

CAN ALL CHILDREN BENEFIT FROM FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING?

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At the end of the national five-year project in England and Wales, the Centre for Information on Language Teaching and Research (CILT) produced for the National Curriculum Council a document which listed the three main benefits as linguistic development, social development and cultural awareness. Other studies, and the experiences of schools themselves, have confirmed and expanded on these findings.

Language development

According to almost all teachers who have worked with learners in special schools and units, foreign language learning, far from interfering with language development as was once thought, stimulates its development, and gains can be detected right across the curriculum. Teachers admit that there can sometimes be confusion, when a child offers a foreign word or spelling in place of English, but they point out that all learners of all abilities do that sometimes. It is part of the learning experience. Sorting out the confusion gives the teacher opportunities to clarify points not just about the target language but about the source language as well.

Conceptual development

Hand in hand with linguistic development goes understanding of concepts. Going back to the basics of language learning gives the student an opportunity to revisit concepts which, for one reason or another, may have been missed or poorly understood up to that point. The opportunity to practise basic skills in another language makes them seem more adult and sophisticated and therefore more acceptable to maturing young people who may otherwise resent being made to work on what they see as 'babyish' material.

Speech development

Articulation can be practised just as well through the medium of a foreign language as in the mother tongue. Close listening, imitation and repetition which can seem boring or demeaning in the mother tongue become more attractive in the foreign language where students have the sense of participating in something new and exciting, and where everyone expects to experience difficulty with pronunciation.

Social development

Interaction with others is an essential part of communication. Working with others in paired speaking tasks or games in the foreign language provides opportunities to practise turn-taking and other social skills in a new environment. Students are often less self-conscious about shaking hands and greeting someone formally, for example, than they would be if asked to do the same thing in English. It is quite common for people to assume a new identity when speaking a foreign language, and the learning situation enables young people to experiment with personality and behaviour patterns in an unobtrusive way.

Cultural awareness

The experiences associated with learning about other countries can add an element of the exotic to limited lives. Children with special educational needs are more likely than most children to experience restrictions on their movements and interactions with other people. Learning about other peoples, their language and their way of life, whether in the classroom or by travelling abroad, can be an illuminating experience for some youngsters whose horizons have previously been limited by a tendency on the part of those caring for them to focus on the fulfilment of their immediate needs. Becoming aware that life is different in other countries leads to a realisation that things *can* be different, that things *can* change.

Predictable benefits

Some benefits, such as those already cited, are predictable, and are common to most students. Of these, some will accrue automatically, through the natural processes of language learning; others will be achieved only if teaching is explicitly designed with the desired targets in mind and if the achievement of those targets is monitored.

Unpredictable benefits

Other benefits are unpredictable, though they can be life-enhancing for individual students. The children described in *Figure 1.2* [below] would have been immeasurably poorer if they had been denied the opportunity to participate. Perhaps it is this above all which justifies their inclusion: if we cannot predict what advantages certain children might gain from exposure to foreign language learning, neither can we predict what advantages they might lose if we deny them the chance even to try.

Figure 1.2:

Some of the benefits of MFL are predictable and common to most students, others are unpredictable but sometimes life-enhancing for individual children.

Mary has severe communication difficulties and is reluctant to speak, preferring to use her electronic LightWriter®. In French, however, she makes an effort to communicate in speech and is working for a Level One Module in French.

John, who has quite severe learning difficulties, is so delighted with his ability to speak French that the reward he chooses for success in other classes is the opportunity to do more French or to have the visiting French assistant's attention all to himself for five minutes.

Andrew has aphasia and experiences particular problems with mathematics. For some reason, he found he was able to do simple sums in German which he had been unable to do in his mathematics class. This has persuaded him that he *can* succeed and, whereas before he was quick to give up on tasks he found difficult, he has become more confident and resolute.

Amina, in the course of trying to explain why it was that she picked up French more quickly than other members of the class, revealed that she spoke Pakistani at home and English at school. She enjoyed teaching some phrases in Pakistani to the rest of the class. She had previously been ashamed that her family spoke differently.

Lisa has no speech and limited movement, which means that she can communicate only by pointing. She is picking up French very quickly and communicates with her teacher by pointing to relevant words and phrases on sheets which the teacher prepares for her. In this way she is able to do worksheets and join in role play, games and songs with the rest of the class. Experiments with a reconditioned assistive communication device programmed to 'speak' some words of French suggest that ICT may provide other ways for her to participate and to enjoy her new ability.

Ronald, who has learning difficulties, visited Denmark with his school and helped to host a return visit by Danish students. His self-confidence as well as his ability to communicate in Danish increased considerably. In the year he left school he travelled again to Denmark with a teacher, spent three months there after the teacher returned to the UK, and later returned home unaccompanied.

Flora has no hand control and difficult speech. She achieved certification in French by means of a 'verbal scribe', a classmate who could understand her speech and who repeated what she said, whether right or wrong. Flora is still so keen on French that she chooses to continue coming to the classes even though she is now in the Post-16 Unit.

Mike has a good accent and seems able to remember a considerable amount of French, which surprises the teachers who are familiar with his usual memory problems. He spent some time at the Peto institute when he was younger and, without realising it, picked up some Hungarian. He has had great fun teaching his French teacher and classmates to count in Hungarian.

Fraser has been transferred from mainstream to special school on account of behavioural difficulties. He was reluctant to join in the foreign language learning at first, because it was one of the subjects he had not enjoyed. He was surprised to discover, not only that he can do the work, but that he actually enjoys it.

Carl, who could not be counted on to say all the days of the week in English, despite many attempts, has learned to do so in the course of keeping a wall calendar in French and learning to sing a French song about the days of the week.

Lucy, a student who had failed to learn how to tell the time in English, found she was able to do it in French and subsequently mastered the skill in her mother tongue.

Julie, a student with a loud and aggressive way of speaking developed a beautifully modulated French accent.

Ben, a deaf boy who is studying German, learned about English word order when his German teacher demonstrated the difference between English and German word order on the blackboard. It had never been explained to him in that way before. His written English, in particular, has improved.

Chang's parents do not speak English and he was ashamed of this. He disguised his own difficulties by avoiding communication and had become a bit of a loner. He was surprised and pleased to find how quickly he was able to learn his third language, Spanish. Helping his determinedly monolingual peers enabled him to gain their esteem, his own self-esteem rose and he is beginning to make good progress in all his subjects.

Joe was diagnosed as dyslexic a number of years ago and his mother wanted him to be withdrawn from French lessons on the grounds that "he can't even read and write his own language properly". Joe was dismayed. This was the only subject in which he was just as good as everyone else. He eventually persuaded his mother to let him continue.

Natasha's father is a soldier. She has lived in a number of different countries and in some of them she attended local schools. Despite her learning difficulties she has picked up an extensive vocabulary in several languages.

David consistently failed Maths and English exams, so his teachers couldn't understand how he managed to do so well in French and German. David can't account for it either. He is now studying both languages as a mature student at university. He still hasn't passed English or Maths.

Sally is (was) an elective mute, refusing to speak to adults, though she would chatter away to her friends when no adults were listening. Whatever psychological reasons inhibited her willingness to speak English to adults proved not to apply to French.

Tina and her classmates who have autistic spectrum disorders have difficulty in making eye contact and paired speaking exercises were rarely successful. The French teacher found that students responded well to using hand puppets to speak on their behalf and this technique has now been adopted for other subjects.

Sean has no voice at all. He uses various other means of communication and attends his local school, but has been very aware of the fact that he communicates differently from everyone else. He was quite surprised, and consoled, to find out that there are millions of people in the world who communicate differently from his friends.

Richard's communication impairment made it difficult for him to track text across a page, but his teachers noticed that he had no difficulty reading lists of vocabulary in German and English. When they experimented with setting text for him in columns, his reading level improved markedly as did his work in other subjects.

Sam and his friends from a unit for students with hearing impairments travelled to Germany on a school exchange along with their mainstream peers. Hearing students quickly used up their limited store of German phrases and found it difficult to communicate with their German counterparts. The deaf children from both schools found that their national sign languages had enough in common for meaning to be negotiated relatively easily. They quickly made friends, with whom some of them still communicate.

Charlotte's French course required her to be tested on her ability to hold a simple telephone conversation in French. Charlotte is a wheelchair user and also quite deaf; she had never made a telecommunication without an adult intermediary. Meeting the exam board requirements led to her school acquiring a text phone. Charlotte can now phone her parents and friends by herself and is learning to use fax and E-mail .

Maria goes to a school for children with profound and complex needs where it was customary for background music to be played in the canteen. During the course of a European theme week staff decided to play music from a different country each day. Austrian popular brass band music caught the children's attention, as did the French accordion. Spanish Flamenco created such a positive physical reaction that staff decided it was unsuitable for use in the canteen, but it was thereafter incorporated into the music therapy programme.