Foreign Language Learning in Primary School

Key Conclusions

1. Children in FLL classes made no additional progress in English language compared to children in other classes in the trial. The 1 padlock security rating means we have very low confidence that there was no difference and that this was due to FLL and not affected by other factors.

2. Children in FLL classes who had ever been eligible for free school meals made 2 months’ fewer progress compared to other ever-eligible children. However, we have very low confidence that this result was not affected by other factors.

3. There was a lot of variation in how the intervention was implemented. Not all teachers delivered the linked English literacy activity and some schools delivered fewer weeks of FLL than prescribed because of staffing or timetabling issues.

What is the impact?

This study investigated whether teaching Year 3 and 4 primary school children for one hour a week using an 18-week curriculum of French language and linked English literacy would have an impact on their English language attainment (as measured through testing of grammar, punctuation, and vocabulary). This randomised controlled trial found no evidence of such an effect. Additionally, no effect was found for: boys, girls, children who had ever been eligible for FSM, children with English as their main language, or children with another language as their first language.

The results of this evaluation differ from those of two large-scale retrospective cohort studies with matched intervention and control groups that showed an impact of foreign language learning on English language attainment in the United States (Rafferty, 1986; Taylor-Ward and LaFayette, 2010). This variation may be a result of the shorter length and reduced intensity of this intervention compared to those studied in the US (18 weeks/60 minutes per week vs. one to three years/minimum 150 minutes per week). Additionally, this evaluation tested a particular type of foreign language teaching (which was combined with some linked English literacy activities) against a control group where there was often some foreign language teaching being undertaken. This type of comparison was different from those US studies where the control group had no such foreign language teaching.

Outcome/ Group | Effect size | Estimated months' progress | EEF security rating | Type of Trial | EEF cost rating
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English Language | 0.00 (-0.08 to 0.09) | 0 months | 1 | Efficacy | £ £ £ £ £
English Language FSM pupils | -0.11 (-0.23 to 0.02) | -2 months | n/a | Efficacy | £ £ £ £ £

How secure is the finding?

The security rating of the trial indicates how confident we can be that the additional progress experienced by the children in the trial was due to FLL and not to any other factors. This trial was an efficacy trial, which tested whether the intervention can work under ideal or developer-led conditions. These findings have very low security. The study was a large cluster randomised controlled trial with an appropriate analysis plan. However, there was high attrition: more than 50% of the pupils who started the trial were not included in the final analysis, due to a
large number of schools dropping out and problems with the testing. Attrition affects the security rating because it increases the chance of systematic differences between the control group and comparison group at analysis. The high attrition rate resulted in the loss of five padlocks. A small upward adjustment was made, because the analysed groups appeared to be similar in terms of gender balance, FSM eligibility, and prior attainment, despite the high attrition. Only a small adjustment was considered appropriate however, because there was also some variability of implementation, and the primary outcome of vocabulary was not measured.

How much does it cost?

Assuming a teacher attends the training and then delivers the intervention to one class of 30 pupils each year, the cost per pupil is £11.53 per year over three years or £1037 in total. Schools should add to this the cost of providing cover for each teacher for three one-day training courses. (This cost is not included in the estimate because of the different ways in which schools manage teacher cover.)

EEF summary

The Foreign Language Learning French curriculum builds on existing evidence that learning a foreign language can help to develop general literacy skills, and is specifically designed to improve pupils’ English literacy skills as well as their French. From 2014 all primary schools in England have been required to teach pupils a foreign language. EEF funded this evaluation to assess whether FFL would be a particularly effective way to use the new foreign language requirement to also deliver improvements in English.

The study provides no evidence that FFL had a positive impact on English outcomes over and above the impact of normal foreign language provision. However, the results have very low security because of problems collecting test data for all of the participating schools.

EEF has no plans for a further trial of FLL, but will continue to consider other projects which aim to improve literacy skills in English through innovative foreign language provision.