

LEARNING FRENCH IN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL

THE ROLE OF TEACHING AND TEACHER FACTORS

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STUDY AIMS

- Within the context of learning French in England at primary school, to compare the impact of oracy and literacy approaches on:
- Children's knowledge of the underlying system of the foreign language (gender, adjectival endings, simple present)
- Investigate the impact of other teaching and teacher-related factors

PRIMARY LANGUAGES

- Relatively little research into outcomes of PML in England
- Amount and quality of input important (Myles & Mitchell, 2011; Muñoz, 2014) – more important than age in classroom contexts
- Little research evidence regarding relative benefits of different teaching approaches, or of the impact of different teacher-related factors (proficiency, training, teaching time)

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING

- To ensure we establish the best possible environment for language learning in the primary school, we need to establish what the impact on outcomes is of variability across teaching and teacher factors
- Essential information if we are to support teachers adequately

TEACHER FACTORS AND ATTAINMENT

- Edelenbos and Suhre (1994): teaching approaches (grammar vs. CLT), teaching experience and teaching qualifications, teacher spoken fluency, teaching time
- Teaching time positively related to all scores except learners' spoken fluency
- Teaching qualification the most important teacher factor for predicting a wide range of outcomes
- Teacher spoken fluency positively related only to learners' grammar scores
- Only difference attributable to course on the grammar test - learners following 'grammar' courses had the higher scores.
- Teachers who used grammar courses also the most qualified and experienced; also had more teaching time

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

- Research, mainly in EFL/ESL contexts, indicates a complex relationship between teacher factors and outcomes
- Bowers and Vasilyeva (2011) - number of words spoken by native speaker teachers positively related to learners' receptive vocabulary knowledge, but length of teacher's utterances negatively correlated with it.

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

- Relatively uncomplicated input needed for beginners, who can only take advantage of native speaker input once they are beyond the very beginner stage?
- But native speaker input may sow the seeds for later development?
- Aukrust (2007) - amount, diversity, and discourse complexity of teacher input only predicted preschool learners' language outcomes two years later

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND TEACHING TIME

- Unsworth, Persson, Prins and De Bot (2015)
- Impact of teacher language expertise and weekly language lesson time on vocabulary and grammar for 194 Dutch children learning English, 1st two years of learning
- Teacher (oral) language proficiency- from native speaker to A1
- Weekly English lesson time ranged from 40 ('regular' English classes) to 220 minutes ('early English' schools)

TEACHER LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND TEACHING TIME

- Both teaching time and teacher proficiency very important factors in scores for grammar and vocabulary development, especially where children received under 60 minutes a week of English instruction, and where the teachers' proficiency level was below level B1.
- But teachers' proficiency was the best predictor of outcomes

OUR OWN CONTEXT

- Issues of teaching time, teacher language proficiency and training (Tinsley & Board, 2016)

TEACHING APPROACHES

- ‘Oracy’ and ‘literacy’ equally weighted in previous Key Stage 2 Framework (2005)
- Current National Curriculum - increased emphasis on literacy-based skills
- However: in practice oracy predominates
- Reading/writing skills less well-developed (Cable et al, 2010; Ofsted, 2011)
- Low use of verbs and high use of formulaic phrases
- **Unclear whether this is directly attributable to a largely oral approach**

Research questions

- What is the impact of two different teaching approaches on vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (gender, adjectival agreement, simple present tense verbs) for learners of French in Years 5, 6 and 7?
- What is the relationship between teacher language proficiency, training, teaching time at KS2 on vocabulary and grammatical knowledge?

- Longitudinal, over two years (2012-2014)
- Tasks in Years 5, 6 and 7
- *Participants*
- Approx. 250 children in total (9 schools)
- Oracy and literacy groups (3 schools each, removing borderline schools), based on teachers' reported (questionnaire) and actual practice (observation)

Research design and participants

Language tasks + questionnaire	Whole sample	Oracy	Literacy
Time 1 (Summer Year 5) - tests	252	73	103
Time 2 (Spring Year 6) Tests + quest.	241	68	100
Time 3 (Autumn Year 7) tests + quest.	164	54	77

TEACHING/TEACHER VARIABLES

School	Teacher French	Training in language teaching	Minutes per week	Teaching approach
1	Degree	PGCE specialism	60	Literacy
2	Native speaker	PGCE specialism	40	Oracy
3	Degree	PGCE specialism	30	Literacy
4	GCSE	None	30	Borderline
5	Degree	Some within general training	15	Oracy
6	None	None	30	Borderline
7	Native speaker	PGCE specialism	60	Oracy
8	Degree	PGCE specialism	40	Borderline
9	Degree	PGCE specialism	30	Literacy

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Research methods – sentence repetition

- Listen to sentences and repeat them verbatim.
- Sentences are relatively long in order to tax the children's processing ability enough so that they have to analyse the sentences they hear and reconstruct their meaning and grammar instead of parroting.
- Children can repeat and correct the sentences they hear only if they have acquired the grammatical features involved (Lust et al, 1996). Provides a window into the grammatical system of the learner

Research methods – sentence repetition

- Three grammatical features 8 items per feature :
 - article-noun agreement (gender)
 - adjective-noun agreement (gender)
 - simple present tense verbs
 - Nouns and verbs taken from commonly used PL schemes of work, cross-checked with schools' Schemes of Work



Research methods – oral production

(Photo description task, PD)

- Three grammatical features 6 items per feature :
 - article-noun agreement
 - adjective-noun agreement
 - simple present tense verbs

Photo description – part A

- Learners saw picture of a noun
- Were asked ‘Qu’est-ce que c’est?’ (What is it?)



Photo description – part B

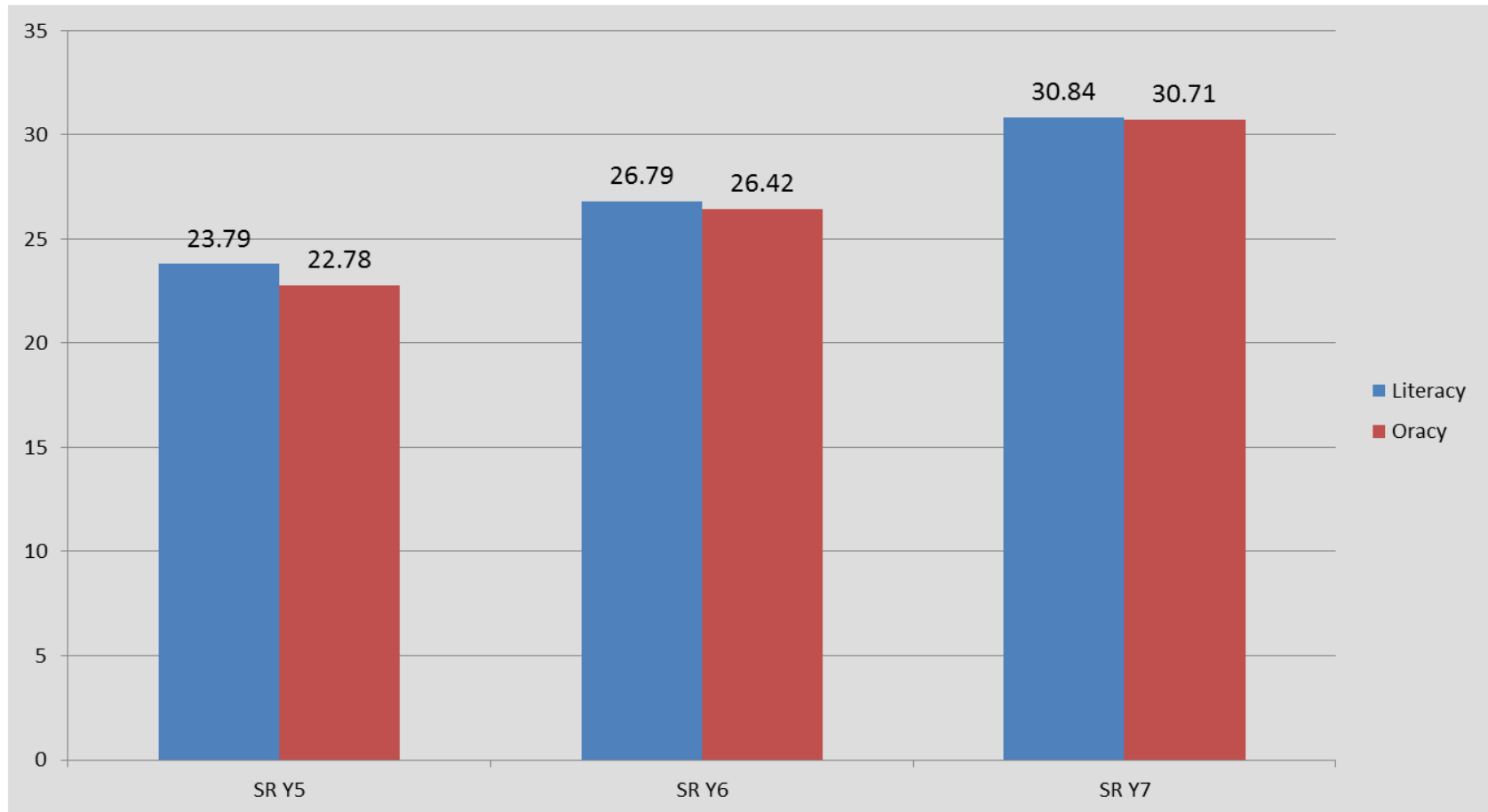
- Learners saw picture of an ‘action’
- Were asked ‘Qu’est-ce qu’il fait?’ (What’s he doing?)
- **Other important data:** English literacy (reading and writing) scores



Results:

- Small but statistically significant improvement across the time points for SR and PD tasks
- Significant but modest correlations with teacher variables and teaching time, but not consistently so
- No impact of teaching approach

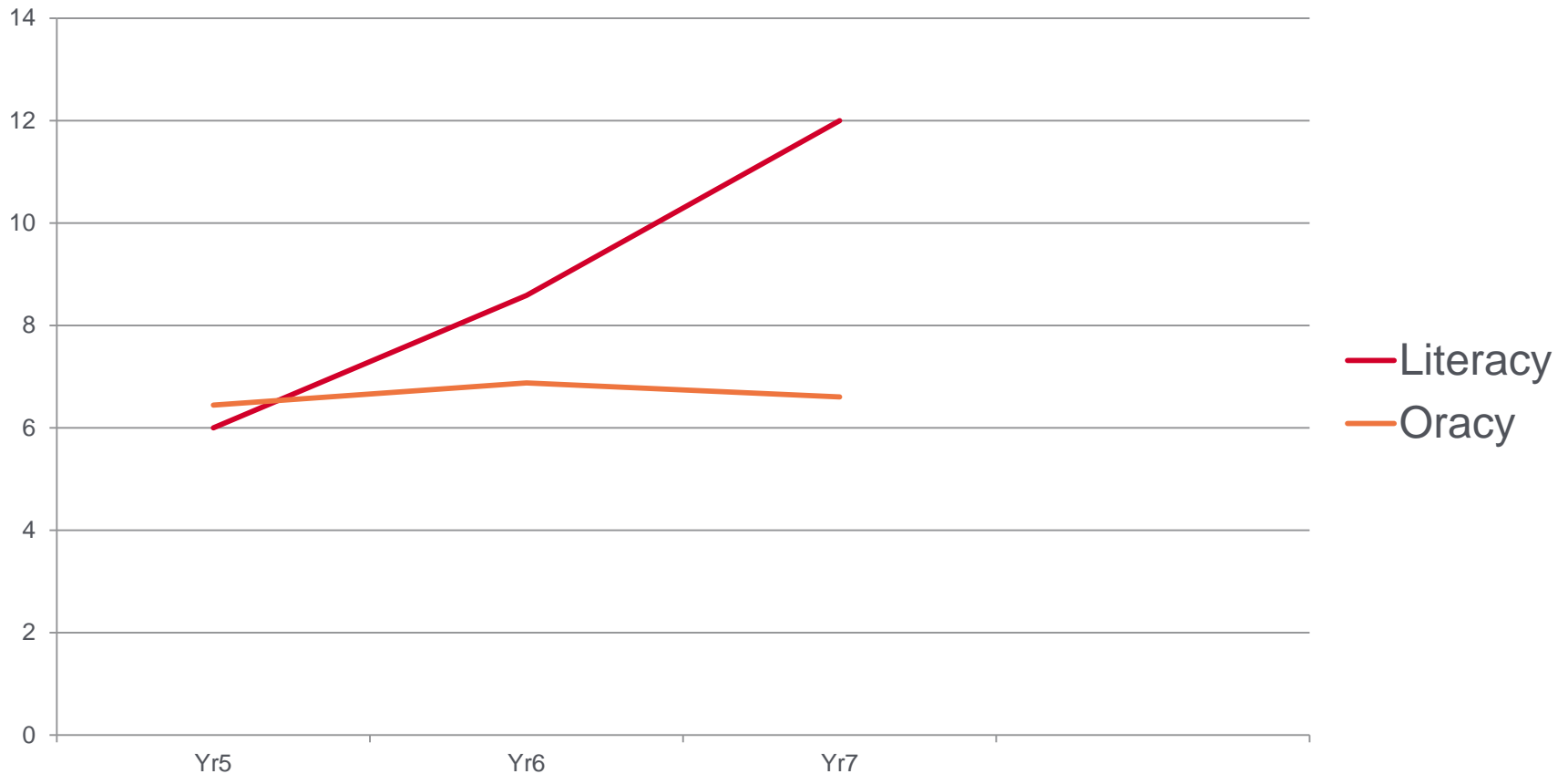
Results – effect of teaching approach sentence repetition task



TEACHING APPROACHES

- Little difference in mean scores for the two approaches at all time points
- Analysis to explore role of teaching approaches while controlling for learners' English literacy scores and all teacher variables together ('School')
- At each time point, a very large amount of the variance explained by English literacy levels
- In spite of this, however, 'School' overall had a significant influence on outcomes, but Teaching Approach did not – except for lower English literacy learners on PD task

PHOTO DESCRIPTION SCORES FOR THE LOW LITERACY GROUP



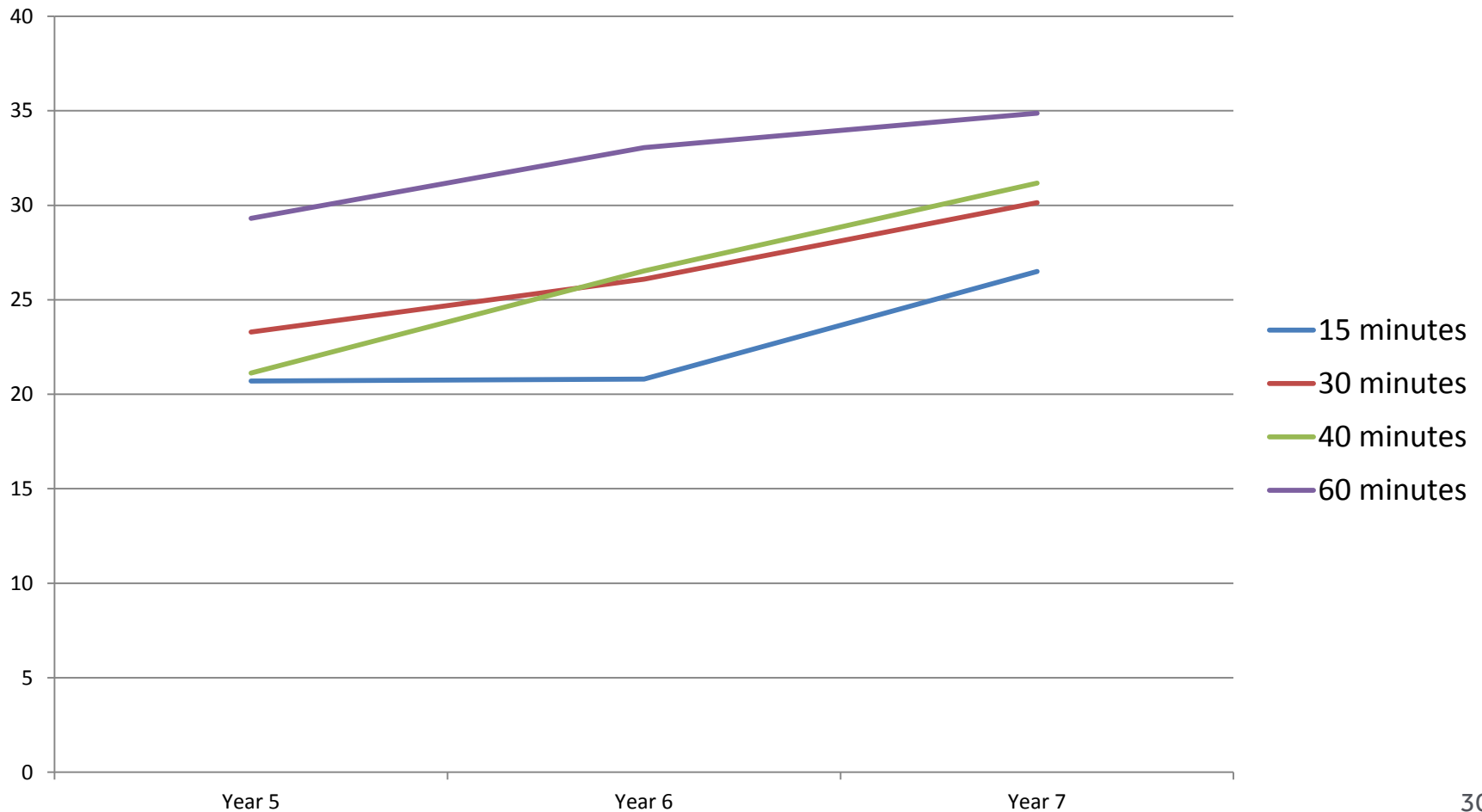
RELATIONSHIPS: SR TASK

Outcome	Year	Teacher French proficiency	Teacher training	Teaching time
Global scores	5	.126*	.098	.239**
	6	.182**	.202**	.362**
	7	.230**	.222**	.231**
Vocabulary	5	.045	.053	.158*
	6	.179**	.181**	.389**
	7	.241**	.210**	.247**
Grammar	5	.182**	.132*	.279**
	6	.175**	.216**	.303**
	7	.192*	.211**	.211**

PHOTO DESCRIPTION

Outcome	Year	Teacher French proficiency	Teacher training	Teaching time
Global scores	5	.198**	.161*	.424**
	6	.165*	.140*	.392**
	7	.239**	.183*	.235**
Vocabulary	5	.180**	.147*	.388**
	6	.130*	.083	.373**
	7	-.006	.059	.121
Grammar	5	.196**	.152*	.436**
	6	.203**	.215**	.377**
	7	.420**	.274**	.288**

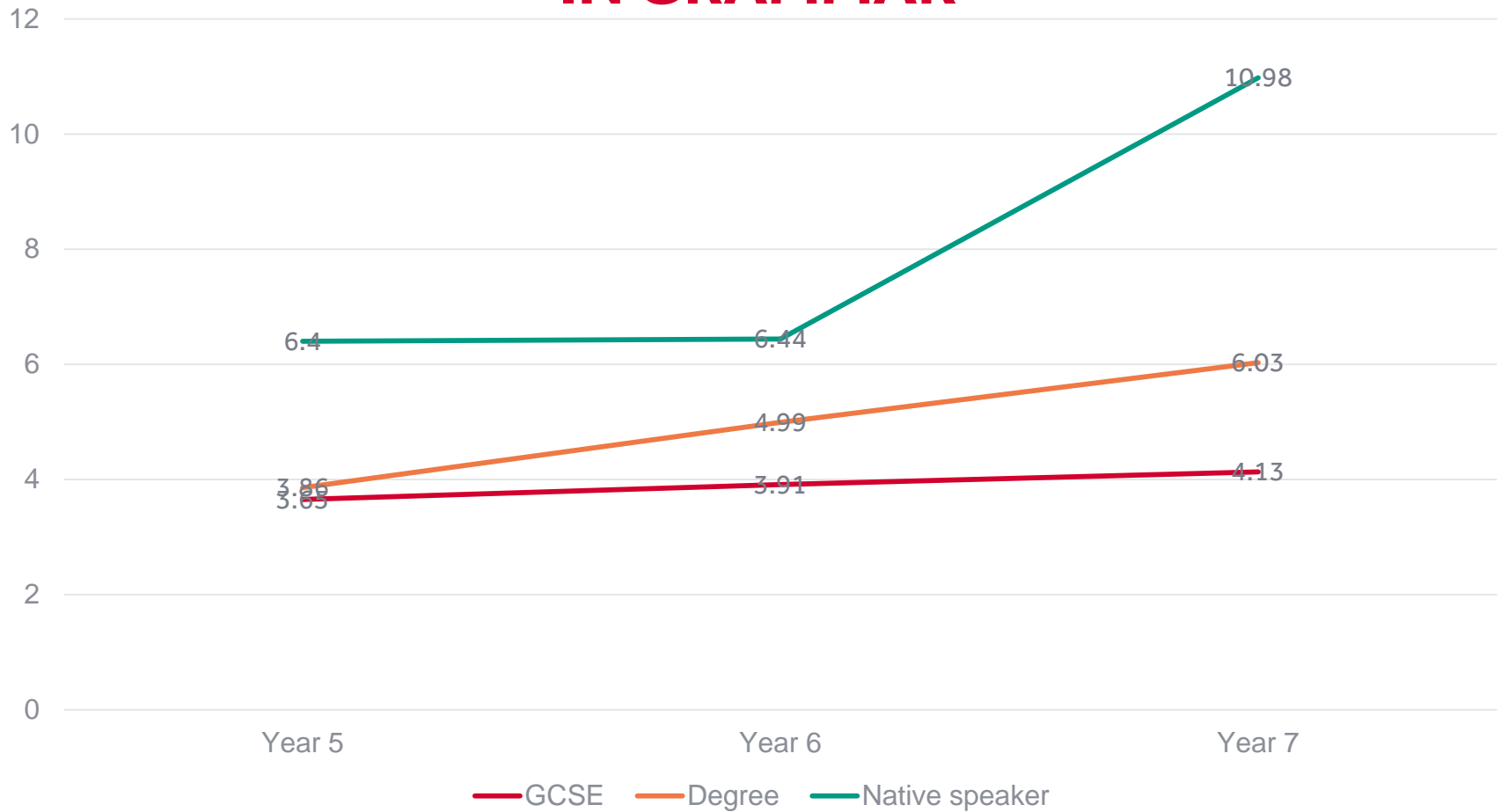
LANGUAGE TEST SCORES AND WEEKLY TEACHING TIME



WHAT DOES THIS SUGGEST?

- Importance of teaching time!
- 60 minutes groups always ahead – but gap narrowing in Year 7
- Secondary schools not capitalising on their primary school progress?
- No significant difference between any of the groups receiving under 60 minutes a week at primary school
- 60 minutes a week seems to be an important threshold

TEACHER PROFICIENCY & LEARNER PROGRESS IN GRAMMAR



WHAT DOES THIS SUGGEST?

- Teacher language proficiency matters, especially for grammatical development
- Its effect is complex
- Learners taught by native speaker teachers always scored more highly but with uneven progress
- Seeds sown for later development?
- But learners taught by teacher with a degree made the most steady progress
- Limited progress for other groups

CONCLUSIONS

- Variation at primary school in teaching time, teacher language proficiency and teacher training leading to wide variation in outcomes
- Perhaps unsurprising but generally under-acknowledged
- Essential information if we are to support teachers adequately and equip them for the task in hand
- “trusting young age of learning with the burden of learning success is clearly not enough” (Muñoz, 2011: 130)

Thank you!

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