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Addressing Current Challenges in Primary Language Learning: Unlocking the Potential of 'Local Languages' in Initial Teacher Education Programmes

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Key messages

Strategic role of local languages: Leveraging local languages as a strategic tool in education fosters cultural competence and inclusive pedagogies, aligning with broader societal goals of diversity and global citizenship.

Policy and implementation gaps: Language policies are often beset by systemic barriers; we need to consider the purpose of Primary Language learning and look for ways to avoid repeating the same issues.

Initial Teacher Education as a transformational tool: ITE content must continue to evolve to equip future educators with the skills to navigate linguistic diversity, fostering culturally responsive pedagogies

Engagement with and beyond curriculum: Engaging with local languages requires a more holistic approach that transcends traditional language instruction, integrating inter/ cross-disciplinary projects and community involvement

Sustainability of language learning: Building sustainable models for language learning requires a shift towards co-teaching, collaborative learning, and reflective practice that incorporates local linguistic realities and those of primary teachers' skills base

The Scottish '1+2 languages' policy

Aspect	L2 (Second language)	L3 (Third language)
Start age	Age 5 (Primary 1/ Reception)	By age 9 (Primary 5/ Year 4)
Duration	Up to age 15, before exam phase (age 16, possibly 17- 18)	Starting by age 9, may not continue into Secondary phase
Languages	Most often European	Potentially wide ranging, including community languages
Goal	Enhanced fluency and communication	Broaden language and cultural awareness
Flexibility	Standardised across P1- 7	Flexible, based on local needs
Approach	Traditional methods, in place since late 1990s	Innovative, interdisciplinary, new with introduction of '1+2'
Focus	Progressive language skills	Language in context
Curriculum time	Regular/ semi regular, often scheme/ resource based	Typically blocks of input over 4-6 weeks

Scottish Government (2012)

Challenges in Primary Language Learning

- **Decline in language uptake:** Fewer secondary students studying languages, diminishing the pool of future primary teachers.
- **Limited time/resources:** Constraints within ITE programmes for adequately covering language teaching/ upskilling student teachers.
- **Teacher confidence and competence:** Lack of confidence among primary teachers to deliver language lessons effectively.
- **Disconnect between languages studied and pupils' experiences:** Taught languages often do not match students' diverse backgrounds, reducing engagement, relevance and purpose; 'future touristic experiences' vs. 'here and now'

(Pedley et al., 2024; Valdera & Gill, 2018)

The Concept and Importance of 'Local Languages'

Defining local languages

- Local languages are those spoken within specific communities, often not official but vital for cultural identity (Bühmann & Trudell, 2008; Mahboob & Lin, 2018)
- Over 180 languages spoken at home/ in communities (Scottish Government, 2023)

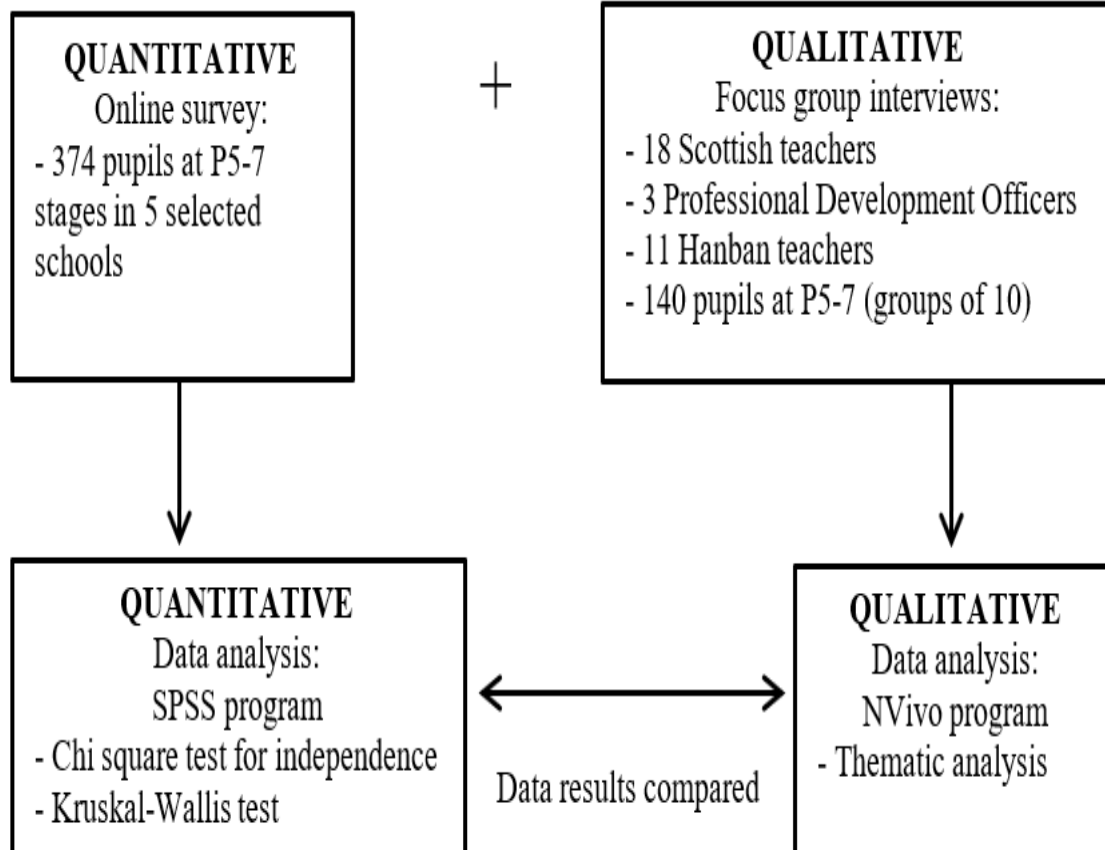
Importance in culturally diverse societies

- Connects learning to students' everyday lives, increasing engagement and motivation
- Validates the linguistic knowledge students bring from home, promoting an inclusive classroom environment
- Using local languages helps bridge the gap between school and home, making education more relevant
- Encourages cultural understanding and prepares students for life in a multicultural world (Pedley et al., 2024; Roxburgh, forthcoming 2024)

Research basis (Roxburgh, 2021)

Research themes

- Pupils' classroom experiences of Chinese Language and Culture (CLC) (ages 9- 11)
- How Chinese culture is construed by Scottish and visiting exchange teachers delivering CLC
- The impact of CLC in shaping pupils' attitudes towards different cultures across Primaries 5- 7



Key implications

- Focus on integrating Chinese language and culture using local contexts rather than exoticizing the language
- Higher student engagement and positive attitudes towards multilingualism when local contexts were used
- Emphasise language use in the 'here and now', rather than as a delayed, future touristic experience
- Need for consideration of similar cross- curricular projects

Other Projects that Explore Local Languages Pedagogies

Mother Tongue Other Tongue

Pedley's research focuses on integrating local languages into the primary curriculum to support a wide range of bilingual identities. Her findings show that engaging students in creative activities using their home languages fosters inclusivity and connects learning to their cultural backgrounds.

Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Local Language Learning

Anderson explored teacher-parent collaborations in teaching L3, where bilingual parents helped teach their native languages (Shona). This approach enriched language learning, promoted cultural awareness, and redefined traditional teacher roles by positioning parents as language experts.

(Pedley et al., 2024)

Integrating Local Languages into ITE Programmes

- **New module:** 'Teaching Local Languages in the Primary School'
- **Student audience:** Year 4 students on BA (Hons) Primary Education
- **Prior experiences in programme:** Year 2 looking at L2 experiences
- **Educational aim:** Prepare teachers to handle linguistic diversity effectively and engage with local communities.
- **Core components:** Sessions on language approaches, cultural responsiveness; seminars with case studies; practical applications on placement

Underpinnings for ITE module

Interdisciplinary

- Student teachers learn to incorporate language into interdisciplinary projects, making language learning more practical and relevant.

Project-based

- They learn how to design projects where pupils use local languages in real-world tasks. For instance, students might create poster advertising the forthcoming school show to the community in different languages.

Culturally responsive

- Student teachers are trained to adapt their teaching practices to reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students. For example, they draw upon the resources available in/ from the community e.g., parents, businesses, students etc.

Underpinnings for ITE module

Reflective practice

- Students are encouraged to maintain reflective journals and portfolios where they assess their use of local languages in the classroom. They reflect on what worked, what did not, and how their approach could be improved. Also reflect on their own journey as language learners alongside pupils.

Collaborative learning

- Student teachers are trained to co-teach with community members or peers who have expertise in local languages. Students focus on primary pedagogy and curriculum links; community members focus on the language in question.

Place-based education

- ITE programmes train future teachers to incorporate local languages and cultures into their lessons by using the local environment. For example, language lessons might be structured around field trips to local market.



Example from practice

We had lots of fun making it, but we worked really hard. When we recorded the episode, I was excited, not nervous. My mum and dad were really proud of me.

Pupil participant

- **Co-teaching and co-learning**
- **Sustainable learning**
- **Building community**
- **Enjoyment of purposeful language learning**

As well as developing their language, pupils have had the opportunity to build a wide range of skills including art and design, presentation, drama, script writing and public speaking while becoming more aware of their role as global citizens.

Co-ordinating class teacher

Well done to all involved - a great model emerging here that will help inform how we roll out this innovative approach to learning at our other sites.

Historic Environment Scotland

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Prompts for discussion

- What are the challenges of thinking innovatively around language learning in your own context?
- What do you feel are the systemic changes are needed in ITE/ school systems to prepare future educators for the demands of multilingual, culturally diverse classrooms?