

# Learning French in the UK setting: Policy, classroom engagement and attainable learning outcomes

## Abstract

Due to the contemporary dominance of English as global lingua franca, all other “foreign languages” face a number of challenges in formal education. This paper describes the recent evolution of policy and practice regarding foreign language education in England, with a particular focus on early language learning. Evidence from a classroom study of French as foreign language is used to illustrate primary school instructional practices and children’s engagement in this setting, and their learning outcomes. Conclusions are drawn concerning sustainable approaches to the teaching of languages other than English in the early school years, in an English-dominated linguistic landscape.

## 1. Introduction: the recent policy background

### 1.1 The dominance of English in FL education

The international profile of foreign language (FL) education has developed and changed profoundly in recent decades. On the one hand, there has been an enormous expansion with increasing worldwide investment and inclusion in formal education at all levels; on the other hand the dominance of English in globalisation processes has led to an overwhelming focus on English in school and higher education curricula (and its rapidly growing use as medium of instruction) (Erling & Seargeant, 2013; Galloway, Kriukow, & Numajiri, 2017; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). The more detailed policy picture is complex, with major polities acting top-down to support some forms of linguistic diversity, for example through the pro-multilingualism policies of the European Union, or the promotion of Mandarin through the international network of

Confucius Institutes (Williams, Strubell, & Williams, 2013; Zhao & Huang, 2010). However, the widespread bottom-up societal pressure for English remains very clear. In Europe for example, despite efforts to support the teaching of a wider range of languages through policy initiatives such as the European “mother tongue plus 2” initiative, numerous studies show strong student preferences for English, and corresponding difficulties in recruiting and retaining learners of other languages (Busse, 2017; Henry, 2010, 2011, 2017; Kangasvieri, 2017).

Against this background it is unsurprising that FL education in English-dominant national contexts is problematic, with public scepticism regularly expressed about the necessity for language learning, equivocal motivation among school aged learners, and policy vacillation (Blake & Kramsch, 2007; Lanvers & Coleman, 2017). This situation has been affected very little (so far) by the increasing internal linguistic diversity of wealthier, historically Anglophone countries (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, USA), due to recent global migration flows and resulting demographic changes. In these countries, the language-related goals of public education continue to centre on mastery of (standard) English literacy and oracy, with limited attention to other languages. For example, in the USA, despite urgings from language specialists (Abbott et al., 2013; Commission on Language Learning, 2017), there is no central (federal) policy for the promotion of foreign languages in schools. Across the American school system, FL instruction is a minority activity; only around 15% of elementary schools teach a foreign language, and around 25% of high schools include FL coursework as a graduation requirement (O'Rourke, Zhou, & Rottman, 2016).

## 1.2 Policy evolution in the UK: compulsion versus choice

In the United Kingdom, there has been a distinctive complex interaction between central top-down policymaking, and bottom-up pressures regarding languages in compulsory education (i.e. up to age 16: the 17-18 age group is not dealt with in this paper). In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most secondary schools became comprehensive in their intake, with a resulting broadening of the curriculum, and the

UK also acceded to the European Economic Community in 1973. These developments meant that access to foreign language learning steadily increased in English secondary schools, and interest was also shown in primary languages (Hawkins, 1996b; McLelland, 2017; Mitchell, 2011; Schools Council, 1966). This development happened in a relatively bottom-up way, given the considerable autonomy of schools and local authorities with respect to the curriculum pre-1990, and arguably indicating a wider social interest in languages; a notable strand was the development in the 1970s and 1980s of more communicatively-oriented FL programmes with short-term “graded objectives”, targeting less academic students in the lower secondary school (Page, 1996). With the introduction of the first unified National Curriculum (NC) in England in 1990, promotion of “languages for all” was supported by considerably strengthened top-down control. Building on earlier developments, study of one FL was included as a compulsory National Curriculum subject for the lower secondary (11-16) age group (Department of Education and Science/ Welsh Office, 1991). By 2001 (the peak year), almost 80 per cent of secondary school students were studying at least one FL for five years, and taking this language as an examination subject for the national General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) at age 16, with French the most commonly taught language, followed by other major European lingua francas (German, Spanish).

However, within the NC framework the FL was seen as a “hard” subject, with relatively low attainment (as reflected in 16+ examination outcomes compared with other subjects), and problematic motivation especially among boys. Concern that students were “failing to make good and effective use of their last two years of compulsory schooling” (Dearing & King, 2006), and the key judgement that FLs in particular were not “essential for progression or for personal development”, led to the relaxation of NC requirements, so that from 2004, the period of compulsory FL study was reduced to the first three years of secondary school, i.e. from ages 11-14 (Dearing & King, 2006). At the same time, a “Languages Strategy” was adopted for English schools (Department for Education and Skills, 2002), which it was hoped would raise the profile of FL study, enhance choice and quality for languages students, and above all improve learner motivation. Languages Strategy measures included substantial investment in (still voluntary) FL initiatives at primary school level (Cable et al., 2010;

Hunt, Barnes, Powell, Lindsay, & Muijs, 2005; Wade & Marshall, 2009), with a view to the eventual inclusion of primary FL study in the National Curriculum, and the provision of nationally accredited languages tests in a wide range of languages (including heritage immigrant languages as well as other European and Asian languages) independent of the GCSE system ("Asset Languages" tests: Jones, 2007).

The disappointing outcome of this move to increased student choice was a rapid fall in the numbers continuing with language study at secondary school to GCSE level, so that by 2006, only half of all students took a languages examination at GCSE level, with continuing decline to 43% by 2010 (CILT the National Centre for Languages, 2011). It was clear that schools serving disadvantaged students, in particular, were allowing or encouraging early opt-outs from languages. School management reforms of the 2000s have resulted in the break-up of local government control of schools in England, with growing numbers of academies and free schools, whose leaders have considerably increased autonomy regarding curriculum design and subject choice. (Even the current narrower National Curriculum is not compulsory in these schools, though many follow it.) Hagger-Vaughan (2016) reports on an opinion survey among contemporary head teachers, who express continuing perceptions of FLs as a difficult subject (in terms of achievement of examination grades), and one which non-academic students find unmotivating; they also report difficulties in staffing FLs satisfactorily. These key school leaders can be seen as responding to local market conditions in a bottom-up way (Williams et al., 2013). However, early opt-outs from languages are clearly contributing to the marginalisation of language study among less advantaged social groups (Sutton Trust, 2015).

Further policy responses have followed on the part of government in England, to attempt to stabilise and promote FLs. The earlier initiatives of the Languages Strategy and Asset Languages have been abandoned. However, from 2014, FL study finally became a compulsory element in the National Curriculum for primary schools, from age 8 onward (Department for Education, 2013). At secondary school level, one FL has been included among the core five "academic" GCSE subjects to form the so-called "English Baccalaureate (EBacc)", to be studied by all students by 2020 (Department for Education, 2016). Uptake of these five subjects is already a school

performance/accountability measure, and FL educators acknowledge its role in re-growing the proportion of students taking GCSE to around 50% (in the survey of Tinsley & Board, 2017). In the same survey, however, teachers were also asked what they saw as the main barriers of increasing FL takeup beyond current levels. The main barriers reported were “reluctance of some pupils to study languages” (61%) and “unsuitability of GCSE exam for all pupils” (56%); in comparison, teacher shortages, lack of support from school leaders, or parental opposition, were reported much less often (Tinsley & Board, 2017, p. 105).

### 1.3 General rationales for FL study in an Anglophone setting

It is clear that top-down government strategies and directed resources can be helpful in supporting diversity and intensity of language provision (see Williams et al, 2013, for a Europe-wide survey on this). However, compulsion does not by itself solve underlying issues relating to FL motivation. Here, learners need to be convinced that the effort involved in FL achievement is worthwhile, i.e. that there is an adequate rationale for FL study, and that their vision of a future self is actually enhanced through FL learning.

In Anglophone contexts such as the UK, varied rationales have been advanced over time for FL study (McLelland, 2017, Chapter 6; Mitchell, 2014). These include instrumental and vocational arguments that the UK requires a cadre of multilingual personnel to contribute to economic, social and political development (including addressing security concerns), and/ or that individuals seeking employment in a future globalised “knowledge economy” will be advantaged through the possession of advanced multilingual skills (British Academy, 2014, 2016). An association between FL learning and the development of intercultural competence and intercultural citizenship has also been developed through the work of Michael Byram and colleagues (e.g. Byram, 2014), and advanced as a further general rationale for FL study. So far, these rationales are in line with Council of Europe views on language study as “a means to support intercultural dialogue, social cohesion and democratic citizenship, and as an important economic asset in a modern knowledge-based society” (Council of

Europe, 2005). Finally, arguments are advanced for the contribution of FL learning to students' personal development, through cognitive challenge and the broadening of social, cultural and literary experience; as shown by McLelland (2017), these are longstanding ideas, which have existed in some tension with more instrumental and vocational "communicative" goals through successive formulations of curriculum rationales. More recently, the learning of foreign languages has been linked to enhanced cognitive abilities, the so-called 'bilingual advantage' (Bialystok, Craik, & Luk, 2012). The most recent (very brief) version of the National Curriculum for languages alludes to almost all of these main strands (Department for Education, 2013). However, the inclusion of languages in the EBacc, with its emphasis on 'academic rigour', plus renewed advocacy of systematic grammar and literature study in recent pedagogic advice (Teaching Schools Council, 2016), suggest a belief among current policymakers that issues of student motivation as well as of low attainment can best be addressed through a re-emphasis on the cognitive challenge of language study. Whether this reorientation will address the concerns expressed by teachers in the Tinsley & Board survey, or the currently heavy backwash effects on classroom practice of tests and examinations (Wingate, 2016) remains to be seen.

#### 1.4 Languages in English primary schools

After an early, abortive attempt to introduce languages in the primary school, around the time of the UK's accession to the European Community (Burstall, 1974; Hawkins, 1996a; Schools Council, 1966), interest diminished, but revived again in the 1990s. In the 2000s, in line with the new National Languages Strategy, there was considerable investment in local initiatives to develop expertise and materials for primary languages, supported nationally with a voluntary curriculum framework (Cable et al., 2010; Department for Education and Science, 2005; Hunt et al., 2005; Wade & Marshall, 2009). There were also a number of local experiments with primary "language awareness" projects, involving children's exposure to a wider range of languages including heritage community languages (e.g. Barton, Bragg, & Serratrice, 2009). After some hesitation and delay, and at a time of considerably greater financial

constraints in schools, the sustained study of a single FL was finally made compulsory within the primary school National Curriculum for children aged 8 and above, from 2014 (Department for Education, 2013), with the expectation that they will “make substantial progress in one language” (Department for Education, 2013). At the same time the FLs curriculum took on a more academic flavour at all levels, with an increased emphasis on grammar study on the one hand, and on literature on the other. However, at primary school, there is no expectation that schools will be held accountable through national assessments for a set of prescribed FL learning outcomes (unlike e.g. in the core NC subjects of English and Mathematics).

The main motivation behind the introduction of primary languages as originally expressed in the 2002 National Languages Strategy, was to provide a positive learning experience which would “harness children’s learning potential and enthusiasm” (Department for Education and Science, 2002), and also compensate to some extent for learning time lost in the secondary school through the reduction of compulsory “languages for all” to three years only. During the 2000s, a number of projects trialling FLs instruction at the local level were given state funding (the Pathfinder projects: Muijs et al., 2005). On the whole, primary schools participated enthusiastically in these projects, and reported positive motivation and participation among early learners (Cable et al., 2010, 2012; Wade & Marshall, 2009). This generally positive attitudinal impact continues to be reported in more recent research (e.g. Graham, Courtney, Tonkyn, & Marinis, 2016; Tinsley & Board, 2016). However, some well-known challenges to effective implementation of FL instruction in the primary school have also been detailed many times, most recently by Tinsley and Board (2017).

Recommended curriculum time is limited, and subject to erosion from other curriculum priorities; teaching is frequently delivered by regular class teachers, with limited target language proficiency or specialist pedagogical content knowledge; the choice of target language is frequently driven by availability of staff, resulting in an unbalanced focus on French; expectations regarding learning outcomes are unclear; and transition to the secondary school is problematic (Myles, 2017). Thanks to past school management reforms, and the promotion of parental choice over the maintenance of local school networks, a large secondary school may have dozens of feeder primary schools

teaching a variety of languages, and achieving very different outcomes; many such schools can take only limited account of children's prior FL learning (Courtney, 2017; Fisher & Evans, 2009).

In this complex situation, there is still only limited available evidence on the learning outcomes which primary school children are capable of achieving. The original National Languages Strategy suggested that CEFR A1 might be an attainable target for primary languages, and the study of Cable et al. (2010) showed that this was possible in principle, under favourable conditions, but was being achieved by only a small minority in their 40-school sample.

The current National Curriculum (Department for Education, 2013) does not relate the intended learning outcomes to any international standard; however, there is a clear expectation that primary school children will learn to sustain simple conversations and descriptions, and to manipulate sentence level morphosyntax orally and in writing. The most relevant recent study has been conducted at the University of Reading, tracking a cohort of French learners from the penultimate year of primary school (Year 5) through the first year of secondary school (Year 7), documenting children's motivation and FL progression, as well as their interaction with factors such as gender, L1 literacy levels and self-efficacy (Courtney, Graham, Tonkyn, & Marinis, 2015; Graham et al., 2016). Children's proficiency in spoken French was tested once in each school year, using a sentence repetition (SR) task and a picture description (PD) task. Both tasks were designed to elicit evidence on children's knowledge of lexis and aspects of French morphosyntax (Determiner-Noun agreement; Adjective-Noun agreement; and Subject-Verb agreement). Scores on both tasks improved significantly from year to year, but accuracy remained relatively low, e.g. the mean scores at Year 6 were 26.78/56 (or 48.2%) for the SR task and 16.09/56 (or 28.7%) for the PD task (Courtney et al., 2015). This study also showed that test scores correlated significantly with both gender and L1 literacy scores throughout all three year groups; however, this was not the case for motivation, which was directly related to achievement only in Year 7 (i.e. once children were at secondary school).

The findings of the Reading study also showed however that L2 motivation was increasingly related to self-efficacy and feelings about the possibility of making future progress (Graham et al., 2016). Thus overall, they confirm the existence of supportive interactions between the achievement of positive learning outcomes and L2 motivation, known from previous international research. It is clear that more research is needed on the learning outcomes that can realistically be expected in the English setting given the context described previously, from a typical weekly learning experience of 60 minutes or less, as reported by many schools (Tinsley & Board, 2017), if expectations of learners, teachers and programme managers are to be managed positively. In the remainder of this paper, we describe a recent longitudinal project which tracked three intact classes in two schools in England through the first 38 hours of L2 French instruction (Myles & Mitchell, 2012). We concentrate on the learning process and learning outcomes of the Year 3 group (children aged 7-8), so as to contribute further evidence to policy debates regarding FL curriculum and achievable learning outcomes in the Anglophone setting.

## 2. The “starting ages” project

### 2.1 Aims and overall design

The project from which the data discussed in this paper are drawn was titled “Learning French from ages 5, 7 and 11: A comparison of starting ages, rates and routes of learning among early FL learners” (Myles & Mitchell, 2012). This project was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (award number RES-062-23-1545). The project tracked three intact classes for 38 hours each, from the start of their French learning experience, and compared motivation and learning progress across all three groups. However, this paper concentrates only on the Year 3 (Y3) group (7-8 year olds,  $n = 26$ ), i.e. the only group which fell within the current primary school requirement for compulsory FL study (ages 7-11). The age-appropriate pedagogy followed a largely oral approach, with a range of activities including games, role plays, stories, songs and crafts.

All lessons were designed and taught by a single specialist teacher of primary French, and were videorecorded, so that all classroom activities and French input available to the children were fully documented. All Y3 lessons were subsequently transcribed using the CHAT system to facilitate computer-aided analysis (MacWhinney, 2000). The classroom engagement of selected individual Y3 children was also tracked through the video data and coded using the software package ELAN, produced by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, Nijmegen (Wittenburg, Brugman, Russel, Klassmann, & Sloetjes, 2006).

The children's progress in learning French was tracked through a set of tests administered on 3 occasions (Mid test after 18 hours' instruction, Post test after 38 hours, and Delayed Post test after a further 2 months without instruction). The tests repeated each time included a receptive vocabulary test (based on classroom input); an Elicited Imitation (EI) test to measure general proficiency; and a productive role play activity. For the vocabulary test and EI test, overall scores were calculated and comparisons were made between groups and over time. In order to explore children's emerging control of French morphosyntax, analysis centred on production of the Determiner Phrase and the Inflection Phrase, which have been shown in past research to be likely sites for early development (Prévost, 2009). Data from both the EI test and the role play was analysed for this. Previous research with older instructed learners had shown that control of a store of formulaic utterances contributes to the eventual emergence of a working interlanguage system, and the analysis therefore took care to distinguish formulaic utterances from creatively constructed utterances. (Formulaic utterances have been defined as "rote-learned or imitated chunks of unanalysed language, available for learner use without being derived from generative rules":

Myles, Hooper, & Mitchell, 1998. They are easy to identify in early stages of development, as they are markedly different from the creative productions of early learners in terms of e.g. length and complexity.) Attitudes toward learning French were explored in focus groups and individual interviews, and data was collected on children's individual characteristics including their working memory as measured by a non-word repetition test, and their L1 literacy levels as measured by the schools.

## 2.2 Instrumentation and data analysis

*Receptive Vocabulary Test:* This test (RVT) was specially devised for the “starting ages” project. It took the form of a 50-item multiple choice test administered individually on computers. Children saw four black and white line drawings on a screen, heard a French lexical item and had to select the picture representing the item. The words included in the test were mostly drawn from the French input actually heard in the classroom (i.e. from the teacher's speech, up to Lesson 18). Criteria used for selection of lexical items included relative frequency in teacher overall input; number of lessons in which heard; whether produced by children; whether included in songs; word class; and whether cognates.

*Elicited Imitation Test:* This test (EIT) was also specially devised for the project, as a measure of participants' developing morphosyntactic ability in French. The basic assumption underlying any EIT is that participants can repeat only what they have been able to process in the utterance (Bley-Vroman & Chaudron, 1994; Yan, Maeda, Lv, & Ginther, 2016). The test consisted of 26 items each comprising a complete sentence of up to 9 familiar words. The test was administered individually; the child listened to each (pre-recorded) utterance and their attempt to reproduce it was then audiorecorded. To take account of participants' age and to promote attention to meaning, the utterances followed a simple story line and were supported by images; comprehension questions were included at regular intervals (see Figure 1).



**Mes amis** [My friends]

*Voici Xavier c'est une tortue* [Here is Xavier, he's a tortoise]

*Voici Emilie c'est un lapin* [Here is Emilie, she's a rabbit]

*Emilie est brune et blanche* [Emilie is brown and white]

*Elle mange une carotte* [She is eating a carrot]

*Elle a de longues oreilles* [She has long ears]

*Xavier ne peut pas courir vite* [Xavier can't run fast]

*Il ne mange pas de carottes* [He doesn't eat carrots]

**Questions :**

- **What is Emilie eating?**
- **What can't Xavier do?**

FIGURE 1. Extract from Elicited Imitation Test

Production of individual words within each utterance was scored by members of the research team on a 3-point scale, as follows:

0	Item not produced
1 / 2	Placeholder or lexical approximation produced
3	Item accurately produced.

In this way children's overall EIT scores were calculated. In addition, for the Year 3 group, individual productions were analysed for:

- Reproduction of formulaic utterances and part utterances (identified from their match with formulas in classroom input)
- Reproduction of non-formulaic Inflection Phrases (IPs)
- Reproduction of Determiner Phrases (DPs)

*Role Play Test:* For this test (RPT), designed to elicit evidence on children's FL productive ability, the participants worked with an investigator in pairs or triads. The role play was semi-structured, and included exchange of personal information (with a doll manipulated by the investigator), description of the doll's possessions (mini toys), and a group game (*Jacques a dit*/ Simon Says). During the role play the investigator scaffolded the children to complete all tasks, so much of the children's French production was primed. The role plays were audiorecorded and later transcribed using CHAT. CLAN-supported analyses were carried out at group and individual level, on the following dimensions:

- Mean length of utterance (words)
- Range of lexical output (types and tokens)
- Production of formulaic utterances
- Production of non-formulaic utterances of 2+ words (IPs and DPs)

A sample RPT excerpt is included below; the children's codeswitching, and reliance on Investigator priming, and mutual support, are characteristic of the larger dataset.

\*INVF: *Maxence tu as un animal? tu as un animal?* [Maxence, do you have a pet? do you have a pet?]  
 \*MAXE: what's that?  
 \*CORF: *le chat.* [the cat]  
 \*MAXF: *le chat.* [the cat]  
 [...]  
 \*INVF: *Corinne tu as un animal?* [Corinne, do you have an animal?]  
 \*CORF: *un hamster.* [a hamster]  
 \*INVF: *ehm ehm et comment il s'appelle?* [ehm ehm and what is his name?]  
 \*CORE: I have got millions of animals.  
 [...]  
 \*INVF: *un hamster oui et quoi d'autre?* [a hamster yes and what else?]  
 \*CORE: I have got *le chien.* [the dog]  
 \*INVF: *il est quelle couleur ton chien?* [he is what colour your dog?]  
 \*CORE: ehm I have got +... black. I have got +... I have got +... *marron.* [brown]  
 \*INVF: *un chien marron? ehm ehm.* [a brown dog ? ehm ehm]

\*CORF: *le chien marron.* [the brown dog]

KEY:

\*INV F = Investigator, French utterance

\*INVE = Investigator, English utterance

\*MAXE, \*CORE = participant Maxence/ Corinne, English utterance

\*MAXF, \*CORF = participant Maxence/ Corinne, French utterance

*Working Memory Test:* To provide a measure of children's working memory, an existing non-word repetition test was adopted (Gathercole & Baddeley, 1996).

*Motivation Interview:* Participants also took part in focus group and individual interviews (in English) exploring their attitudes toward their experience of learning French, their motivation to learn more, and the learning strategies they had developed. This material was transcribed and analysed using systematic content analysis.

*Classroom Engagement Coding Scheme:* To provide behavioural insights into children's classroom engagement, six Y3 children were selected and tracked individually through a subset of 5 videorecorded lessons. (Selection criteria are detailed in Table 6 below.) Using ELAN their behaviour was coded on 2 dimensions, gaze/ direction of attention and embodied actions. The coding scheme developed for this purpose is shown as Figure 2. Qualitative analysis of the same children's classroom behaviour was also conducted, identifying critical incidents illustrating varied aspects of classroom (non) engagement: behavioural, affective and cognitive (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012; Guz & Tetiurka, 2016a). A sample ELAN screenshot is included as Figure 3.

<b>Gaze/ focal attention (continuous coding)</b>	<b>Embodied action (intermittent coding)</b>
At teacher	Change posture
At screen	Change location
At other children	Sitting down
At other adult	Standing up
At materials	Kneeling
Other	Handraise
Out of shot	Deictic gesture
	Iconic gesture
	Beat
	Clapping

Handling materials  
Other

FIGURE 2. Behavioural engagement coding scheme

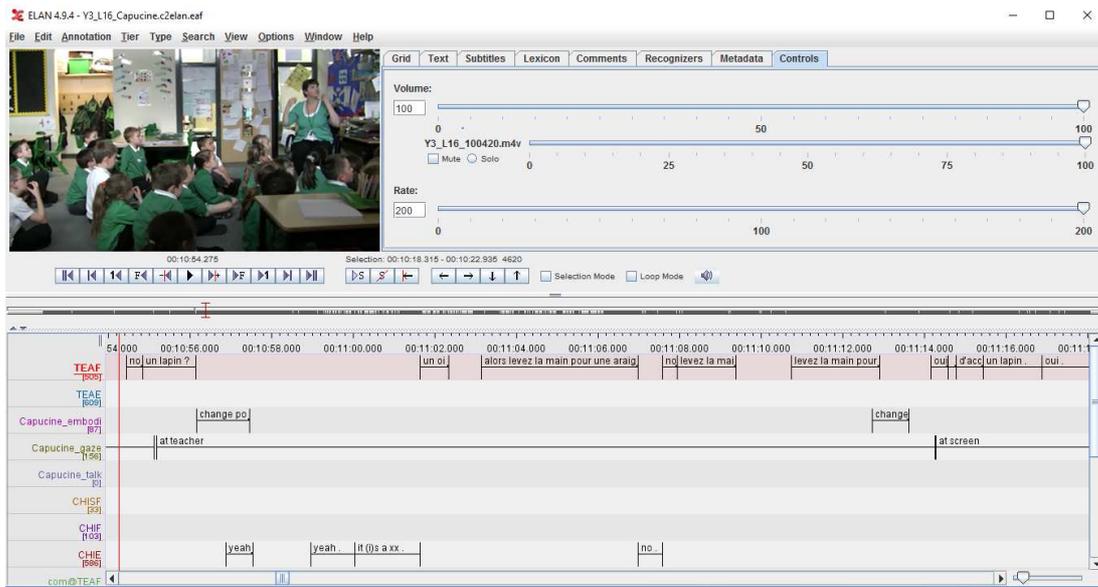


FIGURE 3. Sample ELAN screen

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 General progression

A detailed analysis of children's linguistic development was carried out (Myles & Mitchell, 2017), and an overview for Year 3 is presented here. Firstly, Figure 4 gives a general picture of Year 3 group performance on the 50-item RVT. While mean vocabulary scores tended to rise, there is no significant difference between the Y3 group performances at Mid test, Post Test or Delayed Post Test. However, Figure 5 shows the pattern of overall scores for the EIT, and in this case, significant gains are seen at each test time, with a large effect size (ANOVA, Wilks' Lambda = .421,  $F(2,24)=16.528$ ,  $p<.000$ , multivariate eta squared = .579). Table 1 provides descriptive information for the Year 3 students' collective productions in French during the role

play task at the three different test points, showing increases in both word counts (tokens) and utterance counts from the Mid Test to Post Test. There is some small decline from Post Test to Delayed Post Test, but the number of productions remains greater than at Mid Test. Utterances are short however, and the group mean MLU does not substantially change between test points.

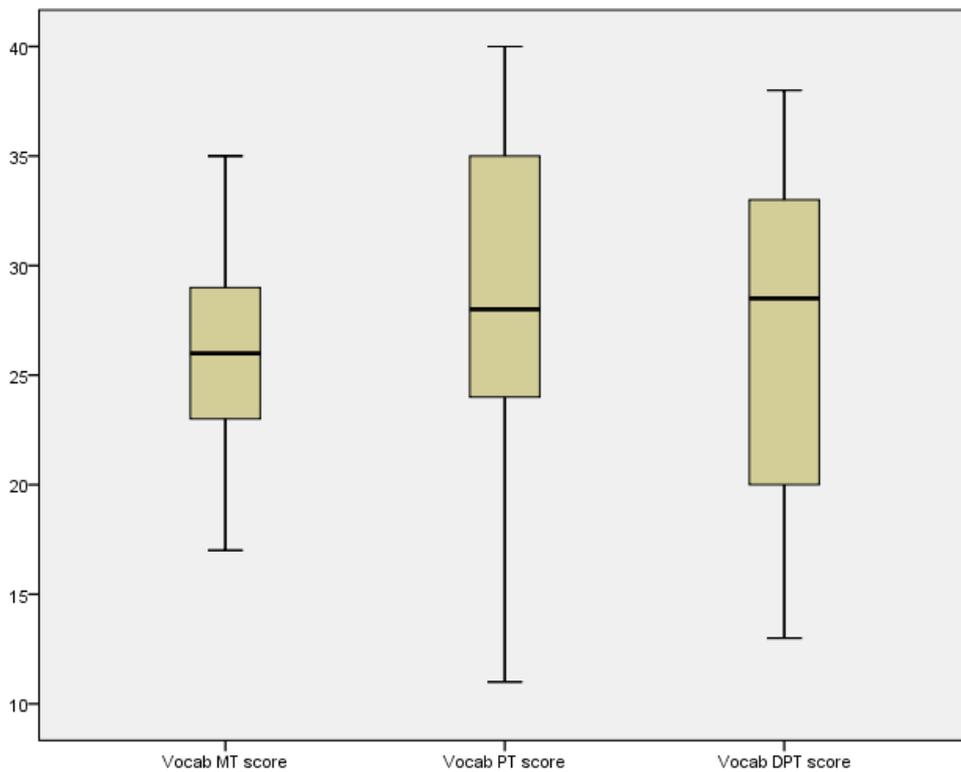


FIGURE 4. Receptive Vocabulary Test scores over time, Year 3 group

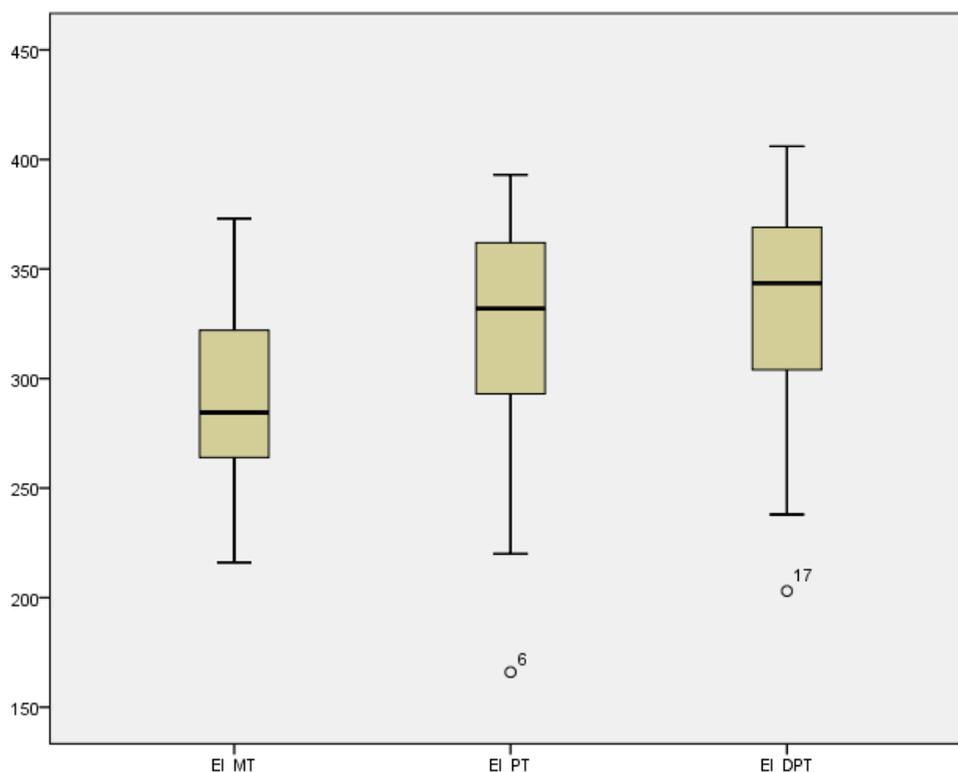


FIGURE 5. Elicited Imitation Test scores over time, Year 3 group

TABLE 1. Production of French words and utterances during role play, Year 3 group

Time point	Utterances (group total excl. Investigator)	Words (tokens, group total excl. investigator)	MLUw
Mid test	859	2006	2.34
Post test	1232	2853	2.32
Delayed Post test	1086	2550	2.42

### 3.2 Formulaic sequences and verbal inflection

In the EIT, a small number of stimuli were reproduced from Mid test onward with over 90% accuracy; these are shown in Table 2. In every case these utterances included a verb-centred formula, which had been heard with high frequency in teacher input, spread over a substantial number of Year 3 lessons. Only one other complete item ever approached this level of accuracy: *Je n'ai pas de soeurs* [I don't have any sisters] (91.9% accuracy at DPT; 51 occurrences in teacher input in 10 lessons).

TABLE 2. (Re)production of utterances containing high frequency formulaic expressions in EIT

Item no.	Item (chunk underlined)	Item accuracy at Mid test (%)	Instances in teacher input (30 lessons)	No. lessons where heard
1	<i>Bonjour <u>je m'appelle</u> Suzie</i> [Hello I am called Suzie]	92.8	127	12
16	<i><u>Quel âge as-tu,</u> Suzie?</i> [How old are you, Suzie ?]	96.4	123	6
17	<i><u>J'ai trois ans,</u></i> [I am three years old]	97.1	188	6
24	<i><u>Asseyez-vous tout le monde</u></i> [Sit down everyone]	92.1	240	23

Table 3 lists all verb forms occurring in the EIT stimuli (including those found in formulaic utterances), and indicates the degree of accuracy with which they were reproduced at Mid test. With a few exceptions, the table suggests that for the most part, high frequency items in teacher input are reproduced more accurately, but reproduction of low frequency items is more variable. Figure 6 summarises group accuracy over all verb forms over time (including forms within formulaic utterances); There is a significant improvement over time in verb accuracy, to which formulaic forms contribute. A one way repeated measures ANOVA found a significant effect for time (Wilks' Lambda = .761,  $F(2,22)=3.46$ ,  $p<.049$ , multivariate eta squared = .239).

TABLE 3. (Re)production of inflected V forms in EIT (Mid test)

Forms	Input frequency	Accuracy in reproduction
<i>Je n'ai pas</i> [I don't have] <i>As-tu</i> [Do you have] <i>Elle/NP a</i> [She/NP has] <i>Je m'appelle</i> [I'm called] <i>Asseyez-vous</i> [Sit down]	High (50+ tokens)	High (mean score >2.0)
<i>J'ai</i> [I have] <i>C'est</i> [This is/ it is] <i>NP est</i> [NP is]	High	Mixed/ affected by immediate context
<i>Je suis</i> [I am] <i>Elle n'a pas</i> [She doesn't have] <i>elle mange</i> [She eats] <i>il ne mange pas</i> [he doesn't eat]	Low	High
<i>Elle s'appelle</i> [She is called] <i>Il s'appelle</i> [He is called] <i>NP ne peut pas</i> [NP can't] <i>NP n'aime pas</i> [NP doesn't like]	Low	Low (mean score <2.0)

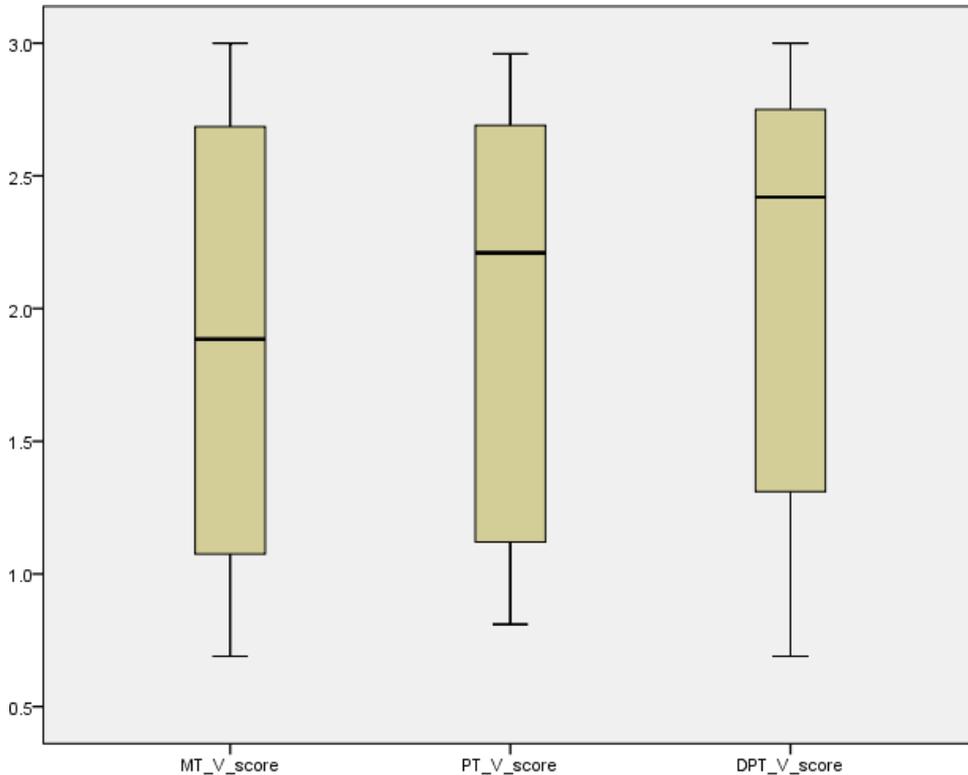


FIGURE 6. Mean scores for (re)production of inflected V forms within EIT, over time

Regarding the RPT, a range of formulaic utterances was produced, all of them of high frequency in classroom input:

*ça va* [How's it going]  
*ça va bien* [(It's) going fine]  
*comment t'appelles-tu* [What are you called]  
*je m'appelle xx* [I am called xx]  
*j'ai xx ans* [I am xx years old]  
*quel âge as-tu* [How old are you]  
*Jacques a dit xxx* [Jacques has said]  
*levez-vous* [Stand up]  
*asseyez-vous* [Sit down]  
*touchez xx* [Touch xx]  
*j'aime xx* [I like xx]  
*j'ai xx* [I have xx].

The number of formulaic utterances produced by individual children was quite substantial (mean 6.73, SD 2.07 at Mid test). However, their production of chunks was not solely a reflection of teacher input. For example, in spite of the chunk *c'est* [it is/ this is] occurring 559 times in the Year 3 teacher input, it was reproduced with only mixed success in the Elicited Imitation test (consistently poorly in response to the stimulus *Voici Emilie c'est un lapin* [This is Emilie she's a rabbit], and consistently successfully in *Bonjour c'est mon anniversaire* [Hello it's my birthday]). This chunk was also used frequently by the Investigators managing the RPT (e.g. there were 220 occurrences during the Post test RPTs). However, there are no occurrences of this chunk in children's own RPT productions.

Apart from complete or partial reproduction of chunks learned from input and rehearsal in classroom activities, there were very few instances of production of inflected verb forms. A small number of utterances including third person forms of the verbs *être* [to be] and *s'appeler* [to be called] were produced, which could be interpreted as at least partially generated productively:

*elles s'appellent Gigi and Lou* [They are called Gigi and Lou]  
*il s'appelle Lou il s'appelle Jo* [He is called Lou he is called Jo]  
*elle s'appelle le sœur Jo* [She is called the sister Jo]  
*carnet est bleu* [Notebook is blue]

*elle est grand* [She is tall]  
*il est blanc il est noir* [He is white he is black].

However, all of these examples except for the last were produced in the context of Investigator priming. There is thus effectively hardly any evidence in the RPT data of emergence of independent, productive control of the Inflection Phrase, within these early learner L2 systems.

### 3.3 Determiner phrases

As with the Inflection Phrase, we examined the participants' French productions in both the EIT and RPT in order to explore their emerging control of the Determiner Phrase.

The stimuli for the EIT included 19 Determiner Phrases (Ns preceded by definite, indefinite articles in both singular and plural: *le, la l', les, un, une, des*). In all DP attempts on this test, the children collectively produced only 3 examples of a Determiner unaccompanied by a following N (i.e. 0.6% of 494 attempts). Their responses to the DPs within stimulus utterances were categorized as being of four types:

- Zero response (0+0)
- Bare Noun, either Placeholder or Accurate (0+Pl, 0+N)
- Placeholder Determiner with Placeholder or Accurate N (Pl+Pl, Pl+N)
- Accurate Determiner with Placeholder or Accurate N (Det+Pl, Det+N).

The results of this DP analysis are summarised in Table 4. This shows somewhat improving performance over time, so that by Delayed Post Test both elements of the DP are being attempted 88% of the time (though inaccuracy rates/ placeholder use remain fairly high). However, the production of a small proportion of bare Ns continues, at 7.1% of DP attempts at Delayed Post Test.

TABLE 4. (Re)production of DPs in Elicited Imitation Test over time

Test	No response	Bare nouns*	D*+N*
Mid test			
N	49	48	388
%	10.0%	9.8%	80.0%
Post test			
N	40	38	412
%	8.1%	7.7%	84.1%
Delayed post test			
N	24	35	434
%	4.9%	7.1%	88.0%

\*Includes placeholders

TABLE 5. Production of bare Ns and DPs in role play test (Year 3 Post Test)

	All Ns types	All Ns tokens	Bare N tokens	Bare N + Adj tokens	Det + N (+Adj) tokens
Mean (per child)	10.38	14.54	7.88	.23	6.62
S.D.	5.01	10.01	6.69	.51	4.4
% of all Ns (tokens)	n.a.	100.00	52.65	1.59	45.77

Table 5 presents information on the production of DPs in the RPT (Year 3 Post Test only). Children are producing a mean of 10.38 Ns (types), though with substantial variation between individuals (SD = 5.01). Just over half of N tokens are bare Ns, often produced as one-word utterances, resembling the very early production of determinerless Ns by French L1 children to name objects (Prévost, 2009, p. 251). However, 45% of N tokens are produced within a DP; some examples can be seen above in Figure 2, and a few further examples of participant utterances with/ without a DP are given below.

Example utterances with bare N

*Jacques a dit Ø “pieds”* [Jacques has said Ø “feet”]

Example utterances with DP

*un lapin rose* [a pink rabbit]  
*deux sœurs* [two sisters]

*j'aime Ø rouge* [I like Ø red]

*Jacques a dit "les pieds"* [Jacques has said "the feet"]

Overall, taking together the findings for lexis, formulaic utterances, Inflection Phrases and Determiner Phrases, we can see that after 38 hours' instruction, these children were building receptive vocabulary and making progress with learning and using a range of high-frequency communicative "chunks" (i.e. formulaic language). However verbs/verb inflections had not yet been isolated from surrounding chunks, and were not yet used productively beyond these. On the other hand, individual nouns were being isolated, and used at times as bare Ns, while also appearing in productive Determiner phrases; this was the first indication of emergent control of a particular domain of French morphosyntax (Myles & Mitchell, 2017). The study thus provides important evidence on the kind of linguistic proficiency which primary school learners can be expected to develop, in the course of a year's instruction at the rate of one lesson per week.

### 3.4 Classroom engagement and its relation with learning success

In this final section, we address differences in FL learning success within the Year 3 group. Previous researchers have attributed such differences among early learners to factors such as L1 literacy and working memory (Murphy, 2014). We have reported elsewhere that these factors also play an important role for our Y3 participants; Mitchell (2017) found significant correlations between L1 literacy scores awarded by the school, scores on the NWR test of working memory, and scores on the EIT Mid test and the RVT (Post test and Delayed Post test). However, it is known that at this age, working memory is still actively developing, with quite wide variations between individuals; in turn, working memory is connected with the development of L1 literacy (Siegal & Ryan, 1989). It is therefore reasonable to reject deterministic predictions of FL learning success based on such measures, and we were also interested in the likely impact of L2 motivation and classroom engagement on children's learning success.

Here we focus on classroom engagement in particular, given how little it has been studied in early language learning despite its clear relationship with motivation and self efficacy (Guz & Tetiurka, 2016b). We pay attention to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004).

To study classroom engagement, because of the intensity of video analysis required, we adopted a case study approach. Six children were identified with different profiles in terms of their age, L1 literacy scores, and French attainment as measured by EIT and RVT. The profiles of the six children are summarized in Table 6. (All names are pseudonyms.) It can be seen that the two youngest children (Xavier and Faustine) had the lowest L1 literacy levels and NWR scores, while the two highest performers on the French EIT (Bruno and Roseline) had high L1 literacy and NWR scores. Xavier had the lowest scores on both French measures, as his literacy and NWR scores might predict. However, Faustine outperformed expectations deriving from her general school performance, achieving consistently better than both Maxence and Xavier on the French measures. The classroom behaviours of all six children were therefore examined to explore the possible contribution of engagement to the observed learning outcomes.

TABLE 6. Six case study children

	<b>Bruno (m)</b>	<b>Maxence (m)</b>	<b>Roseline (f)</b>	<b>Capucine (f)</b>	<b>Xavier (m)</b>	<b>Faustine (f)</b>
Born	Sept 2001	Nov 2001	Feb 2002	Feb 2002	May 2002	Aug 2002
L1 literacy level (school scale 0-9)	8	6	9	8	3	2
NWR test score (max. 28)	24	15	20	18	6	9
French receptive vocabulary scores: MT/PT/DPT (max. 50)	31/40/33	25/18/20	29/34/32	24/33/36	20/14/13	31/25/27

Elicited imitation mean score (max. 465)	391	262	349	289	244	282
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### 3.4.1 Behavioural engagement: quantitative analysis

As described earlier, each of the six participants was tracked through a subset of 5 lesson videos and their classroom nonverbal behaviours were coded during whole class activities, using the coding scheme presented in Figure 3 within ELAN. While the individual children were not always visible to the camera, the behaviour of each child was coded for a minimum of 20 minutes per 60-minute lesson. Figures 7 and 8 present the resulting quantitative findings.

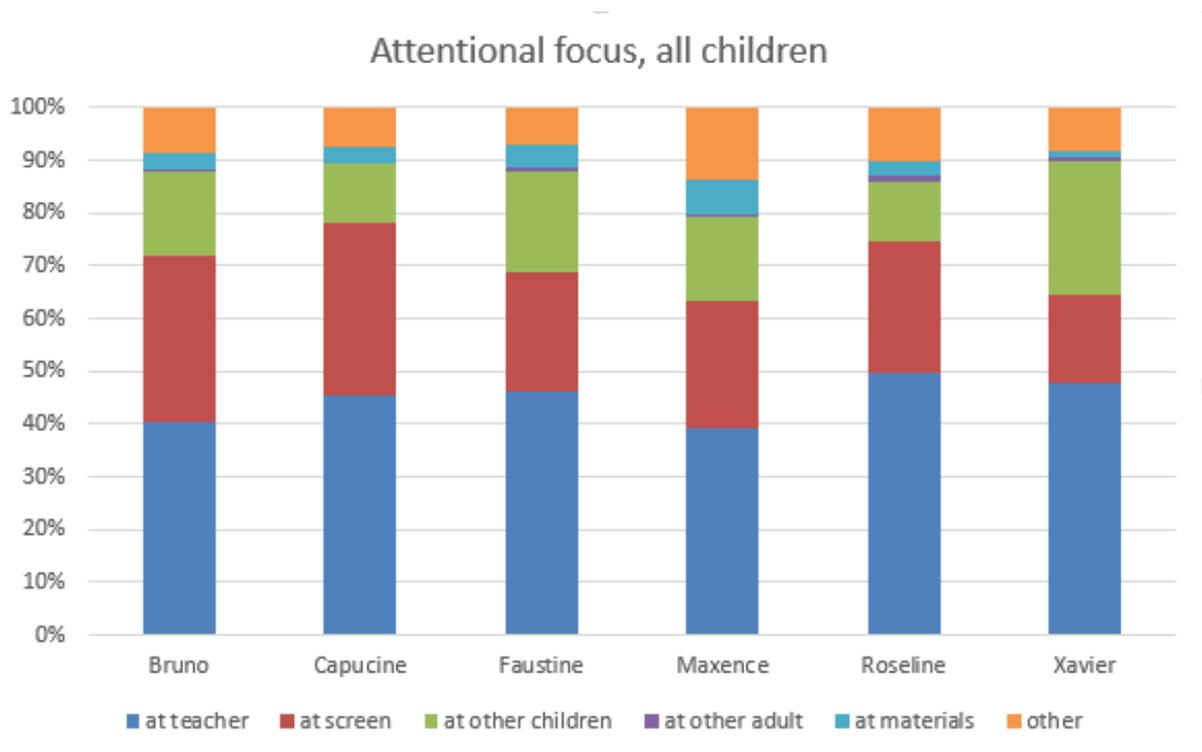


FIGURE 7. Direction of gaze/ attentional focus, case study children

Figure 7 shows the distribution of children’s gaze/ attentional focus. It can be seen that all six children were focused on the teacher or the classroom whiteboard for the majority of time. Some of the time spent watching other children was also a function of learning tasks (such as games or competitions), though some of it was “off task” behaviour; time coded as “other” was the most reliable indication of a child’s being off task. It can be seen that the four highest achievers (Bruno, Roseline, Capucine, Faustine) also spend the highest proportion of observed time during “whole class” activities focused on the teacher/ the screen, i.e. attending behaviourally to the main French input sources (approx. 70% or more). The two lowest achievers (Xavier and Maxence) have the lowest orientation to these sources, Xavier because of the amount of time he spends attending to other children (c25%) and Maxence because of time spent with undirected “other” attention (c15%). It seems highly likely that children’s ability to sustain attention to French input sources is related to their learning.

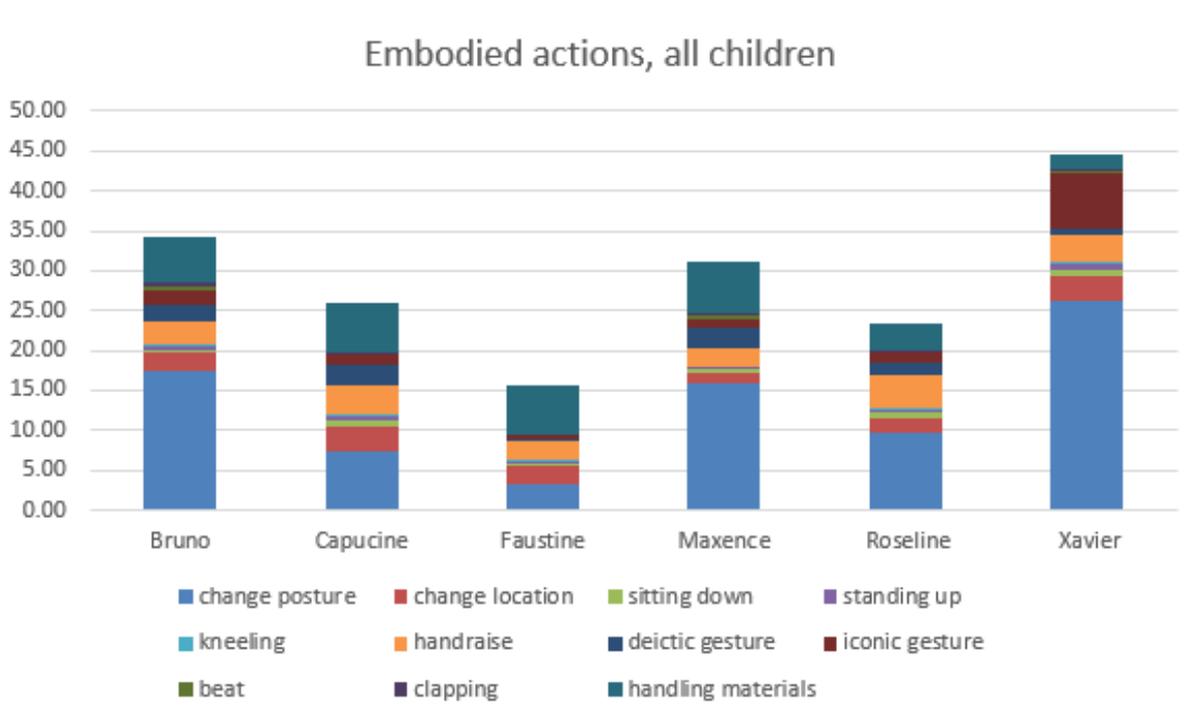


FIGURE 8. Proportion of time using embodied actions, case study

Figure 8 shows the proportion of observed time when each child was engaged in a range of embodied actions. Here an overall gender effect is apparent: the three boys

were making some form of bodily movement between 30-45% of observed time, while the girls were doing so between 15-25% of time. In particular, the boys were considerably more likely to be coded as “changing posture” than the three girls. (Faustine kept a strikingly still posture throughout, changing posture for less than 5% of observed time.) This category includes self-touching behaviours (e.g. scratching nose), as well as shifting seating positions, crossing arms or legs etc, which probably indicate mild distraction (and could be interrupted by periods of stillness probably indicating heightened attention, e.g. to instructions for a new activity, or an appealing video). Most other actions (e.g. use of deictic or iconic gestures) were in response to teacher expectations and the requirements of activities such as games, songs or vocabulary learning. A proportion of new vocabulary (animal names, colours) was associated by the teacher with distinctive gestures, which she expected the children to use; Xavier made exceptionally frequent use of these, even when not asked to do so, whereas some of the high achievers (here Bruno, Roseline) made declining use of these gestures in later lessons, or executed them in minimalist ways. Faustine made limited use of gesture throughout, consonant with her overall bodily stillness. Overall, it seems that bodily restlessness up to quite a high level is not a barrier to learning (e.g. Bruno’s extent of “changing posture”); however Xavier’s restlessness level (including 25% “changing posture”) may have reached a point where it did become so.

#### 3.4.2 Emotional engagement

The quantitative data just presented (both gaze and actions) supports the view that the case study children were generally well engaged behaviourally in their French learning experience. To explore emotional and cognitive engagement, it is necessary to turn to a qualitative approach, seeking illustrative “critical incidents” in the observations of each individual. A range of relevant incidents is described in detail in Mitchell (2017), but can here be summarized only briefly.

Positive indications of emotional engagement included children’s general enthusiasm for classroom games (seen in e.g. Xavier’s and Faustine’s persistent and enthusiastic

bids to be selected for active roles). Roseline and Capucine in particular sought teacher attention and praise by regular volunteering in response to teacher questions, shown in their active handraising behaviour. Negative indications appeared e.g. when Maxence was given a “verbal warning” by his class teacher, for some action not captured on camera: this led to his effective disengagement from the lesson for around 10 minutes. It once happened that Xavier was called from the classroom, just after being “picked” for a game; returning when the game was over, he protested vigorously over the loss of his turn. Overall it seemed that here-and-now “fun”, and teacher approval, were important stimuli for emotional engagement.

### 3.4.3 Cognitive engagement

Unsurprisingly, cognitive engagement is viewed in the research literature as central to effective learning. It involves investment in the learning process, self-regulation, and consequently a degree of strategic behaviour or planfulness, beyond compliance with the immediate expectations and demands of the teacher. Within the video corpus, a small number of critical incidents were identified, which seemed to illustrate emerging self-regulation of this kind. For example, Lesson 16 was the children’s first meeting with their French teacher following the Easter break. She followed her usual morning routine, greeting each child briefly in turn. However, when she called on Capucine, a longer exchange took place, on Capucine’s initiative:

- \*TEAF: *Et Capucine?* [And Capucine ?]
- \*CAPF: *Bonjour.* [Good day]
- \*CAPE: Ehm wait I've got some more.
- \*CAPF: *Ehm bonjour, je m'appelle Capucine. j'ai huit ... j'ai huit ans.* [Ehm good day, I am called Capucine, I am eight ... I am eight years old]
- \*TEAF: *Huit ans.* [Eight years old]
- \*CAPF: *Huit ans. J'ai un cochon d'inde.* [Eight years old. I have a guinea pig]
- \*TEAF: *Oh j'ai un cochon d'inde.* [Oh I have a guinea pig]
- \*TEAE: Do you know I was gonna give you a sticker anyway for sitting the smartest bestest person in the room. But then you need another one for speaking fantastic French.

Here it seems that while waiting her turn to greet the teacher, Capucine had planned and rehearsed a sequence of utterances, showing she could recall and re-use the French

learned in the previous term (and of course earning teacher approval at the same time). In contrast, in a similar repetitive episode in Lesson 30, Maxence showed clear failure to make use of available “planning time”. Maxence had been selected as one of four children who must guess the foods (plastic toys) being manipulated by others. If they succeeded, they would win the toy, as seen in the extract below:

- \*TEAF: [to 4 children including Maxence] *Levez-vous*. [Stand up]
- \*TEAE: ready? ok we'll start with Amandine.
- \*CHIF: *Erm je vou-* . [Erm I'd li-]
- \*TEAF: *Je voudrais*. [I'd like]
- \*CHIF: *Je voudrais glace*. [I'd like icecream]
- \*TEAF: *Une glace ? non. Daniel*. [An icecream? no. Daniel]
- \*CHIF: *Je voudrais (.) un maïs*. [I'd like a corn]
- \*TEAF: *Du maïs? Titouan du maïs?* [Some corn ? Titouan some corn?]
- \*CHIE: Yeah.
- \*TEAF: *Oui changez*. [Yes swap over]
- \*TEAE: *Maxence (.) ooh (.) je voudrais (.)*. [Maxence (.) ooh (.) I'd like (.)]
- \*TEAE: Five seconds (.) too slow.
- \*TEAF: *Assieds-toi*. [Sit down]

In the video, Maxence can be seen standing smiling and relaxed, and watching the others in the game; but when it came to his turn, it was clear he had not attended to/ retrieved/ rehearsed the French phrase *je voudrais* [I'd like], required to make the expected formulaic request. Even teacher prompting and extra time could not make up for this lack of self-regulation.

Cognitive engagement/ self-regulation could also occasionally be expressed nonverbally. For example, in Lesson 23, the teacher was giving instructions in English for a listening comprehension task; seated in groups, the children were to show comprehension by drawing objects the teacher would describe in French. In completing her instructions, the teacher said:

- \*TEAE: What about if I said “*un poisson violet*”, “*un poisson violet*”? [a purple fish]
- \*TEAE: Jules?
- \*CHIE: A fish that's purple.
- \*TEAE: A purple fish. see I might try and trick you by telling you things that you're not expecting, ok? so you need to listen.

At this moment Faustine can be observed on video, checking privately through the box of coloured pencils on her group table and selecting a purple one, i.e. ensuring she would be ready for any similar “trick” instructions.

Similar incidents involving private planning/ rehearsal were noted for Bruno and Roseline. However, for Maxence and Xavier, no such instances of planning/ foresight were seen.

Overall, this case study analysis shows that all participants including the less successful learners demonstrated reasonably high levels of emotional response and behavioural engagement in their lessons (e.g. they joined enthusiastically in “fun” activities, they sought teacher praise). However, it was only the more successful learners who showed positive evidence of cognitive engagement, and a more proactive approach to learning activities. Most striking is the case of Faustine, who seemed able to compensate to some extent for her young age, her low L1 literacy level and her low working memory score, through general engagement in French lessons including cognitive engagement. Xavier had a similar starting profile to Faustine, but despite high emotional engagement, seemed not to plan or regulate his learning, and thus did not compensate in the same way. Maxence, with an apparently stronger profile than either Faustine or Xavier, was the least engaged of the six, and this seems the most straightforward explanation for his limited progress in French.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

This paper has reviewed the recent history of FL instruction in UK schools, and illustrated current policy with a short account of a recent observational study of primary French. The longitudinal study of a beginner Year 3 group confirms that an oracy-led teaching approach, with varied classroom activities, was found enjoyable and behaviourally engaging by most children in middle childhood. The group also made measurable progress in their first experience of French, learning some high-frequency vocabulary and formulaic expressions. There are signs of emergent morphosyntax in a limited domain (the Determiner Phrase). However, these limited learning outcomes

from the equivalent of one year's study also suggest that an ongoing time allowance of 38 hours per school year will make for slow progress overall, making it challenging to achieve current National Curriculum objectives, even when instruction is consistent and of good professional quality. Slow progress in turn potentially puts at risk children's motivation, their sense of self-efficacy and thus the "possibility of future progress" (Graham et al, 2016, p. 682). It also increases the possibility that secondary school teachers will ignore the limited and variable amount learned in the primary school and treat Year 7 students as complete beginners, with additional potential threats to self-efficacy and sense of progression.

The other main lesson from the empirical study has to do with the quality of learner engagement. Wingate (2016) has argued that the concern of FL teachers in English secondary schools with problematic learner motivation, leads them to over-emphasise short term "fun" when planning lessons. There is a consensus among primary FL teachers that lessons should be enjoyable (Cable et al., 2010), and the teacher in our study rightly shared this view. However, our case study work suggests that behavioural and emotional engagement are not by themselves sufficient to promote successful classroom learning, and that it is necessary even for young children to take some responsibility for managing their own learning from moment to moment, if they are to succeed. That is, lesson planning needs to include time for reflection on learning goals, and on the development of verbal and nonverbal tactics for self regulation within the classroom. Given the small time allowance and slow rate of actual FL progression in the primary languages classroom, sustaining learners' resilience, sense of self efficacy and positive image of the L2 self are major challenges. However, it is clear that optimising cognitive engagement in languages, as in other subject areas, will help face these challenges and bring longer term benefits for FL learning.

The overall conclusion from this paper is therefore a somewhat paradoxical one. Where classroom hours for hearing and practising the target FL are scarce, progress in FL learning will be very gradual, and it is tempting to maximise the proportion of available time spent in direct learning activities, familiarising children with target language sounds, building vocabulary and formulaic competence, and embarking to a limited extent on the development of productive morphosyntactic knowledge. However, it is

also clear that if Anglophone children are to sustain their interest in FL learning and sense of self efficacy over the longer term, active attention needs to be paid from the very beginning to the development of FL cognitive engagement i.e. learning how to learn. This means that curriculum time must be given regularly to development of the learning strategies which children can operate themselves through short term goal setting and self regulation. In light of the motivational issues reviewed at the start of this paper, it also seems likely that a focus on developing short term cognitive engagement in the learning of languages other than English will not be effective, unless it is systematically supported by age-appropriate reflection in the classroom on the longer term goals and benefits of FL learning. Empirical research will be needed to establish the most effective means to develop such understandings at different ages, and the optimal balance of time distribution between these, and direct FL input and practice. This will take FL pedagogy in a somewhat different direction from the outcomes-focused intentions of the current National Curriculum in England, but seems to offer the best chance to lay a strong foundation for the maintenance of “languages for all” in education, including for reluctant Anglophones and more generally for learners of languages other than English..

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