

## French at Early Level: A Pilot Study

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**Abstract:** This article describes the planning and implementation of a pilot study of teaching French to Early Level Learners. It discusses suitable pedagogy and resources for teaching a language at this level. In particular it demonstrates the importance of contextualising language learning and involving young learners in multi-sensorial activities. The benefits of creating a theme around stories and songs to learn a language are also discussed. This article shares practitioner's opinions about their involvement in delivering language teaching and how they envisage their role in future provision.

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**Keywords:** French, early language learning, pedagogy

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*Opening children's minds to multilingualism and different cultures is a valuable exercise in itself that enhances individual and social development and increases their capacity to empathise with others [...] As young children become aware of their own identity and cultural values, Early Language Learning can shape the way they develop their attitudes towards other languages and cultures by raising awareness of diversity and of cultural variety, hence fostering understanding and respect (European Commission, 2011:7)*

### Background

Over several years, I have been developing the teaching of French within the primary schools where I work as a class teacher and also in conjunction with national agencies such as Education Scotland and SCILT. Blondin et al (1998) identified the main advantages of an early start in language learning are related to developing motivation and positive attitudes. Therefore, to help embed language learning from the earliest possible age, the Educational Support Officer responsible for Modern Languages within Argyll & Bute Council and I decided to initiate an Early Level Pilot Study of teaching French, over an eight week period. This would involve teaching French to Pre-5 and P1 classes in several establishments within one cluster of primary schools.

The objectives of this study would be to:

- determine suitable pedagogy and resources for teaching a language at this level
- analyse the children's engagement with the language
- measure the children's progression in comprehension and use of the language
- determine staff motivation to be involved in teaching a language

In this article I report mainly on the findings with regard to the first two objectives.

## Research in the field of early language learning

Up to that point I had mainly taught French to pupils in Primary 1 to Primary 7 classes so I started by doing some research on teaching languages in Pre-5 settings. The literature review confirmed my belief in the importance of young children learning through play and by using all their senses:

*Children can learn almost anything if they are dancing, tasting, touching, seeing, and feeling information" (Dryden & Vos, 1997).*

I was also aided in my planning by the European Commission report entitled 'The main pedagogical principles underlying the teaching of languages to very young learners' (Edelenbos et al, 2006). I found the principles set out in this paper, derived from the collaboration of experts in the field of Early Language Learning, very useful, in particular the section Principles as 'maxims for action' (ibid: 155-56):

- *Stimulate and foster children's enjoyment to learn an additional language;*
- *Promote basic skill communication;*
- *Build on and sustain the initial motivation which children bring with them; provide particular language-activities which are adapted to suit age-and stage-levels of children;*
- *Provide meaningful contexts and relevant thematic areas;*
- *Ensure that comprehension precedes production;*
- *Make provision for holistic language learning;*
- *Make provision for a visual approach and multi-sensory learning;*
- *Cater for training of the ear and training of pronunciation;*
- *Help pupils become aware of the relationship between the sound and written systems of the languages they know and are learning.*

These principles consolidated my own beliefs about language teaching based on my own language teaching experience with young children.

## Organisation of the project

The four establishments for the pilot study all offered interesting variations as study groups and also the possibility of continuity in learning a language: In Primary School A its pre-5 unit some children are already being taught an additional language (Gaelic) and the staff are very open to learning languages. Primary School B is where I work as a class teacher and already deliver French to P1-7 and again the bilingual pre-5 practitioner is aware of the importance of learning additional languages. Primary School C had shown a commitment to delivering French from P1-7 and therefore there was a future possibility for continuity with the language. Finally, Primary School C has an Early Level class (Pre-5 and P1) and the class teacher already teaches the children French and this continues up to P7. It was agreed that I would come to the schools on a weekly basis for a period of 8 weeks and I would teach each class for an hour.

## Planning

I decided that the teaching would revolve around a story and the main character of the story. I felt that this would be an effective method of engaging the children as it would capture their imagination and therefore bring the language to life. They could also develop affective attachments with the story character which would increase their desire to communicate. The context of a story also allowed for a variety of stimulating learning activities to be created which related to the main themes and key vocabulary of the text.



I chose the story 'Toutes Les Couleurs' by Alex Sanders (2001) about a little white rabbit called Lulu and his 'encounters' with different colours. The actual total text of the book amounts to no more than a paragraph and the way it is written chimes well with the recommendations by Cameron (2001):

*A good story for language learning will have interesting characters that children can emphasise with, who take part in activities that the learners can make sense of (ibid: 168)*

*The built in repetition of words and phrases is one of the features of stories that is most helpful for language learning (ibid: 169).*

Lulu, the main character, is visually attractive and like most young children loves to play and get dirty and there is indeed a great deal of repetition in the sentence structure and vocabulary used. Furthermore it contains very useful and versatile basic vocabulary: colours, body parts, and the verb *avoir* (to have) conjugated as *j'ai* (I have) and *tu as* (you have). Lastly, the story allowed for development of discussion in the children's first language around themes which they could relate to. For example, do they like getting messy? Taking baths? Giving presents to their mum? Health and wellbeing topics could also be discussed such as the importance of personal hygiene when Lulu takes his bath.

Another useful reference in the planning stage was Payen-Roy (2012) who had conducted a similar pilot study in Glasgow in 2011. Like Payen-Roy I used a table listing a variety of successful approaches and provided examples from my teaching which allowed me to check that I was varying my teaching strategies and putting these approaches into practice. (cf. Table 1)

Table 1

| Successful approach                  | Example   |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Learning through play and all senses | Acting out the story of 'Toutes les Couleurs'   |
| Interactive activities               | Making a rabbit finger puppet   |
| Active learning approaches           | Putting images of the story in the correct order  |
| Relevant and purposeful context      | Using French for greetings and singing a song   |
| Consistency and repetition           | Learning the colours each lesson but using different contexts: story, objects and songs                                 |
| Simplified speech                    | Accentuating key vocabulary contained in the story and using actions to aid comprehension of this vocabulary            |
| On-going formative assessment        | Tracking progression in children's ability to use words in French also using the big book they created to ask questions |

I also wished to implement three of the four Education Scotland guiding principles for teaching at Early Level ([Curriculum for Excellence in ELCC](#), online):

- Active, experiential learning
- A holistic approach to learning
- learning through play

(The fourth principle, ‘smooth transitions’, was not applicable in this context). The Overview of Sessions in Table 2 shows how the approaches mentioned in Table 1 were translated into practice.

**Table 2: Overview of sessions**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 1 | Introduction of Lulu the puppet, background information, greetings through song.  |
| 2 | Talking about France locating it on the map. Discussing how we could get there.   |
| 3 | Creating friends for Lulu: finger puppets   |
| 4 | Introducing the story of ‘Toutes les couleurs’ where Lulu is the main character   |
| 5 | Listening to the story focusing on colour and body parts vocabulary   |
| 6 | Consolidating learning through movement: touching body parts, looking for coloured objects in the class, acting out the story   |
| 7 | Setting up varied play activities to allow the children to develop their language skills independently: toys, colouring, board and dice games, matching activities, computer activities |
| 8 | Learning songs with a rabbit theme  |
| 9 | Retelling the story by creating a big book of ‘Toutes les couleurs’. Children’s artwork and language skills developed.  |

## Description of activities

### *Listening and Talking*



Interaction with Lulu the puppet allowed the children to develop their listening skills. This interaction often involved singing to assist the children in producing the French language orally. Because this was a collective experience, it helped to make the children feel secure and they quickly established a relationship with Lulu. I then devised a game which allowed the children to use their knowledge of colour vocabulary and learn from their peers by searching for objects of the appropriate colour around the classroom and calling out the colour name in French.

|  |                                   |  |
|--|-----------------------------------|--|
| <b>Youpi! J’ai le derrière tout vert</b> | <b>J’ai la bouche toute rouge</b> | <b>Plouf! J’ai les pieds tous marron</b> |
| <b>J’ai les mains toutes jaunes</b>      | <b>Et le bleu!</b>                |  |

The children also got involved physically in the story: They created their own finger puppet rabbits and gave them French names. The children were given the instructions to make the puppet in French. This developed their listening skills and was not a stressful experience because all instructions were accompanied with actions.

**Reading and Writing**



Word recognition: circling the book covers which contain the word 'couleur'



Colouring the character with the corresponding colours from the story and writing colour words



Illustrating a map of the UK and France by drawing themselves in Scotland, Lulu in France and possible modes of transport for travelling to France



Placing the French colour names on the corresponding illustration from the story

**Reading and Listening**



Using 'Le stylo Magique' (penpal talking pen) to listen to the text of the story allowed for word recognition by examining the text simultaneously. This then gave the children the opportunity to read the story independently.

**Listening**



Playing a dice game with 'Le stylo magique'. The children roll the dice with the different body parts of Lulu and then listen to the name of the body part using the pen. The first one to have rolled all the body parts and coloured in each part of Lulu lapin is the winner.

**Listening and Speaking**



Play with coloured farm animals and fruit. Children respond to questions from adults relating to the colour of the animals and fruit. This activity extended their knowledge of colour names and allowed them to link this knowledge to the names of the animals and fruit e.g. 'où est le lapin bleu?' It also gave the children the opportunity to use French colour names spontaneously with their peers. (Links to Mathematics: sorting)

**Listening, Talking and Writing**



The children were given the opportunity to design a pattern for *maman lapin's* dress. This activity works towards emergent writing in the pre-5 setting as it develops pencil control to create intricate designs. The creation of a pattern also links to the development of mathematical skills. Once more this activity allowed the children to develop their listening and speaking skills as practitioners were able to communicate with the children in French about the colours they were using.



Emergent writing developed through a maze puzzle and sequencing story.

**Listening, Talking, Reading and Writing**



The creation of the big book of 'Toutes Les Couleurs', was both a formative and summative assessment of the children's progress through the project. Practitioners could continually reinforce the children's knowledge of colours and body parts in French during this process. They were also able to develop their reading and writing skills when colouring in word captions.

## Key resources

### Puppet



'Lulu Lapin' is versatile as there is a whole series of stories based on this character providing scope for continuity in future projects. The children's attachment to this character was a significant factor in their motivation to learn and use the language. They were always eager to see him and engage in Q+A sessions with him. Lulu Lapin also helped to develop the cultural and geographical context of the language. It was important to place French in a real world context (Nikolov, 2009). An example of this was a discussion about where Lulu came from and children participating in drawing a picture of Lulu and themselves on a map of France and Great Britain. In turn, this generated discussion about transport and how we could travel to France. The children then added their chosen mode of transport to the illustrated map.

### Talking Pen



The Talking Pen allowed the children and pre-5 practitioners to learn independently. The pen is supplied with packs of numbered labels which activate phrases that have been pre-recorded on to the pen. Therefore, I was able to record the text from each page of the story and then stick the corresponding label on to each page of the book. The children could then listen to the text independently using the pen and look at the text to begin to develop word recognition. Practitioners could also read the story to the children in my absence without fear of mispronouncing the words. I also labelled dice and board games. It became *Le Stylo Magique* and the children and practitioners loved this tool.

## Evaluation

### Children's engagement with the language

Arguably there needs to be a positive relationship between the learner and teacher for learning to take place. According to Krashen the learner has to be 'affectively disposed to 'let in' the input' (Weitzman & Greenberg 2002). This is why in my view it is easier to evaluate the success of teaching strategies employed with young children, compared to older children or adults, because if they are not interested they will not engage with you.

The learners involved in the pilot study displayed enthusiasm and concentration. They also expressed their enjoyment of learning French in the evaluation process and this was backed up by staff who felt that the project had been a positive experience for the children. Several teachers even noted their surprise at how attentive the children had been during the learning process. Practitioners felt that this was due to the well balanced range of teaching strategies used. They commented that listening time was not too lengthy because it was punctuated with singing and actions and the children could participate in answering questions. They also mentioned that there was a good range of games for the children to play and plenty of physical tasks which either

involved movement or making a product with their hands. Based on this evidence, I concluded that overall, the children had enjoyed the experience of learning French.

During the evaluation process the children had varied responses about what they had enjoyed most (cf. Table 3) which suggested to me that a practitioner needs to put in place a variety of learning approaches in order to cater for the differing needs of young children.

**Table 3: Children's responses and my comments to the question: What did you enjoy most?**

| <b>Children's responses</b>                                    | <b>My comments</b>  |
|--|---|
| <i>Lulu</i>  | Highlighted the importance of developing an attachment to a character.  |
| <i>The songs</i>   | Showed that singing can be highly motivating in learning a language.  |
| <i>The colour game</i> (searching for objects around the room) | Confirmed the importance of movement for young children.  |
| <i>The magic pen</i>   | Demonstrated the significance of this resource in giving children an opportunity to learn independently,  |
| <i>Making the book</i>   | Showed the importance of active learning and children having the opportunity to use a variety of senses. These children specifically mentioned that they enjoyed making prints with their hands and feet and putting face paint on their lips to create lip prints in the book. |
| <i>Acting out the story</i>                                    | Demonstrated the importance of bringing story telling alive by physically participating in the process.   |
| <i>Making puppets</i>  | Highlighted the enjoyment the children derived from creating their own character to participate in language learning.   |

In any follow up studies, it would be interesting to analyse the data relating to preferred activities in order to identify whether children's responses varied depending on their age or gender.

### **Children's progression in comprehension and use of the language**

The children made progress in their comprehension of the language. As mentioned earlier it is important to remember that comprehension must precede production. Children need time to absorb the new language before they can be expected to speak. The children initially demonstrated their comprehension through actions and by responding to simple instructions. For example, they would touch their mouth when they heard the words 'la bouche' being said in the story. Retelling the story helped to build the children's confidence and as the key vocabulary became familiar, they were happy to call out the words they recognised.

It was important not to put pressure on the children to produce the language. As was identified by Blondin et al (1998) the main advantages of an early start in language learning are related to developing motivation and positive attitudes.

Oral proficiency can follow if the motivation to learn is sustained. Having said this, I was very pleased with the amount of speaking that the children did engage in. This was

mainly teacher led in response to questioning or repeating words they heard. However, towards the end of the study there were children who were spontaneously using vocabulary they had learned while interacting with their peers. Examples of this were while playing the board game which related to the story and giving French colour names to the toys they were playing with.

During the evaluation interviews with children they were able to confirm their acquired vocabulary and children's responses suggested that the experience had heightened their curiosity of the French language. For example, when asked what else they would like to learn in French many said other colours. In other words, they were no longer satisfied with knowing the colours which were covered in the story but now wanted to know *all* the colours. Certainly, in the interview responses, most of children knew all the colours from the story. However, although there had also been many activities designed to reinforce the vocabulary on body-parts, this was not as well retained. Upon reflection the children did have far more exposure to colour adjectives because they were constantly hearing these words in conjunction with different classroom objects.

The children were also able to confidently use greeting phrases: *Bonjour, ça va? ça va bien! Au revoir*. This language was learned through song at the beginning and the end of each lesson so this frequent musical reinforcement was also very effective.

### **Parental comments**

During the pilot study I had regular conversations with parents and I found that their opinions were very encouraging regarding their children having the opportunity to learn an additional language. They also expressed surprise at how much the children wanted to use the language at home. The children mainly sang songs which they had learned at school, which supports my belief in the effectiveness of this teaching strategy.

*She was singing a song at bedtime. I didn't understand any of it but she was able to tell me it was about a mummy and daddy rabbit kissing. I thought that was amazing!*

*He tells me the colour of different things at home and sings songs. It's great that that he's getting a chance to start young.*

The parental questionnaires were unanimously positive about the children having the opportunity to learn another language at an early age. The only concern raised was about sustainability. Several parents felt that there was no point starting early if this could not be continued through the whole of primary school.

### **Staff motivation to be involved in teaching a language**

In all the establishments, teachers were very supportive despite some reservations initial concerns such as fear of being given additional responsibility if French were incorporated into the curriculum. One practitioner said that she was happy for me to teach French as it would be beneficial to her class but not to ask her to speak French as she did not feel confident. However, as the study progressed she became a very confident participant. She later commented that I had helped to change her view of



learning French because she had never realised it could be such fun. Previously, she only had memories of her negative experiences of learning French at secondary school.

Those practitioners who had already been trained in teaching French were able to benefit from a project being put in place by a specialist while they in turn could reinforce the learning because they were confident in using the language. They felt the children's learning was being fully developed through my teaching sessions and the constant reinforcement they could offer.

During the project and the evaluation process I ascertained that all the practitioners were motivated by the aspiration that children should be given the opportunity to learn a language from a young age. However they all felt that realising this aim could only be achieved with a great deal of support. Indeed, all practitioners said that they would like to receive additional support or training in teaching French. The teachers who had been trained in teaching French stated that they were more interested in some support. By contrast, several practitioners with no language training preferred the model of a specialist delivering French or at least having ongoing support from a specialist. Others expressed an interest in both training and support in the classroom.

Although practitioners had different ideas about which training model or level of support they preferred, they did share the common aspiration of improving their knowledge and confidence for the benefit of their pupils. These objectives are similar to those stated during a recent study conducted in England (Woolhouse et al, 2011) which focused on teachers negotiating the introduction of French into the Primary curriculum. This study found that teachers predominantly wanted to improve their confidence in speaking French. It also highlighted that as teachers became more aware of the benefits and enjoyment their pupils gained from language learning, they became convinced of the importance of their involvement in teaching a language.

I reached similar conclusions as the practitioners I worked with felt that there would need to be constant reinforcement of the language learning for the children to progress and therefore their involvement would ensure the children received regular exposure to the language.

When practitioners were asked if they felt the group had enjoyed learning French they gave positive responses:

*The children were really engaged. Their parents have been telling me about them singing French songs at home. Even the quiet ones were confident to speak.*

*They were well focused and they were like sponges for picking up the language. They really looked forward to French. Making the book was great because it gave them ownership of their learning. This final product let them say we've done that - we made that.*

Practitioners were also surprised by the amount of progress that the children made with comprehension of the language in a short space of time. Those with no experience of teaching a language said this was also a motivational factor for them to use the language because they felt that if the children could do it, they could too.

Teachers' comments suggest that regardless of their prior language knowledge, practitioners were able to learn from the experience. For example, those trained in teaching French gained new ideas to put into practice in the classroom whilst those with no experience were given the opportunity to learn French with the children. There were, however, differences of opinion about what was most beneficial: The pre-5 practitioners felt it was important for the children to be involved in independent sensory activities while French trained primary practitioners were keen for the time to be focused on structured teacher led activities which allowed the children to have greater exposure to listening to the language and using the language by singing songs or answering questions.

Education Scotland (2014: 7) in their update with regard to the implementation of the Scottish Government's 1+2 language policy recommended that primary teachers should try to use the language as part of classroom routine and lessons each day. In order to ensure that language learning is embedded within the classroom, a mixture of the above teaching strategies would be desirable. However, in my experience, when non-specialist practitioners are delivering language teaching they prefer to follow the audio and visual cues of a song or story and learn with the children rather than embed language in a natural way within the classroom environment. This is because the strategy of embedding a language requires spontaneity and therefore a higher level of confidence in using the language. In my opinion, non-specialist teachers will need a great deal of support to enable them to embed language learning in this way.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

I believe that it is important to give young children the opportunity to learn other languages. This allows children to experience different cultures at an early stage when they are more easily receptive to the idea that whilst cultural norms may vary there is always a common thread between all humanity. This in turn helps children to accept differences, and this is important because we *are* all different and at the same time we all share similar experiences and emotions. It is also at this crucial stage that children can learn a language in a natural and playful way. So we should not miss this opportunity in education as it will enhance children's perception of learning a language as being a positive experience and therefore increase future success in language learning.

Conducting this study helped to strengthen my beliefs as I was able to see how much young children had enjoyed language learning. Witnessing and recording the level of engagement and motivation which was displayed by learners and practitioners was vitally important because it has convinced me that this 'can do' attitude coupled with specialist support in order to nurture and develop this confidence will be crucial to the success of language learning in the primary school.

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