

MAIN FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The aims of the Baseline Study were to investigate the situation in Slovenian primary and secondary schools in regard to the use of language assistants, to identify areas of good practice, find out what the problems were from the perspectives of language assistants, mentors, non-mentor teachers, students, and headteachers, and to write recommendations for further investigations, changes and improvements.

For this purpose 34 classroom observations were performed in 31 schools, 31 headteachers were interviewed and 33 post-lesson interviews were conducted with language assistants. 30 interviews with the observed teachers and 34 with groups of students were analysed, together with 26 questionnaires for language assistants and 65 questionnaires for the other language teachers who were not observed in the classroom.

The analysis of the collected data shows an overall positive effect of language assistants and the recommendation is that the Project should continue. However, there are many improvements to be made as well as things to define.

MAIN FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Type of Teaching

The purpose of classroom observations was to learn what the current practice in the classrooms was. There were three types of teaching practice observed:

- solo teaching
- split classes
- team teaching.

We¹ understand solo teaching to be that the assistant plans the lesson without the teacher's input and performs the lesson without the teacher present in the classroom. By split classes we mean that the teacher teaches part of the class in one classroom and the assistant the rest of the class in another room. We expect that when classes are split in this way there is an agreement between the teacher and the assistant, for example in the way the class is divided, in the materials used, topics discussed, follow-up work to be done and that, after the lesson, feedback is shared. We consider team teaching to consist of collaboration between the teacher and the language assistant, including at least one of the following:

- planning the lesson together

¹ In this chapter 'we' refers to the Baseline Study Team.

- designing or finding materials together
- both the teacher and the assistant being present in the classroom
- during the lesson the teacher being involved in more reactive work and participating as an active observer while the assistant is teaching
- during the lesson the assistant being involved in more reactive work and participating as an active observer while the teacher is teaching
- both performing the lesson together
- sharing feedback by discussing the lesson
- devising testing materials together
- planning future work together.

We expected that there would be more team teaching in the classes taught by mentor teachers than in the classes taught by non-mentor teachers because we believed that mentors would be more familiar with the Project. However, the results only roughly match the expectations i.e. team teaching was practised slightly more in classes with mentor teachers than in classes with non-mentor teachers.

The classroom observations also showed that across all types of schools there was 59 % team teaching and 41% solo teaching. We expected much more team teaching, especially as not all assistants were qualified teachers and they were supposed only to help teachers to carry out the lessons. However, judging from the sociograms, completed during the observed lessons, teachers were less actively involved in classroom activities than language assistants. The role of the teacher during the lesson was mostly to complement the assistant and help the students.

However, there was a difference in the occurrence of team teaching depending on the type of school observed. A higher percentage of team teaching was observed in primary schools and vocational schools while most solo teaching took place in grammar schools. Unfortunately, we cannot find an explanation for this in the data, and we can only speculate that team teaching in primary schools may be due to the age of the pupils or it could be the result of disciplinary problems. On the other hand, solo teaching in grammar schools may be due to the fact that the level of the students' language command was higher or the profile of the language assistants assigned to grammar schools was different. Other explanations might be that grammar schools are more traditional and as such might be more resistant to the Project's policy of team teaching.

More team teaching was practised in smaller classes (from 13 to 20 students) than in larger ones (from 21 or more students). Again the data did not offer an explanation for this surprising result. We would have assumed that larger classes would benefit more from having both the assistant and the teacher in the classroom, as this would give students more opportunity to practise the language. However, an explanation for this result may be that teachers and language assistants might not be trained properly how to team teach and therefore, in smaller classes they may feel safer experimenting with team teaching, while in larger classes the teacher may be worried about their ability to concentrate on controlling the class and working with the assistant simultaneously. Therefore, we recommend that teachers be offered training in team teaching so that they can advise assistants on the practice and feel confident to perform it in the classroom, regardless of the number of students.

In general, the most common form of teaching was solo teaching, followed by team teaching, then split classes and finally, a combination of all. It should be noted that, the information gathered from teachers, headteachers and assistants on the amount of solo teaching as compared to team teaching, did not agree with each other. This may be due to the fact that the terms, *solo teaching*, *team teaching* and *split classes* were understood differently. To solve this misunderstanding we recommend that the terms be defined (as previously defined) and made available to teachers, headteachers and assistants.

However, the responses show that many assistants teach on their own. As the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia² states, in the contract between the Ministry and the school from the year 2000, that assistants are allowed to lead the lessons independently only if they fulfil the formal requirements and they have at least three years of language teaching experience. In this case the assistant should independently teach at least six hours a week assigned on the timetable. Therefore, it is especially worrying that less experienced assistants who do not fulfil the requirements of the contract perform solo teaching. We recommend that the contract between the Ministry and the school be available to and read by the mentors and explained to assistants and other foreign language teachers, so that the conditions can be followed.

Another point, which needs to be addressed from the aforementioned contract, is the term *formal requirements*. At the moment this term is not explained. Therefore, we recommend that the Ministry attend to this matter.

It should be noted that although the Project is based on team teaching, all assistants, according to the contract between the Ministry and the school, are obliged to cover for teachers who are absent from school. In this case only solo teaching can be performed. However, the issue of covering for an absent teacher should be clarified in the contract and under which circumstances. The following points should be addressed:

- is the assistant expected to cover for any teacher or just for a foreign language teacher
- is the assistant expected to cover any foreign language hours or just those for which they are timetabled
- is the assistant expected to cover foreign language hours when they have a gap in their timetable
- are the assistants with less than three years of language teaching experience allowed to cover for an absent teacher
- in the case of substitution lessons, is the assistant required to exceed the maximum number of 20 hours a week, as stated in the contract and if this is the case, how is the assistant rewarded for the extra hours?

The majority of the assistants preferred solo teaching, followed by team teaching and split classes. It should be noted that split classes are a type of teaching, which incorporates both solo and team teaching. Namely, the assistant is on their own with a part of the class but there is collaboration between the teacher and the assistant at both the planning and the feedback stage. In the contract between the Ministry and the school the concept of split classes needs to be clarified. The following points should be included:

² From now in this chapter *The Ministry of Education, Science and Sport of the Republic of Slovenia* will be referred to as the *Ministry*.

- whether this counts as solo teaching and therefore all assistants are allowed to perform it
- the importance and need for shared planning and feedback should be stressed
- that the work of the assistant should be monitored.

One of the assistants commented: *'I like solo teaching because it gives me total control over exactly how much material to teach and what kind of practice exercises to design. However, team teaching would allow teachers to learn from each other and help overcome problems as a team. The teaching profession desperately needs this.'*

Split classes are good practice because they combine the qualities of solo and team teaching. They also allow the students to work in smaller groups, which is beneficial to them. Therefore, we recommend teaching in split classes should be encouraged.

Work Management

We expected that language assistants would use a variety of work management: students' individual work, pair work, group work and also some frontal teaching and that teachers would use more frontal work management, e.g. while giving instructions. A lot of frontal teaching was done by the language assistants, and also by the teachers during the observed lesson, but nevertheless, the lessons were still student-centred. However, problems with classroom and time management were observed. Therefore, this shows a need for training in classroom management especially during team teaching.

Topics

A variety of different topics were covered in the observed classes and language assistants focused on cultural content and current events. More students discussed the target culture than Slovenian culture in the lessons with their language assistant. The topics that students enjoyed most were cultural, which is not surprising, as native speakers are known to be a resource on cultural issues. As there are no materials designed especially for language assistants to use in the classroom there is a need to compile and design cultural materials.

Teaching grammar was carried out by language assistants in five classes, which was surprising, as we did not expect the assistants to tackle grammar. According to the induction course guidelines language assistants are not supposed to be doing grammar in the class. What we do not know is how well the assistants were teaching grammar. However, this may suggest that only when the assistant is capable and willing to teach grammar they should be allowed to do so with the consent of the teacher.

Skills

We expected that speaking would be practised more than the other skills because we assumed that teachers and students would take advantage of having a native speaker. The data from the classroom observations shows that more than one skill was usually practised and that in fact speaking was the most practised skill during the observed lessons. This practice should be encouraged.

Sources

The assistants used textbooks and other supplementary materials, especially newspapers, magazines, books, brochures, the Internet, music cassettes and compact discs. Although during the observed lessons there was frequent use of textbooks, this was not the case during the lessons in general, as reported in the interviews with the students and language assistants, where supplementary materials were used more frequently. Therefore, this practice should be supported by the organisation of training for both language assistants and teachers on using supplementary materials in the classroom.

Motivation, Interaction, Atmosphere and Discipline

Students are fairly motivated during the lessons with their language assistant regardless of the number of years they had had the language assistant or the type of the school they attended. Nearly all students liked working with their language assistant. Approximately half of the students found the assistant's lessons more enjoyable and interesting than their teacher's. A similar number of students liked having two teachers at the same time.

As far as interaction was concerned, most of our expectations were met. There were more interactions between the students and the language assistant than between the students and the teacher in the observed classes. In fact, the largest total number of initiatives came from students addressing assistants.

In all observed classes the atmosphere was relaxed, and most students were positive about the atmosphere in the classroom with their language assistant.

Contrary to our expectations discipline did not seem to be a problem when a language assistant was alone with the students. Only approximately one third of the students said that discipline was better with the teacher and half of them that the discipline was the same.

From the above it can be concluded that assistants teaching on their own would be appreciated by the students and therefore, teaching in split classes should be encouraged.

Planning

Teachers and assistants did not agree, firstly, on who did the planning of the observed lesson and secondly, on the amount of work put into the planning. The discrepancy in the answers may be due to a different understanding of the concept of planning. For some, planning may mean suggesting the topic to cover, whereas for others it may mean finding materials and devising a lesson plan. However, it has to be pointed out that there was co-operation between assistants and teachers after the lesson, which should be encouraged also in the future.

We recommend that a time be allocated for the assistant and the teacher to plan the lesson and to discuss it afterwards.

Frequency

The majority of language assistants taught the same classes once a week. However, the majority of students would like to have them more often because this would give them more opportunities to use a foreign language and because they found language assistants'

lessons enjoyable. We recommend that if possible the language assistants should see classes at least once a week.

Training of Language Assistants

We supposed that the most common need of language assistants would be for information about the Slovenian school system but they gave a variety of answers and the most frequently reported need was for a seminar on classroom management and foreign language teaching methodology. We therefore recommend that during the induction course assistants should be given training on classroom management and teaching methodology.

Returning assistants would like to contribute to future induction courses mainly by sharing experiences. We suggest that returning assistants are invited to the induction course.

It was expected that all assistants would observe classes before starting to teach but this was not the case. What is worrying is that four assistants of the six who did not observe lessons were in Slovenia for the first time and two of them had no previous teaching experience. The average length of the observation period was one week and most language assistants found it useful. The observation period in grammar schools was shorter than in the other schools, which might indicate that these schools consider that the observation period could be shorter or they act against the induction course suggestions. We recommend that assistants who are at the school for the first time should observe lessons for a minimum of a week. Although this is already the suggested practice some schools need to be reminded of its importance.

The majority of language assistants had already attended official meetings with the other language assistants and most of them enjoyed them. However, it was worrying that for three of the five assistants who had not attended any meetings, this was their first year in Slovenia. Attendance at these meetings should be compulsory for assistants and their mentors should be invited to participate in order to be informed of any new developments and to help the assistants overcome possible problems in reaching the venue.

It is worth mentioning that although some language assistants thought that it was important for them to learn Slovenian beyond survival level, the level of Slovenian did not have an effect on the assistants' professional and personal satisfaction. It should be left to their own judgement how much Slovenian they learn.

Extra-Curricular Activities

The answers in the post-lesson interview showed that almost all language assistants were involved in a variety of activities. They most frequently attended excursions, sports days, and trips or they were involved in school newspapers, magazines and language competitions.

It was surprising that two thirds of the language assistants did not answer the question as to whether they enjoyed the activities. Language assistants also enumerated a number of activities they would like to be involved in and quite a large number of them would not like to be involved in any other extra-curricular activities.

Students claimed that language assistants were mostly involved in sports and cultural days and half of the teachers said that assistants helped them with extra-curricular activities. This indicates that language assistants should be encouraged as well as given support in

getting involved in extra-curricular activities. We recommend that teachers involve the language assistants in extra-curricular activities they are in charge of or participate in.

Socialising

In general students do not socialise informally with their language assistants outside school. However, the students who perceived most progress in their language acquisition also had some form of contact outside school. We should therefore encourage out of the class contact with language assistants.

In addition, teachers in general do not socialise; however, if the assistant had a problem they would be willing to help. Socialising between the teacher and the assistant should be supported because this may lead to better co-operation in their professional field.

Parents

Almost all students claimed that their parents knew that there was a language assistant in their school. Most headteachers said that the attitude of the parents towards having a language assistant was positive. The implication was that parents were interested in the Scheme.

Assessment

According to the law, assistants are not allowed to assess on their own. Therefore, the assessment of the assistant's input should be performed either by the assistant and the teacher together or by the teacher alone. The data shows that occasionally the teacher and the assistant do assess together. Teachers tend to include topics covered in the assistant's lessons into their tests, which seems to be the current practice in most schools. Nevertheless, we recommend that the issue of assistants assessing should be included in the contract between the Ministry and the school.

Assistants quite often help the teachers correct written work, excluding tests. As there is no job description for language assistants it is not clear whether this is their task. Therefore, we recommend that a job description for language assistants should be drawn up and it should include suggestions on whether and how much correction work should be done on the part of the assistant.

Headteachers

Three quarters of the headteachers applied for an assistant because they believed the quality of teaching would be improved, new methods of work would be developed, language assistants would bring new ideas and would help teachers. And the same number of headteachers claimed that their expectations have been completely fulfilled. This indicates that headteachers are in general positive about the Scheme.

Recruitment of Language Assistants

Over half the language assistants had been in Slovenia for more than a year. From the data we might conclude that the assistants liked living and working in Slovenia.

Most language assistants had prior teaching experience, but the data did not show how many language assistants had taught their native language as a foreign language. Half the language assistants had a degree in subjects other than languages and education. The ideal is to recruit assistants with a language degree, but results show that such people are not applying for the positions. Therefore, we recommend that the way in which the positions are advertised be looked into, with the hope that candidates with relevant experience apply.

Mentors

Mentors were chosen according to the interests and wishes of the Language Departments or via a mutual agreement between the future mentor and the other teachers and/or the headteacher. Alternatively, the headteacher alone appointed the mentor.

When describing the role of a mentor, headteachers and non-mentor teachers gave a variety of answers:

- advising
- guiding
- helping language assistants
- planning and organising the work of the language assistant
- paperwork.

This shows that mentors had a lot of additional work to do. Three quarters of the headteachers rewarded their mentors. Although the possibilities to reward them within the existing school system did not exist the headteachers tried to find certain ways of rewarding them. They admitted that this was not satisfactory. Therefore, there is a strong need for the mentor's role to be officially recognised and a system of rewards to be clearly established. In order to do this a job description for mentors, taking the results of the Baseline Study into account, should be written and also presented to mentors before the beginning of a school year.

According to the data, mentors need training, which will help them gain the knowledge, skills and confidence for their roles. The following are the training objectives:

- relationship management: forming, maintaining and ending
- classroom management
- intercultural issues
- team work
- team teaching
- classroom observation
- active listening
- sensitive approach in discussions with the assistant
- assessing and evaluating assistant's work.

The attendance of first-time mentors at induction courses has to be made compulsory whereas experienced mentors will need to be informed about the latest developments in the Scheme. This can be organised through yearly meetings or other ways of training.

Problems

After the classroom observations observers were asked to write down their general impressions of the lessons. Besides many positive observations there were also some negative comments such as bad class and time management, bad work management, poor motivation, inactive students, or even disruptive students.

Problems mentioned by the observed teachers themselves included problems with timetables and the organisation of the work, forgetfulness and inconsistency of the language assistants and language assistants without proper pedagogical knowledge.

Language assistants mentioned problems such as disorganisation in schools and non-integration in school life, lack of discipline, uncooperative classes, bureaucracy and social isolation. Language assistants themselves suggested how their relationships with students, with mentors and with other non-mentor teachers could be improved. They suggested: smaller groups of students, more advice on team teaching, lesson planning and language/classroom/ teaching strategies, better understanding of their role and the school rules, better mutual understanding of mentors and language assistants, teachers should be more productive and flexible.

In addition, the data shows that nearly three quarters of the headteachers had had some problems with administrative procedures. Our recommendation is that the administrative procedure should be simplified.

Benefits

Observers listed many positive impressions, which matched the data concerning the relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere, active students, diversity of activities, well-prepared lessons, good classroom and time management. All students liked the lessons with their language assistants and what they liked best about them was that they could practise their conversational skills and also learn about the target culture. They also believed that their knowledge of the foreign language had improved since the language assistant's arrival mostly in speaking and vocabulary, which was supported by the teachers' belief that their students had benefited from working with the language assistant. Students were also more self-confident than in lessons with the teacher.

Most of the observed teachers and non-mentor teachers thought that they had benefited in conversation with the native speaker and they had also enriched their vocabulary. They were happy to have the opportunity to ask their language assistant how to solve some language problems. The language assistants provided them with up-to-date information on culture and social life and some of the teachers had also refreshed their ideas on methodology. All non-mentor teachers considered language assistants useful and only a few of them did not consider them to be a part of the teaching staff.

The majority of the headteachers believed that language assistants helped promote the school and they felt that the best thing about having a language assistant was that language assistants helped to raise cultural awareness and that students could converse with native speakers.

Assistants' Views of Their Time in Slovenia

The majority of language assistants' expectations about Slovenia had been met professionally, as well as personally. Most of the satisfaction came from good relationships with students and teachers and enjoying life outside school (culture, sport, travelling).

None of the language assistants complained about their relationship with students and teachers and half of them had had an excellent relationship with students. More than half of the assistants had had an excellent relationship with students and non-mentor teachers while the majority of them had an excellent relationship with their mentors.

When answering the question as to how they could contribute to the improvement of language teaching in Slovenia, most language assistants said that they saw their role in giving students more confidence especially in speaking, in giving first hand information about the life and culture of their native country, and in providing new resources and different ways of teaching.

Language assistants rated their time in Slovenia as either good or excellent.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Language Teachers and Mentors

- ❖ Teachers should be offered training in team teaching so that they can advise assistants on the practice and feel confident to perform it in the classroom, regardless of the number of students.
- ❖ Teachers need training in classroom management especially during team teaching.
- ❖ The practice of using supplementary materials in the classroom should be supported by the organisation of training for teachers.
- ❖ There is a need to encourage cooperation between teachers and language assistants.
- ❖ Teachers should incorporate assistants' work in either written assessment or in the oral part of the assessment in order to add to the credibility and image of the language assistant.
- ❖ Teachers need additional training on how to prepare innovative supplementary material.
- ❖ More cooperation between the mentor and other language teachers should be encouraged.
- ❖ Foreign language teachers should be encouraged to apply, as a Language Department, for a language assistant.

Mentors

- ❖ There is a strong need for the mentor's role to be officially recognised.
- ❖ A job description for mentors should be designed.
- ❖ We recommend compulsory initial training for mentors according to the proposed job description.
- ❖ The mentors need training in observation, teacher training, intercultural studies, debating and giving feedback.

- ❖ At the beginning of the school year mentors should be given guidelines on how to work with the assistant.
- ❖ The mentors need training on how to perform team teaching.
- ❖ The mentor should on receiving the assistant's profile, establish contact.
- ❖ All mentors should attend induction courses, annually.

Assistants

- ❖ All assistants should attend induction courses, annually.
- ❖ Assistants need training in classroom management especially during team teaching.
- ❖ The practice of using supplementary materials in the classroom should be supported by the organisation of training for language assistants.
- ❖ Language assistants need additional training on how to use innovative supplementary material.
- ❖ There is a need to encourage cooperation between language assistants and teachers.
- ❖ Basic level proficiency Slovenian is essential but after that the assistant should be allowed to choose whether or not he/she attends a language course.

Job Descriptions

- ❖ A job description of the mentor should be written, taking the results of the Baseline Study into account, to make it easier to determine what kind of training mentors need and what their responsibilities are.
- ❖ The job description of the mentors should be presented to mentors and headteachers before the beginning of the school year and other language teachers should be informed about it.
- ❖ A job description of language assistants should be designed and it should include suggestions on whether and how much correction work should be done on the part of the assistant.

Rewards

- ❖ There is a strong need for a reward system for mentors to be established.

Recruitment

- ❖ The process of recruitment should be improved.
- ❖ As there is more recruitment taking place directly in Slovenia, there is a need to train people to interview future assistants.
- ❖ The way in which the positions of future assistants are advertised should be looked into, with the hope that candidates with relevant experience apply.
- ❖ The assistant's wishes expressed either on the application form or at interview concerning the geographical area and the level of school should be respected.

Administrative Matters

- ❖ The administrative procedure for obtaining the paperwork should be simplified.

- ❖ The Ministry should provide the school with the assistant's profile by the beginning of May in order to enable prior contact between the assistant and the school, and especially the mentor.

Induction Course and Official Meetings

- ❖ During the induction course assistants should be given training on classroom management and teaching methodology.
- ❖ Returning assistants should be invited to the induction course.
- ❖ All mentors and new language assistants should be invited and attend the induction course.
- ❖ Induction courses should continue addressing topics that have been dealt with so far: Slovenian education system, basic instructions on cooperation between the mentor and the assistant, and Slovenian language for the assistants.
- ❖ Practical guidelines should be given to mentors at the induction courses on how to work with language assistants.
- ❖ Future assistants should be informed about examples of good practice in the classroom.
- ❖ A few students should be invited to induction courses to provide information to the assistants on their experiences with an assistant and what they found useful.
- ❖ Attendance at official meetings should be compulsory on the part of assistants and their mentors should be invited to participate in order to be informed of any new developments and last but not least to help the assistants overcome the possible problems of reaching the venue.
- ❖ The organiser should attend to social aspects of future induction courses and official meetings.

Observation Period

- ❖ Assistants who are at the school for the first time should observe lessons for a minimum of a week. Although this is already the suggested practice some schools need to be reminded of its importance. The observation period should be monitored so that there is uniformity.

Scheduling

- ❖ Some time should be allocated for the assistant and the teacher to plan the lesson and to discuss it afterwards.
- ❖ If possible the language assistants should see classes at least once a week.

Types of Teaching

- ❖ All terms, such as solo teaching, team teaching and split classes should be defined and definitions made available to teachers, headteachers and assistants.
- ❖ Team teaching should be encouraged.
- ❖ Teaching in split classes should be encouraged.

Topics and Skills

- ❖ Language assistants and teachers should be encouraged to pay special attention to raising intercultural awareness.
- ❖ As there are no materials designed especially for language assistants to use in the classroom, there is a need to compile and design cultural materials. A bank of supplementary materials should be created.
- ❖ If assistants are capable and willing to teach grammar they should be allowed to do so with the consent of the teacher.
- ❖ Language assistants should continue to deal with practising conversational skills.
- ❖ More language assistants and teachers should give the students the opportunity to choose topics.

Extra Curricular Activities

- ❖ Language assistants should be encouraged as well as given support in getting involved in extra-curricular activities. We recommend that teachers involve the language assistants in extra-curricular activities they are in charge of or participate in.
- ❖ Socialising between the teacher and the assistant should be supported because this may lead to better cooperation in the professional field.
- ❖ The varied background of the assistants should be exploited in the interest of the students and the school.

Evaluation of the Scheme

- ❖ Classroom observations similar to those, which took place in May 2000, should be repeated to follow up the progress made in language teaching with the language assistants within the Scheme.
- ❖ Examples of good practice should be collected, presented and analysed to promote better teaching. The sociograms of the observed lessons could be collected and given to future language assistants to give them a clearer picture of good and bad practice in the classroom.

The Way Forward

- ❖ Headteachers suggest that assistants should stay at the same school for more than one year.
- ❖ Further investigation into whether two or more schools should share the same assistant should be done.
- ❖ There should be an exchange of assistants between schools on the grounds that the assistants have different cultural backgrounds and interests.
- ❖ The National Institute of Education should be more actively involved in training and evaluation of the Scheme.
- ❖ Criteria for selecting schools to participate in the Scheme should be revised.
- ❖ More cultural institutions in the countries that the assistants come from should be contacted and asked to participate in the Scheme.
- ❖ The programme should continue due to the positive relationship between students and assistants as well as between other language teachers and language assistants.
- ❖ The Language Assistant Scheme as a support to foreign language tuition should continue.

