

Introduction

Authority:	Various authorities (listed below)
Case Study Focus:	Play based approach to language learning
Establishments:	20 primary schools and early year centres
Learners' stage/s:	Early level – Nursery and P1

About the educational establishments and the learners

Partners:

Group 1 (Jan - Feb 2022) comprised practitioners and children at:

- Barassie Early Learning Centre in South Ayrshire
- Bridge of Allan Primary School, P1 in Stirling
- Coylton Early Learning Centre in South Ayrshire
- Mattocks Primary School, Nursery Class and P1/2 in Angus
- Mill O'Forest Primary, P1 in Aberdeenshire
- Newburgh Primary, Nursery Class in Fife
- Ravenswood Primary, P1 in North Lanarkshire
- Royal School of Dunkeld, Nursery Class and P1 in Perth & Kinross
- Shawlands Primary School, P1 in Glasgow
- Tighnabruaich Primary, Nursery Class and P1 in Argyll & Bute

Group 2 (Feb-Mar 2022) comprised practitioners and children at:

- Bilston Primary, P1 and P1/2 in Midlothian
- Busby Primary School, Nursery Class in East Renfrewshire
- Carlogie Primary, P1 in Angus
- Carmondean Primary, P1 in West Lothian
- Cornton Primary, P1 and P1/2 in Stirling

- Dyke Primary, P1/2 in Moray
 - Kilmodan Primary, Nursery Class in Argyll & Bute
 - Maidenhill Primary School, Nursery Class in East Renfrewshire
 - St John's Primary, P1 and P1/2 in South Ayrshire
 - Whitecross Primary, P1/2 in Falkirk
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- Tania Czajka, Teaching Artist and Early Years Practitioner, Founder of [Le Petit Monde](#) bilingual puppet theatre company
 - Karen Faulds, SCILT Lead, Professional Development Officer

Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling. It constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child. At this age play is never trivial; it is serious and deeply significant.

(¹Froebel in Lilley 1967: p.84)

The experiences and spaces for play we facilitate for the children should reflect the children's ideas, aspirations, curiosities and next steps in their learning. It is through play that children learn about themselves and make sense of the world around them.

(²Realising the Ambition: Being Me, Education Scotland)

This project aimed to support the learning and teaching of French in Early Years settings. Together all partners developed their understanding of and practice in using creative puppetry alongside play pedagogy with children in Early Years establishments and Primary 1 classrooms.

Tania shared her expertise in undertaking cross-curricular, inclusive, multi-modal and play-based approach to teaching French.

¹ Lilley, I. M. (1967) Friedrich Froebel. A Selection of His Writings. Cambridge University Press.

² [Scottish Government \(2020\) Realising the Ambition. Being Me](#). National practice guidance for early years in Scotland.

Karen coordinated the online collaborative working space that brought partners together and facilitated professional learning for practitioners.

Early Years practitioners and P1 teachers developed their practice in creative approach to play-based pedagogy with embedded opportunities to learn and use French, as a context for supporting children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Background

The settings

- This project features the involvement of 20 primary schools and Early Childcare Centres from a variety of local authorities across Scotland.
- There is a blend of rural and urban schools each with its own individual catchment profile/ SIMD indicators.
- The participating schools vary in size with differing school rolls and class composition.

The children

- In total, 662 children were involved, with 233 in pre-school settings and 429 in Primary 1 or 2.
- 12 out of the 20 practitioners mentioned they had children who speak English as an additional language (EAL).
- 14 mentioned they had children who have some additional support needs (ASN).

The practitioners

- 14 Primary 1 or 2 teachers participated, along with an Early Years practitioner, an Early Years officer, a multi-composite teacher and 3 nursery class teachers.
- Their experience of working with young children spanned from this being their first year in post to having worked in the sector for over 30 years.

- 16 of them were already teaching French to the children, through weekly lessons - direct teaching - as well as the embedding of the language in daily routines, songs and games.
- 2 practitioners mentioned they have used stories before.
- The participants' knowledge and confidence in their French language skills varied from being total beginners to being bilingual and feeling highly confident, with most practitioners rating their own level to be medium.
- 8 felt very well or well equipped to teach French at Early Years level, while 12 felt mediumly or not equipped.
- Their puppetry experience also varied, from having none at all to using commercial puppets. One practitioner had previously made puppets with her class.
- At the beginning of the project, 2 shared they felt nervous but were looking forward to it.
- All participants' expectations were similar:
 - Extend their own French knowledge and practice
 - Develop their skills and confidence
 - Observe children's reactions
 - Exchange ideas
 - Learn a new way to teach French
- They also shared similar aspirations for the children:
 - 'Confident and enthusiastic French learners'
 - 'Open their minds to varied worlds and cultures'
 - 'Learn through exciting and engaging activities'

[Group 1](#)

[Group 2](#)

Planning and Implementation

Creative puppetry is:

Creative puppetry is when children and practitioners design, make and manipulate puppets together. (3Smith, 2018)

One form of Creative Puppetry is Puppetizing, where...

Adults guide children in using puppets for acting out stories, poems or songs and where performing is for one another, without an audience or a stage. (4Hunt & Renfro, 1982)

In September 2021 Tania and a teacher involved in an earlier smaller scale project presented the creative puppetry approach to language learning at a professional learning drop-in hosted by SCILT. Expressions of interest were sought from EY practitioners and P1 teachers interested in taking part in a larger scale project using the same approach, a Professional Learning Partnership facilitated by SCILT.

An unexpectedly high number of expressions of interest were received from all over Scotland and recruitment to the PLP required further refinement. Ultimately, practitioners working in a total of twenty educational settings from across the country were invited to take part in the Early Years Creative Puppetry Professional Learning Partnership. These twenty were split into two groups of ten. For the period of the project, each group communicated, met and collaborated within a dedicated MS Team in Glow.

In addition, each setting received £100 to spend on craft materials (self-adhesive felt, cardboard tubes etc.) and a resource pack comprising three copies of 'Lapin is Hungry' picture book, written by Tania, templates and instructions for how to make the puppets of the characters in the story.

Building on the approach employed in two previous small scale projects carried out by Tania in 2020, two practitioners at each participating centre/school were involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of four practical activities inspired by the 'Lapin is Hungry' picture book. Each week, one practitioner led an activity, the other practitioner observed and recorded children's engagement.

In total, partners met for six online professional learning sessions:

³ Smith, J. (2018). *Puppetry in theatre and arts education – Head, Hands and Heart* (Methuen Drama, Bloomsbury, UK) ISBN: 9781350012912

⁴ Hunt, T. & Renfro, N. (1982). *Puppetry In Early Childhood Education* (Nancy Renfro Studios, USA) ISBN 13: 9780931044045

1. Meet and greet for partners (four weeks prior to session 2 - giving time to order and receive resources)
2. Collaboratively plan for activity 1 and agree on learning focus. Practitioners introduce the story to children, share the story, read the book. Children draw characters from the story.



3. Debrief activity 1. Plan for activity 2, agree on learning focus. Practitioners re-introduce the story, share audio version of the story. Children supported to make their own puppets of a character from the story.
4. Debrief activity 2. Plan for activity 3, agree on learning focus. Practitioners re-introduce the story, share a film of Tania reading the story. Children sequence the story. Free play with puppets. Picture book available in library corner.
5. Debrief activity 3. Plan for activity 4, agree on learning focus. Children re-tell or perform the story for self, for friends, for parents.
6. Debrief activity 4 and overall experience. Practitioners share ideas for next steps for both them and the children in terms of language learning/teaching and creative puppetry.

Online debrief of each activity:

During each week, practitioners were encouraged to asynchronously post comments, photographs and film clips to Google Jamboard.

At weekly online meetings, practitioners talked through the following reflective questions:

- How did the children react to the (re-)introduction of the story?
- Do you feel the learning focus was met?
- Were there any surprises?
- What do you feel worked well?
- What do you feel could be improved/adapted?

Progress across the different settings was by necessity flexible. Practitioners were encouraged to work at their own pace and alternative ways of tackling the activities were shared by Tania at the debrief or in the Team.

Impact

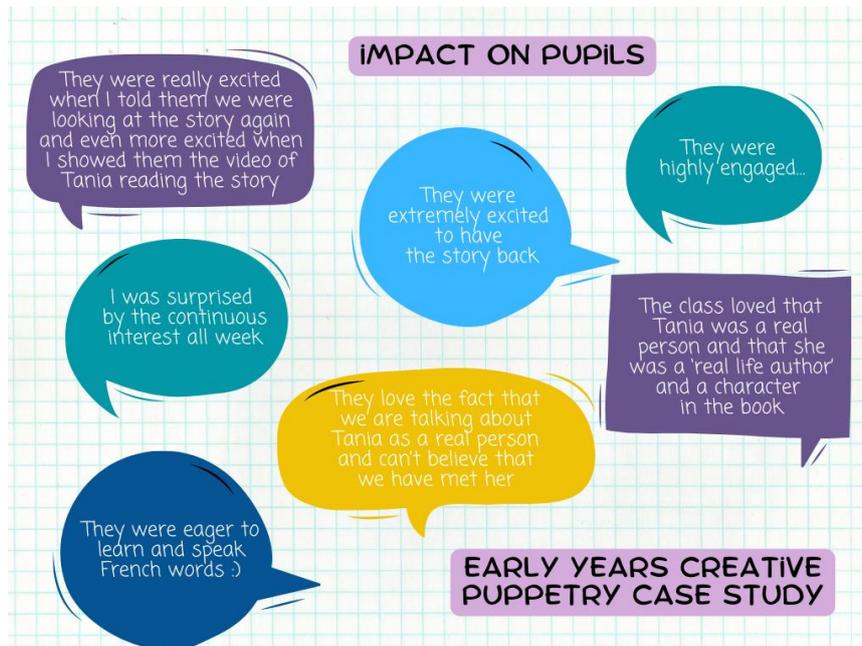
Impact on pupils

Although no formal measure of the impact on children was carried out, all activities were delivered by one practitioner and observed by another in each setting. Practitioners discussed what they saw and heard in pairs and gave written feedback, along with photos or videos, after each activity. Through this method, a robust body of evidence was gathered to support some measurement of the project's impact on the children.

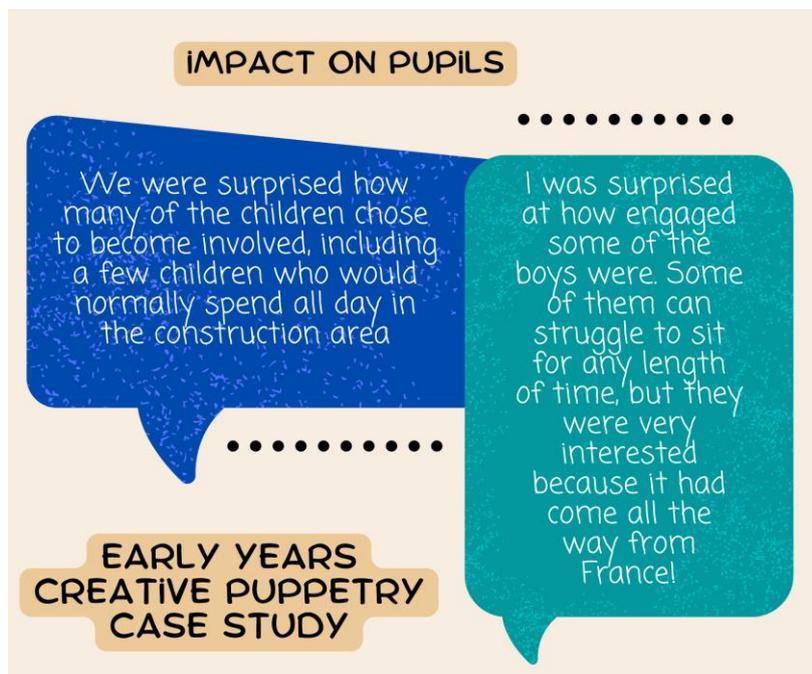
- The children were highly engaged throughout all activities

The practitioners reported that the multi-modal approach - used to introduce the story in a different way at each session - helped keep the children engaged. Some children enjoyed the tactile book while others preferred watching the video of the author reading the story. Therefore, this approach catered for various types of learning. The children showed excitement at the fact that the author of the picture book was a real person. Their teachers had met her and she was on their screens, as well as in the story. This, according to the practitioners, made a big impact on the children.





Practitioners also observed good concentration and focus all round and welcomed how unusually engaged some of the children were:



- The children understood and used French words

Most practitioners reported that children were able to make connections to their prior learning, while some spoke about their experience of France.

IMPACT ON PUPILS

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They noticed transparent nouns such as 'brocoli' for 'broccoli', baguette, croissant, tomate (nearly) and discussed how they were the same. I think this was really interesting and gives them the idea that there are language similarities

Children were linking the story to their prior knowledge of French

**EARLY YEARS
CREATIVE PUPPETRY
CASE STUDY**

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They also noted a high recall of French words from the story as well as children frequently repeating the words they had heard - sometimes without prompting, while watching the video or listening to the audio version of the story. Some enjoyed sharing their new knowledge with staff, teaching them words or greeting them with a 'Bonjour!' the next day.

"The children were asking how to say other words in French. One of the ante-preschoolers asked how to say 'book'!"

But what the practitioners noticed the most was how much the children used their French words in free play time.



- The children’s learning stretched out to other curriculum areas

The practitioners’ feedback was peppered with observations demonstrating that the project invited children to explore other areas of learning. Some wanted to count in French (Number, Money and Measure - Mathematics), some asked to grow vegetables (Planet Earth - Science) while others used iPads to film their peers performing (Computing Science - Technology) or found where France and Paris were on a globe (People, Place and environment - Social Studies). All children had the opportunity to explore puppet making techniques (Art and Design - Expressive Arts), a challenging activity that they embraced with lots of focus and concentration.

“I was surprised at how well the children have retained the French language and have been using the language with each other.”

“Surprised about how much French words they were able to recall – Bonjour, Lapin.”



IMPACT ON PUPILS

The children were given opportunities for free play with their puppets. They made various things for them. A house and a boat to name a few things

The puppets became more complex as the week progressed as the children became more aware of how to cut, fold and construct in different ways, as a result of watching the puppet focus group

We thought it would be chaos with 36 children making puppets but actually, they were very controlled and focused. It was almost like a production line

Some of the children were teaching the puppets about numbers - mixing numbers up and asking the puppets what the number was. That generated a discussion: would the numbers be the same in French?

EARLY YEARS CREATIVE PUPPETRY CASE STUDY



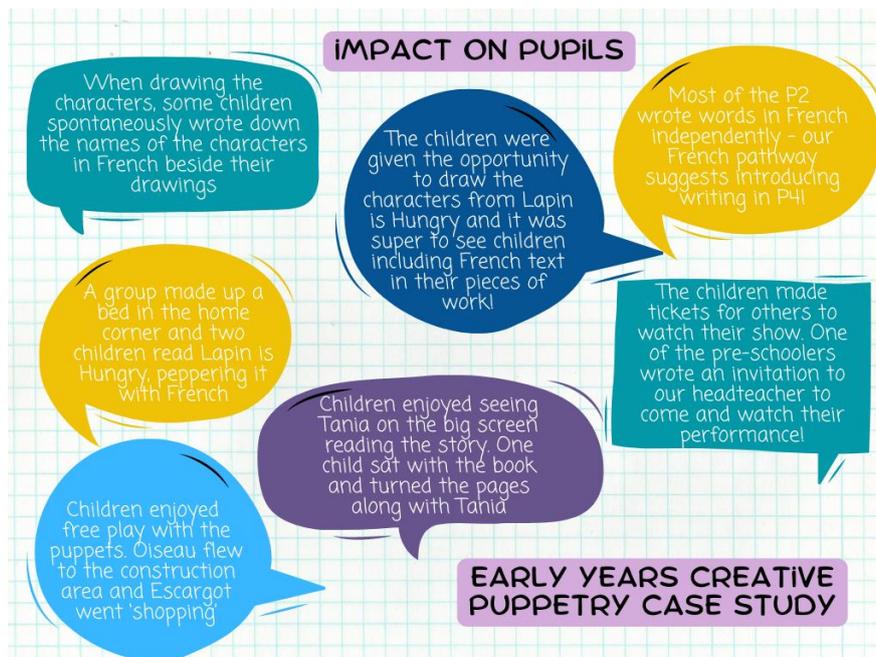
But the strongest link outside Modern Languages learning was the development of literacy skills, along with a reinforcement of positive relationships with books: many children wrote French words in their drawings and they all got to develop their narrative skills by retelling the bilingual story or creating their own.

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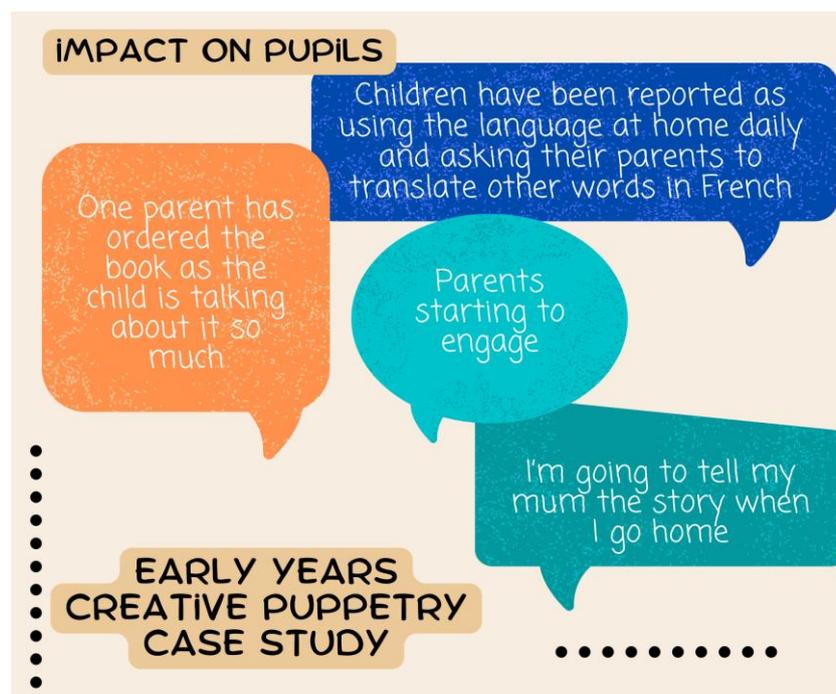
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CREATIVE PUPPETRY WITH LANGUAGES



- The children shared their new learning at home

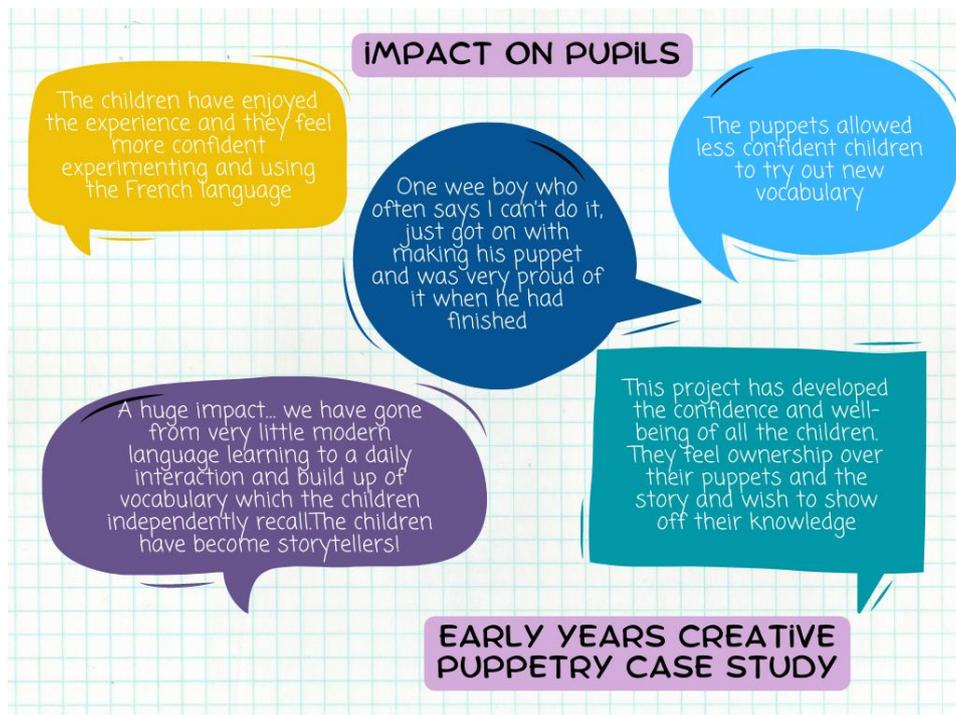
Through dedicated digital platforms, such as SWAY or the e-journals, practitioners were able to share with families what was happening in the settings and families were invited to comment or share what their children said or did at home in relation to the project. This two-way communication, added to in person verbal chats, seemed to work well and parents noticed their children's enthusiasm for the activities.



- The children gained an overall confidence

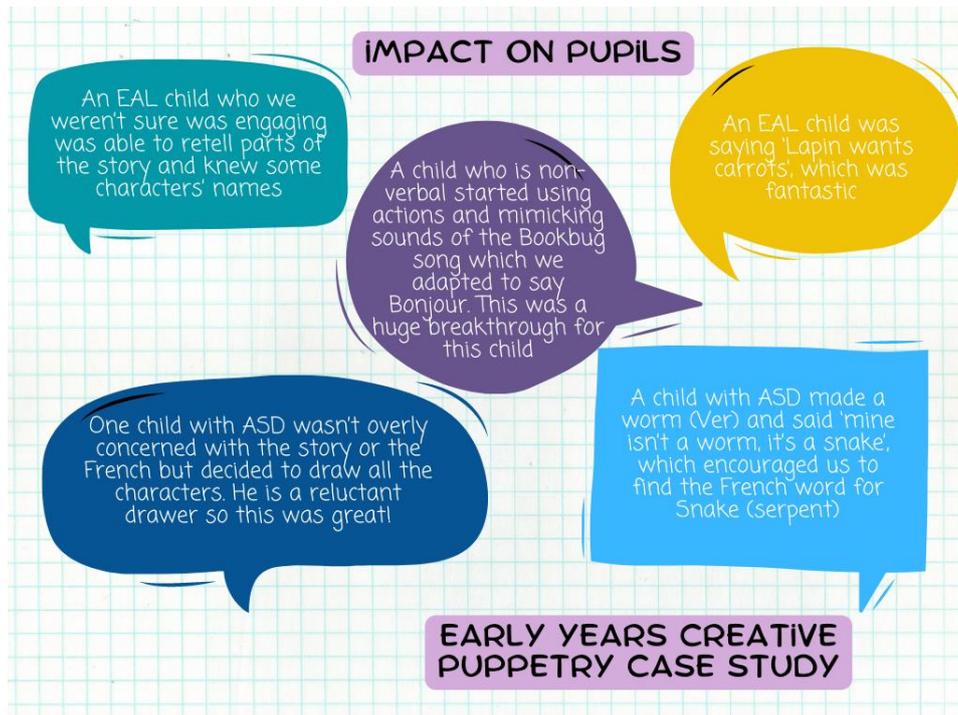
Regarding the children’s confidence in using French language, the practitioners’ feedback was overwhelmingly positive. It appears that most children felt comfortable enough to engage in the activities and, in the process, develop their confidence throughout the project.

Practitioners also reported that the puppet making activity, which appeared challenging but accessible with, in some cases, adult support, made the children proud of what they had achieved.

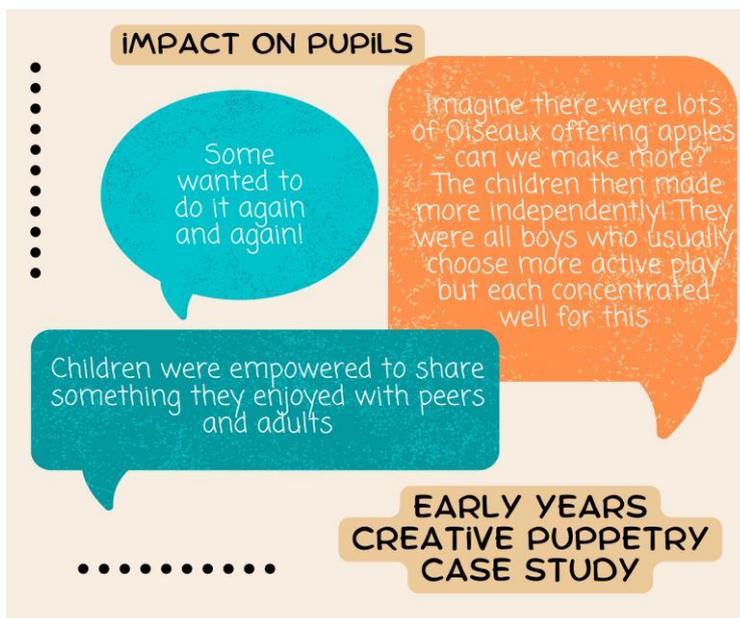


Most settings taking part in the project had children who have additional support needs (ASN) or speak English as an additional language (EAL). Some children were on the autism spectrum (⁵ASD). Practitioners were keen to share that the impact on those children’s confidence was hugely positive.

⁵ ASD – Autistic Spectrum Disorder



Practitioners also observed that the project supported children who would usually decide not to engage in such group activities, to do so.



"We have some children who are very shy. The progression that this group of children made was incredible. By the end of the project, they wanted to perform the story in front of their friends, which is such a big step. These children were asking to have photos taken with the puppets and to be filmed reading the story."

Finally, throughout puppet-making and a strong emphasis on child-led and play-based pedagogy, children had ownership of their learning.

Overall, according to the practitioners' feedback, the project supported the children in developing not only their French language skills but also their confidence in using this new knowledge in conversations with peers or staff and through play. And because they were highly engaged throughout, their curiosity and desire to know more about France, the language and to engage in other learning experiences were aroused. The project also appears to have had a particularly powerful and positive impact on children who have ASN or are EAL speakers, giving all involved a sense of agency in their learning.

Impact on the practitioners

- They valued the resources that accompanied the picture book

For the children's learning, practitioners found the video and audio resources extremely useful.

They also appreciated the multi-modal approach that was used to introduce the story.

"It was mind blowing for the children to see a real author and to understand she is a real person. This made them really connect to the story."

"Thanks to the video, some have a lovely French accent."

They also found the bilingual and accessible approach of the writing valuable and inclusive:

"The way the story is written has made the French language accessible to all children. They could easily pick up the main vocabulary."

For themselves, they appreciated the kit of resources that was sent to them and included prototype puppets. They also felt that the weekly meetings along with the debriefing platforms were useful to share experiences, ideas and thoughts.

“Having the prototypes really made a difference. They really put me at ease.”

- They were positively surprised and felt more confident

All practitioners reported and welcomed the unexpected high level of enthusiasm and engagement the children displayed for the various activities and shared resources. This approach to teaching a language being totally new to them, they were unsure of what to expect. But it would appear they were very pleasantly surprised. Although some felt nervous at the start because their confidence in the French language was low or their puppetry skills were basic, they all enjoyed taking part in the project.

Their feedback suggests that, overall, the feeling of being equipped to teach French at Early Level went from ‘moderate’ at the start to ‘well or very well equipped’ at the end.

- They felt inspired



“What great fun!”



Impact on Tania

- The project has strengthened Tania’s belief in creative puppetry as a powerful tool for language learning in the early years.
- Highlighted the need for accessible and bilingual story books for an inclusive and play-based language teaching practice.

Impact on SCILT

- The overwhelming level of interest has highlighted the need for increased provision of professional learning to support practitioners teaching languages at Early Level in primary schools and Early Years Centres.

Next Steps

For children:

- Enjoy more opportunities to explore creative puppetry in other curricular areas.
- Explore the ‘Lapin in Hungry’ story with their families through a Home Link Bag containing the book and resources.

- Develop independent learning skills.

For practitioners:

- Some will continue using *Lapin is Hungry* along with the creative puppetry approach to teach French.
- Others plan to use the book and framework to support transitions from nursery to P1.
- A practitioner plans to use the bilingual element for other stories while another wants to adapt the framework for Gaelic teaching.
- All will share their experience of creative puppetry to teach additional languages and support colleagues locally to try out the approach.

For Tania:

- Currently working on developing a sustainable model to provide more *Lapin* picture books and accompanying resources to support French teaching.
- Working with *Lapin is Hungry's* illustrator Olivier Czajka on a new adventure for the French rabbit and his little garden friends.
- Working with a publisher specialised in promoting languages to get *Lapin is Hungry* published.

For SCILT:

- Share the outcomes of this project with various audiences.
- Seek funding opportunities to support more play-based and/or EY language learning.
- Establish, facilitate Languages in EY network.

Resources

Audio version of 'Lapin is Hungry' and audio glossary:

<https://www.lepetitmonde.co.uk/book/>

Film/video of Tania reading 'Lapin is Hungry': <https://youtu.be/xtCTwE02Kwc>

See #EYCP_scilt hashtag on Twitter for examples of engagement from some of partner ELC/primary classes between January and April 2022.

A Languages in the Early Years Team has been created on Teams within GLOW. If you would like to be part of this learning community, please access using this code **Ub5yxgt**. Please note you will need your GLOW email to access the Team.