

Modern Foreign Language Education for learners with Additional Support Needs in Scotland

Abstract

The face of Modern Foreign Language education (MFL) in Scotland is changing. A major shift was marked by the Scottish Government's policy, 'Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach' (2012a), setting out the aspiration that all students up to the end of third level education in Scottish schools will have the opportunity to learn not one but two languages, in addition to their mother tongue. Over the last twenty years there has been, concurrently, an undertaking by the Scottish government, in a series of policy documents, committing to provision that will ensure that students with additional support needs (ASN) receive equality of access to a broad and balanced education. This paper draws upon policy documents and published research in the area to review the extent to which the vision of language learning of all has been made available to students with ASN, and the documented benefits associated with MFL education for those with ASN. Drawing upon case studies of inclusive MFL pedagogies, it identifies successful strategies that can be deployed by teachers. It then considers some of the mechanisms by which the current gaps in provision have arisen and proposes possible remedial steps, drawing on both an analysis of policy and case studies of effective practice. (206 words)

Keywords: Additional Support Needs, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), Scotland, curriculum

Introduction

This article focuses on students in Scotland with additional support needs (ASN) for whom, by virtue of their age, MFL education is mandatory, but who are frequently not receiving their curricular entitlement. It responds to previous authors' demands to understand more clearly the extent of equality of access to MFL education (Stevens and Marsh, 2005; Wight, 2015). The review considers the policy landscape around MFL provision and the apparent mismatch between aspiration and practice. The argument will be made that, with curricular and methodological accommodations, a full range of learners with very diverse needs, can meaningfully learn MFL in both

specialist and mainstream settings. In the light of this evidence, it will be argued that equality of access to the curriculum as a whole is an area meriting urgent research and strategic response, if students with ASN are to receive their entitlement to a broad and balanced education and the benefits associated with it.

The current situation in Scotland of MFL learning and inclusive education

In Scotland, the national response to the expression of an international commitment to full participation in society by all, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), was the Additional Support for Learning (ASL) Act (2004). The legislative framework provided by the ASL act (2004) and its revised (2009) version applies to the education of all children with additional support needs in Scotland. In addition, notions of equality and entitlement are further embedded in seminal pieces of legislation such as, 'Getting it Right for Every Child' (2006), the 'Equality Act' (2010) and the 'Children and Young People (Scotland) Act' (2014). However, there remains concern that the high aspirations of this legislation are not being fulfilled across the whole curriculum.

In parallel with the raft of legislation promoting inclusive education, a new approach to the learning of modern foreign languages (MFL) was concurrently introduced. In 2012, the Scottish Government brought out a policy entitled 'Language Learning in Scotland: A 1+2 Approach', which detailed a new approach to learning additional languages in Scotland. Students were to be entitled to MFL education in two languages from the early years of primary schooling to the end of their broad general education, three years into their secondary education. The '1+2' approach has raised the profile of MFL education in Scotland, and resulted in public acknowledgement of the importance of language learning. Although the needs of pupils with ASN are not explicitly affirmed, some authors maintain that the focus on MFL in the primary stage is especially beneficial to ASN learners. Primary provision is described as an 'enabler' for language education in secondary schools and is helpful in that it makes available to secondary staff knowledge of a very wide range of differentiated teaching strategies and associated resources (Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019; Wilson, 2014). There is thus a mixed picture, with general support for MFL education but, despite the chronological parallel of the development in languages education and the promotion of inclusive education, there has been no explicit policy consideration of the accessible language learning for ASN students.

By contrast, England's MFL teacher educators and student teachers were given additional guidance on MFL teaching targeted by the Teacher Development Agency's 2009 publication, 'Including students with SEN and/ or disabilities in secondary modern languages'. This followed the earlier publication of 'Languages for all, languages for life' (Department for Education and Skills), as a result of which modern foreign language learning was made available to a far greater proportion of the pupil population. The welcome focus of the TDA publication appears to have been dissipated since, by performativity pressures which have placed a heavy focus on attainment in 'core' subjects, and the attendant disapplication of pupils from other National Curriculum areas, including the requirement to learn one foreign language ((Ayres-Bennett and Carruthers, 2019; Wilson, 2014). The focus of language education in Wales and Northern Ireland (NI) is different again, Their foreign languages education has been shaped, like Scotland, by a desire to conserve indigenous languages, respectively Welsh, Irish Gaelic and Ulster-Scots. However, in Wales Welsh has been privileged, and one other language is offered in addition, whilst NI has never had a foreign languages programme for primary learners (Collen, 2019; Hunt, Barnes, Powell, Lindsay and Muijs, 2005). Thus, the Scottish modern languages policy is distinguished both by the breadth of languages considered and the age range encompassed.

Despite this supportive policy environment, the failure to co-ordinate the MFL and inclusion initiatives has perpetuated the paucity of MFL provision in Scottish specialist provision, commonly special schools, recorded by different researchers. It was estimated that only 50% of ASN learners were being offered the opportunity to study MFL (European Commission, 2005; McColl, 2005; Stevens and Marsh, 2005). This finding is in contravention of the directive of the same European Commission report (2005) that no young person should be denied access to the learning of another language because others consider it to be unsuitable for them. Beyond the clear assertion that MFL was very much part of the expectation of participation of ASN learners in the whole curriculum, the European Commission's report offered practical guidance on how MFL education could be made more accessible to more learners with special needs. Despite this, a later report by the European and External Relations Committee on foreign language learning in primary schools (2013) found that students

with ASN had been insufficiently considered during the planning and implementation of the 1+2 initiative. There is not only a lack of provision, but a near absence of literature documenting this absence, noted previously by Abrams (2008), who described it as 'extremely limited', pointing to the fact that this remains an unrecognised issue on provision. The absence of consideration of the full range of learners in most evaluations of the impact of MFL learning, means that it is impossible to know accurately whether the documented benefits (SCILT, 2011), are incurred by all youngsters.

Inclusion and entitlement in the Scottish context

In a critical review of research and policy relating to disabled children, Stalker and Moscardini (2012) argued that despite Scotland's commitment to inclusion, it is well known that children with disabilities do not always receive the same opportunities to participate in all areas of the curriculum as their peers. Woolfson, Grant and Campbell's (2007) study found that, although students with ASN were generally satisfied with access to information that they were given, this did not apply to information relating to the curriculum. The situation in Scotland demonstrates the process whereby, despite policy drivers for inclusion, a lack of curriculum-specific guidance on pedagogic approaches translates into the absence of some groups of learners from certain subjects, including, but far from limited to, MFL.

In Scotland, *'Every child and young person is entitled to receive a broad general education'* (Scottish Government, 2008:14). This entitlement explicitly includes the learning of foreign languages (Scottish Government, 2012a). Although inequalities in access are certainly considered with respect to MFL, for example, the 'Language: A 1+2 approach' (Scottish Government, 2012a) there is a section that explicitly considers equality. However, this section focuses solely on the exclusionary impact of social deprivation, whilst many other causes are omitted all together, including disability. In this way a document that has spearheaded language teaching provision appears not to have considered even the possibility of learners with disabilities engaging in MFL education. The impact of the omission is mirrored in the absence of provision. For instance, Wight (2015) states that students with disabilities are indeed more likely to be

excluded from MFL lessons than other students in many Anglophonic countries, including Scotland. Wight (2015) notes that the idea persists that language learning is based on 'ability' or perceived intelligence, and that current assessments of proficiency contribute to the perpetuation of the notion that some students should be excluded from MFL without ever having a chance to participate. This finding echoes those of Moscardini and Stalker (2012), who argue that attitudinal barriers are the major factor precluding learners from full curricular access, in direct contrast to the European Commission's forcible assertion that if we deny any student the experience of MFL learning because of our low expectations, then we are effectively denying them an aspect of European citizenship. For a nation with strong pro-European leanings (Scotland in Europe website), the inconsistency between this stance and the gaps in curricular provision in MFL seem hard to reconcile.

The current fundamental mismatch of curriculum provision and policy aspiration is far wider than simply the absence of timetabled subjects, however. When we consider the wider gains associated with the study of MFL, it seems that we are depriving students, who already face a number of additional challenges in achieving full participation in education and society, from a number of benefits that might enhance inclusion. These include transformative gains in 'enhanced mental flexibility' and 'enhanced learning ability' (Marsh and Hill, 2009: 8). The same authors state that these benefits contribute to globally enhanced academic achievement, most especially in literacy which is a 'gatekeeper' ability, especially for those at risk of marginalisation (Trudell, 2012). Wight (2015) highlights the positive social differences associated with language learning in comparison to other curricular subjects. These include the opportunity to become more aware of one's own language and culture and compare it with that of other countries. Wight (ibid) further argues that learners who experience increased opportunities to critically consider the world that they live in will become more accepting of others. Such attitudinal shifts would appear to be key to facilitating full twenty-first citizenship for young people.

The underpinning and undermining of anti-inclusive practice in MFL

Stalker and Moscardini argue that curriculum deprivation is strongly linked to teachers' limited professional knowledge of appropriate pedagogy in specific subject areas when working with students with ASN. This pattern has been documented in a range of

subjects including MFL (McColl, 2005), Music (Moscardini, Barron and Wilson, 2012) and Science (Essex, 2018, Essex, Alexiadou and Zwozdiak-Myers, 2019), as well as MFL. A closely related factor is teacher expectation. A seminal piece of work by McColl (2005) captured the way in which the attitudes and expectations of adults led to decisions about which students to include in MFL lessons.

A second barrier to schools offering every student their entitlement to MFL is the notion of utility. Anglophonic cultures commonly doubt the value of MFL study, holding a culturally perpetuated notion that 'everyone abroad speaks English anyway'. This expectation is compounded by the high status commonly afforded to English, as opposed to other modern languages. The Scottish Government (2012a) report noted that much work was still needed to persuade people in Scotland that learning additional languages is worthwhile. Such attitudes can mandate against the inclusion of MFL in an increasingly crowded curriculum (SCILT, 2011).

The frequently ambivalent attitude to MFL learning for the general population is compounded by attitudes to students with learning difficulties. A history of successful engagement with MFL education has come to mean that MFL study is more suited to academically able students (SCILT, 2011). Associated with this is a widespread misconception that MFL learning is just too difficult for those with ASN (Edgin, Kumon, Spano and Nadel, 2011; Wight, 2015).

The possibility of finding pedagogic approaches that would fulfil the entitlements of both populations is notably absent from literature, despite much rhetoric about inclusion. Negative attitudes towards inclusive MFL education are most clearly apparent in the post-secondary education context but undoubtedly exist in schools too, where arguments such as, 'It will be too much for him' or, 'He already has enough trouble with English!' are too often heard (Personal observation). Skinner and Smith (2011) record that such students are often offered exemptions to MFL, or alternative courses. They argue that the teachers' attitudes, which they term 'antiquated', are based on case studies from the 1980s and 90s suggesting that students with language difficulties would find it unduly hard to master an additional language. This expectation is based on a notion of a fixed capacity in learners, whereby such study would 'overload' the cognitive resources of learners who were already struggling. Wight

(2015) roundly condemns the reasons given for exclusion from languages lessons, noting that they lack the support of any theoretical basis or empirical data.

Whilst some teachers understood that curricular exclusion does not fulfil the expectations of full inclusion and entitlement, none of them felt that opening up curriculum choices was practicable. This tension is exemplified by the following quotation from a primary teacher,

No-one would wish to exclude any child from being part of this experience but at what cost to others when the problems are such that the learning environment is destroyed and everyone pays a price?

(General Teaching Council Scotland 2004:13)

These assumptions of unchangeable deficiencies do not sit well with the present currency of 'growth mind set' and similar (Hochanadel and Finamore, 2015). Empirical studies, such as those described below, provide further robust evidence to problematise earlier assumptions.

Various studies have evaluated the experiences of learners with learning difficulties. Some of these establish that there were no deleterious effects, contrary to the concerns about overload, such as Edgin et al.'s (2011) evaluation of students with Down Syndrome learning a foreign language; the author also noted social benefits associated with the lessons more than justified their participation. Wright cites Sparks, Philips and Javorsky (2002) argue that students with learning disabilities do not necessarily have any more difficulties in learning languages than their peers, a line that has subsequently been adopted by Scottish Government (2006, 2012b) and subsequently endorsed by SCILT (2011). The ways in which resources and methodologies might be adapted to meet the needs of different learners are illustrated a case study on of a Renfrewshire school (MacAskill, 2016; SCILT, 2015). Such exemplification of inclusive pedagogic approaches to MFL were intended to support teachers in making the subject truly inclusive. The limited shift in practice may be inferred to reflect the very deep-seated nature of teachers' negative expectations, coupled with a lack of confidence in the subject matter.

Some of the pre-conceptions about language learning that contribute

Are based on notions of it being based on the acquisition of vocabulary. However, language learning is so much more than that, being the means to achieve much broader learning outcomes such as the sharing of different cultures, promoting an awareness of others and appreciation of other people's lives. Not all students will necessarily become proficient or fluent in the additional language, however, the experience will afford them the chance to become engaged members of society who are,

'responsible global citizens who value diversity and who demonstrate tolerance, respect and understanding of other countries and cultures'

(SCILT, 2011: 6)

The implication of depriving some students of an important opportunity to achieve full citizenship on the basis of unfounded negative expectations are huge, and highly troubling.

A final, indirect consequence of teachers' negative expectations is that it can easily be communicated to students who, in turn, experience a loss of self-confidence. Many students already come to lessons with anxieties and these can interact with low expectations to impede attainment. Students with ASN benefit even more than their peers from working with a known (and trusted) teacher and a positive classroom environment. The former requirement raises questions about the staffing of MFL lessons in specialist provision, which are considered again later in this paper. Other evidence on potential stressors in lessons include anxiety about participation, according to a study by Soulis and Floridis (2010) which looked at the experiences of ASN students in mainstream settings. Skinner and Smith (2011) refine this further and state that learners with ASN are prone to experiencing anxiety specifically about speaking; they advocate making oral responses purely voluntary during the early stages of MFL learning and ensuring that there are ample opportunities to utilise previously mastered vocabulary when students are asked to speak. Additional support may be needed, included close monitoring for signs of anxiety in students, a slower pace of learning and more extensive test preparation.

Enacting inclusion in MFL: aspirations and mechanisms

As the previous discussion shows, MFL learning has a powerful capacity to give students meaningful social and societal engagement. This begs the question why, despite exemplar materials to help staff to make MFL learning fully accessible, so few schools are pursuing an inclusive curriculum for language learning that facilitates full inclusion of the sort described

Being included is so much more than being present in a classroom or during a lesson. It is taking part and having resources that allow you to participate effectively accessible to you. (MacAskill 2016: 4).

Part of the answer may lie with an already variable level of MFL subject teaching expertise and associated quality of learning (Scottish Government, 2012). The need to enhance the quality of MFL teaching for academically able means that languages specialists may be actively sought by mainstream schools, leaving them under-represented in specialist educational settings. This mechanism has previously been documented in science, another subject that, like MFL, is commonly thought to be most suited to academically able students (Essex, 2018).

The technical feasibility of meeting students' entitlement to MFL learning is not in doubt. Skinner and Smith (2011) state that, with accommodations, MFL teaching and learning can cater for ASN students without compromising the challenge of the subject matter. In the wakes of the 2+1 report (Scottish Government, 2012a), many more examples of good practice were shared, from both inclusive and specialist educational settings. These underline the multi-faceted benefits of MFL learning and the opportunities that much current thinking removes from ASN students. One such example came from a mainstream secondary school in Glasgow which had adopted a skills-based inter-disciplinary approach to MFL, using it with students who had low motivation and limited resilience. A project was undertaken on food, music, cafes and currency in a French language context. As a result of this novel approach to learning a MFL the students became more motivated, as well as developing skills in French language.

Another notable example of what can be achieved through MFL was demonstrated by a special school that was the winner of the 2015 Education Scotland Award for

languages was won by a special needs school. The school caters for students with complex physical, language and health needs aged 5-18 and teaches Spanish to its second level (equivalent to Key Stage 2), making use of innovative methodologies and inclusive pedagogies to make MFL accessible to all students (SCILT, 2015). Some students were able to achieve accredited qualifications in Spanish at National 1 and 2 levels. This engagement, and associated attainment, has been achieved by integrating Spanish language into the daily school processes and the culture of the school. In addition, whole school events are held, such as a Spanish café and a sensory theatre trip to Spain, in which all students are included. Technology such as interactive screens, communication devices and a digital sensory theatre are used to bring language learning to life for all students. What is notable in this instance is how it is the combination of positive staff attitudes and the use of appropriate pedagogic strategies that has made this transformative work possible. Both of these elements are potentially readily available to all school communities, if they choose to deploy them.

'The key to teaching and learning here is the methodology, particularly in terms of communication and visual prompts as well and sensory prompts too. You know methodology is so important to us and it's how we bring learning to life for our kids'

(SCILT, 2015:18)

This quotation illustrates how MFL teachers are able to bring the pedagogic insights that they have of the learners with whom they work, and which have been corroborated by external observers in various Anglophonic contexts (Skinner and Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2011 and 2016). Staff then use these to make traditionally elitist subjects accessible and, as importantly, engaging. The effective matching of pedagogy to learners' needs, as opposed to simply having them physically present as the lesson proceeds, is essential if students are not to feel excluded. Abrams (2008) suggests that teachers need to consider students' communicative abilities, rather than any unsubstantiated notion of 'ability', when planning lessons in MFL for ASN learners. There is a consensus that multi-sensory experience is effective in supporting learning (Skinner and Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2011). The organisation of the lesson can be made to promote both inclusion and attainment if it is highly structured and makes the target content very explicit, using the over-learning of key points to aid memory and providing rapid feedback in the form of praise and reward (Abrams, 2008; Skinner and Smith, 2012). Likewise, assessment needs to be modified significantly, eschewing

summative assessment and, instead, recording attainment shown during real life learning experiences and collaborative work, and capturing attainment in a portfolio. Inclusive pedagogy in MFL needs to make accommodations to the 'fullest extent possible' whilst maintaining validity of the work undertaken. However, Abrams (2008) asserts that the benefits of moving away from traditional MFL pedagogic and assessment models can not only change the learning experience of a student but enhance their future life opportunities.

One systems-level need that is apparent from many of the sources examined is how to help teachers to develop a level of subject expertise that makes them confident to teach, using their knowledge about the range of learning needs of their students (Essex, Alexiadou and Zwozdiak-Myers, 2019). This need is as prevalent in Scotland as elsewhere, as a report on the country's strategic vision young people with complex additional support needs. (Scottish Government, 2012). This seemed unlikely to be possible at the time the report was prepared, due to the depletion of suitably qualified and experienced staff in the universities; one instance was cited where the number of staff experienced in teaching ASN students had fallen from ten to two in a short space of time. Scottish Government (2012) notes that whilst positive qualities such as willingness amongst staff are beneficial, and the government's commitment to meeting the needs of these learners is commendable, neither is sufficient on their own to bring about the reform in practice that they advocate. Without provision for training teachers, including experienced MFL teachers, how to meet CASN students' needs so as to enhance participation, statements such as the one below remain simply rhetorical.

'Every child and young person is entitled to receive a broad general education'

Building the Curriculum 3: A framework for learning and teaching (Scottish Government, 2008:14)

Meeting this need is fundamental to making MFL fully inclusive and has resource implications, for schools, teacher educators and policy makers alike. It will also require better collaborative working across traditional boundaries, which currently prevent specialist and mainstream teachers from working together (Swanson and Bianchini, 2015). The associated growth of understanding of subject pedagogies that would arise would benefit not just students with ASN but all learners. The benefit of additional collaboration and the provision of specialist support and training would pertain to both

mainstream and specialist provision staff. It would lead to the normalisation of diversity within MFL classes, irrespective of setting.

Despite the potential gains in such a development, Skinner and Smith (2011) stress that prior to beginning general staff and programme development in MFL for students with ASN/learning difficulties additional supporting research is needed due to the lack of current, available data. They argue that many published programmes provide data that is anecdotal or simply too old, whilst Wight (2015) notes that much additional work is still needed. One of the key findings to emerge in the preparation of this paper is the dearth of research evidence with which to inform future practice in inclusive MFL.

Conclusion

Language learning truly can be made appropriate for students with a full range of needs, but it is presently happening too infrequently. Future policy needs to be far more explicit in order to ensure that everyone involved in education is clear that MFL education is an entitlement of all learners. Pedagogical considerations arise from this expectation; MFL teachers in all settings will need to understand the differing learning needs of all students in their setting and be able to identify suitable pedagogies to meet those needs. Case studies demonstrate the feasibility of this undertaking, but there is much to be done to make good practice in inclusive MFL available across all Scottish schools. The enforcement of full curriculum availability has major implications for teacher education in MFL, which needs to support teachers in developing a range of inclusive approaches to learning. Almost more urgently, professional learning is required to counter negative expectations about the feasibility of MFL education for all Scotland's eligible students. Such 'branch and root' reform is likely to require the support of the bodies responsible for curriculum and assessment. Further research in this area is urgently needed if future reforms are to respond meaningfully to the current situation. Until this happens, Scotland's ASN learners demonstrate that, despite many good intentions, 'Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose' (the more that changes, the more that stays the same)

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