

Links into Languages

Growing Learning Networks to enhance MFL teaching and learning

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Summary of Findings

- Teachers from all phases report a willingness to take risks, try new teaching and learning strategies and have their perceptions about students language ability challenged.
- Students report increased confidence in speaking tasks, increased enjoyment and challenge.
- Collaborative enquiry (in particular the Timperley Model) is valued by teachers and facilitators as an effective method of professional learning which can impact positively on teachers and students.
- Time, particularly when enquiry is a new approach to professional learning, is important. This is especially valuable at the design stage of the enquiry process.
- Facilitation/external expertise is a feature of effective network learning.
- Facilitators value support and acknowledge the benefits of learning through shared conversation with colleague facilitators for enabling their effectiveness.

Rationale

With *Links into Languages* ending in March 2011 this project was an opportunity to build regional capacity for a sustainable model of professional learning intended to enhance the teaching of Modern Foreign Languages (MFL). The rationale for this project is based on evidence of a collaborative and sustained model of professional learning (see section 5), in this case collaborative enquiry. Investment has been targeted at training and supporting three regional network facilitators, enabling them to support teacher enquiry in the field.

Network facilitators have learned about network theory, evidence informed professional learning and knowledge creation strategies (for example Lesson study, Action Research and Collaborative Enquiry). This combined with peer support, means network facilitators have been enabled to facilitate three teacher networks (each working with between 4 and 6 teachers at the outset). By equipping facilitators with the skills to facilitate enquiry this approach can be sustained due to the initial investment made by *Links into Languages*.

Each of these facilitators was recruited on the basis of a particular area of pedagogic or linguistic expertise. The networks then coalesced around three aspirations.

1. To enhance and expand their own language teaching expertise.
2. To develop experience of using evidence informed professional learning processes in order to impact pupil learning.
3. To learn on behalf of the wider language teaching community.

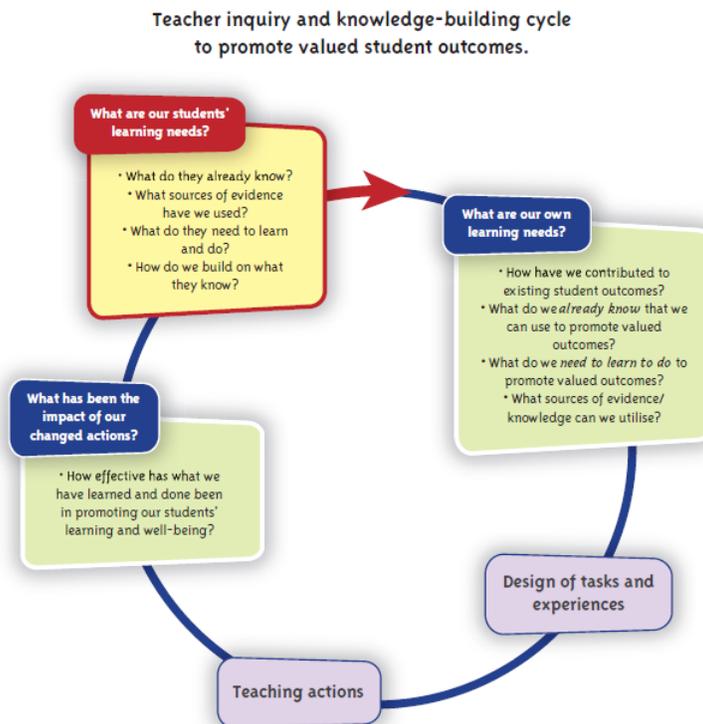
With a variety of face to face support facilitators have then recruited and developed the skills of their teacher network members. Evidence has been gathered showing developments in teachers' pedagogic and professional learning skills and the subsequent impact on pupil learning in Modern Foreign Languages.

The project has involved two project leads, three facilitators and 14 teachers at the outset (this fell to 10). Though the sample size is small and thus results are not generalisable there is enough evidence of impact to help weigh the benefits of this investment.

The Enquiry Process

The project from the first face to face to the submission of network reports spanned 3½ months with the teacher enquiry cycle lasting 2½ months. The entire process (from project design to classroom activity) has been based upon Helen Timperley’s teacher enquiry and knowledge building cycle (figure 1). This model makes an evidence informed case for teacher enquiry which is informed by an understanding of learners needs and which places high priority upon measuring the impact of changed practice.

Figure 1



H. Timperley, A. Wilson, H. Barrar & I. Fung (2007)

Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration

Wellington, New Zealand: Ministry of Education

Training and support for facilitators

The project was lead and managed jointly by an external consultant who specializes in improving classroom practice through enquiry based professional learning and a research associate (RA) skilled in research design, evaluation and project management. Together they provided expert input and ongoing project support with the RA conducting a sample of teacher interviews at the end of the project to gather some evaluative data about the project.

These project leads offered facilitators four half day face to face sessions. These focused on:

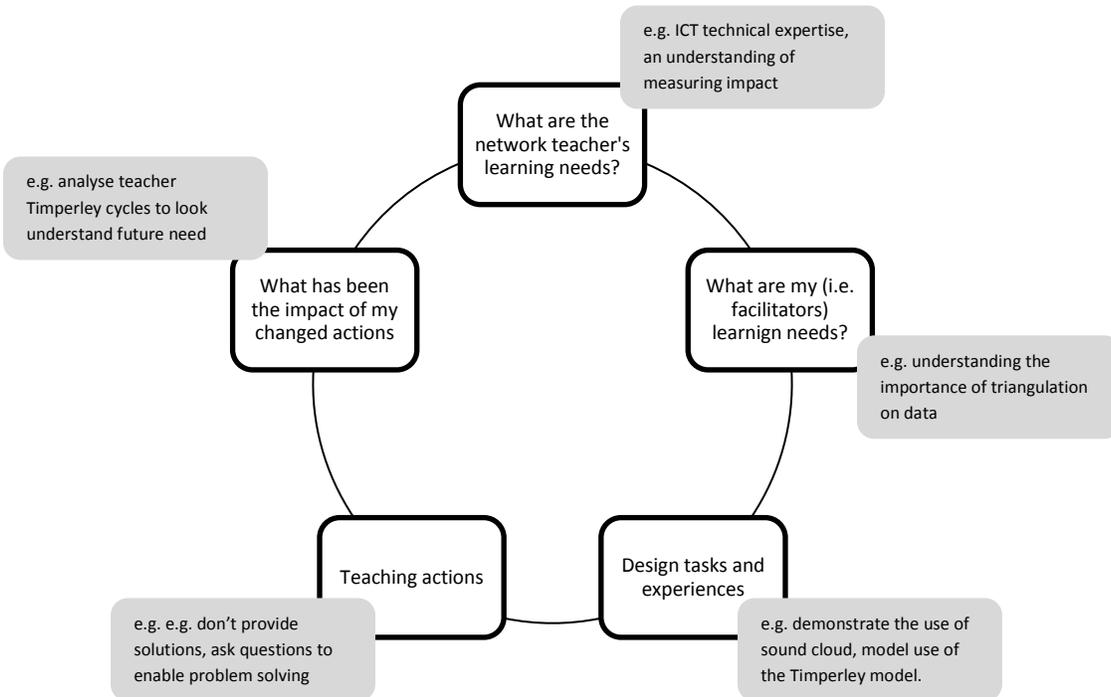
1. Providing a rationale for and introduction to enquiry and a logic model for the project
2. Developing an enquiry question and designing an enquiry methodology
3. Analysing and Interpreting data and report writing
4. Report writing – communicating the learning

Each face to face mirrored the focus of a facilitator/network face to face which followed soon after.

In addition network facilitators had access primarily to the RA who offered additional bespoke support. This included two network visits, sharing relevant reading, data collection tools and feedback on emerging enquiry designs, and some quantitative data analysis. Two of the three network facilitators attended every face to face. One was only able to attend the first two.

Facilitators were encouraged to be as self reflective as was to be expected of the teacher enquirers. Consequently they were asked to use a version of the Timperley cycle to reflect on their learning needs and experiences. In this cycle they viewed the network teachers as their “students” and thought of themselves as the “teachers”. This promoted a support plan support based on need rather than a predetermined agenda. For example:

Figure 2: Facilitator Timperley Cycle



Support for network teachers

Informed by this reflection on practice facilitators worked with teachers in a number of ways (see case studies contained as appendix for further exemplification). Broadly this included:

- Facilitation (as opposed to consultancy) of collaborative network learning E.g. asking good questions to clarify and challenge thinking, bringing network member s together
- Pedagogic or technical expertise e.g. ICT , questioning or MFL skills
- Enquiry skills e.g. designing a focused, manageable enquiry question and gathering data to answer it
- Brokering knowledge e.g. gathering and sharing enquiry or teaching tools, providing reading material on the given focus, acting as a conduit for learning between project leads and teachers.

Teachers had the option of 2 network face to face meetings and one school visit from the facilitator. The facilitator also had the option to use the project RA in network time should they find this useful. Two networks took advantage of this additional resource to support enquiry design and/or data analysis. Though the project paid for facilitator time no funding was allocated to supply cover for teachers. One network did, however, secure additional resource to pay for supply for teachers who represented a geographically disparate area. This network was the only one which retained all network members to the end of the project. Each network was also allocated a £500 budget which could be used at the discretion of the facilitator to buy in additional support and expertise should they need it. In each case this was used to fund additional technical support by the facilitator (e.g. ICT skills or MFL teaching skills).

Each network agreed a metaquestion: an overarching question or focus that individual teachers would make a contribution to answering/understanding. Teachers then designed their own enquiry question supported to develop something manageable in the short space of time allocated to the work. As described in detail in the case studies (see appendix) teachers completed up to two cycles of enquiry.

This involved:

- Identifying student learning needs
- Developing new pedagogical skills (e.g. questioning or ICT related)
- Planning a short intervention
- Designing an enquiry methodology
- Gathering and interpreting data to measure the impact of their intervention
- 5 teachers also took part in a short evaluation process to help us understand the benefits of the process

Modern Foreign Languages Learning

Enquiry Foci

- Network 1 Focus: Progression in MFL
Teacher enquiry questions: “Does the quality of children’s questions change as they get older?” and “What is the gap between children’s capability in asking meaningful questions in English and in French?” (Case Study 1)
- Network 2 Metaquestion: “How can ICT improve Language Teaching and Learning?”
Teacher question: “Can SoundCloud help my students to be more confident French speakers?” (Case Study 2)
- Network 3 Focus: Effective teaching and learning approaches that would engage students in the post 16 sector.
Teacher question: “How can I exploit listening comprehensions more effectively to make them more accessible to learners?” (Case Study 3)

Using Enquiry to learn about MFL teaching and learning is not confined to the outcomes of the enquiry process. A collaborative approach to identifying students learning needs (the first stage in this enquiry cycle) afforded an opportunity for teachers to develop a shared understanding of the problem or issue they perceived in the classroom. Understanding the problem is central to resolving it. In two of the networks teachers shared the same concerns resulting in their Enquiry Question ending up the same despite having permission to work on different questions. In network 1 for example, all teachers, irrespective of the age of their students shared views that included:

- *Pupils are ill equipped to ask meaningful questions in another language*
- *Pupils need to draw on their natural curiosity as a motivating factor to form their own questions*
- *The quality of their questions does not appear to progress*

And in network 2 the three teachers that began the work all recognised that

- *Students lack confidence in speaking and reading aloud*

As well as making explicit a shared understanding of the problems, this scoping and ‘tinkering’ stage helps teachers develop a shared language with which to talk about pupil learning and their own teaching – an important feature of collaborative working. Through the enquiry cycle teachers have developed either new understanding or awareness or have identified a quantifiable impact on learners.

New insights

Enquiry, it seems, offers teachers a lens through which to look more closely at teaching and learning. This provides an opportunity to illuminate, crystallise or provide a more detailed view of the classroom. The collaborative nature of a network enquiry then provides an opportunity to develop a shared understanding of this. Network 1 for instance found that:

“Year 3/4 children are more willing to use emergent language than their year 7 peers”
(Network 1)

Together they speculated upon the reasons:

“[does this] suggest they are potentially less self-conscious about the language they are using...possibly perceiving French and Spanish as an extension of their generally developing language skill.” (Network 1)

Their next step might be to consider the implications of this for their practice. For example, does this offer weight to an argument for starting MFL teaching early or can changes be made to classroom practice to nurture this risk taking culture.

Teachers in all three networks describe valuing the opportunity to identify a focus that is relevant to their students learning needs and then gathering the data which helps them to understand this better.

‘focus[ing] on the student’s needs in addition to teacher needs was a benefit and [I] enjoyed the aspect of choice in the teacher enquiry. “I think we all had the same aim, but the way we got there...we got to choose. I think that worked really well.”’

Conversely a teacher, unable to complete the research cycle, had initially been frustrated by what she perceived as being an external agenda imposed on her preferred enquiry. There is merit in enabling teachers to identify the focus of their professional learning priorities and, it would seem, in equipping teachers to gather data that responds directly to their student learning needs. As Professor John MacBeath writes “We must learn to measure what we value rather than valuing what we can measure.” (*Self Evaluation*, John MacBeath, NCSL) This enquiry appears to have given teacher’s permission to measure what they valued. In one network for example they have, as a result, discovered a valuable diagnostic tool for improving linguistics.

“Teachers found categorising pupils’ questions according to criteria not focused on accuracy was intensely liberation...it allowed them to measure what they valued...provided a valuable diagnostic tool in terms of linguistic issues.”

Promoting enjoyment and engagement enables student progress. In each network there is evidence of learners finding the interventions ‘fun’ or ‘motivating’. A teacher in network 3 (case study 3) believes this had a positive impact on retention of students. In network 1 we see a relationship between student’s positive response to the task and their willingness to investigate. This may explain the level of metacognitive awareness or problem solving approach communicated by some students;

“Once you have worked out how to ask one question, you can ask loads.” (Year 7 student)

“‘Took’ wasn’t in the dictionary so I figured I would have to look at ‘to take’”. (Year 8 student)

“I didn’t realize how much French I knew”. (Year 9 student)

Teachers in network 1 identify the benefits of engaging learners through the use of stimuli which students perceive relevant to them. Similarly in network 2 we see students engaged by the use of new technology and here too we find evidence of impact: students in this case study judged themselves to be better at pronunciation as a result of using SoundCloud.

Further detail pertaining to MFL learning can be found in the attached Appendices (Case Studies 1-3).

The next steps in the Links into Languages project is a network to network event designed to share learning between the networks. By giving network teachers the opportunity to bring a colleague with leadership responsibility it also aims to build capacity for enquiry to be developed back in their school/college. There is a strategic plan to turn network learning into system learning. It might be, for example, that Salma's students desire for greater use of "audio visual aids" and "...more listening exercises to clear, audible CDs" might in part be addressed by learning from Rachel and Andy about the potential of SoundCloud. Similarly network 2 planned to build student's confidence through the use of SoundCloud. They might, therefore benefit from network 1 findings regarding the contribution of emergent findings to confidence and empowerment.

Professional Learning

A research review for Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) which reviewed the impact of collaborative and sustained CPD identified the following:

When teachers engaged in collaborative and sustained CPD (eg coaching, action research, etc) there was a positive correlation with:

- greater confidence among the teachers
- enhanced beliefs among teachers of their power to make a difference to their pupils' learning (self-efficacy)
- the development of enthusiasm for collaborative working, notwithstanding initial anxieties about being observed and receiving feedback
- a greater commitment to changing practice and willingness to try new things.

The findings from these network enquiry projects and subsequent evaluation reveal that the process has had similar effects on participating teachers. Teachers, for example, who initially lacked confidence in using ICT took risks with new technology. Others showed signs of increased self efficacy:

"Sometimes you collect all this work and I'll hand it in to County or University and it'll be lovely and then they put it in the cupboard. The fact that it's now something I'm going to be using as well...is a benefit." (Teacher, Network 2)

“The discipline of an enquiry has helped the participants involved in this network to develop an objective attitude to classroom practice, enabling a proactive rather than reactive approach to issues around behavior and learning.” (Facilitator, Network 1)

An enthusiasm for collaborative working is also evident and is explored in section 6 below.

Without exception the enquiry process has led to new understanding or knowledge generation and all teachers describe how they plan to continue to develop their practice in response to this. For example:

“As a result of learner feedback, one teacher will continue to provide bespoke content. She will adapt her lessons to ensure there is more learner preparation time and provide a variety of active learning approaches.” (Facilitator, Network 3)

“Andy has started to integrate SoundCloud with his existing practice and teaching resources.” (Facilitator, Network 2)

The Timperley Model has proven to be useful in promoting reflection in and on practice. Some teachers find it difficult to disentangle teaching from learning (this may explain the challenge of implementing this reflective model felt by the facilitator of network 3). The model makes explicit the need to plan for and learn about the distinct but deeply connected nature of student and teacher learning. As one teacher describes;

“The focus on student’s needs in addition to teacher needs was a benefit.” (Teacher, network 2)

Better understanding the impact of teaching on learning is central to improving student progress. Arguably much satisfactory learning is rooted in low expectations of students by teachers. This may, in part, be the result of teacher led learning which fails to create opportunities for students to demonstrate their capabilities. Teacher enquiry approach provides an opportunity for teachers to have those expectations challenged. In network 1 for instance, watching pupils cope with a cognitively challenging task also challenged teachers perceptions and as such may offer a strategy for helping to raise teacher’s expectations of students capabilities;

“The skills demanded by the nature of the task benefited the language learning process and was an unexpected surprise for teachers.” (Facilitator, Network 1)

The role of facilitator has been crucial in promoting teacher professional learning. Their role as knowledge broker has been central. When facilitators have a deep understanding of the rationale for professional Enquiry and can apply this practically they are better able to help network members manage the scope and scale of the work. This helped the teachers who completed the process to cope with the time constraints and the demands of the enquiry.

“...the one to one time spent with the facilitator was a good support and lessened the stress of embarking on an enquiry alone.” (Teacher, Network 2)

Facilitator’s reflections on their role highlight the importance of enabling teachers make meaning and develop understanding for themselves. In network 2 the facilitator worked hard to maintain a facilitative rather than a consultative or ‘expert’ role (though he sometimes adopted the role of ‘expert’ when invited). As with students it is important to support teachers to problem solve or develop their understanding for themselves – it is this that leads to changed practice.

Facilitators also play a key role in developing positive relationships and nurturing trust which promotes a safe environment in which teachers can take risks. Eight of the ten teachers (spread across two networks) that completed the project had a prior relationship with one of the facilitators and had experience of working in collaborative learning networks. Relationships and trust take time to nurture but are not a prerequisite of successful network. Working in a supportive collaborative culture builds trust and capacity for learning.

Learning about the project

Towards the end of the project, once teachers had completed their enquiries and the facilitators were in the process of writing up their network reports, a sample of teachers were approached by their facilitators to participate in either a telephone interview or email response with the researcher from Newcastle University. It was explained that the purpose of the interviews was to reflect upon their experiences of the project and that participation was entirely voluntary. Five teachers took part in the

process, (3 from Network 1; 1 from Network 2; and 1 from Network 3). Questions centered around the impact of enquiry and a networked approach on their professional learning, and upon specific impacts for MFL teaching (a full interview schedule can be seen in Appendix 1). Where telephone interviews took place, the interview schedule was provided ahead of time. 3 teachers chose to arrange telephone interviews, some with an accompanying email response, whilst 2 responded entirely through email. In addition, a telephone interview took place with the line manager of Network 3. This interview focused upon the impact of the enquiry network on professional learning from his perspective.

The researcher works to, and within, BERA's (British Educational Research Association) Revised *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Researchers* (please see: <http://www.bera.ac.uk/files/2008/09/ethica1.pdf>). During telephone interviews the researcher made notes and asked for clarification on key issues that emerged. The researcher later re-read her own notes and those sent by the teachers, identifying themes across the data and selecting quotes to illustrate these.

All teachers contacted valued enquiry as a professional learning process, although there was variation in the degree of previous experience in using enquiry in this way. For some enquiry was already a part of their practice, one teacher having recently completed a MEd in Practitioner Enquiry, whilst for others the process felt new, 'it was scary ... it took us out of our comfort zone'. Teachers saw their enquiries as a challenge, 'it made us think harder' and embraced that, valuing the opportunity to focus within their networks and above all share professional experiences and ideas, leading to 'new perspectives gained'. One teacher noted that his pupils had responded well to the idea of enquiry and valued what they were participating in as 'important research'. Others commented that the enquiry had helped them to better understand their pupils' learning needs. Teachers acknowledged that their enquiries had entailed extra work, although for the majority this was not excessive and felt to be 'worth it'. Time constraints were also highlighted, particularly in regard to planning and carrying out tasks and providing detailed feedback to their networks. These together with timetabling and logistical issues were seen as the main negatives. One teacher had further concerns in that she felt an externally imposed agenda had compromised the autonomy of her own enquiry; however, this was not a representative feeling across the networks.

The opportunity to work with a range of teaching professionals was valued by all and seen to be a primary advantage of a networked approach. Teachers from Network 1 particularly commented on the opportunity to work with professionals across the phases (first, middle and high), 'working purposefully and enthusiastically towards a common goal', 'taking us out of our bubble' and 'learning from others'

experiences'. Teachers reported on the feeling of being 'all in it together' as an impetus to carry out new and 'quite scary' ideas in school, as well as the opportunity and space to think and explore ideas. A couple of teachers commented on the benefits of working within a small group and others drew attention to the importance their facilitator had played in organizing and assisting the network. One teacher felt that she would have valued informal network time without the facilitator, but this was not felt by others. As above, lack of time and logistical issues were seen to be the main disadvantages.

The majority of teachers contacted did feel that their involvement in the enquiry network had impacted on their MFL teaching. Teachers commented on being introduced to and developing a range of interesting tools and techniques that they had not previously used. There was a consensus among many that they had engaged in new practices: 'I did things I would never ordinarily have done in the classroom' and it 'pushed me into doing something I've thought about for a while'. Reference was made to the use of new methods of 'assessing the impact of the resources and my teaching'. Whilst a number of teachers commented that through enquiry they had reached a better understanding of their pupils' learning; at times this related to student motivation, at others the quality of pupils' work given a different context, together with generally gaining new perspectives, 'the children really surprised me'.

Finally, there was some evidence of impact reaching beyond the classrooms of the teachers directly involved in the networks. One teacher drew attention to the opportunity her enquiry had created for potentially developing cross-curricular links and skills. Another teacher commented that his involvement in the project was providing 'a springboard for discussion with my senior leaders about the way we offer CPD in school'. Discussion with a line manager of a further teacher revealed his engagement with the Timperely Cycle used throughout the networks. In this case the network had suffered from a number of teachers withdrawing and the line manager discussed with the researcher his own reflections on possible contributing factors using the Timperely Cycle. In particular he noted the importance of the teachers' learning needs in enabling the process of enquiry and self reflection.

Discussion and recommendations

Does facilitated professional enquiry enhance and expand teachers own language teaching expertise.

Professional Enquiry has the capacity to change teachers MFL practice. Despite the short timescale in which the enquiry took place teachers showed a willingness to take risks (for example with new technologies) and make changes to their practice (e.g. adopt a different approach to promoting student questioning). Some had their perceptions challenged regarding students cognitive and linguistic abilities and most were given the confidence to try new teaching tools or approaches and evaluate their impact.

Links into Languages wanted to invest in developing the use of ICT in MFL, increase understanding of progression in languages learning and support developments in adult education. Collaborative enquiry has enabled new learning, understanding and practical application in these areas. It has given teachers more confidence to try new things, reflect more deeply and develop shared understanding across phases. Furthermore it has encouraged teachers to extend their teaching repertoire beyond the life of the project with all teachers planning further action in response to their learning.

It is likely, however, that had the facilitators had a longer start up time to prepare teachers for the process of enquiry (particularly those who were new to it) and take ownership of that process then it is possible that a higher proportion of teachers would have completed the process. Also ensuring facilitators are supported throughout the process appears to have been a feature of successful network learning. Having access to peer to peer support and challenge along with access to expert input have been reported to be features of a successful network.

Teachers also said they valued the collaborative element of the enquiry process. Where networks were small (less than six teachers) network members felt they would have benefited from having more opportunities to share and learn from each other.

Recommendation Provide more time for facilitators and teachers to plan their enquiry cycle at the outset.

 Ensure that skilled facilitators and Languages expertise are available to a network.

 Ensure facilitators also have opportunities to learn collaboratively about enabling Enquiry.

Ensure that the enquiry process is rooted in evidence: both external evidence to inform pedagogic activity and the collection of data/evidence to measure the impact of teaching and learning activity.

Recruit networks with enough teachers to enhance opportunities for collaborative learning and share practice.

Did the project develop experience of using evidence informed professional learning processes in order to impact pupil learning?

All teachers who completed the process felt it had been worthwhile and of value. All were able to identify impact on pupil learning. This included increased pupil confidence in speaking tasks, improved questioning and greater enjoyment and engagement. The length of the process, however, prevents comment on any sustained changes to pupil learning. To gather this evidence it would require a longer enquiry cycle and more baseline and retest data collection tools. The process, however, is robust enough to gather this type of evidence should it be required.

Recommendation Ensure enquiry has clear focus on students learning needs and a triangulated data collection strategy to measure the impact of changes to teachers practice.
Allow the process to run over the course of one term minimum.

Have teachers and facilitators learned on behalf of the wider language teaching community?

Learning on behalf of the wider language teaching community has been built into the project design from the outset. Teachers have contributed to high quality written Case Studies which can stand alone. Accompanied with this report, however, we believe there to be enough information for other teachers (both MFL teachers and others) to adopt an enquiry approach to professional learning. There is still scope for further learning and sharing learning which is describe in our recommendations.

Recommendation Facilitate a network to network event at which network members can learn from the experiences of teachers in other networks.
Use this as an opportunity to build capacity for enquiry in school by inviting a supportive colleague with leadership responsibility to attend with them.
Assess the benefits of adopting a similar process between teachers and students to enable the work of Routes into Languages.

Appendix

Appendix 1

Links into Languages Enquiry Networks – Teacher reflections

For each of the following statements could you please identify a plus, a minus and an interesting:

- 1) The impact of **enquiry** as a professional learning process.
 - Plus:
 - Minus:
 - Interesting:

- 2) The impact of a **networked** approach to professional learning.
 - Plus:
 - Minus:
 - Interesting:

- 3) The impact of your enquiry specifically on **MFL teaching**?
 - Plus:
 - Minus:
 - Interesting:

Any other comments:

Biographies

Julie McGrane is Director of Leading Learning (Education) Ltd, a development and research consultancy committed to helping individuals and organisations develop and innovate by making learning their core business. Having been a teacher and network consultant for the National College for School Leadership, Julie's clients include individual schools, networks and organisations. Julie observes in schools in a wide variety of capacities and works with them as they innovate in the areas of curriculum, teaching and learning and professional learning. Julie is author of a variety of publications including *Engaging Parents Toolkit* (2008) and is a visiting fellow at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. To find out more visit www.leadinglearning.eu.

Lucy Tiplady joined Newcastle University as a researcher in 2005 and since then has developed a wealth of experience in research design, literature review, qualitative, quantitative and visual research methods, data analysis and reporting research findings. Previous research projects include:

- Learning to Learn in Schools Phase 4 Evaluation
- An Evaluation of the DCSF Extended Schools Subsidy Pathfinder
- Helen Hamlyn Trust Open Future Evaluation
- Developing formative assessment using ICTs in education
- Facilitating participation in the design process at Seaham College
- Seaview Primary: Creative Partnerships Evaluation
- An Evaluation of the DfES Full Service Extended Schools (FSES) Initiative
- An evaluation of the Scottish Executive Activating Children's Thinking Skills (ACTS) Project in East Ayrshire.