

Language Futures Pilot Study Research Report September 2016: Executive Summary

Author: Dr Rachel Hawkes

1. The Language Futures approach

The core purpose of [Language Futures](#) (LF) an approach to language learning that was initially developed in 2009 by Linton Village College in Cambridgeshire as part of the Learning Futures initiative led by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, is to generate deep engagement with learning, such that learners are motivated not solely by outcomes but also by the learning process, that they take responsibility for their learning both within and beyond the classroom, voluntarily extending it outside school.

2. The Language Futures conceptual framework

Building on its origins within Learning Futures, LF is underpinned by constructivist theories of learning, and envisions the optimum motivational blend for language learning of learner autonomy and collaboration, of self-directed learning and scaffolded co-construction, and there are five core features of the approach that underpin this overarching aim: Student choice and agency, Teacher as designer and facilitator, School as Basecamp, Project-based learning and Building a learning community. Motivation or engagement is a salient thread that connects the five core features of LF.

3. The pilot study

The current research project, of which this is the pilot study report, seeks to explore the learning opportunities offered by this approach, adding to the findings of initial small-scale studies (Hawkes, 2011a, 2011b) and was guided by three overarching research questions:

3.1 Research questions

1 What progress do pupils make following the Language Futures approach?

The aim of this research question was to describe what learners are able to do in the language they are learning in LF, focusing on what they are able to communicate in speech and writing using the language. It was also important to describe progress from the participants' (learners, teacher and mentors) perspective, and explore the relationship between perceptions of progress and engagement in the approach.

2 How does their progress compare to conventional classroom-based progress in language learning?

This question hinges on the nature of language learning progress within the LF approach, and the extent to which it is different from other more conventional classroom-based progress. LF differs substantially from conventional classroom-based language teaching and learning. Where the design and organisation of teaching and learning are so different, we may expect the learning, and therefore the progress, to be qualitatively different as well, as previous studies have suggested. The goal of this question was to describe all aspects of progress within the LF programme and set these within the context of teacher, learner and researcher perceptions of progress in more traditional classroom-based language learning. The study did not include a comparative, experimental element. All learners and teachers involved in the study were also engaged in language-learning within conventional contexts at the same time as their involvement with LF, so the aim was to draw together learner, teacher and researcher perceptions of comparative progress in the two approaches.

3 What are some of the key factors that impact on this approach?

Previous studies indicated that elements of the LF approach were aligned with a deepening engagement in language learning. However, there were individual differences in the extent to which the learning affordances of the LF approach were taken up. This question seeks to identify the key factors of LF that influence learners' engagement in language learning, exploring their impact on different learners. The study builds on previously identified features but in keeping with the open-ended nature of qualitative research is attentive to the emergence of other factors.

3.2 Research strategy

This pilot study followed a qualitative case study approach, focusing on one Language Futures project school. In keeping with the main methods for qualitative research, the study included interviews, observation and document analysis.

3.2.1 The pilot school

The school in this pilot study is a mixed gender secondary academy, part of a multi-academy trust in the East of England. Rated 'good' in its last Ofsted inspection, the school has a higher than average proportion of pupil premium students. The proportion of students who represent minority ethnic groups is above average and so is the proportion who speak English as an additional language. The proportion of students who need additional support with their learning; those at school action plus and those with a statement of special educational needs is just above average.

3.2.2 The Language Futures model

The model of LF in the pilot school was an in-curriculum model for a group of 14 Year 8 (age 12-13) students. All students at the school learn French from Year 7 and throughout Key Stage 3. The group of students who began LF at the start of Year 8 was selected to do so. One of the aims of the model was to provide a more motivational context for language learning for certain students whose progress and behaviour within mainstream language lessons was of some concern. Within the model's design, students continued to learn French in two of their three hourly lessons each week, one lesson as mainstream classroom teaching, one lesson in two smaller French groups, and one lesson working on a cultural project in their chosen LF language. This model had the full support of the senior leadership team, and carried the expectation that all students would achieve their target (old) national curriculum level 4 in French by the end of Year 8. The majority of students in this class was not expected to continue with a language to GCSE during Key Stage 4.

3.2.3 The learners

At the time of data collection for this pilot study there were 14 students in the class. The group had an extremely diverse academic profile in terms of previous and current achievement in English and maths, attitudes to school and learning, and classroom behaviour. Seven students had SEN (Special Educational Needs) including low literacy and dyslexia, including three students with major SEMB (Social, Emotional, Mental and Behavioural) difficulties. Of these, one was additionally EAL (English as an Additional Language). In total, six students were EAL. Contrary to initial expectations when the group was created, five of the 14 students had elected to continue with a language (French or Spanish) to GCSE and were set to begin the three-year GCSE course the following year in Year 9.

4. Analysis and findings

This purpose of analysis within this pilot study was two-fold: first, the goal was to ascertain the extent to which the research tools were 'fit for purpose', and identify potential improvements to the overall research design, and second, the case study aimed to generate findings in its own right that would contribute to the developing understanding of the LF approach, building on earlier findings, and setting the scene for the main study to follow.

4.1 Linguistic progress

Despite evidence that learners make progress in speaking and writing within the LF approach, the students in this pilot study struggle with particular aspects of spoken linguistic development, most notably pronunciation, retrieval of vocabulary when speaking, and speaking in full sentences. This seems to be principally as a result of a lack of oral input and practice, the reasons for which are explored more thoroughly in the full study report. In written work, students produce longer, more complete sentences than in speaking. However, their writing is influenced by the use of online tools, and the word choice may be unusual or unidiomatic or incorrect. The study also highlights however that for individual students the LF approach may lead to better linguistic progress, simply because students are better motivated and better behaved in those lessons.

4.2 Comparing Language Futures and conventional classroom-based learning

A simple count of positive and negative references to both LF and classroom-based learning reveals a clear preference for LF. However, there were mixed preferences, with a few students liking both, some liking neither, and two preferring classroom-based language lessons. Students were less able to describe the specifics of how they learnt in either context and their awareness of language learning processes was hard to discern. When asked about how they learnt, students focused much more on the physical resources used, describing how they enjoyed using computers and producing printed work for their folder portfolios. There was a suggestion from one student that classroom-based language teaching moved on too quickly for him, not allowing mastery of new language.

4.3 Factors that impact learner engagement in the Language Futures approach

Using a combination of matrix coding queries (comparing pairs of items and displaying the results in a table or matrix) and micro-textual analysis, it was possible to explore the impact on learner engagement of the five core features and identify further factors for exploration.

4.3.1 Choice

As in previous studies, choice emerged as an aspect of the LF approach that is strongly associated with learner engagement. Different aspects of learner choice all appear to play a role, even when the extent of the choice is quite modest. These include choice regarding: language learnt, task, micro-topic, moment-by-moment choices within PBL, curriculum and pedagogy (teacher).

4.3.2 Agency (autonomy)

Students' ability to take the initiative in their own learning emerged as problematic within the study, and different reasons for this are explored more fully in the full report. Overall, the indication is that, students within the LF approach, do not automatically develop successful independent learning skills. IT resources and a project-based learning approach are important to their agency, but so too are the development of research skills, the support of mentors, and the willingness of students to take the initiative.

4.3.3 Project-based learning (PBL)

The perceptions of the impact of PBL were mixed: the negative comments relate to the difficulties learners had with independent research skills. The positive comments correlate with the comments relating to choice within their learning.

4.3.4 Additional factors

Within the pilot school the features of School as Basecamp and Building a learning community remained rather under-developed. This, in turn, had an impact on the role of Teacher as designer and facilitator. The teacher was very clear in her view that without mentor input, progress was significantly restricted, both in terms of spoken confidence and also in terms of conceptual knowledge of the language. Without mentors in the programme, the teacher is less able to facilitate

and tends to adopt a more directly instructional role, whilst without parental involvement the teacher may have limited expectations for learner engagement beyond the classroom. The suggestion here may be that the core features of the LF programme need to be present and where possible, as fully developed as they can be, to allow the teacher role to be fully facilitative.

5. Conclusion

This small-scale interpretative study explored the motivational aspects of choice of language and learner agency, the roles of teacher and mentors, the progress made by students, as well as their attitudes to LF and to conventional classroom-based language learning. The study confirmed the researcher's conviction that the overarching research strategy of qualitative, instrumental case study is the most appropriate one, but highlighted a few aspects of the research design to change for the main study.

5.1 Changes to research design

Summary of changes to research design

| Aspect of research strategy | Change proposed |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Research design | Reduction in number of schools |
| Research schedule | Questionnaires in advance Analysis leads to selection of same for interviews based on suggestions in their responses that might prove fruitful to further inquiry |
| Research instruments | Student questionnaires Open response questions more closely focused on the Language Futures approach and experiences |
| | Student interviews – more structured questions Continue to use the questionnaires and examination of portfolio work as a way to relax students and provide a natural springboard to the interview questions. |
| | Speaking tasks - Mentors to conduct these instead of researcher Students to complete in pairs rather than individually |

The LF approach explored in a previous small-scale study led to the identification of 'nuggets of gold' (Hawkes, 2011a), elements of promise that require further investigation and development, including that 'choice in language learning is positively aligned with motivation for language learning'. There were glimmers of the potential for achieving the deeper levels of learner engagement needed to blur the boundaries between classroom learning and learning beyond the classroom. There were also tensions that emerged between the aims of the approach and the individual needs of the learners, and differences in learner responses to the opportunities that increased autonomy presented. The indications in the study were, in general, that linguistic progress, as measured by former national curriculum levels, was slower than in a traditional teacher-led classroom. This too was an aspect requiring further research, as it raised questions as to whether the definition of 'progress' needed broadening to include aspects of language learning competence, such as language awareness (Hawkins, 1984), autonomy (Little, 1997) or language learning strategies (Macaro, 2001, 2007) which, the report suggest, may be developed within the Language Futures approach.

The findings of this pilot study replicate the positive alignment of choice with motivation, and extend the identification of different elements of choice that contribute to positive engagement. The other core features of the LF approach: Student agency, Teacher as designer and facilitator, Project-based learning, School as Basecamp and Building a learning community were somewhat underdeveloped in the pilot study model of LF, but a key finding was that they appear to be co-dependent features and may need to be present, and preferably in balance, if their positive impact on learners is to be fully realised. The identification of a multi-lingual environment as a motivational factor was an interesting, new finding.