LanguageFutures

Chapter 7: Case Study 4

Language Futures as extra-curricular language learning programme

Four schools associated with this research study implemented Language Futures as an extra-curricular language learning programme. Three of the schools provided data from student and teacher questionnaires (identified for the purposes of this study as E, F, G), three of the four schools were visited (schools F, G, H) where sessions were observed, and in one school (H), the LF teacher, one mentor and one student were interviewed.

7.1 The schools

All schools in this model (E, F, G, H) are mixed gender secondary academies in the East of England. Rated either 'good' or 'outstanding' in their last Ofsted inspections, three of the schools are located rurally and have lower than average proportion of pupil premium students (pupil premium being additional funding for students known to be eligible for free school meals, those in local authority care and those with a parent in the armed services). The proportion of students who represent minority ethnic groups and also those who speak English as an additional language are lower than the national average in two of the schools (E, F), but a little above average in another (G), and the fourth school (H), which is located in a city, has a higher than average proportion of EAL students, and a significantly higher than average proportion of PP students. 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 approximately the same as the national average in all four schools.

7.2 The Language Futures model

In all four schools the model of Language Futures is an optional extra-curriculum model constituting a weekly one-hourly learning session. The model is open to students from ages 11 – 16 (Years 7 – 11) but predominantly draws participants from Years 8 – 10. All student participants were, at the time of the study, also learning languages within the curriculum, with the exception of one student from school H, who had arrived at the school from South Africa in Year 9 and it was felt to be unrealistic for her to pick up a curriculum language at this stage.

In terms of its design, this model of Language Futures sought to include all five core features of the approach, as described below:

Student choice and agency

In this model, all students choose the language they want to study. Following the long-established in-curriculum model in case study 1, the schools commit to allowing students to learn the language of their choice, as long as there are at least two students who want to study it, and as long as a mentor for that language can be found. At the time of this study, the languages that had been chosen and were being studied were Afrikaans, Mandarin Chinese, French, Italian, German, Japanese, Latin, Polish and Spanish. In total, at the time of this study, there were 43 students following this LF model across the four schools.

In terms of choices of what and how to learn, students started with a project entitled The Block (see appendix). The idea was to frame the learning of essential vocabulary and grammatical structures within an open, imaginative project which would allow for overall cohesion across and between languages, as well as facilitating the development of learner autonomy through self-direction in terms of resources to use, how to record, practise and retain the new language.

Teacher as designer and facilitator

During the LF lessons the teachers' role was to support learning and guide students with their use of resources. In addition, the teacher provided the initial framework for the learning, presenting and then reminding students of the task parameters, periodically setting up a series of questions for students to research and answer about their own target languages. Predictably, the teachers were

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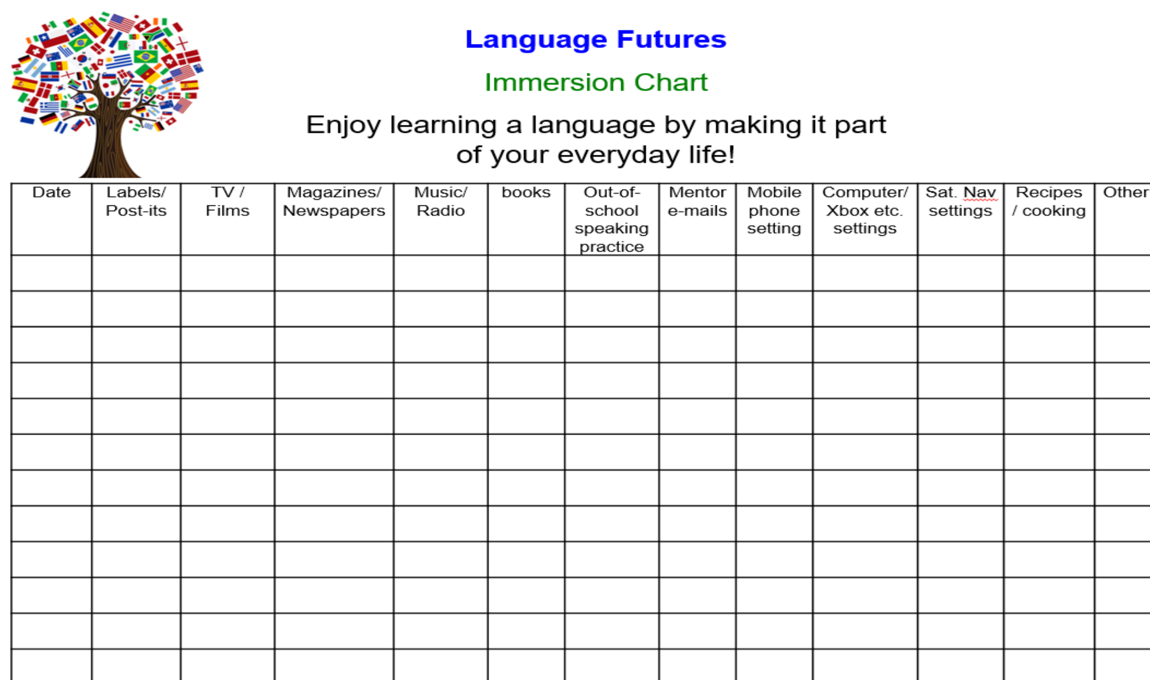
not knowledgeable in every language, but as linguists their role was to help students to navigate and interpret what they found in books and online.

School as basecamp

On one level, as participation in this model of LF was entirely optional, all participants were already demonstrating a high level of engagement in language learning. In addition, students were given an out-of-class immersion chart, and encouraged to take their learning beyond the classroom (Figure 35, below). The study therefore explored the extent to which LF students in this model engaged further in out-of-class learning.

Figure 35 Language Futures immersion chart



Language Futures

Immersion Chart

Enjoy learning a language by making it part of your everyday life!

Date	Labels/ Post-its	TV / Films	Magazines/ Newspapers	Music/ Radio	books	Out-of-school speaking practice	Mentor e-mails	Mobile phone setting	Computer/ Xbox etc. settings	Sat. Nav settings	Recipes / cooking	Other

Project-based learning

In the LF sessions, the over-arching framework was project-based learning. Through teacher and student interview, teacher and student questionnaires this study probed the impact of project-based learning on student motivation, knowledge and skill development and overall progress, the analysis revealing both positive outcomes and some limiting factors.

Building a learning community

Affective support and linguistic scaffolding are key components of the LF classroom. Previous models of the project provide evidence that peer support fulfils several important functions. Language expert adult mentors from the community have also proven essential to the success of previous schools' versions of the programme. The main study aimed to extend our understanding of the impact of both sources of support (peer and mentor). In all schools in the project, mentors were either adult members of the local community or teachers and teaching assistants from the school community. They were both native and non-native speakers of the different languages. They were recruited, trained and supported in their role by the LF teacher. The impact of peers, adult mentors, the LF teachers and co-ordinator and that of parents and siblings on students' learning is evaluated in the analysis that follows.

7.3 The participants

The learners

At the time of the main data collection for this study there were 43 student participants across the four schools. The majority of students were aged 12 – 14 (Years 8-9), but there were a few 11 and 15-year old (Years 7 and 10) students, too. As mentioned, background data, student and teacher questionnaire data were collected for schools E, F, and G, whilst lesson observation took place in schools F, G, and H, and teacher and student interviews were conducted in school H. Predictably, for a completely optional programme, students tended to be relatively able, although this was by no means universally the case. A few, lower-attaining students were sufficiently motivated to learn a new language that they committed to the after-school programme. One or two learners had some heritage background knowledge of their LF language, including some literacy, and whilst the vast majority were absolute beginners, there were also just a couple of students who had chosen to do LF in their curriculum language, in order to improve it.

The teachers

The Language Futures teachers were full-time teachers in their schools who gave up their time voluntarily to lead the programme in their schools. This represents a high level of commitment, given the demands on teachers' time, particularly at this time of unprecedented change in curricula and assessments across KS3, KS4 and KS5.

The mentors

It is a pre-requisite of this LF model that there are mentors for each language being learnt. Whilst mentor attendance varies according to individual mentor commitment and availability, on average mentors attended lessons at least once every two to three weeks to work with students. In many cases, mentors attended more frequently than this, in some cases, every week. The impact of mentors on learner progress and motivation are a focus for this study and presented in the findings below.

The parents

Language Futures aims to harness parents' knowledge of their child and their skills to support their child's language learning at home. In school H there was a meeting with parents to explain the LF programme's aims and expectations of the students' learning. In the remaining three schools, communication with parents was by email.

7.4 Analysis and findings

The analysis and findings in this chapter are organised around the three overarching research questions, drawing on thematic analysis of all of the data sources. Driven by the pattern of data itself, I focus first on linguistic progress and then integrate the comparison of LF and conventional classroom teaching with the analysis of the range of factors that impacts on the LF approach.

7.4.1 Linguistic progress

Within this extra-curricular LF model there was no formal assessment. Therefore, all data relating to linguistic progress were student self-report data, teacher and mentor perception data through interviews and observation data.

The student questionnaire responses, which included schools E, F and G, were completed approximately four months into the course. At this stage, the majority of students considered that they had mastered a productive repertoire of around 25 words, with a quarter estimating a vocabulary of more than 50, and a fifth fewer than 10 words.

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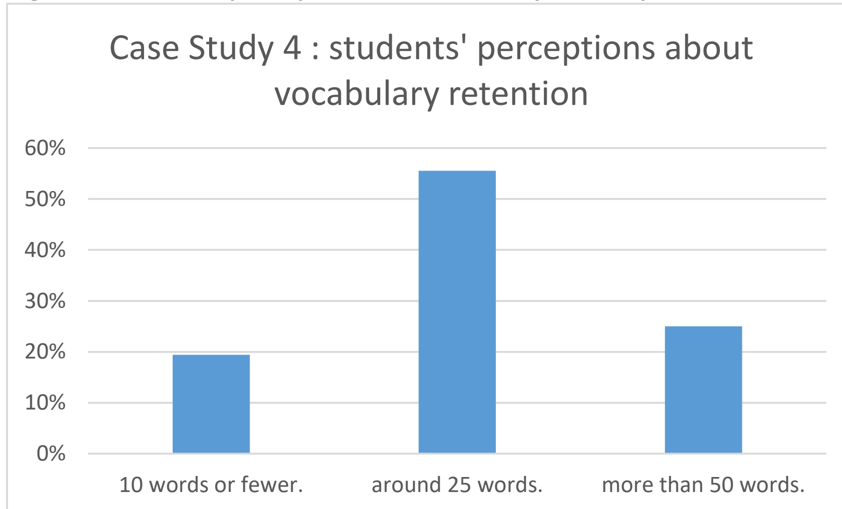
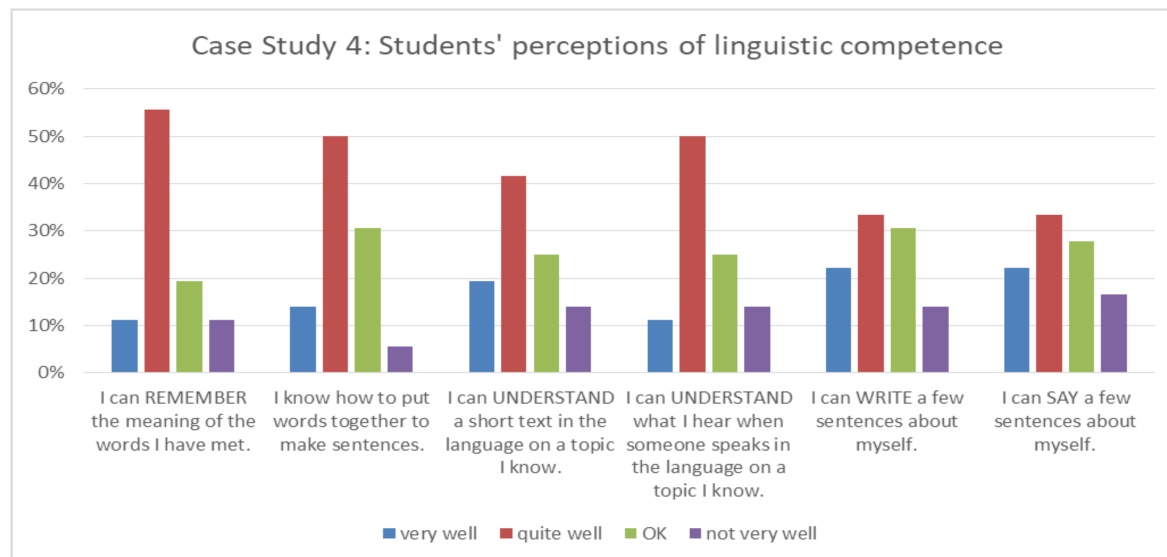
Figure 35 Student perceptions of vocabulary mastery



These data are broadly comparable with, and in fact slightly ahead of, the data from case study 1. This is noteworthy given the substantially greater contact learning time for students in that study. It is also interesting to compare students' perceptions of confidence across the four skills, with those of case study 1. Not only are the overall positive responses (very well / quite well) higher for each of the items for learners in the extra-curricular model, there is a more even spread of confidence across the four skills and grammar than for case study 1 participants.

Figure 36 Students' perceptions of their competence in the four skills



We must, however, be tentative when drawing such comparisons and not forget that there were a few students who had prior learning of their LF language from curriculum time.

Whilst, broadly speaking, student self-report data present a positive sense of progress within this model, interview and observation data offer greater definition to the picture of learning. Group size attrition was a feature of this model and clearly, where students' attendance at the after-school sessions was patchy or even ceased altogether, linguistic progress was limited. Reasons were varied, but usually a result either of a conflict of interest with another extra-curricular activity, a school-based compulsory intervention in another curriculum subject, or diminished interest, probably as a result of perceived lack of success. As one LF teacher explains:

"well we started off with five, and two of them have dropped out, one because she got another commitment on the same night, and one has just stopped coming, and we're not sure why…"

It is the mentor who offers a possible explanation as to why this student stopped attending:
"the one who dropped out and I don't know why wasn't keeping up as well as the others perhaps that's why he dropped out, so for example we just one week when we were learning adjectives we decided it would be a good idea to learn numbers – we did that by playing a simple game where we threw the ball to each other and said the numbers 1 to 20 as we threw the ball and after a couple of weeks of doing that the three students I've got left were very competent to do that completely on their own, whereas the student who dropped out was still really struggling with that after four or five weeks, so"

All schools saw this pattern of reduction in attendance, and when reasons were given they were mostly the conflict with another activity. However, there was a minority of students who simply stopped attending, without giving a reason, and in those cases, it seems fair to assume that they were not experiencing sufficient success in their learning to sustain their interest over the longer term.

For the students who did continue to attend, progress still remains difficult to define. The perceptions of teachers involved in the programme differ quite substantially in this regard. Two of the teachers ultimately felt that students were not progressing as rapidly as they might, with just the programme parameters to structure and guide their learning, and felt that they really needed more of a structure. Another teacher, in spite of the modest progress of students in her group, felt nevertheless that the programme was building a platform for longer-term commitment and retention of language:

"Well, I believe that with LF they will remember better, with the grammar or the vocabulary, coz they'll be working at their own pace, and with virtually no like language classroom, not working towards an assessment, they learn something specific for fun, they have been taught to learn, than have a teacher tell them what to learn, vocab to assess for, that's it, and it's actually be put in a box and forget about in a few years a few months you know…if they choose their own learning you know they'll remember better coz they choose it."

The mentor who was interviewed also reported positively about progress, going on to give an example:
"the three I've got are all pretty competent and are making really really good progress …So we decided it would be a good idea to learn numbers – we did that by playing a simple game where we threw the ball to each other and said the numbers 1 to 20 as we threw the ball and after a couple of weeks of doing that the three students I've got left were very competent to do that completely on their own"

In terms of vocabulary retention, grammar knowledge, speaking and pronunciation, there were similarly disparate views about progress. What emerged, and will be explored more fully in the next section of findings, is that this difference was best explained not only by the presence or absence of mentors, but also by the approach taken by the individual mentors.

For example, one mentor was proactive in her approach. Her mentoring was akin to small-group teaching, although decisions about what to learn next and how to go about it were taken together with the learners. She acknowledged spending a lot of time preparing for each mentor session. With her support, learners were observed studying grammatical structures carefully and attentively, and they were able to produce sentences. One learner, who, when interviewed has seemed unable to recall any target language words, was observed confidently constructing a sentence to describe what different people in the pictures were wearing. Pronunciation was secure and students were

focusing hard to get it right. A similar approach was taken by another mentor, a trainee teacher, who directed the learning, eliciting responses from students, pushing for good pronunciation, and using the target language herself to praise students.

These learners, when working with their mentors, seemed to have no anxiety about speaking in the target language. A Spanish pair of students showed interest in phonics, and one was quick to make a link from encountering a verb form to using it in a short utterance, picking up that 'soy' means 'I am' and saying immediately 'Oh right so can I say 'Soy Darius'?

They are keen to get pronunciation right, and there is a sense of enthusiasm coming from the students, all of whom were very engaged in their learning. In interviews, they speak very positively about their enjoyment of LF, but as mentioned, one student was much more inhibited about speaking:

Interviewer: What are you struggling with?
Student: I'm struggling with how to pronounce it,
Interviewer: You're quite nervous about saying anything in German
Student: Yeah
Interviewer: What's the basis for your nerves? What makes you anxious about saying
Student: I think pronouncing it wrong maybe

Where there were mentors who took this active approach, essentially acting as small-group tutors, there was a definite sense of progress in terms of grammatical knowledge, the ability to form sentences, and to pronounce language accurately. Even retention seemed less of a thorny issue than it has been seen to be, at least as far as this mentor is concerned:

"but very definitely they understand the vocabulary around the projects we've done so far and they can build on that and use it to go forward from…. where we've learned the vocabulary and built up the vocabulary they can probably retain about 80% of it"

The students were, of course, still very much ab initio learners. The mentor was careful not to overstate the progress they had made:

"although I think if you put them into a German environment and asked them to speak German they would be a bit lost because their vocabulary is very much limited to the projects that we've covered so far"

The interesting thing here is that the main barrier to progress for this mentor was the length of time students had been learning, rather than any factor associated with the structure of the programme itself. This view was not shared by the LF teacher in school F, however, who noted that students were unconfident about stringing together simple sentences and dialogues using the language they had been learning. When the researcher visited this LF class, it happened to be a session where only two mentors (Italian and Spanish) were present. Observing the Italian group, she noted that there was a lot of discussion about vocabulary, including some interesting cultural information, but that the target language input in the discussion was limited to individual words. With the Spanish group, the mentor talked quite a lot in Spanish, and students were clearly able to understand very well, although they tended to answer in English. In addition, these were the two students who were already learning Spanish in curriculum time, so had already had significant exposure to the language in lessons. The other groups, Japanese and Latin were working independently. Whilst the Japanese pair were clearly very interested in animé and seemed to know a fair bit about it, they knew rather less language, and it was difficult to get a clear sense of their linguistic progress.

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These findings suggest that, in this extra-curricular LF model, higher rates of linguistic progress are associated with a direct approach to mentoring, akin to small group tutoring. Where this is the norm, and students and mentors sustain regular weekly attendance, two principal limitations to linguistic progress, highlighted elsewhere in this study and previous LF research reports, are, to a certain extent, mitigated. In the section that follows, an analysis of the impact of specific elements of the LF approach in this model serves to develop further our understanding of these findings.

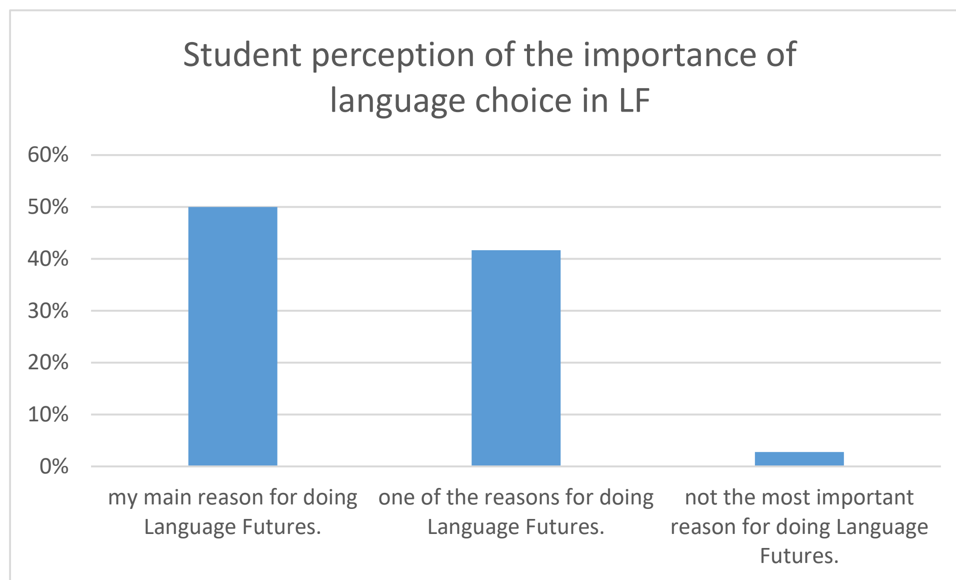
7.4.2 Key factors that impact on the LF approach

Choice

All students in this programme not only chose the language they wanted to learn, but significantly, also chose to participate in the programme itself. As one LF teacher put it:

"the motivation to learn a language, which has particularly piqued their interest, is probably what has attracted most participants to the scheme in the first place."

Figure 37 Student perception of the importance of language choice in LF



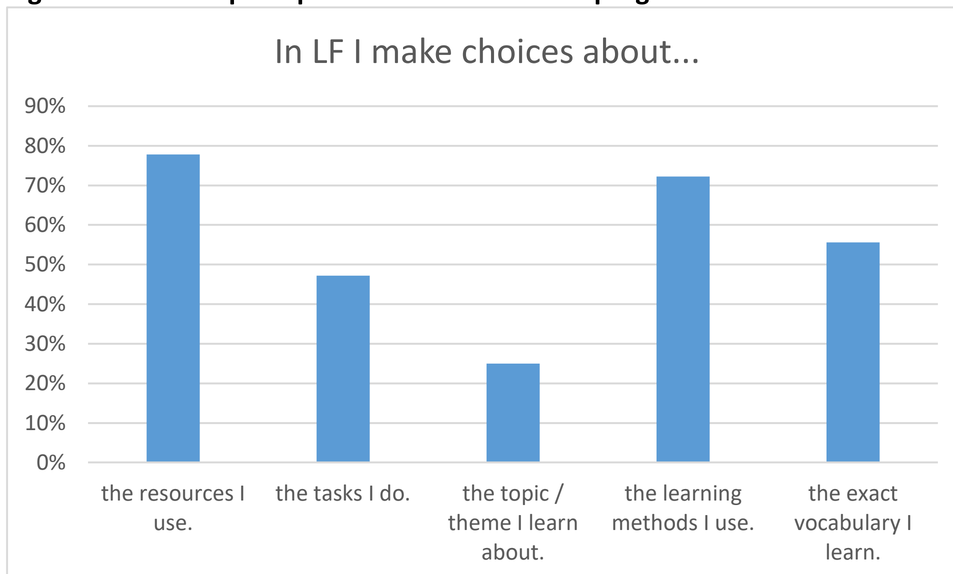
For the vast majority of learners, the ability to choose the language of study was either one or the main reason for applying to take part in the programme. Students' reasons given for choosing their particular language were varied. Broadly speaking, they fall into three main categories: family, intrinsic interest in the language, country and people, and a more general commitment to improving language learning skills. The table below shows the range of responses:

Table 21 Student reasons for choosing their LF language

	Family / friends speak the language	**A love of the language / interest in the country and its people**	**To get a qualification / improve language skills**	**To learn how to learn a language**	**Other**
Sample response	"I have family in that country and I would love to be able to communicate with them better"	"I love the language and I want to study there one day."	"because I wanted to improve my language knowledge and skill."	"To learn how to teach myself a language for future reference."	"To learn a language in a fun environment with my friend." "because it was free."
No. similar responses	9	9	10	3	4
Total responses: 35					

Agency and autonomy
Students in this LF programme reported high levels of freedom with respect to resources and learning methods and less with regard to the choice of exact vocabulary, and tasks and topics. This is consistent with this model of LF, which guides learning with a themed project (see Appendix H).

Figure 38 Student perception of choice in the LF programme



Teachers' perceptions of the impact of these freedoms differed significantly. One LF teacher felt that, without input from mentors or teachers, many students opt to copy out vocabulary or, in his exact words, 'play pretty', rather than do things that would further their language acquisition more reliably. This was attributed to a generally shallow knowledge about language and weak self-directed language learning skills. This view was, at least partly, shared by two of the other three LF teachers, although individual difference was viewed as significant, too, in determining just how well students were able to work autonomously.

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The LF teacher in school H was much more robustly positive about the level of student autonomy associated with LF:

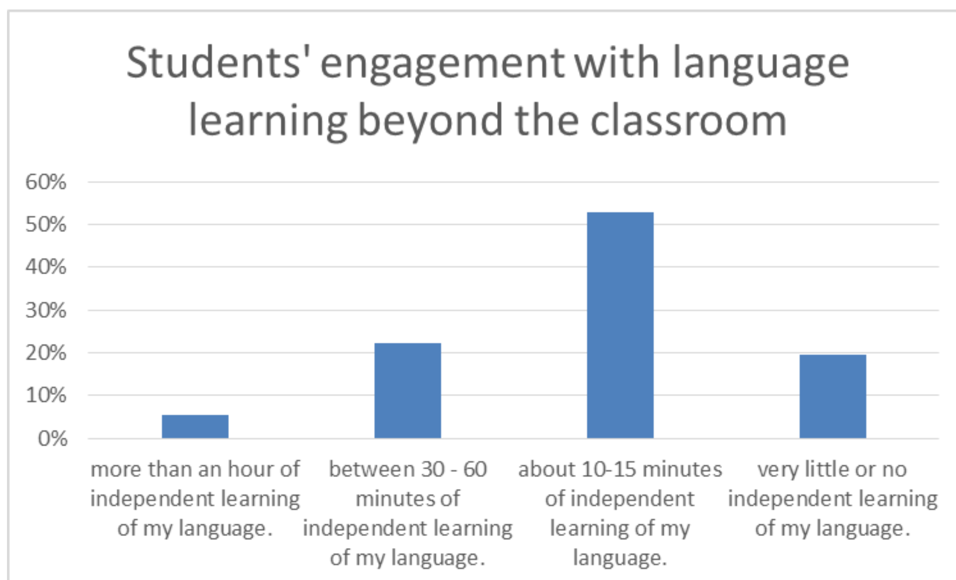
"Well the key as well I think is that they are free to go and work by themselves in groups or in pairs when I say work with themselves, they are actually holding the steering you know of the car, you know, and they are driving themselves you know to this, you know, wherever they're going to go to the project you so we are not you know pushing them and tell them where to go you know they are doing themselves."

This was, however, the school which had, for German and Spanish at least, highly proactive mentors who approached their role as language tutors. Whilst the students were certainly consulted about themes, learning methods and vocabulary choices, they were not required to direct their own learning in the same way as others with less frequent (or non-existent) mentoring were obliged to do. This does rather relativise the strength of the teacher's perceptions about learner autonomy.

School as basecamp

According to self-report student survey data, over half of students spent on average 10-15 minutes per week learning their LF language outside the classroom, and around one fifth spent between 30-60 minutes. A very few claimed to spend more than an hour each week, and at the other end of the spectrum, nearly a fifth of students claimed to spend very little or no time consolidating their learning outside of the classroom.

Figure 39 Student perception of choice in the LF programme



In terms of the activities undertaken, the most popular were: using apps to learn vocabulary, listening to songs and watching YouTube. Overall these responses are remarkably similar to those from case study 1, both in terms of time spent and preferred activities. It is worth remembering, however, that students in this programme have already voluntarily spent one hour each week on language learning just by participating in LF.

One LF teacher was clear that out-of-class learning needed to be absolutely optional as this was an extra-curricular learning project:

"Well you can't make them do homework for the project otherwise they're gonna think oh it's actually a lesson, but we always recommend actually we always tell them would be nice for you to take this home and just to read this to your parents or just revise for the week so you can remember

this next week"

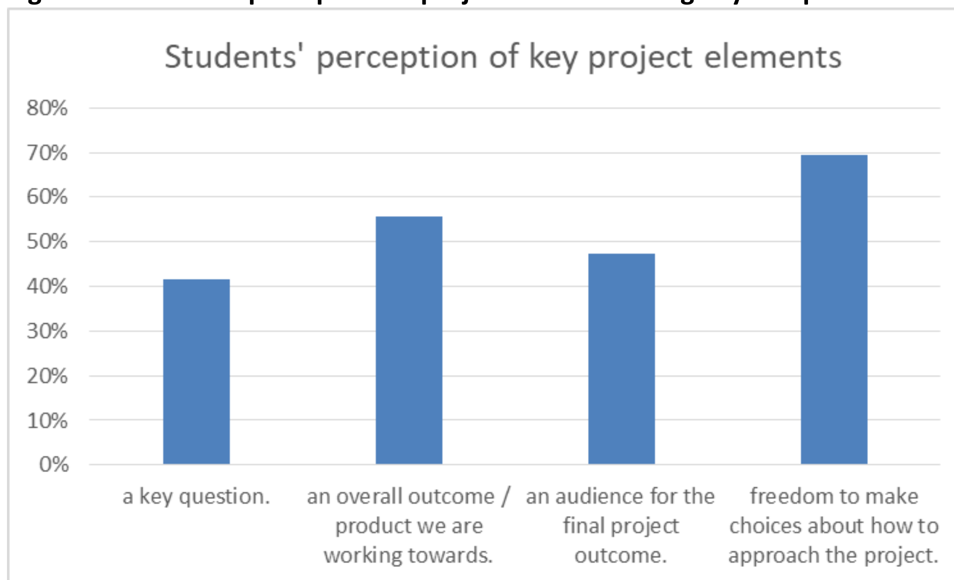
On the other hand, she also revealed that the German mentor had given them some homework the week before and that they were quite receptive to it.

The LF teacher in school F observed that students typically needed to look back through their notebooks to remember what they were trying to do the week before. In addition, he mentioned that some students had been good at researching things in the LF sessions but less good at practising them over the week on their own. Most students in school H said they didn't practise very much outside class, and although in his interview, one student said he practised Spanish for one hour every day, that was not evident from his progress. Self-directed learning beyond the classroom emerges consistently as the most under-developed aspect of Language Futures. The question of how to resolve this is explored in the discussion chapter that follows.

Project-based learning

The vast majority of students (4/5) involved in this model of LF recognised that their learning involved the opportunity to engage with project-based learning. From the student questionnaire data there was a high level of agreement that their LF project-based learning involved freedom about how to approach the project, although fewer students (approximately half) were convinced that there was a key project question, an overall outcome and an audience for the project outcome.

Figure 40 Students' perceptions – project-based learning key components



Overall, however, students were positive about projects, perceiving them as effective, fun, interesting and challenging, with just a few more negative responses indicating several students found them confusing, slow or boring.

Building a learning community

Within the LF conceptual framework learners are supported by their LF teacher, their peers, a community mentor and their parents. The student questionnaire sought perceptions about the level and impact of support in particular from mentors on their language learning. Teacher and mentor interviews, classroom observation notes and teacher questionnaires were triangulatory sources of data.

Mentors

Mentors are an integral part of the Language Futures programme. As mentioned above, mentors in

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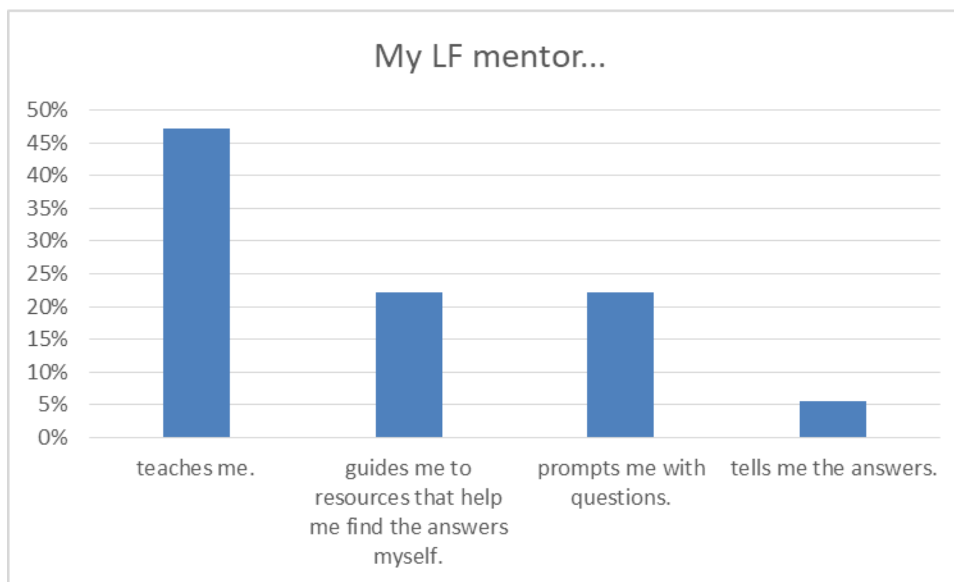
this programme are volunteers from the local community, or teaching assistants, trainee teachers or even language teachers who are expert linguists in the target languages; they are either native speakers or people who have language expertise due to an extended period of study or time spent abroad. Whilst the co-construction model of LF learning envisages that mentors guide rather than teach, as we have seen, some mentoring within this LF model resembled tutoring. As we have also noted, this approach to mentoring was also associated with higher levels of linguistic progress.

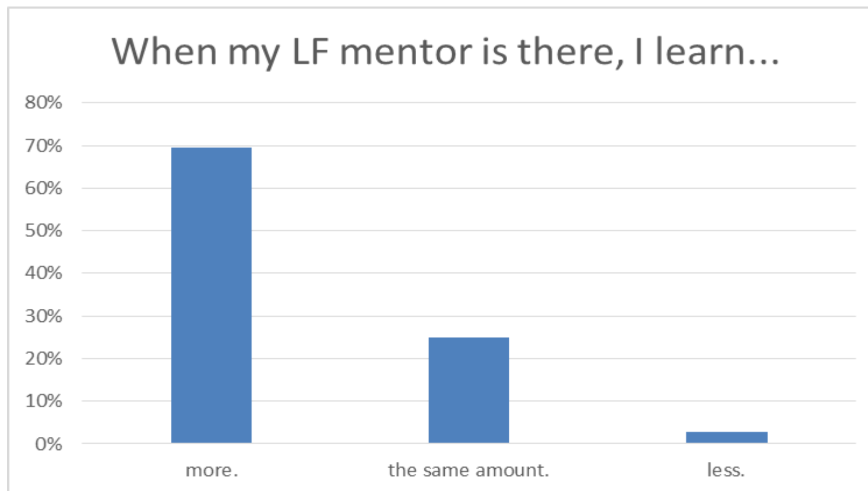
Student questionnaire data support this; nearly half of students felt that their mentors taught them, as opposed to a fifth who felt guided, and the same proportion who felt they were prompted by mentor questioning. A very small number felt they were told the answers.

Figure 41 Student perceptions of what their LF mentor does to support them



Interestingly, these student responses correlate with those in case study 1. However, there are not the same indications that there is any mismatch in the level and style of support offered by mentors, and the students' need for support. Nearly three-quarters of students believe they learn more when their mentor is with them, a quarter that they learn the same, and just two students think they learn less.

Figure 42 Student perceptions of learning when LF mentor is present

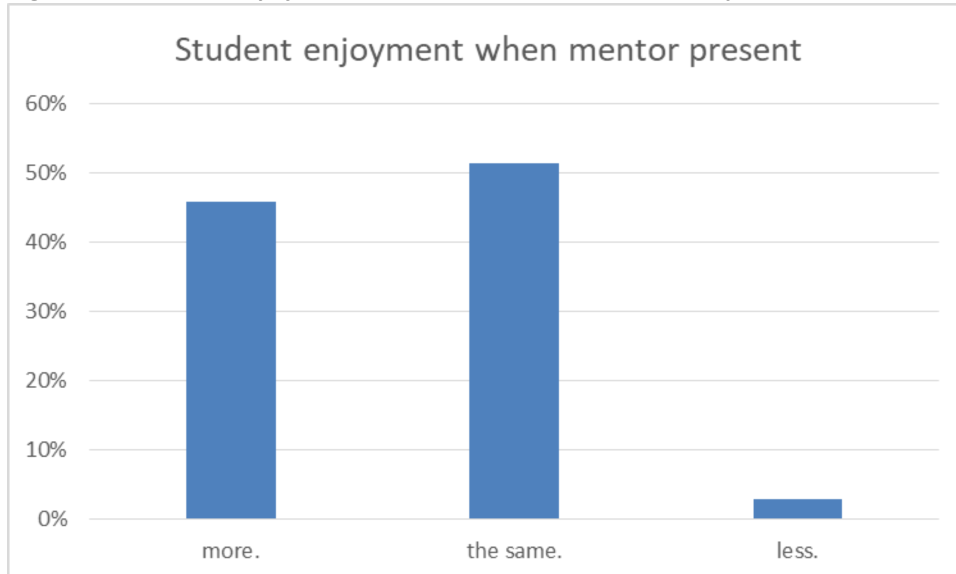


Around three-quarters of students believe that their mentor supports their pronunciation and speaking development. Students were directed to choose only one response in this question, so whilst mentors may also support with other aspects of language learning, students are clear that they gain most from the mentor input on pronunciation and speaking. This is consistent with the LF teacher's view that "community mentors have been particularly useful in pronunciation, modelling language learning skills and clearing up misunderstandings arising in students' independent work."

Figure 43 Student perceptions of LF mentor support

More than half of students enjoy the sessions with mentors more than other LF sessions, and most of the rest enjoys all LF sessions equally, with only two students claiming to enjoy them less when a mentor is there. These responses are more consistently positive than those in case study 1.

Figure 44 Student enjoyment of lessons when LF mentor is present



This LF model didn't suggest any instances where the mentor-student relationship might be a barrier to learning because it was excessively didactic. It seems that students were grateful for, and benefitted linguistically from, the personalised language tutoring that they received:

Interviewer: How often do you see your mentor?
Student: Once a week.
Interviewer: I'm getting the impression she gives structure to your learning.
Student: Yes
Interviewer: Is that helpful?
Student: Yes, a lot.
Interviewer: Do you feel free to ask?
Student: Yes, yes, if I'm confused I'll ask her like questions.

In school H, the progress of the students was seen to correlate with the frequency of attendance of the mentors:

"Well, I think they're important if you have proper mentors who actually come in, but we are lucky we have our German mentor who is very committed, who comes every week, she goes with her own resources, with quite er other things you know, and even comes even with food to share with the students, during Christmas time you know, so that they can taste what they eat during Christmas so we are lucky to have this person, but we would love to have more people I would say committed to LF so er.. I would say yeah in my LF project, the German groups are quicker because they do have German mentor weekly"

This contrasts starkly with the absence of an Italian mentor:

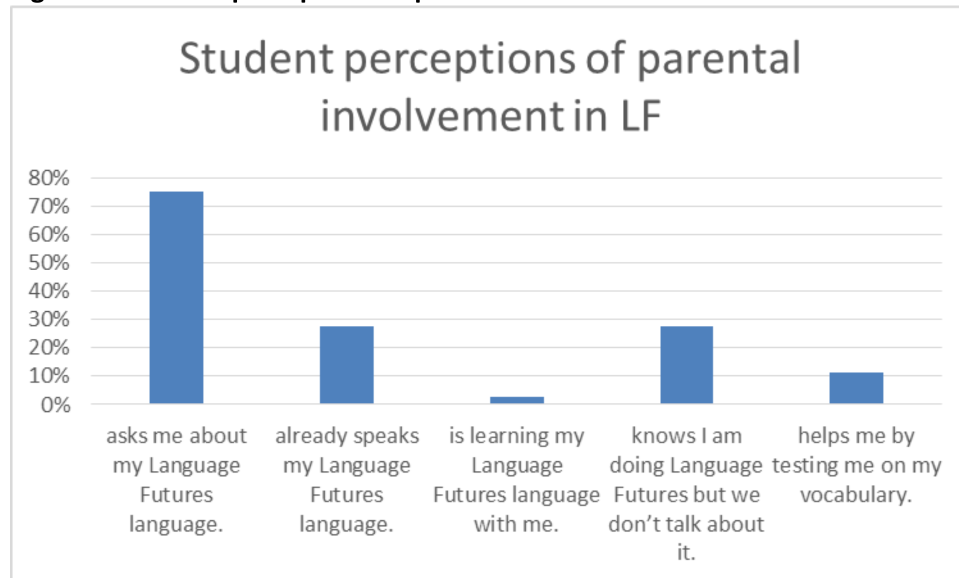
Interviewer: So you haven't got an Italian mentor, how are the Italian children getting on?
LF teacher: I must say not really brilliant because they have been very very good working by themselves and as a language teacher I was supporting them you know in the Italian you know but then having being here and having nobody as a mentor totally to give them a lesson or like teaching them you know, just a bit sad coz I mean the other group had German coming in every Thursday, and but they have nobody and they actually, I was feeling a bit coz they had nobody, so I tried my best to basically be there as the Italian mentor, but sometimes you have to be around everybody just to check they're doing well and if they need anything, they need, you know, but I don't think.. I

need to get more Italian as well, pupils, coz I don't think the Italian boys are going to carry on as well you see

Without a mentor, sustainability was a key issue in school H. The two Italian students decided not to continue, and this, in the teacher's view, was largely because of a lack of mentor in Italian.

Parents
In terms of parental involvement, three-quarters of parents show interest by asking about LF, and around a third of parents already speak the LF language. These responses compare very favourably with those of students in the other three case studies.

Figure 45 Student perceptions of parental involvement in LF



When asked about the importance of parental support, the LF teacher in school H corroborates the high level of interest suggested by the student survey responses:

LF teacher: It is coz have very positive supportive parents who push those students you know to keep learning this language and ask them what did you learn today, tell me about it, it's just important you know encourage them and feedback to parents to show off what they're learning, I think, having parents who care about this, and who show support to their children you know there I mean those students are quite pleased, because they'll be I can show off to my mum and my dad what I've learned, I'm doing something very important,
Interviewer: Did these parents come to the initial meeting?
LF teacher: They did, yeah, they were very supportive and they did come to the initial meeting where I've met them as well, it's nice to see that as well, coz it's not apparently we may have we could have nobody coming to the meeting, to have people coming is a very good sign already for us.

Data from different sources in the study indicate therefore a high level of parental awareness about and interest in LF.

7.5 Conclusion

This model of LF is offered to students as an extra-curricular activity. Learners choose to learn a language with the support of at least one other student, a community mentor, their LF teacher and their parents. Across four schools a total of 43 students began the programme. However, there was a significant drop-out rate, as we have seen, and in three of the four schools, the project ran for two

full terms, but was subsequently discontinued in the summer term, because of low numbers. Those schools have not ruled out a re-launch of the programme, but want to learn lessons from the first year, as it was a pilot programme for all schools.

One clear finding from this case study was that a more overtly didactic pattern of mentoring was associated with observably higher rates of progress, including previously resistant elements such as vocabulary retention, pronunciation and speaking. A related, and predictable, finding is that, where mentors were more instructive or 'teacherly', students worked less autonomously, but in contrast to findings in case study 1, this did not lead to any diminution of enjoyment on the part of students, who overwhelmingly welcomed the support of their mentors. More research would be needed to determine whether this was purely down to the individual preferences of the students who happened to be in this particular model, or whether the extra-curricular model itself attracts learners who are resolutely more motivated by learning a new language than they are interested in learning in a more autonomous way.

Equally, it was noted that students lacked the language awareness needed to make the most of the learning affordances of LF, and perhaps a more structured, explicit preparation phase to develop the knowledge and skills needed to learn a language independently would not only help to sustain the extra-curricular programme more successfully but would also support students' GCSE outcomes in their curriculum language, as well as genuinely equipping a generation of future linguists with the tools to learn any language.