The following case study is formed from a compilation of excerpts taken from my Masters degree research project, which was graded as ‘Merit’. Title: To what extent does learning sign language alongside a foreign language in Modern Foreign Languages lessons support oral vocabulary retention in the foreign language?

Introduction

Pachler and Field (2001) demonstrated that the teaching of Modern Foreign Languages in secondary education posed many challenges, more than a decade later this would still appear to be the case, with the introduction of the ‘EBacc’ and since its withdrawal, the new league table performance indicators, placing more value on MFL GCSE results than ever before, with a view to increasing uptake of MFL at GCSE (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012) teachers of MFL are continually required to develop strategies and adapt their practice to boost the results of the students which they teach. One of the main challenges which I have encountered in my practice as a teacher of Modern Foreign Languages is developing effective strategies to support learners’ retention of vocabulary. The aim of this research project is to trial the teaching of vocabulary in French with sign language and investigate the effect on students’ language retention.

Rationale

Knowles (2010) advocates that in teaching, it is important to incorporate a range of learning styles in order to suit our learners, this a view which is supported by Doyle (2011) who asserts that students should not only have the opportunity to apply a range of learning styles but also be aware of their own preferred learning style and how best to apply it; Pashler et al (2008) however claim that there is insufficient conclusive evidence to support application of learning styles in general educational practice. Coffield et al (2004) agree that whilst there is a relative lack of knowledge concerning learning styles amongst educational practitioners, teaching in such a manner which provides learners the opportunity to exercise their own preferred learning style is widely recognised as good practice. This is a view which is supported by Kara (2009:77) who states that when there is a ‘mismatch’ between teaching and learning styles it can result in failure.

In addition to this, the opportunity to teach the students some sign language means that students can learn both French and Sign Language in their MFL lessons. There are also students in our Academy who use Makaton signs to aid their communication, I feel that if more students were to learn this sign language it would enhance our Academy’s inclusive ethos.

Makaton language development program is proven to be successful in supporting the development of speech in children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and in Early Years education (Mistry and Barnes, 2011), a stance which is supported by Sheehy and Duffy (2009) who state that the Makaton program is well regarded amongst professionals for aiding speech development in children with limited or developing communication skills.

Method

I decided that the best approach would be to teach all classes in a year group half of the words with the sign language and half without. Whilst considering which words to teach with sign language and which ones to teach without I ensured that there was an equal number of cognates taught in both sections. If a student was absent for one lesson, they were removed from the sample. The resulting sample of one hundred and thirty eight subjects was large enough from which to draw meaningful conclusions and analyse sub-groups within the data.

Whilst I have stated that it is appropriate for me to draw conclusions from this sample, these conclusions may not be transferrable nationally as there are several factors which form the unique context for this investigation such as Academy procedures, socio-economic factors and students’ background knowledge.
Results

The aim of this research project was to test the research question: To what extent does learning sign language alongside a foreign language in Modern Foreign Languages lessons support oral vocabulary retention in the foreign language? My hypothesis is that students will have noticeably higher levels of oral language retention when taught the vocabulary with the sign language, from my further reading I believe that this trend will be more notable in students with additional needs such as SPLD or are EAL.

As can be seen, the overall percentage of students’ correct answers when vocabulary was taught alongside sign language was eleven percent higher than for vocabulary which was taught without sign language. It can also be seen that students in the subgroups were more able to recall vocabulary which was taught with sign language, this is more notable amongst the ‘EAL’ and ‘SPLD’ groups of students.

Birsch (2011) states that if students are taught with a multi-sensory approach they are not only more likely to learn the content which they are being taught but also as Fisher (2005) suggests, teaching students to multitask and providing them with opportunities to practice will develop their metacognitive ability. Meyer (2001) however highlights that students with learning difficulties often find multitasking more difficult than their peers. It is therefore possible that for these students, this support strategy could actually make MFL more difficult, although Makaton signs are developed for people with learning difficulties and the trends shown in my research would appear to repudiate this.

It is important to note that this investigation has focused on students’ oral vocabulary retention, the experimental strategy has therefore only been applied at a single word level, Makaton signs are designed to be one aspect of a program which is used as a method for supporting communication, as such they can be applied to full phrases and sentences. This has not been the focus of this investigation and would form an appropriate basis for further research.

Although this research project has specifically focussed on the use of sign language as a support to language retention, on a wider scale it is an investigation into the application of multisensory teaching in Modern Foreign Languages. It is possible that the results of this research could be used to form an argument in support of the application of ‘VAK’ approaches to teaching. Whilst I would agree that the positive results of the research indicate that a multi-sensory approach to teaching vocabulary in MFL is effective; it does not support the theory of students having a specific learning style in which they should be taught or advocate a specific design for the classification of learning styles. This is because all students have been taught with the above method and eighty three percent of students, which is a notable majority, have either given the same amount of correct answers for words taught with and without sign language or have given more correct answers for words given with sign language.

Does teaching sign language and vocabulary in MFL alongside each other aid students’ language retention?

From my investigation it would seem that this is the case, overall students were able to retain and recall eleven percent more of the language which was taught with sign language than language which was taught without the sign. As previously discussed in this report, I believe that this is because a multisensory approach enables students to retain language more effectively in addition to raising levels of engagement as advocated by previously identified theorists such as Carreker and Birsch (2011).

To what extent is this the case?

Having proven that students in this study were more able to retain and recall language which was taught alongside sign language, the research question asks to what extent students are supported. There was an eleven percent increase overall in language retention when taught with the Makaton signs; this statistic although not insignificant in itself was more significant for some of the identified sub-groups.

Are there specific groups for whom this strategy is particularly effective?

The investigation found that the strategy was particularly effective in increasing language retention in students with EAL and SPLD, as previously identified theorists such as Regan (2011), Washbourne (2011) and Murphy (2011) would advocate, although the size of these groups means that further research into this is required, my findings seem to support Theorists who suggest that using sign language with students who have EAL is a particularly effective strategy for supporting language development and that multi-sensory learning experiences are beneficial to learners with SPLD.

From my perspective as an MFL practitioner, the findings of this research have reiterated the need for a multisensory approach when teaching students. It outlines the benefit of such an approach, particularly for students with EAL and SPLD.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Difference between % correct answers taught with/without Makaton</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>+ 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EAL</td>
<td>+ 32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPLD</td>
<td>+ 27%</td>
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<tr>
<td>G&amp;T</td>
<td>+ 5%</td>
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Bibliography


Regan, S. (2011) An Evaluation of Strategies in place for students with EAL in Music Education. Noderstedt: GRIM.
