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Modern Foreign Language Learning For All: the role of digital technologies in inclusive practice.

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Background

The last decades have witnessed a growing interest in the contribution which Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) can make to broaden and enrich the curriculum for students with learning difficulties across Europe, which has resulted in the implementation of several 'languages for all' policies. Foreign languages were, and, in some cases, still are, regarded as difficult subjects which only high ability students could choose to do. Research, however, has shown that this assumption is misguided and that all children can benefit from appropriate teaching of a new language and its culture (McColl, 2005).

Research Questions

Considering that context, we wanted to explore the provision for language learning for children in England attending special and mainstream schools, regardless of their needs. Learning a language is compulsory in England at Key Stage 3 (Years 7, 8 and 9) and children at Key Stages 2 and 4 are entitled to it. Hence, in July 2009, we sent out questionnaires to gather data for the research. Our research question was to explore in what ways digital technologies can benefit pupils with learning difficulties in their Modern foreign language learning endeavours.

Methods

A total of 107 questionnaires were sent out to 46 schools, most of them state and independent schools in London and a few others in the North and in the South East of England. These included primary and secondary schools and sixth form colleges. Some were mainstream schools, some were special schools and some were mainstream schools with a special unit. Each school was sent sets of questionnaires, a letter addressed to the Head of MFL or the teacher responsible for languages in the school explaining the project. The data collection process, including 8 interviews, finished in mid December, with a 34% return to the written questionnaires.

Frame

Since the implementation of the Salamanca Declaration, in 1994, most countries have moved towards a unified education for all and hence a move towards mainstream education has steadily taken place. In this attempt, countries like England have succeeded in establishing inclusive learning environments (Abbott, 2007). This has been facilitated by the use of digital technologies such as interactive whiteboards, virtual learning environments, ipods or specialised software in the classroom which provide language teachers with the opportunity to adopt a multi-sensory approach that benefits all learners and they, in return, can adapt the learning experience to their needs. Digital technologies provide the language learner with the means for communicating with people in other countries and with different languages both inside and outside the classroom. We have drawn on the key concepts in the Salamanca Statement that emphasise the right to education of every child and the need to cater for every child's characteristics and needs in providing a similar curriculum for all to frame our analysis.

Research findings

Our results showed the wide range of languages provision for pupils and that although MFL teaching is only compulsory at Key Stage 3, many children at Key Stage 2, 4 and 5 are also being taught a modern foreign language, regardless of ability. Our data also indicated that digital technologies could play an important role in the creation of materials, in the presentation of contents and in making learning accessible for everyone, and in general, there was considerable agreement that attention to special needs benefits all learners (Jones and McLachlan, 2009). Some schools in the present study provided MFL teaching for all but only until the point the students started to struggle, and not necessarily with the foreign language. Some children seemed to be disapplied from MFL on the grounds that the subject was too difficult for them or because they needed extra support in English or Maths. There was evidence of children who were almost disapplied who did not themselves want to drop the language. We suggest that it is crucial to consider the students' feelings towards the language, the option of offering the student more support or taking up a different language or even, the possibility of setting differential targets or a shorter course before student find themselves in such a daunting situation.

Whilst our findings cannot be generalized given the small sample, there is an indication that most MFL teachers in this study have a positive view in respect of SEN. Teachers have a reasonable awareness about the technological tools available and a working knowledge of most aspects of SEN, and there is invaluable support from the SENCO, but training in digital technologies could go a step further and provide teachers with greater expertise to develop, for example, their own language packages for the benefit of children with learning difficulties and indeed all pupils. The teachers interviewed in this study mentioned that they shared materials by uploading them on the school's virtual learning environment. Crucially, we suggest that those responsible for the disapplication of children with SEN from the languages classroom need to consider such options.