

Language Training for Child Development Officers: A Case Study

Maryse Payen-Roy, Glasgow City Council

Abstract: The aim of the project was to explore the best ways to introduce French to pre-school children within early years' establishments and devise a training course for Child Development Officers which could be duplicated and rolled out across the local authority in other modern languages.

Keywords: language learning, language policy, staff development, Scotland

Introduction

At the beginning of August 2010 Glasgow City Council gave me the responsibility for developing learning and teaching modern languages to young learners. I had always been interested in the links between first language acquisition and second language learning and this was only reinforced when, being a native French speaker my Scottish husband and I had children of our own. So being given the scope to research this area professionally with the aim to developing not only a program for the introduction of modern languages to pre-schoolers, but also a training course for Child Development officers felt like a hobby rather than a job. Coincidentally, it also presented me with the focus for my Chartered Teacher's final module work based project.

The project had three aims, namely to:

1. gather information on methodology to teach a modern language to pre-schoolers;
2. develop a teaching program through a pilot in early years' establishments (EYEs) and
3. transfer the findings to a training course for Child Development Officers (CDOs) to enable them to introduce French to the children.

In the first instance this involved reading and research on established theories regarding the way children learn language in general and an additional language (L2) in particular. The second step consisted of a pilot scheme to trial these in situ with young children over an average period of six weeks in each establishment. The last stage took place over 10 weeks' training to enable the participants to deliver the L2 themselves, maximising the children's exposure as well as ensuring its sustainability.

Pilot Study

It was agreed that the language for the pilot study would be French. Two Early Years Establishments (EYEs) were recommended by the QIO for Early Years Education. They were selected because of their positive disposition towards learning French, parental support and staff willingness to undertake the training. It was also important for continuity and progression's sake that the EYEs belonged to a learning community

where French could eventually be introduced from Primary 1 in their associated primaries. An initial period was spent reading and researching the relevant areas which would inform the development of the teaching and learning programme.

The pilot consisted of three stages. First I observed practice in EYEs and gathered information to build into my programme. I then went into the EYEs myself to model introducing French to young learners. Lastly I endeavoured to convert my findings into a training course suitable for Child Development Officers.

To reduce bias and stay as objective and “truthful” as possible I used triangulation as outlined by Golafshani (2003) seeking corroboration for my findings from colleagues, trainees, and heads of establishments, parents, and pupils as suitable. This implied using a variety of approaches to gather data from all the stakeholders.

Literature Review

My literature review concentrated on two main areas:

1. the wider context of how young children acquire their first language (L1) and
2. Second language learning methodology.

It was affirming to read well established linguists and child’s educationalists confirming what a lot of practitioners seem to know intuitively or from empirical deductions.

Chiefly:

1. Play is a major component of the way young children learn.

Within the realm of early education, play has been described as a principal vehicle for learning [...] (Sheridan, 2002: 77)

I believe that it is a natural way to engage with the reality of the environment around them, whether it be concrete interaction with solid materials, accessing abstract concepts, mastering motor development or practising social skills.

Therefore it makes sense that the introduction of a second Language (L2) must include adaptations of games and activities traditionally present in EYEs although it should not be playing for playing’s sake. Practitioners must keep in mind that the activities must have a language focus. They must be a vehicle for language presentation, understanding or practice, or reinforce cultural awareness but not simply be “fun”.

2. Children learn better when they are allowed to experiment with a certain degree of freedom.

A sense of freedom, choice and control in play means that boundaries are set and regulated by children themselves. As a result play promotes and protects esteem and maintains attention for learning to take place. (Sheridan, 2002: 2)

It is up to the practitioner to plan an environment which provides the children with a variety of potentially enriching experiences to choose from. These experiences shall dictate some of the French language content.

3. **There is both a need for careful planning** and identification of the potential learning outcomes linked to the experience arising from an activity **and a need for flexibility** as the children might actually take the learning experience in a totally different direction to the one anticipated by the adult who planned it. May (2011:18) stresses the need for contexts

[...] where it is the children who are in control and thus take the play where they need to for their own satisfaction.

This type of responsive teaching places a greater demand on the creativity and flexibility of the teacher. Nursery learning and teaching is far more children-led than any other sector I have worked in because:

- **At this stage in early childhood you should draw on all senses to stimulate learning.**

Brain research points to the importance of the five senses in relating information. The right hand hemisphere receives sensorial signals and because of the right brain's link to emotions it releases pleasurable signals. This encourages the child to repeat the experience and leads to enhanced learning. Using activities involving all senses when introducing new language will not only make the experience more relevant and realistic it will also maximise the learning potential of the children as

[...] when children are able to learn through their senses with freedom of movement, they learn with more breadth, depth and permanence." (Moyles, 2005: 264)

- **The importance of affective relationship in language learning.**

To be successful the types of activities discussed above are better led by a trusted adult. This frees the child from potential insecurity and vulnerability. A relaxed child is much more likely to be receptive to new experiences than a child who is not at ease with his / her interlocutor. As May (2011: 34) puts it:

It is in the warm and accepting philosophy of an empathetic and loving environment where children understand that they are accepted and valued that they will have the most courage to extend their developmental boundaries by trying things out.

Thus CDOs / classroom practitioners seem much better placed to deliver L2 than a visiting specialist.

- **Learning has to be relevant and purposeful**

Young children always find that new knowledge makes more sense if it is linked to something within their own experience. New knowledge for them, needs to have a

purpose, this has sometimes been called “knowing how” rather than “knowing that”. (May, 2011: 16)

- **Consistency and repetition are also essential.**

Communication and language learning take place within the everyday interactions children have (... these) must be enjoyable and frequent and should continue over an extended period of time. (The longer the better). (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002: 10)

It is therefore essential that the introduction of L2 is embedded in their daily interaction to achieve maximum impact.

- **There is a definite sequence to follow when introducing new language / concepts be it in English or other modern language.**

The child needs experience of the item / idea in concrete terms before associating it with a name. This combination then has to be internalised and generalised to some extent in order to be recognised even in a different guise. When introducing L2 it is thus important to use items relevant and meaningful to the learners.

- A **“silent period”** is a natural stage when children are learning their first language. It ties in with the (much shorter) silent stage which appears when pupils learn a second language. A lot of oral / aural repetition is needed before you can expect the learners to produce the FL. (Ipek, 2009: 155)
- Also it is worth mentioning that **errors** exists in both L1 and L2 and **are transitional forms** of language before a rule acquisition. Indeed many skills’ development seem to feature in both L1 and L2 acquisition. (Krashen, 1982: 28)

Most of the research on L2 acquisition dealt with bilingualism whereby children were exposed to L2 at a very young age; most children using L1 at home and L2 within the wider world. Other theories were based on total immersion situations, some of which I present below.

Findings from Immersion and Bilingualism Research

Both immersion and bilingualism angles differ from my project context where children’s L1 is English most of the time and French will be the L2 artificially introduced within the pre-school setting. Nonetheless I found some common ground that I could exploit and that is summed up below under four headings:

1. Simplified speech and repetitions are key in L2 as in L1 acquisition.

Learners need input that is adjusted to their level. Ellis (1999: 249)

Modifying what would be natural native speech is beneficial as understanding helps acquisition. Teachers should not hesitate to simplify their sentences, exaggerating the important words speaking clearly and slowly and using mimes and gestures to help

understanding. This reinforces the importance of imbedding the language in relevant situations which will help to convey meaning.

The child might not understand the FL but can be helped if the teacher remembers to “say less, stress, go slow, show” (Weitzman & Greenberg (2002: 238)

I believe that the same approach applies to the use of story books. Rephrasing the text so it matches the illustrations increases simultaneous recognition. Giving learners a chance to observe the illustrations, welcoming their interruptions and extending the topic in the child’s L1 will allow the teacher to exploit the text from a cultural point of view too.

2. Language acquisition is better if L2 has socio-economic or affective relevance

It is interesting to note that the degree of success achieved in L2 acquisition can be linked to the importance of the L2 in the outside world, the attraction the L2’s culture holds for the learner, the amount of exposure to this language through various media and its relevance to facilitate communication with a person/ group which holds a special place in the learners’ life. Also researchers agree that there are advantages if there are similarities between L1 and L2. (McLaughlin, 1984; Met, 1998; Clark, 2000; Nikolov, 2009)

The “critical age” theory

According to Met (1998) there is indeed a period during which the plasticity of young children’s brain would allow them to internalise new systems more effectively. Older brains, on the other hand, have a more rigid structure that doesn’t allow the creation of new infrastructures but merely allowing their analysis through existing “grids” thus impacting on the depth of “absorption” of new systems.

Others (e.g. Ellis, 1999; Sigelman and Rider 2009; Nikolov, 2009) have pointed out that over the same period of time adults have the capacity to learn L2 and reach a higher level of competence faster. This is mainly due to developmental stages and access to a more sophisticated way of learning. Nonetheless there are some advantages to learning a L2 at an earlier stage even though it is accepted that the outcome might not be native like competences. Young children are uninhibited, more open to new cultures and concepts and will reproduce foreign sounds more readily and achieve better accents (Met, 1998; Ellis, 1999).

3. Explicit and Implicit acquisition.

The former is the conscious effort to learn rules and structures, study a language to be able to use it; the latter is the subconscious absorbing of a language through passive exposure. My aim was to achieve a balance whereby the children would be explicitly taught some aspects of the language but hopefully would also implicitly absorb some language through repeated exposure to relevant phrases in meaningful contexts.

The observation in situ

I started to visit two EYEs. While observing I gathered information on methodology which I was able to confirm when interviewing CDOs and play leaders. I had a list of key points and was looking for the activities described in my readings. I observed evidence of

1) the importance of play in early years

During role-play sessions I was certainly able to identify the four CfE capacities where children are expected to be:

Successful learners (e.g. discovering new skills, putting their ideas into practical steps, making sense of their chosen context for role play)

Confident individuals (e.g. contributing to decision making and arguing successfully about distribution of roles)

Responsible citizens (e.g. acquiring and practising social skills)

Effective contributors (e.g. negotiating, working successfully in a group)

2) Free flow play was facilitated by careful planning and a variety of contexts for learning being provided through sand and water tanks, play dough tables, painting areas, quiet reading corners, building materials, role-play settings. The learning was discreetly being led by the CDOs ensuring a natural group rotation where children still had a multiple choice.

3) These types of varied activities definitely stimulate all senses and promote learning and apply in practice the findings by Anning (2010:26);

Recent research into brain development and function has alerted us to [...] the importance of the biological basis of learning processes [...] We know that information comes to the brain from the five senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste. Information is taken on board visually, auditorily or kinaesthetically

4) Through the easy interaction between the staff and the children I witnessed the importance of affective relationships on learning and teaching. The relationships displayed were quantifiable via the amount of care which was given to the children's basic needs, and the enthusiasm with which the children accepted the CDO's suggestions and interactions in their play. This emotional stability is undoubtedly another factor facilitating and maximising the learning taking place.

Developing the programme for pre-schoolers (4-5 year olds)

Once my period of observation was over I had to use the information gathered to create a teaching programme. My aim was to embed French as much as possible within daily routine events such as morning greetings, choice of snacks, expressing basic needs etc...

I found that the main areas where I could easily integrate French were:

- Daily routine
- Playground games + physical activities

- Art & Craft
- Story telling
- Songs and rhymes
- Any of the last four above centred around festivals

The relevance of the language, its constant repetition in meaningful contexts improved its recycling appeal and maximised its impact. Table 1 exemplifies how the observed practice translated into L2 teaching:

Table 1

Successful approach	Example
learning through play and all senses	Using play dough to make a person as instructed in French
interactive activities	Making pancakes for “La chandeleur”
active learning approaches	Putting a pictorial recipe into the correct sequence
relevant and purposeful context	Using French for greetings / praising / daily routine activities
consistency and repetition	Commenting on snacks each day e.g. “j’aime les pommes”
simplified speech	Focusing on single words e.g. <i>le vent</i> in the first instance rather than the whole phrase e.g. “il y a du vent”
on-going formative assessment	Tracking a child’s progress from reactive to productive, keeping evidence like the paper caterpillar they made (after some story telling with “La petite chenille “and used to name the colours of the rings and count them in French.

Training the CDOs

The last stage involved disseminating my findings to the CDOs during training sessions, on the understanding that the CDOs would share a willingness and enthusiasm to continue introducing French after my departure. Indeed a constructivist approach demands that “the members of an action research team must share a common goal, demonstrate a mutual commitment to the critical enquiry of a particular issue (Burton *et al*, 2008). In this case, the whole EYE from Head to CDOs and play leaders had to stand united behind my proposal to introduce French to ensure its success and sustainability.

Drawing on my experience as a staff tutor for Modern Languages in the Primary Sector (MLPS) I drew up a plan for a 10-week training course. I met with CDOs and EYEs staff (14 participants in total) every Monday afternoon from 3.30 to 5 pm over a period of ten weeks. The course was hosted in a local nursery and neighbouring establishments were invited to join. We covered the basic language present in the most popular topics commonly used in EYEs through songs, rhymes, storytelling and physical games in line with the Modern Languages Principles and Practice statements for early level described as such:

Activities will include playing games, singing songs, carrying out simple instructions, and playing with simple poetry and rhyme – harnessing the natural curiosity of young children for sounds and words and their strong desire to communicate. In this way they can begin to be enthusiastic, confident language learners from the outset. (Education Scotland, no date: 2)

I also drew on my experience during the pilot phase to inform some of the language content. I was able to use Glasgow City Council formal evaluation questionnaires at the

end of the 10 weeks though I regularly sought oral feedback at the end of each session. The Glasgow City Council evaluation includes both ranking and open responses.

Discussion

At the time I was training the EYE staff with the materials and content I had used during my experience in the pilot study. This was well received but I found this audience to be more reserved and self-conscious than my usual cohort of primary teachers. I could feel a distinct awkwardness on the part of the participants as they found themselves in a learner's position again.

The way I approached the French language itself also turned out to be a difficulty. Because of previous training experience I expected that participants would value an overview of the French sound system to boost their oral confidence. Instead I found out through the end of course evaluations that some actually found it quite threatening. It turned out that some younger members of the group had a good grounding in French and this intimidated others who didn't feel confident enough and thus didn't fully engage in the course oral practice.

The same thing happened when I introduced the concept of gender and articles in the French language (*le* vs. *la*). To some (especially more mature participants), it brought back memories of dreaded French grammar lessons and it seems that they hit a virtual learning wall. The merest hint of grammar made them shut down, defeated and embarrassed, all the more since other participants coped well with the same concept. I had not anticipated the perceived intellectual hurdle some people associate with learning a new language.

I used the evaluations, discussions with participants, dialogue with my line manager and colleagues to make sense of what had happened and tried to remedy it. Looking at the situation objectively and systematically was important to maintain the project's validity. Several points emerged, as outlined in Table 2:

Table 2

Practical issues	Methodology issues
The venue was not very conducive. Participants liked the locality / proximity but resented sitting on tiny nursery chairs, with no tables to lean on to take notes.	I spent too long on what was perceived as "grammar" (gender / articles / sounds)
The nursery's provision of refreshments was very welcome after a day's work but it took time away from the session.	The lesson planners worked well in the pilot (delivered by myself, a native speaker specialist) but I could not expect the same level of language competence from the average EYE's staff delivering with no support.
The sessions were too long, staff were tired or had to leave early due to childcare commitments	I devised the content of the programme based on my experience in the pilot (as native speaker and trained language teacher) but this did not reflect the reality of what the experience would be for a CDO.
Mixing staff from several EYEs didn't create a comfortable enough environment for staff to relax and lose their inhibitions about speaking in another language in front of other adults.	

I had to systematically review my practice, and to come up with a revised program. As such I addressed the points of concern highlighted by the evaluations, I sought discussions with participants, colleagues etc. and devised a reactive plan summarised in Table 3:

Table 3

Issue	Action taken
Venue	Targeted nursery but move to staff room of nearby secondary school.
Refreshments	Served 15 minutes before start of course
Timing	Reduced from ten to six one-hourly sessions, to be topped up by support visit (co-teaching)
Target participants	One EYE at a time / partner nurseries
Language competence	Redrafted and greatly simplified to include mostly words and phrases key words and phrases in context around festivals, numbers, colours and similar traditional basic topics.
Course content	Language suitable to be embedded in daily routine and scenarios relevant to a CDO, not a visiting teacher.
Program of work	Planners available as sample but concentrate more on opportunities for learning identified by stakeholders.

I also had to rigorously employ self-evaluation in order to maintain the quality and validity of the project. The main thing to emerge from these reflections was the difference between two models of delivery:

- Stand-alone sessions delivered by a language specialist and
- Embedded language delivered routinely by EYE's staff on a daily basis.

The dichotomy within my project appeared as in fact I had to rely on the first model to gather information in order to develop and implement the second model. It was unrealistic to expect to transfer my findings directly into a training program for non-specialist English native speakers. Thanks to the evaluations I was able to redraft the program content and tailor it to EYE's staff needs.

Conclusions

When delivering a modern language in Early Years establishments, purpose, relevance, repetition and simplification are paramount.

Simplification of the vocabulary not only helps making the modern language accessible to the children but it also alleviates complexity for the staff having to use it. It raises confidence in the children and the adults alike. It can then be built on and expanded at a pace which suits both the children and the staff.

The modern language should be embedded in the daily routine at welcoming time or snack breaks for instance but also through playful activities involving all senses specifically identified during planning as suitable for language delivery such as rhymes, songs, four corner games, cooking, etc. when and where possible.

Festivals in the country or countries where the modern language is spoken provide an interesting backdrop for comparison of cultural customs but the discussion must go beyond mere exchange of information in English for the modern language to have any

real impact. Relevant follow-up practical activities such as baking or making art & craft products will both reinforce the cultural aspect and recycle exposure to basic instructions in the modern language. Responsive modern language input to the environment without specific language context achieves minimal impact.

Topic led activities focusing on specific teaching points are better delivered by language specialists. They can deliver a richer language experience but the stand-alone nature of their lessons has a lesser impact on the learner. Those sessions often lack the regular repetition and meaningful nature of routine activities embedded in the EYEs' practice.

CDOs and EYEs' staff are in a better position to deliver purposeful, relevant and consistent modern language input. They also have the advantage of established affective relationships with the children that foster a better climate for teaching and learning in general. It is therefore important to provide CDOs and EYEs staff with appropriate training.

The training course must take place at a time and place that suit the working day arrangements in place in EYEs. Weekly sessions of one hour to one hour and a half at the end of the day when most children have gone home and staff can be made available to cover seem to work best.

It's an advantage if the venue is either the EYE itself or in its vicinity but it must take into consideration the participants' comfort and must provide an adequate environment conducive to successful teaching and learning. Training one centre at a time or neighbouring centres with established positive working relationship is important contribute to the course's positive ethos.

The course content should concentrate on basic language used routinely in EYEs' activities with some information on festivals whilst also providing opportunities for working on stories and more elaborate projects with the help of the tutor. Lastly, it is essential to emphasise the post-training support available to staff through access to the staff tutor, websites, audio materials and other resources.

Looking Ahead

My next step shall be to develop a suitable support pack including audio recordings of stories, rhymes and core language areas. With help from the EYEs I would also like to devise a reporting tool to inform parents of specific areas of ML covered. It would provide opportunities for the parents to support their child's learning at home and give me a chance to gather written feedback from parents.

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