores remained stable.

[Insert Table 6 here]

At delayed post-test (Table 6), FL outcomes were, statistically speaking, not significantly different and therefore the learning over the course of the teaching intervention appeared reasonably long-term. Despite this lack of attrition, the FL literacy scores were still positively skewed and therefore concentrated in the lower score ranges whilst general ability variables showed values clustered at the higher end of the range.

***RQ3: Pupil reflections on the teaching intervention and learner confidence***

*Pupil evaluation of the teaching programme.*

Group ranks for activities showed a diverse reaction to tasks (Table 9). Speaking including sound-based phonics activities (n=6) such as ‘practising French sounds’ or ‘talking about my animal or insect’, ranked in the top five activities (33 counts) for all fourteen groups of pupils. Phonics-related activities (n=4) accounted for 24 counts (72.7%) of the positive ratings for speaking tasks. Reading tasks (n=4) featured in the top five for 11 out of 14 groups (16 counts in total) while slightly fewer groups (9 out of 14) rated writing activities (n=4) highly (13 counts total). Listening activities (n=3) such as ‘listening to other group’s documentaries’, ‘listening to myself speaking French’ or ‘listening to a French story’ were rated highly by 13 out of 14 groups. 11 out of 14 groups felt positively about collaborative planning and information gathering tasks (n=3).

Additional quantitative learner questionnaires showed that, by post-test, the children expressed increased confidence in their written and spoken French at word level.

[Insert tables 7 and 8 here].

**Discussion**

It should first be noted that this study’s design, as action research, did not focus on causality in relation to teaching approach. Rather it sought to question the assumption that FL literacy only has a supporting role in the FL classroom and to investigate the design and implementation of a systematic and principled approach to FL literacy and oracy in two beginner primary school classrooms.

***FL progression after the teaching programme***

The data obtained suggest that general proficiency (spoken) and literacy skills can develop simultaneously in younger, lower-proficiency learners and that learners in minimal input settings can make steady progress in measures of both oracy and literacy even over a limited timeframe (23 weeks. These findings concur with larger-scale research that has found that learning tends to develop slowly and across all four language skills (Cable et al., 2010; Enever, 2011; Graham et al., 2017; Singleton, 1995). FL reading aloud progression showed a small but statistically significant, moderate increase at post-test (medians 3.00 to 4.00) which indicates that FL sound/spelling link learning is problematic and slow (Cable et al., 2010: 115-124). Contrary to other findings, FL reading comprehension scores remained within the lower range, as evidenced by positive skewness (Cable et al., 2010: 119-120). This could be due, in part, to test design as the Cable et al (2010) study tended to use instrumental texts (such as recipes and postcards) and learners may have been able to access text meaning by utilising existing L1 skills (e.g. cognates, knowledge of genre, inferencing skills). Both FL general proficiency variables showed similarly slow and steady progress. FL receptive vocabulary showed a small effect size yet statistically significant gain between pre- and post-test (medians 19.00 to 21.00). It should be noted that this small effect size could largely be due to the higher starting point. To summarise, three of the four FL variables (all except FL receptive vocabulary) showed moderate, significant increases between pre- and post-test. Descriptive statistics showed that, by post-test, the distribution (skewness) of scores except reading comprehension had shifted but the actual difference in test mean scores was small. In other words, the moderate effect size was, perhaps, a function of the particularly low pre-test ‘baseline’ scores.

These data align with existing research showing that attainment varied widely at all test times (Cable et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2017). We thus have to conclude that the teaching programme was not able to compensate for this range in learning outcomes across spoken and written skills. Nonetheless, the pupil perception data show increasing confidence in FL productive skills (writing and saying words) and that the children appeared to enjoy a range of both literacy and spoken activities, particularly the phonics instruction.

One of the key aims of this study was to challenge, through ‘in-situ’ experimentation, existing teaching advice which often accords a secondary role for FL written input (Jones and Coffey, 2006: 46, 50; Martin, 2008: 51). The data, which showed progression across all FL variables, appeared to contradict albeit historic assumptions that introducing written French adversely affects achievement (Burstall, 1970: 81; Hurrell, 1999: 80,83). Further, pupil reports suggest that a teaching programme which aimed to offer challenge, creativity and learner autonomy was appreciated by the learners. Pupil evaluations rated the writing activities less highly but over half the groups still ranked these in their top five activities out of twenty. Comparisons between pupil confidence at pre- and post-test showed that confidence had grown in relation to both spoken and written production; there was a particularly clear shift in the number of pupils declaring they could write ‘quite a few’ French words from just under 15% at pre-test to just over 57% at post-test.

As this is a small-scale, classroom-based study it is essential that data are interpreted cautiously. Nonetheless, it was interesting to note statistically significant and moderate relationships between all the spoken and literacy variables at all test times. In other words, rather than FL literacy impeding progression (Burstall, 1970: 81; Hurrell, 1999: 80, 83), this investigation found that learning FL literacy and oracy could be inter-dependent. It should be noted, though, that relationships between FL variables are likely to be mediated by a range of factors such as: L1 literacy proficiency, verbal working memory, motivation and self-efficacy (Courtney et al., 2017; Graham et al., 2017).

***The durability of FL learning***

Results showed that French learning, at least in the case of three of the four variables tested, was not subject to significant attrition after seven weeks with no French instruction. FL reading aloud was the exception with a statistically significant but small drop between post-test and delayed post-test. This may reflect a need for regular, ongoing practice in FL phonological decoding (converting print to sound). However, it is equally likely that, as this variable showed the second biggest gain between pre- and post-test (effect size 0.36 moderate), the greater attrition could be related to an initial, shorter-term boost in learning. Interestingly, one median (FL elicited imitation 25.00-27.00) increased between post- and delayed post-test. This could be due to repetition effects between both test times, in other words that learners remembered the sentences after a seven-week delay. However, this increase in scores could also be related to test timing. The delayed post-test was deliberately scheduled after high stakes national, standardized tests (in English and Maths). This perhaps indicates the importance of a range of factors when testing school-age such as the influence of attitudinal and contextual factors on achievement (GL Education, 2016). Overall though, whilst linguistic progression emerged slowly, it seems that, in line with extant studies, specific aspects of FL learning may be quite resistant to attrition (Graham et al., 2017).

**Higher-order literacy activities and contextual factors**

This action research study suggested that teaching the spoken and written word together was not disruptive to FL learning. Its teaching programme also offers an example of how scaffolded spoken and written activities which utilise some core vocabulary (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs) plus rehearsed sentence patterns can result in independent and creative language use. Consequently, this study provides an illustration of teaching which culminates in higher-level literacy activities (those requiring focused engagement in reading/writing activities). Graham et al. (2017) posit that higher-level literacy activities are likely to underpin progression. However, it is important to recognise that additional contextual factors such as lesson time and teacher expertise also influence outcomes in primary FL classrooms (de Bot, 2014; Graham et al., 2017). In this study the teacher/researcher was both highly invested in the teaching programme and a linguistically and pedagogically confident practitioner. Further, both participating schools scheduled weekly 50-minute FL lessons and this is likely to have been an essential factor in creating the exploratory and independent language use involved in higher level literacy (and language) activities. This study, therefore, suggests that whilst teaching time exemplifies extent of input, it likely offers opportunities for learners to engage in richer, better-quality learning activities. The pupil evaluation data showed that, broadly speaking, children enjoyed participating in both literacy and language activities although they felt most positive about phonics games involving the whole class. Further, their questionnaire data illustrated developing confidence in word-level written and spoken language use.

**Limitations and observations**

***Elicited imitation test***

The operationalisation of this test proved problematic. The elicited imitation test probably reflected memorisation or language processing ability rather than interlanguage due to utterance reformulation. In other words, despite instructions to the contrary, the child test-takers seemed to focus on trying to memorise the presented oral utterances rather than focussing in processing the initial input for meaning (which was an essential component of the elicited imitation test – see research instruments quantitative data section). To address these issues, ideally future classroom experiments could assess a range of oral ability variables.

***Generalisability***

Clearly this study cannot determine whether the literacy-oracy teaching approach *improved* or *caused* the learning but this was not its overarching aim. Rather, this study sought to design, implement and evaluate a principled pedagogy combining literacy and oracy. It aimed to address a perceived gap in the literature by documenting progression in a context where the researcher had a high degree of control over teaching and learning activities which formed part of a coherent teaching programme. The two school contexts where the study was conducted are representative of many primary school settings – in other words larger, mixed-ability classrooms and, therefore, it is likely that this pedagogy could be adapted and/or trialled on a larger, experimental scale. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that a range of complex contextual factors could have contributed to its apparent success such as: teacher linguistic ability, teacher language specialist training and teaching time (Graham et al., 2017). It should also be remembered that participants were late primary learners (aged 9-11) and had therefore mostly automatized L1 word reading skills, deemed as an essential factor for transferring to reading in another language (Koda, 2008). It cannot therefore be assumed that implications for practice could be applied across the young learner age range. Further both languages involved in this study (French/English) are alphabetic orthographies. In any future application of the teaching principles proposed here, careful consideration should be given to the age of the learner, to the level of L1 reading ability and to the distance between the L1 and the FL (Genesee, Geva, Dressler and Kamil, 2008; Lindgren and Muñoz, 2013).

**Conclusion**

This FL oracy and literacy teaching programme showed that, over the course of 23 weeks, children made moderate but statistically significant gains between pre- and post-test coupled with minimal attrition at delayed post-test seven weeks later. It showed that when supported by a principled pedagogy, FL literacy learning does not necessarily have an adverse effect on FL oracy outcomes. The study also supports existing young FL learner research in showing that linguistic gains are possible in limited input settings, that they emerge slowly but are relatively durable. Finally, this study suggests that young learners’ engagement and confidence were high throughout a FL teaching programme which offered both autonomy and challenge in the classroom.

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**Table 1.** Taught French phoneme/grapheme links.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Phoneme | Articulatory Properties | Grapheme |
| /ɑ/  /ɛ/  /ɔ/  /ʏ/  /ȷ/  /o/  /e/ | Novel: back rounded nasal vowel  Novel: front unrounded nasal vowel  Novel: back rounded nasal vowel  Novel: front rounded closed oral vowel  Existing: front unrounded glide  Existing: back rounded, half closed oral vowel  Existing: front, unrounded, half-closed oral vowel | AN/EN  IN/AIN/IEN/EIN  ON  U/Û  LL  O/Ô/AU/EAU  É/ER/EZ |

**Table 2.** Pre-test and post-test scores all FL variables – Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable  (*N*=45) | Pre-test | Post-test | *Z* | *p* | s.e. | effect size  (Cohen’s *d*) |
| median | median |
| FL literacy  FL read aloud  (max 10)  FL reading comprehension (max 8)  FL general prof  FL elicited imitation  (max 48)  FL receptive vocab  (max 29) | 3  1.5  22  19 | 4  3  25  21 | 3.403  3.341  4.346  2.307 | .001  .001  <.0005  .021 | 52.895  65.697  82.715  68.488 | 0.36 moderate  0.35 moderate  0.46 moderate  0.24 small |

Asymp. Sig. determined at 0.0125 using a Bonferroni Correction (0.05 ÷ 4 tests)

**Table 3.** Descriptive statistics pre-test scores all FL variables.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable  (*N*=45) | Pre-test | | | | | | | |
| mean | median | mode | s.d. | range | | skewness | kurtosis |
| min | max |
| FL literacy  FL read aloud  (max 10)  FL reading comprehension (max 8)  FL general prof  FL elicited imitation  (max 48)  FL receptive vocab  (max 29) | 2.64 *26.4%*  2.21  *27.5%*  21.09  *43.9%*  18.64  *64.3%* | 3  1.5  22  19 | 3  1.5  19  19 | 1.525  1.387  7.642  3.220 | 0  0.5  2  12 | 6  5  42  27 | .196  .767  -.235  .311 | -.272  -.237  1.179  .189 |

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics post-test scores all FL constructs.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable  *(N=45)* | Post-test | | | | | | | |
| mean | median | mode | s.d. | range | | skewness | kurtosis |
| min | max |
| FL literacy  FL read aloud  (max 10)  FL reading comprehension  (max 8)  FL general prof  FL elicited imitation  (max 48)  FL receptive vocab  (max 29) | 3.67  *36.7%*  3.07  *38.4%*  25.22  *52.5%*  19.64  67.7% | 4  3  25  21 | 4  2.5  24  22 | 1.871  1.282  8.393  3.880 | 0  0.5  6  10 | 7  6  42  27 | -.252  .048  -.275  -.397 | -.768  -.726  -.238  -.451 |

**Table 5.** Post-test and delayed post-test scores all FL constructs – Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable:  *(N=45)* | *Post-test* | *D post-test* | *Z* | *p* | s.e. | effect size  (Cohen’s *d*) |
| median | median |
| FL literacy  FL read aloud  (max 10)  FL reading comprehension (max 8)  FL general prof  FL elicited imitation  (max 48)  FL receptive vocab  (max 29) | 4  3  25  21 | 3  2.5  27  21 | -2.174  -1.347  1.332  .604 | .030  .178  .183  .546 | 52.672  53.073  76.934  55.434 | -0.23 small  -0.14 small  0.14 small  0.06 small |

Asymp. Sig. determined at 0.0125 using a Bonferroni Correction (0.05 ÷ 4 tests)

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics delayed post-test scores all FL constructs.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable  *(N=45)* | Delayed post-test | | | | | | | |
| mean | median | mode | s.d. | range | | skewness | kurtosis |
| min | max |
| FL literacy  FL read aloud  (max 10)  FL reading comprehension (max 8)  FL general prof  FL elicited imitation  (max 48)  FL receptive vocab  (max 29) | 3.09  *30.9%*  2.86  35.6%  26.31  54.8%  19.87  68.5% | 3  2.5  27  21 | 2  2.5  29  22 | 1.781  1.329  8.586  3.539 | 0  0.5  4  10 | 7  5.5  43  27 | .112  .068  -.453  -.596 | -.537  -.639  -.042  .682 |

**Table 7.** Pupil confidence: FL spoken French

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| How many French words can you say? | | | |
|  | A lot | Quite a few | Not many |
| Pre-test | 3 (6.4%) | 26 (55.3%) | 16 (34%) |
| Post-test | 15 (31.9%) | 21 (44.7%) | 9 (19.1%) |

**Table 8.** Pupil confidence: FL written French

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| How many French words can you write? | | | |
|  | A lot | Quite a few | Not many |
| Pre-test | 0% | 7 (14.9%) | 38 (80.9%) |
| Post-test | 8 (17%) | 27 (57.4%) | 10 (21.3%) |

**Table 9.** Top 5 activities (total number of activities =20) counted by group (total number of groups =14)

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Task: | Top 5 by Group |
| Reading | Reading French words & sentences aloud. | 2 |
| Reading other groups’ fact files in French. | 4 |
| Matching French words and pictures. | 6 |
| Making sentences in French with word cards (e.g. un ours brun). | 4 **16 counts** |
| Speaking  and Phonics | Practising French sounds in the hot/cold game. | 13 |
| Talking about my animal or insect for the documentary. | 5 |
| Learning to say French verbs using actions. | 4 |
| Practising French sounds by reading to a partner. | 3 |
| Learning about French phonics. | 3 |
| Using gestures to learn French sounds. | 5 **33 counts** |
| Writing | Finishing French questions. | 2 |
| Trying to write French words by sounding out, then checking them (écrivez and corrigez). | 3 |
| Writing my own fact file in French. | 4 |
| Contributing my written work to the class French fact file. | 4 **13 counts** |
| Listening | Listening to myself speaking French! | 5 |
| Listening to other groups’ t.v. documentaries. | 9 |
| Listening to a French story. | 7 **21 counts** |
| Metacognitive | Planning our group’s t.v. documentary. | 6 |
| Planning what to write in a group for our book. | 5 |
| Finding out about animals and insects. | 8 **19 counts** |

NB: ranks could contain multiple activities