

Introduction and Context

This article reports on a small-scale study conducted in a rural co-educational, Languages and Sport specialist school in eastern England. The focus of the study was on exploring how physical education may provide a vehicle for developing and shaping interest in other subjects, in this particular case Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) and specifically, French.

The learning of a foreign language is an integral part of most school curricula around the world. The benefits are universal, both individually and to society. However, in the United Kingdom there is consistent reporting of an apparent reluctance of the British to learn a foreign language (Lanvers and Coleman, 2013; Watts, 2003). There appears to be an ‘English-is-enough’ mentality (Coleman, 2009, pg. 125), with the notion of language learning in Britain being superfluous, based on the tenet of English as a global commodity (Ensslin and Johnson, 2006; Thomas, 2012) and English as a world language’ (Court 2001, pg. 1). Such attitudes of the general public at large are deemed to be shaped by the media and by Government policy and also associated with language pedagogy (Coleman, Galaczi and Astruc, 2007).

Williams et al reported that ‘the teaching of foreign languages within the UK education system has given rise to a number of concerns over the years’ (2002, pg. 503). The perceived level of difficulty of languages in relation to other subjects has often been linked to students’ disengagement (Evans and Fisher 2009; Jones 2009). In a similar vein, Graham et al. (2012) discussed the perceived difficulties of language learning, which has often been seen as cognitively focused and challenging. The same study highlighted how pupils perceived physical education as more popular and familiar. Similarities in French and physical education identify that both are performative in nature involving public displays of how well

learners have mastered what has been taught (Graham et al., 2012). McCall (2011) reports on an evaluation of the 'Score in French' study developed by the University of Southampton, aimed at motivating boys (aged 11 – 13 years) through the use of football, piloted with 800 Year 8 pupils across six schools. Children reported increased enjoyment, engagement and motivation to study languages. With the above in mind, the school reported on in this paper felt it was timely to explore how collaboration between different curriculum subjects might foster greater pupil enjoyment and engagement in the subjects. The initial impetus for the study evolved after teachers from the school's Languages and Physical Education departments attended a seminar run by 'Routes into Languages' and the Youth Sport Trust. Inspired by the seminar, and also that the physical education teacher spoke French, the two colleagues worked together to design their own project to foster a passion in learning languages, through physical education. They decided on the method of learning a new activity of handball during core physical education as the vehicle for fostering a passion for French.

Design

All Year 7 pupils aged 11-12, (n = 87: males =49, female = 38) were purposefully selected for the project, with the intention of capturing their interest in French early into their secondary school career. During the Spring term for two hours a week across six weeks, pupils completed an introductory unit of work on handball in physical education lessons. Concurrently, in French lessons they learnt key vocabulary associated with the sport. Scaffolding their development further, pupils were invited to develop their knowledge and performance of handball through attending a weekly non-mandatory lunchtime club. During physical education lessons and the lunchtime club, the physical education teacher reinforced their French vocabulary as they played. The culmination of the teaching was a Year 7 inter-

form handball tournament. In preparation for the tournament, each form group had to nominate their squad of players (mixed gender), a team captain, a manager, officials and journalists (to publicise and report on the tournament) with those not taking a specific role acting as spectators on the day and supporters for their team. The tournament took place on a morning with the whole year group released from normal lessons to be a part of the event. The main caveat to the event was that as much communication as possible (pupil to pupil and pupil to staff) during the tournament was to be conducted in French.

Data collection and analysis

In order to evaluate the success of the project, data were collected through a multi-method approach of focus group and individual interviews and questionnaires obtained by university researchers working in partnership with the school. Informed consent was sought adhering to the researcher's university ethics procedures. Following a semi-structured interview protocol, they conducted eight focus group interviews held immediately after the tournament, with pupils selected by the physical education teacher, consisting of: 23 players (including captains and managers), 8 journalists and 6 spectators. To ensure maximum sizes for interviews were kept to a reasonable number, pupils were divided into groups depending on their role in the tournament (see table 1), and further split by gender with two interviews conducted simultaneously by the researchers. Construction of each focus group in this manner was designed to facilitate an environment in which pupils felt comfortable (Ennis and Chen 2012). The focus of the interviews, which lasted between 30-45 minutes, was to ascertain the pupils' retrospective reflections and perceptions of learning and then applying their French vocabulary whilst playing handball as part of physical education. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and transcribed verbatim. Individual interviews with the French and Physical Education teachers also took place.

Table 1: Structure and organisation of the focus group interviews

Focus Group design	Numbers involved
Spectators	3 girls, 3 boys
Players group 1	5 girls
Players group 2	5 boys
Players group 3	7 girls
Players group 4	6 boys
Journalists	4 girls, 4 boys
French teacher	1 female
Physical Education teacher	1 female

Further, once the tournament had been completed all year 7s were asked to complete a questionnaire at the start of their next physical education lesson. Pupils were asked to identify gender, role taken for the handball tournament, and to answer 17 questions, ten of which required Yes/No responses but all of which invited qualitative elaboration. Questions related to their views and experiences of combining their learning in French lessons with their learning in physical education lessons. A hundred per cent response rate was achieved with questionnaire returns. The use of focus group interviews and questionnaires as data collection techniques contributed towards ensuring the accuracy and trustworthiness of the interpretations of the data (Curtner-Smith, 2002). Transcripts were analysed by both researchers independently. The emerging themes and relevant issues were coded manually (Gibbs, 2002) and using NVivo Software ©. Key patterns were noted and compared in order to locate common categories for analysis (Patton, 2002).

Findings

The findings demonstrated the success of the handball project in engaging pupils in developing their French speaking and listening skills, with sixty three percent of males and sixty six percent of females reporting they were enjoying learning French in Year 7.

I think it helps you with French because people who enjoy sports, like me and Joe and Tommy and Frazer and that, we all, we are listening so we can learn the commands, so we can get stuck in on it. So we're learning more French than we usually do, because of the involvement in sports which we like, so (male player).

This was in contrast to eighty per cent of pupils who indicated that they had not enjoyed learning French at primary school. Constant comparison between the testimonies of pupils and teachers revealed three key themes to the findings that appeared to impact on pupils' attitudes towards learning French through physical education: experiential learning and social benefits, increased confidence in speaking and listening and interest and enjoyment. A significant majority of the cohort strongly endorsed their experience by indicating that the next Year 7 cohort should also learn French through physical education.

Experiential learning and social benefits:

Experiential learning or learning through doing, emphasises the role experience plays in learning (Kolb, et al, 1999). Experiential learning theory defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb, 1984, pp 41). The handball project allowed pupils to consolidate their learning of French vocabulary through experiencing its use in action during physical education. A key message to emerge was the importance of applying theory to practice. Pupils expressed the usefulness of what they were learning in French and how to apply it:

‘When in normal French lessons you’re just sitting in your chair, just looking at a screen, or a book usually, but through handball it can help you with your sport technique and your French technique. I think it’s good to have it because it makes people want to do French, like you’ve got people that don’t usually like French and don’t try hard, but when they’re out on the pitch playing, they use their French they’ve learned and try to use it well’ (male player).

Opportunities for applied learning was positively received: *'I found it very interesting that we could use French to speak to our team whilst we were playing and Miss really made us use what we've learned in French on the pitch'* (male spectator). Sixty three percent of pupils reported that using French within the physical education context improved their learning and understanding of the language, as demonstrated by both spectators and players,

'Because in lessons maybe more people don't get involved, but if you're actually playing the game of handball, and then doing it, it's kind of the same French, but a better environment' (male spectator).

'When I was saying 'passez', or 'tirez', we didn't even realise we were saying it, it was just coming out ready to do it. I was saying passez, and the ball would come to me and I'd shoot. I hadn't even realised I was saying it, sort of thing' (male player).

These comments reinforce the value of providing an alternative to classroom-based simulated real experiences, like imagining being at a market to buy a baguette (Carr and Pauwels, 2006).

From the teacher's perspective, the opportunity to put into practice theory learnt in the classroom facilitated much broader social learning benefits. It is widely accepted that the interactive and social nature of physical education develops qualities such as leadership, teamwork and fair play, contributing to broader dimensions of the curriculum, (Webb et al, 2010). Whilst the organisational structure of the handball project, particularly the tournament, reinforced these dimensions, it transpired that the impact on learning was far reaching. Pupils were learning from each other, bridging two subject areas concurrently as they engaged in the activities, as illustrated by the physical education teacher's comment:

'John [pseudonym] – the little Year 7 - he blew the whistle and I said, 'When you blow the whistle you have to say what's happened.' And he went, 'Erm ... repetez dribblez' I hadn't taught him that, but he meant double dribble. But he's putting bits together that he's picked up and me and the French teacher both looked at each

other and it was like we haven't taught him to say repetez and dribblez together, but from bits and pieces he's picked up and I thought that's been one of my highlights - something that I hadn't told him to do, or the French teacher hasn't told him to do, or taught him, and he's kind of putting languages together and yeah had the confidence as well' (Physical Education teacher).

The impact of this situated learning whilst playing handball was further highlighted by one pupil who confessed he had originally been sceptical of the process:

'When we first got talking, like she said, 'Oh we're going to mix handball with French,' I used to play handball at school, at my primary school, and I thought (?) together because people aren't going to like speak the language (?) pass and that, and then when it came to the actual day I was thinking well, that's proved me wrong because more people were saying the language than I thought they would and then I realised that I was speaking it and I was like well, that sort of shot me down a bit, so' (male player).

A key message emanating from all involved in the project reaffirmed the social nature of physical education and how learning French through sport provided increased opportunities to apply French speaking in an authentic, meaningful and engaging context. Interestingly, girls appeared to place greater importance on the benefits associated with the social aspect. They endorsed roles other than performer, which allowed everyone to be involved, whilst being encouraged to communicate in French. For example, access to the role of journalist, allowed the pupils to develop their French vocabulary, whilst still included within the broader physical education experience of the tournament, *'You get to expand your vocabulary. You get to use it in a different way'* (female journalist). The comment about using vocabulary in a different way is an insightful observation by the pupil. High levels of anxiety have been documented around oral/aural communicative tasks (Macintyre and Gardner, 1994) and this can lead to negative attitudes towards language learning (Walquai, 2000). Using French vocabulary whilst immersed within the sport of handball and associated activities acted as a form of distraction from speaking in a public forum. Importantly, the nature of the learning climate had been cleverly constructed by the teachers to ensure that a

fun and collegial environment was the main focus during the tournament, allowing speaking French to emerge authentically as and when pupils felt able to contribute. This, in turn led to interest and enjoyment emerging from the handball project as further key themes.

Interest and enjoyment:

There has been much written on pupils' diminishing enthusiasm for the learning of foreign languages per se, especially between the ages 11 – 14 (Barton, 2001; Davies, 2004; Graham et al., 2012; Macaro, 2008), and particularly so for boys (Coleman et al., 2007). It was evident that engagement in the handball project had fostered greater enjoyment in both subject areas, especially for boys,

'I think it helps you with French because people who enjoy sports, like me and Joe and Tommy and Frazer, we all, we are listening so we can learn the commands, so we can get stuck in on it. So that's we're learning more French than we usually do, because of the involvement in sports which we like' (male player).

Teachers endorsed this further by revealing that those that perhaps benefitted more from the process were 'sporty boys'

'I think it's helped languages through sport, as opposed to helping sport through languages, because the type of people we've had involved are the sporty boys and the boys who tend to be lower down on the academic list and that, and I think it's helped to bring their language up' (Physical Education teacher).

Time and time again, the notion of enjoyment was reinforced: *It strengthened our French by using it in a fun way* (female pupil); *it was combining a subject that I liked and one that I don't like* (male pupil); *'basically we're just learning how to play hand-ball, but instead of speaking in English, we're speaking in French, which makes it more complicated, but more fun'* (female player). One of the male players summed up the intrinsic relationship between enjoyment and learning nicely, emphasising the potential of learning through a combination of subjects as potentially a 'win-win' situation for everyone: *'Well people like sport and they don't like French, they can still learn French through sport, but if they don't like sport and like French, they can still learn sport through French.'*

Speaking and listening:

Findings indicate that fifty nine percent of pupils felt that applying French to handball increased their confidence in their French speaking and listening skills. An increase in confidence and enjoyment of speaking French was most significant for boys, with thirty three per cent more boys acknowledging they much preferred to apply their knowledge whilst playing handball, rather than sitting in the classroom. Holmes (1994) and Swann (1998) expressed concerns about boys' inadequacies in oral exchanges in classrooms. Despite Cohen (1998) reporting that boys under perform in French because of shyness and reluctance to make an effort with French pronunciation, the handball project triggered more favourable responses,

'Because you're speaking and listening out for like someone saying like 'passez', you're stuck with three people, or someone saying 'tres' if you're close to shooting'. I would say that it really boosts their confidence, like because when they're speaking everybody else is listening to them and you're just speaking to your mates, not in a classroom worried about if you're going to get it wrong' (male player).

I'm fine with the writing, the reading and writing is much more easier personally, but the listening and speaking I find a bit difficult 'cause like, 'cause you find some words which are like nonsense and they sound nonsense, personally and then it's kind of hard, but with the handball it's kind of been helping a bit' (male player).

A further positive outcome of the project was that pupils appear to feel safe within their physical education environment and happy to experiment with their French vocabulary, without fear of judgement. Such a finding is reassuring when the nature of physical education usually requires pupils to be 'on display' (Carlson, 1995) in terms of their abilities and physical competences; a pressure that has been found to alienate some pupils, particularly girls, from the subject. The structure of the handball project created an inclusive environment with the opportunity for everyone to actively engage, whether as a performer, coach or official, without fear of marginalisation (Lamb, 2014). Boys appeared to respond

more favourably to applying their French as performers, whilst girls preferred roles other than that of player. Both of these findings offer potential solutions to previous research highlighting boys' unwillingness to practice their French speaking (Cohen, 1998). Whilst girls were able to show off their knowledge and understanding of both subjects rather than simply the physical performance aspect. Place (1997) suggests that MFL strategies for boys should focus on achieving success earlier, with more time devoted to oracy skills and learning verbatim. The French teacher concurred that the study had enabled early success for the boys:

'Yes and they [boys] tend to, they've been much more willing and much more confident to speak up in class after they've experienced this. Once they start doing it, like the lad I mentioned, like Bradley, you know, fine but tricky, but actually in lessons he's putting his hand up more, he's involved more. But then I've also got there's a young lad called Paul, very able sportsman, you know he's in a lot of the school teams, he doesn't do French at school. He's taken out of his French lessons to do intervention, to help him with his English. The last couple of weeks he's been speaking the most French, I think, on when we're playing, like passez ici' (French teacher).

Generally, girls reported some improvement in their speaking and listening skills. But in contrast to the boys, girls touched upon the area of developing writing skills too as mentioned by one of the players,

'I prefer writing because for future reference if you want to learn how to speak it, if you write it down, if you wanted to actually speak it, you could read it, so you have it written down instead of memorising it in your brain. So it would be easier' (female player).

The findings concur with previous studies indicating subtle differences between genders related to speaking and listening, with boys developing their speaking and listening skills and girls highlighting the benefits of developing their writing skills.

Conclusion

Creative methods of engaging pupils in learning a language through the use of immediate resources such as other curriculum subjects can motivate and capture pupil interest. Physical education as the vehicle for learning can promote a passion for languages, particularly for boys. One of the advantages captured by this project is that those pupils who engaged in speaking and listening within an applied context, demonstrated increased confidence and less anxiety about making mistakes that can be so visible when speaking in a classroom. This project was facilitated by two teachers' passion about their subjects, with the additional caveat that the physical education teacher also spoke fluent French.

Physical education offers a unique contribution to a pupil's education. This case study provides a strong example of cross-curricular-learning taking place, evidencing how learning in one subject can be enhanced by another. In this case, opportunities for learning have been made explicit through the innovative and creative design of the handball project. Teachers have a collective responsibility to exploit cross-curricular opportunities within their teaching (Verma and Pumfrey, 1993). The default position with regard to popular cross-curricular choices for physical education teachers tends to be within literacy and numeracy (Everley and Wild, 2014). The handball project demonstrates the power of collaborative practice with colleagues in other subject areas, working within the normal daily parameters of timetabled lessons and extra-curricular opportunities. Additionally, this successful example helps to 'dispel the perceived difficulties with linking the teaching of physical education to other parts of the curriculum' (Kellam and Whewell, 2009, pg. 29). It is acknowledged that, due to the restrictions imposed by small-scale research, any claims made by a singular case study can only be viewed as generalizable in a theoretical sense, and that a much broader study on whether pupils enjoyment and engagement in a foreign language may be fostered through

physical education would be required to substantiate the significance of these findings. However, this project demonstrates what is possible when subjects work together creatively. The ongoing language crisis suggests this article is timely in highlighting the power of physical education in contributing to learning beyond its own boundaries. This case study strongly advocates that other schools consider adopting the success of one school and two teachers, who because of their passion for their own subjects and desire to work collegially, enabled pupils to foster a passion for languages through physical education.

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