

# The School Exchange visit: effects on attitudes and proficiency in language learning

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This paper reports the findings of a small-scale study involving Year 9 pupils at three Cambridgeshire schools participating in French exchanges. The findings are based on language tests and attitudinal questionnaires completed before and after the visit abroad and on post-visit interviews. The data suggest that pupils gained a degree of language proficiency and language awareness from their stay, as well as returning with a more favourable attitude towards France and French-speaking people.

## INTRODUCTION

The school exchange is a fixture in most languages departments across the UK, with thousands of pupils and teachers crossing the Channel every year to visit their partner schools. A languages teacher, asked for the rationale behind these visits, might answer that they: enhance the learners' linguistic confidence and ability; lead to a heightened awareness and empathy with the target culture; and raise motivation for language learning. The pupils themselves, when asked why they might take part in an exchange, list reasons such as: practising or improving their French; seeing how others live; seeing new places; fun; being with friends; and meeting new people (Taylor, 2000). It would seem that for both pupils and teachers an improvement in language proficiency remains one of the primary purposes for participating in, or for organising, an exchange. School management and parents also hope that there will be a pay-off in terms of an improvement in pupil results.

And yet there is very little empirically based research that establishes a connection between the experience of school exchange visits and language proficiency. Although there have been several studies at HE level (Willis *et al*, 1977; Dyson, 1988) and most notably Coleman's (1996) extensive survey involving around 25,000 undergraduate language students, there remains little data regarding the language gains from a short period of immersion in a foreign language for school-age children.

Our study, therefore, aimed to answer the

following questions:

- Does participation in an exchange programme have a positive effect on pupils' acquisition of French?
- If there is an effect, what is its nature? (How far is it discernible across all four language skills? Is the effect short-lived or still perceptible in results at GCSE?)

The study's second focus centred on attitudinal factors, namely the way in which the exchange participants adapted to their environment, attempted to make sense of it, and tried to learn from it. Byram (1997b: 69) states that:

"The experience of a total environment affecting all five senses challenges learners in ways which the classroom can seldom imitate".

He claims that where learners are separated from other learners and teachers, and from their family and friends, they have:

"the opportunity to develop attitudes which include the ability to cope with different stages of adaptation, engagement with unfamiliar conventions of behaviour and interaction, and an interest in other cultures which is not that of the tourist or business person."

The study sought, therefore, to answer two final questions:

- What is the effect of a visit abroad in terms of pupils' perceptions of the foreign culture and its people?
- How do pupils adapt to the 'total environment' in which they find themselves and to their period of independence?

## METHOD

The study involved Year 9 pupils learning French at three Cambridgeshire comprehensive schools. In these schools there were 68 pupils taking part

**"there remains little data regarding... language gains... for school-age children"**

in the French exchange, of whom 23 were males (33.8%) and 45 were females (66.2%). This would seem, based on the figures suggested by Taylor's report (2000), to reflect the UK-wide boy/girl bias in exchange uptake. The exchanges lasted 6, 9 and 11 days respectively, with the visit to France constituting the first leg of the exchange and with pupils resident in families for the duration of their stay. In all three cases the exchanges were open to any Year 9 pupil who wished to take part. Before the visit all participants completed a questionnaire aimed at eliciting information about prior contact with France, existing attitudes towards French people and society, and views on their competence and attitude towards learning French. Post-visit (within a week of their return from France) all participants completed a second questionnaire which elicited information on how they spent their time, their relationship with their partner and family, the amount of French spoken, the amount of support they received, their views on French people and society, intentions concerning further contact with France and learning French.

**“58% said that the family encouraged them in their use of French”**

Listening, reading, writing and speaking tests were completed by all participants both before and after the visit. For the speaking tests the pupils were asked to speak about their own home background (pre-visit) and host family and experiences (post-visit). The writing tests were also open-ended tasks of approximately 100-120 words on the topics above. For the listening task pupils listened to a taped recording of young people talking about their home town and had to identify main points and some details. In the pre-visit reading test pupils completed a true/false task relating to a letter from a French penfriend, involving understanding of tense, vocabulary and inferred meaning. The same letter was used in the post-visit test but with a different comprehension task which still measured literal comprehension and inferred meaning, although this time through context and grammatical understanding. The rationale for setting a different task based on the same stimulus was to broaden the range of tools used for measuring improvement.

In addition, and to facilitate an analysis of performance at GCSE level, participants in the exchange were matched with a similar number of non-participants from the same school. The matching was based on Key Stage 2 English and Maths results and internal school test results. These non-participants also completed the pre-visit attitudinal questionnaire and language tests.

Group interviews (between 6 and 8 pupils in each) were also conducted, and recorded, with all participants in order to elicit a description of the exchange experience and their attitudes towards it. The aim here was to identify personal and social factors which might have influenced their language development.

Participants were encouraged to keep a diary during their stay to note what they saw and did,

and to record any new language they learned.

## FINDINGS

### 1. Evidence of gains in proficiency in French

#### 1.1 How much French did the participants use?

As a whole, the pupils indicated that they spoke more French with their partners' families than they did with the partners themselves. Fifteen pupils (22.4%) spoke entirely or mainly in French with their partners, and 17 (25.4%) spoke mainly in English with them. The remainder said they spoke both French and English equally. On the other hand, 27 (39.7%) spoke entirely or mainly in French with their partner's family, and 11 (16.2%) spoke mainly in English. Just over half (58%) said that the family encouraged them in their use of French, 38.8% said that the family did not mind which language was spoken, and 2 (2.9%) pupils reported that the family preferred English. Eleven pupils (16.7%) said that the family always corrected their mistakes in French, 43 (65.2%) said they corrected them sometimes, and 12 (18.2%) said they were never corrected. Very few pupils found the families' efforts at correcting their French a discouraging factor. Of the 11 pupils who said they were corrected continuously, 6 said this encouraged them in speaking the language, 1 said it discouraged her, and 4 said it had no effect. Of the 43 pupils who said they were sometimes corrected, 25 said this encouraged them, and 18 said it had no effect.

#### 1.2 Listening test and Speaking test results

**Table 1 Listening**

Post-visit scores compared with pre-visit scores

	numbers	percentage
higher	38	61.29%
no change	12	19.35%
lower	12	19.35%
N=62		

**Table 2 Speaking**

Post-visit scores compared with pre-visit scores:

	total	pronunciation	accuracy	content	fluency
higher	43.53%	23.07%	26.15%	24.61%	13.84%
no change	21%	64.61%	55.38%	46.15%	70.76%
lower	35.38%	12.3%	18.46%	29.23%	15.38%
N=65					

As Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate, the listening test results revealed the greatest number of improved

scores, with around three fifths of the group improving their aural performance, one fifth remaining the same and one fifth scoring lower on the second test. However only just under half of the pupils improved their extended speaking skills. It would seem that the pupils were able to understand the spoken language, but not yet able to reproduce it.

When the results from the pre- and post-visit speaking tests were analysed it was found that there were a number of common features of improvement. These included:

- Improved pronunciation (French 'R', French nasal sounds)
- More confident delivery
- More detailed information and a longer presentation
- Reduced English
- More sustained correct use of the perfect tense
- Use of reflexives: e.g. 'je me couche'
- Use of 'on' + perfect tense
- Use of idiom: e.g. 'je sais pas'
- Use of 'nous' and '-ons' ending
- Wider range of vocabulary
- Correct use of possessive: e.g. 'la maison de mon partenaire'

### 1.3 Reading test and Writing test results

No distinct pattern of improvement was discernible from an analysis of the reading test results (see Table 3).

**Table 3 Reading**

Post-visit scores compared with pre-visit test scores

	numbers	percentage
higher	27	40.9%
no change	9	13.63%
lower	30	45.45%
N=66		

This could be because written input for the pupils was relatively minor compared to the aural input. Also, the second test at an increased level of difficulty did not perhaps allow pupils to properly demonstrate any improved performance.

There was however an increase in writing proficiency (Table 4), with around 50% of pupils improving on their pre-visit performance.

**Table 4 Writing**

Post-visit scores compared with pre-visit test scores:

	total	fluency	content	accuracy
higher	32 49.2%	26 40%	10 15.4%	21 32.3%
no change	19 29.2%	35 53.8%	43 66.1%	35 53.8%
lower	14 21.5%	4 6.1%	12 18.5%	9 13.8%
N=65				

An analysis of the assessment categories reveals that the pupils' writing improved more in fluency and accuracy than it did in content. The fluency mark measured pupils' expression of opinion, use of idiom or of language beyond the standard corpus of vocabulary taught on the syllabus, as well as the extent to which, through the use of connectives and other syntactic features, the passage flowed together. It was evident from the use of 'parce que', for example, that the pupils were producing work which read better and formed a more coherent whole. Moreover, there was a statistically significant correlation between pupils' improved performance in writing and their claims about the amount of French spoken in their host families ( $p = .010$ ) and the amount of language correction they said they received from them ( $p = .028$ ).

The most visible difference between the pre- and post-visit writing tests is that the majority of the latter were longer. Word-counts reveal that in 38 cases (65.5%) pupils wrote longer pieces – in many cases substantially longer pieces – in the second test. This would seem to indicate greater confidence in their ability to express themselves. It might also indicate the value of having something interesting and novel to say acting as a spur to language production.

The following features were noticeable in the writing of pupils who improved on the written test:

- Increase in the number of words
- No use of German where previously used
- Reduced English interference
- More correct use of the perfect tense (use of auxiliaries [when omitted in pre-visit test], improved accuracy of perfect tense with 'être')
- Use of idiom: e.g. 'j'ai mangé sainement', 'marant' [sic], 'la sable est fine' [sic], 'c'est pal mal' [sic], 'mignon', 'chouette', 'à mon avis', 'comme', 'stressant', use of 'où', 'parce que'
- More range in use of food vocabulary
- Use of 'liking' verbs
- More detail in writing (e.g. more detailed description of location)
- More variety in use of subject pronouns (use of 'nous')
- Use of 'c'était'
- Use of relative pronoun 'qui'
- Future tense attempted
- An attempt at humour

There were also indications of an aural influence on their spelling. Pupils frequently wrote, for example, 'j'acheté' confusing this sound with the -ais/ait/aient imperfect tense ending which they were frequently hearing.

Also noticeable in the work of a number of pupils was a marked attitudinal shift. One weak learner who wrote only in English in the pre-visit test wrote continuous prose in the post-visit test. Whilst his language was very weak, it was obvious that he had been enthused by the trip and the

**"pupils were producing work which read better and formed a more coherent whole"**

people he had met and had tried hard to communicate this: "J'adore le ville francais"(sic).

Another more able pupil who in the first test had written 51 words including a sentence in English telling us "I can't remember French", wrote a much longer piece (160 words) where he enthused about his experiences. When he was stuck this time he no longer wrote that he could not remember French, but that he could not remember a particular word "Je ne ce [sic] pas le français pour...". It is also noticeable that although he was writing partially phonetically his phrasing had shifted from English to the target language.

## 2. Pupils' views on the social conditions of their learning

### 2.1 Changes in pupils' perceptions of the foreign culture and its people

Research findings (Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Schumann, 1986) have demonstrated that attitude to the people of the target country is a key factor in language learning. In his 1996 survey of undergraduate students spending a year abroad, Coleman found that stereotypes about the target people were not weakened at all by residence abroad but, on the contrary, seemed to be strengthened. Between 8% and 15% of students returned from residence abroad with a more negative view of the people than those yet to live there.

In our survey, part of the attitudinal questionnaire was devoted to discovering how the exchange pupils viewed French people before their visit and on their return from France. These included categorising the French according to a 6 point scale with 6 representing the strongest rating for the positive quality. The figures below indicate the number of 5 and 6 responses given in pre- and post-visit questionnaires.

**Table 5 Showing pupils' attitudes to French people before and after the exchange** (on a scale of 1-6 where 6 is the most positive value)

	pre-visit 5	post-visit 5	pre-visit 6	post-visit 6
helpful/ unhelpful	18	25	9	21
good/ill- humoured	10	20	9	24
polite/ rude	16	13	17	22
patient/ impatient	15	19	6	13
tolerant/ intolerant	19	1	1	13
friendly/ unfriendly	25	15	24	40

In contrast to the undergraduate students spending a period abroad, the findings here (Table 5) suggest that the exchange visit had positively affected the UK pupils' views of French people as a whole. This shift towards a more positive attitude is also reflected in pre- and post-visit responses to the question 'Would you like to live in France?'. Before the visit, 18 (26.5%) replied 'yes' to the question, 29 (42.6%) said 'no' and 21 (30.9%) were unsure. After the visit 30 (44.1%) replied 'yes', 14 (20.9%) said 'no' and 24 (35.8%) were unsure.

## 2.2 How do pupils adapt to the 'total environment' in which they find themselves and to their period of independence?

### 2.2.1 Settling into the foreign culture

The pupils expressed mixed views on how quickly they settled at their partner's home. Some were initially homesick or apprehensive as they approached their new 'home'; others got along well very quickly. The most common comments on the best ways of 'breaking the ice' referred to 'low-level language activities' like playing on computers, Nintendo 64, playing football or other sport. Pupils also reported strategies such as talking about pets (especially where both had similar ones) or looking at family and school photos as being useful:

'First of all we weren't really talking but then she got all her photos that her friends had left ... and then [she said] what everyone's name was. It wasn't really sit down and try to speak French; it was just getting to know each other'.

Being allowed to choose what to do and what to eat was also seen as a good way of establishing a rapport. A number of pupils mentioned that having the whole first weekend with the host family was a good way of settling in as there were no English people around and they were forced to talk to their partners and their families. One boy established a form of camaraderie with the group of his partner's friends and did not consider being unable to understand them talking amongst themselves a problem. Others, however, felt excluded from the French peer group by the language:

'They are all right when you get home but when in groups they are horrible'.

This statement, whilst more negative than most pupils' descriptions of their relations with their partners, seems to reflect the general view that the home setting was more welcoming both personally and linguistically than other contexts, such as the French school or day excursions. In most cases, it was evident that very good relations were established with the partner's family; at times this compensated for a not very successful relationship with the partner. The strength of the relationship with the parents was partly based on their skills as hosts and partly built around the question of language. In some cases, the parents

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