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An education revolution

Eneida Garcia Villanueva investigates how Scotland's 1+2 policy of teaching two foreign languages is working five years in

In 2011, the Scottish Government pledged to “introduce a norm for language learning in schools based on the European Union 1+2 model – that is we will create the conditions in which every child will learn two languages in addition to their own mother tongue. This will be rolled out over two Parliaments, and will create a new model for language acquisition in Scotland.” This statement marked the beginning of a new language era in Scotland focused on language learning as a central element of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Until the introduction of the 1+2 policy, foreign languages were usually introduced in Scottish primary schools by a specialist teacher in P6 or P7 (ages 9-11). Building on the previous Modern Languages in Primary Schools (MLPS) system, the new policy was set up to address the endemic monolingualism of Scottish primary schools and facilitate the establishment of a national qualification. It grants Scottish pupils parity with their European peers by giving them the linguistic skills that will help them to strengthen bonds with neighbouring countries, which has become particularly important in light of Brexit. Since 2012, the Scottish Government has allocated £24.2 million to support the implementation of the policy by the end of 2020-21 in Scotland's 32 local authorities (LA).

Shifting from the specialist teacher model, 1+2 seeks to embed languages in the curriculum, adopting a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach. Scottish pupils have their language of instruction (L1) complimented by a second language (L2) from P1 to P5 (ages 4-9), and a third language (L3) from P5 to P7 (ages 8-11). More than 75% of all primary schools currently have Primary Language Learning (PLL) in place from P1, while 90% offer PLL from P4. The most popular second languages at primary are French, Spanish and Gaelic; and at secondary, French, Spanish and German. Spanish, French and German are the preferred L3 in both primary and secondary, with Italian, Mandarin, Scots, Doric, Japanese, Norwegian, Latin, Shetlandic, Romanian, Swedish and BSL (British Sign Language) also covered.

Work locally should ensure continuity of the L2 from P1 to S3 (ages 13-14), but there are no such expectations for the L3. A positive environment towards learning another language is nonetheless still created. Despite policy provisions for language learning thorough broad general education (BGE), the lack of strategic leaders shows that the policy is an exclusively primary curricular development, rather than a holistic strategy to ensure continuation towards secondary qualifications and Higher Education (HE).

The 1+2 policy has fuelled an increase in the numbers of foreign-trained Modern Language Assistants, Language Ambassadors, Erasmus+ applications for intensive courses abroad and Language Development Officers (DOs). Each LA offers different training options and models of implementation, so the level of engagement varies dramatically across Scotland. As the policy demands innovative pedagogies, methodologies and resources, all created ad hoc, the different level of support from area to area translates into a lack of harmony in delivery.

There have been isolated examples of leadership teams not considering the policy a priority. According to one teacher, “children who can't read and write well in English are never going to manage to learn another language. It's a very difficult attitude to go up

against when it's coming from above.”

Achieving consistency and continuity is not only problematic between LAs and local clusters, but also in the transition from primary to secondary. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) is key to this, and including language training in ITE would provide newly qualified teachers with a solid understanding of the policy, who could help to train more senior colleagues. Although, the Scottish Government acknowledges the importance of HE to the successful implementation of the 1+2 strategy, it leaves it to the HE institutions to decide on their contribution in this area.

Scotland is taking big and firm steps to champion language learning but there is still some way to travel. The CfE provides the perfect framework to make the learning of two additional languages the norm, but this can only be achieved with effective leadership, unified cross-sector efforts, and business and parental involvement.

The policy itself is a declaration of good intentions, encompassing the promotion of learning and the teaching of languages with a more integrated and contextualised pragmatic experience. It is a celebration of linguistic diversity and cultural awareness, which improves literacy skills and facilitates inclusion for speakers of languages other than English. Confidence and self-esteem is thus improved for all, regardless of origin, first language, cultural background or ethnicity.

Stakeholder feedback

There is a wealth of must-read literature for those interested in a revolutionary languages model,¹ with numerous examples of excellence in teaching. However, I sought to gather opinions from selected stakeholders. I asked 106 participants “In your opinion, what are the best and worst aspects of the 1+2 language policy?” and received 25 responses. Respondents included education consultants, a languages advocacy group, development officers, teacher trainers, policy makers, primary head teachers, and primary and secondary teachers. The observations were similar across their various sectors, including the view that a language policy was needed in Scotland, the synergy between the flexibility of the CfE and the 1+2 policy, and the fact that other elements (mainly culture) are also brought into the classroom.

Although respondents acknowledged that it is too early to see the full impact of the policy, there is no question that good progress has already been made. There was agreement that HE institutions are understanding their role in the success of the policy. Concerns were raised about the funding required for the ongoing implementation and development of the strategy, as well as support for the continuity of 1+2 beyond the policy deadlines. The lack of a linguistic background among most teachers is a problem in terms of resources, workload and confidence. “It is a lot to ask of classroom teachers who already teach so much and may not have the confidence to teach one language, never mind a second,” said one respondent.

However, most highlighted the personal and professional benefits the policy brings: “It has encouraged me as a teacher to develop my school French and to learn a completely new language, Spanish. The professional learning opportunities I have undertaken in the past year that have excited me and have had a personal impact on me have come as a result of the 1+2 policy.”

“The way the policy is construed and rules are stipulated by certain educational bodies” was identified as a shortfall by one development officer. There also seems to be a poor understanding around the introduction of the L3, with LAs and secondary schools expecting some continuation from primary to secondary. This belief “is narrowing the choice of languages, leading to the demise of German in particular,” according to one respondent. Whereas respondents recognised a need for a joined-up approach to achieve a more consistent interpretation of the policy, they celebrated and enjoyed cross-sectoral partnerships, collaborative work and planning in their local clusters.

Despite mixed feelings surrounding training and confidence, some financial and logistical challenges, and issues with consistency and continuity, the 1+2 policy has brought the languages family together. It has placed us all on the same footing, devoted to nourishing a love for languages.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach feeds curriculum innovation and the normalisation of language learning. Now, more than ever, educators are perceived as torch-bearers of creativity and imagination. In addition to enhancing our understanding of our own language and culture, the policy sets young people on a journey towards better career pathways and a boosted economy.

Notes

1 See Education Scotland, SCILT and UCMLS