

## Investigating Factors that Influence Language Learning Ability

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**Abstract:** In this article we give a brief report of our experiences of conducting a joint Interdisciplinary Project for the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages.

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In 2009, the SQA introduced the Scottish Baccalaureate as an S6 qualification in Scottish schools. The Baccalaureate is available to study in languages or science, and gives students the opportunity to develop their independent learning and research skills. This year, we decided to study for the Baccalaureate in Languages. Our initial aims were to try and find out whether or not age is a limiting factor in a person's ability to absorb a new language, and also to examine effective methods of teaching languages. We understand it's a common assumption that children learn languages more effectively than adults, so we decided to carry out some research in this area and hold a number of language-related events in order to determine our own opinion on the issue.

To see who we thought were the better learners, we decided to host a "French café" themed event for ten adults and ten children. We wanted to see which group retained the most language. A lot of planning went into this, starting with encouraging the pupils to want to become involved. We created a letter to send out to a Primary 4 class, and then took the letter to them to promote the event and get them keen and interested in attending. We received many replies, and we selected ten pupils, along with one parent each to attend the evening. We then had to negotiate a date with our senior management team, the janitors and refectory staff to arrange a suitable night for the event. In the end, we decided on November as this is a quiet time in our school calendar.

Once we knew how many people would be attending, we created a lesson plan for the evening. This had to be thorough and clear without being patronising, as we had to take into consideration that there would be adults there, as well as young children. As a group we then created the final, detailed lesson plan and asked one of the modern languages teachers to check it over, to be sure that it would fulfil all of our learning objectives. We also had to think how we would assess how well parents and children had absorbed our lesson, and decided that the most effective way would be to create a workbook. The final result was a booklet with many pages of exercises, which also contained basic questions for the participants regarding all the vocabulary we would teach on the night.

However, in the course of the evening it became very clear that the adults and children had been working together, so we felt that the results of the evening were invalid in terms of our first objective, although we still got some valuable feedback on our teaching methods. Following these results, we realised how complex and challenging an issue this would be to investigate. In the short time we had available, we couldn't possibly gain access to all the necessary research for this topic, therefore we decided to change the route of our project a little.

We decided to get a professional opinion of whether or not age is a limiting factor in language learning and e-mailed the person in charge of adult language learning at Strathclyde University. At its Centre for Lifelong Learning there are classes for adults, and also classes exclusively for people aged 50+. We arranged a time to go in and meet with the Director to chat a little about how well she felt the classes worked. She told us that the 50+ classes were the most successful and in her view language learning depended less on age than on self-motivation.

We also felt it would be important to show what we had learnt from the first event. In order to do this we decided that each one of us would teach an individual French class, taking into consideration all the feedback we had had. We each taught a Primary 6 class, starting on a new topic but using the knowledge they had already acquired throughout the year. Before we produced the lesson, each pupil was handed out a questionnaire so we would have a better idea of what activities they enjoy in French class, and which methods seemed to get the best response. We then created our lessons taking into account the results of the survey, and incorporating games and PowerPoint Presentations as teaching resources. We also created many worksheets for the children, including exercises such as matching the correct picture to the French, or splitting the children into groups, giving each group a description of an animal in French and allowing them to search around the school for the matching picture. The feedback from the children was very positive, which made us feel really proud.

The progress recorded throughout our project demonstrates the work and effort we have devoted to the project. Our original project aim was to investigate the effect of age on the ability to learn a language. However, although this was our original idea we also discovered that other variables might affect the ability to learn a foreign language, for example certain teaching methods which people may relate to and thus understand foreign language better. We discovered all this through our surveys and by talking to different people including children, parents and teachers of both adults and children. These variables proved to just as much a limiting or aiding factor to the ability one has to learn a language as the age issue.

This project has most definitely given us a confidence that we lacked before, and at the end enabled us to stand up in front of a class and teach alone. This growth can be noted through the fact that at the start of the year we carried out our French lesson together, planned and organised as a team. However, in the final stage of the project every one of us was able to create and teach a final lesson, using what we had learnt throughout

the year about effective methods of teaching and the ages we think are most likely to respond better to new topics taught by a stranger.

Overall we felt that this project was quite successful, even though we were not able to prove, as we thought we would, that age can have a significant impact on language learning ability. Instead, we discovered a lot of other important variables. We have learnt how important motivation is when learning a language. Putting in the time and effort required seems to make the biggest difference in learning. In other words the effect of age doesn't really match incentive.

The process and completion of this project has been highly useful for us in other ways, too. We have learned valuable skills and have increased our confidence through a variety of out-of-school situations and interaction with adults and teachers in unfamiliar settings. Meeting with the director of language services at Strathclyde University also gave us an insight into the challenging life at university and what may be expected of us there. This is something that we can now say we feel ready to take on. As well as confidence and communication we have acquired useful skills for daily life such as working efficiently within a timeframe, the importance of being organised, working both independently and in a group and various research skills. We are now able to take constructive feedback and advice on board and have successfully worked through the various difficulties and obstacles we came across throughout. It has helped our growth and maturity. All these things have made us feel more prepared for future life challenges - and of course study at university, where we look forward to further developing the vital skills we have acquired throughout this process!!!