

# **Sustaining Use of the Target Language: One teacher's attempt to implement a strongly communicative approach during French Club sessions**

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## **Abstract**

In this study a language teacher with a general Primary background, undertook a process of action research, in order to increase her use of the target language in French lessons. Initial attempts to implement this more strongly communicative approach, within the context of Middle school Modern Foreign Language (MFL) curriculum provision, were unsuccessful. Consequently, the teacher focused on the more favourable setting of an extra-curricular French club, which she ran on behalf of a private sector organisation within a Local Authority controlled primary school.

Twelve strategies were taken from a Scottish study into early partial immersion (EPI) education and implemented in this French club setting, with eleven children aged between five and seven. The teacher monitored her practice over four sessions, responding to colleague observations over the first two sessions and analysing transcriptions from two further, tape-recorded sessions. Pupil responses to this more strongly communicative methodology were also monitored in order to establish the suitability of this approach with young children.

The results of the study show that the strategies have helped the teacher implement this approach successfully. However, the relative contribution of each strategy and the practicability of sustaining use of the target language all the time are brought into question. Also, this study would need to be replicated within the context of Primary or Middle school MFL curriculum provision, in order to establish whether the success of the current study can be partly contributed to the favourable teacher-pupil ratio and pupil motivation within the club setting.

The study also confirms the findings from the field of research into teacher cognition, that the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of language teachers have an impact on their practice. Importantly, the dissemination of best practice from Scotland into the English context strengthens the case for such groundbreaking initiatives, such as the Scottish EPI study.

The full details of the study formed part of an MEd thesis (Shanahan 2006).

## **Introduction**

The importance of language learning in our society and in the global economy is set out as a rationale for the Languages Strategy for England (DfES, 2002). A clear vision is set out within the strategy, outlining plans for the provision of 'opportunity for early language learning, aimed at harnessing children's learning potential and enthusiasm', as well as for the provision of 'high quality teaching and learning opportunities required to achieve this' (DfES 2002, p.4).

At the heart of these visionary statements lie two assumptions, namely that (1) younger learners have an innate learning potential for languages and (2) teachers harnessing this innate ability will have the knowledge, understanding and skills needed to do this successfully.

Without this knowledge, understanding and skill, there is a real danger that provision may not offer the necessary conditions for language learning. There may even be an over-reliance on the children's age to produce the results, rather than an appropriate pedagogical approach. There is evidence to suggest that this may lead to an absence of other key factors required for successful learning to take place (Burstall et al., 1974).

## Context

The drive to extend MFL provision in the primary sector combined with a shortage of qualified specialist MFL teachers in English primary and middle schools has led to the recruitment of non-specialist primary teachers, who have some knowledge of a foreign language, to teach this to their own class, or in some cases to several classes within their school.

As a primary school teacher, I had no formal training in language teaching, but was assessed at level C1 of the Common European Framework by the French Institute in London. My proficiency in spoken French, combined with a personal commitment to providing stimulating language-learning provision, enabled me to take on the role of an after school French club teacher with Le Club Français (LCF). This experience later led to a position as French teacher to eleven year olds in a middle school.

With little theoretical knowledge about language learning, but a wealth of ideas, activities and fluency in the French language, I set about developing my practice. Influenced by my own experiences as a language learner, as well as a set of beliefs about the role of the teacher and the needs and abilities of children, I worked hard within both settings, to make language learning a meaningful and fun experience, whether following the school scheme of work or the LCF curriculum.

I was offered the possibility to reflect formally on my teaching in the middle school setting. During an appraisal by a senior teacher, a concern was raised about my limited use of the target language (TL) for the management and organisation of the class and the activities during the lesson.

This surprised me for a number of reasons. Firstly, the three Early Language Learning (ELL) training sessions I had attended had made limited use of this methodology. Here we had been assured that very little knowledge and experience would be needed in order to provide meaningful language learning opportunities to children in the primary age range. It must also be stated, however, that most participants attending this training were not specialist language teachers but volunteers. Secondly, although the curriculum plans given to me in the middle school outlined 'key objectives' for language to be taught, they did not detail the desirability of sustained target language use.

Thirdly, despite an emphasis on 'naturalistic' learning outlined in the LCF policy manual, teacher-trainers discouraged the over-use of the target language during French club sessions, when the issue was raised by one of the participants at LCF in-house training. Thus both ELL and LCF training had confirmed my own view that only 'manageable' chunks of French should be taught.

Finally, I felt I was not alone in my uncertainty of the practicality of sustaining TL use. The comments of MFL teachers asked to describe their attitudes to TL use in their own lessons reveal an underlying anxiety about this methodology among many of them (SEED 2003). The comments below were recorded at the Edinburgh Good Practice Conference and resonate with my own experience as an MFL teacher, as well as with attitudes expressed by some colleagues;

- Don't use the foreign language all the time. It's alienating and too difficult.
- Instructions should be given in both languages.
- Sustained use of the target language is de-motivating to certain pupils.
- It is not always practicable to teach in the TL.

Nevertheless, the appraisal had challenged my beliefs about what constitutes second language learning, of how children at different stages learn best, and my personal goals for the foreign language classroom. This marked a turning point in my professional development as it is from these implicit theories of language and language learning, that classroom procedures, roles and relationships follow (Baker 1996).

Although I had set 'communication' as a goal for my classroom, colleague observation and subsequent analysis of transcripts from my lessons had shown that my pedagogical style was centred towards explaining or conveying knowledge *about* language to the pupils, rather than creating stimulating opportunities for the pupils to actively negotiate meaning or communicate. This had led to my use of French for less than 50% of some lessons. My reliance on verbal explanations of what the children should do and the absence of a repertoire of non-verbal strategies to communicate this information was also evident. Nevertheless, I undertook to introduce sustained use of the TL in my teaching. I was determined to reflect critically on my practice in order to achieve a more strongly communicative teaching style and so looked for evidence of a successful model on which to base my own practice.

A recent Scottish project on Early Partial Immersion (EPI) offered evidence in support of the sustained use of the TL in lessons. The Scottish Executive, with the support of the Director of Scottish CILT, facilitated the setting up and monitoring of an EPI project at Walker Road Primary School in Aberdeen. In October 2000, with the head teacher's support, a fully qualified, native French-speaking teacher was employed at the school to teach the expressive arts curriculum in French to the five-year-old children in Primary One.

The strongly communicative approach has its roots in the findings from international research into immersion education. Important differences between the experiences of the children at Walker Road and children in other immersion contexts set it apart from much of the international research but make it more comparable to the school contexts of the

majority of primary modern foreign language (PMFL) provision in this country.

Notably, the children at Walker Road are learning French as a foreign language, rather than a second language that they might encounter within their local community. Secondly, they are immersed in the foreign language for a lesser proportion of the time than children in most of the immersion settings cited in the international research (Johnson and Swain, 1977).

The success of the Walker Road project, as outlined in the preliminary report (Scottish CILT, 2002) suggests that the strongly communicative approach could be successfully implemented in a PMFL setting, due to the similarities between the two settings. Table 1 below outlines the key strategies implicated in the success of the project so far.

**Table 1 Strategies taken from The Walker Road Study**

1.	Reinforce familiar vocabulary in different activities and across sessions.
2.	Select and adapt activities to make full use of non-verbal communication.
3.	Praise and reward children's attempts to guess what is being said.
4.	Expect that children will cope.
5.	Allow creativity and mistakes.
6.	Accept that a wrong guess is better than no guess, or not having had the opportunity to guess.
7.	Produce a script and rehearse language to be used.
8.	Write up detailed accounts of what worked well or not.
9.	Take these in to account in planning the following session.
10.	Allow 'silent time' when children can absorb language and respond to it.
11.	Provide cognitively challenging contexts –not 're-naming'.
12.	Facilitate 2-way communication where meaning is 'negotiated'.

Using these 12 strategies, I undertook a process of action research, through which I aimed to change not only my pedagogical practice, but also my beliefs about, understanding of and attitude towards teaching a foreign language. Indeed, there is evidence from research into teacher cognition in language teaching, which suggests a complex relationship between teachers' cognitive processes and their behaviours. Beliefs established early on in life are resistant to change even in the face of contradictory evidence.

Clearly, in order to be able to take the wealth of practical advice from the Scottish EPI study, and put it into my own classroom practice, I needed to follow the guidance offered to Key Stage 3 teachers and

stand back from my practice and refocus on the purposes of what I did in the classroom (DfES 2003, p.66). I hoped that this process would empower me to change the teaching methods and styles I used, to those that would allow pupils to 'hear the target language used expertly on a consistent and long-term basis' and bring a 'quality to the outcomes of lessons' (DfES 2003, p.26).

The purpose of the present study was to increase my use of the target language. The range of strategies suggested by the Walker Road EPI study offered the possibility of achieving this increase. However, perhaps more importantly, the Walker Road study challenged one of my core beliefs about language teaching and learning. My existing belief, i.e. that the language taught should be 'manageable' for the children, was contradicted by the evidence that children responded positively when exposed to 'fast, fluent French' (Scottish CILT, 2003). This indicated that the level of language input that the children could actually process, might in fact be higher than I had previously believed.

This information facilitated a change in my knowledge and beliefs and attitude. Now that I was faced with evidence that sustained language use was possible, I could believe that it was possible in my own practice. The positive results of this methodology on children's language learning also convinced me that it was desirable that children should be exposed to as much TL as possible. For the first time, my belief that language is learned primarily by instruction was challenged. I began to believe that language can (and should) be learned in a far more 'natural', way. That meaning could be negotiated, through context-rich, communication-based interactions, rather than taught in a teacher directed way.

## **Methodology**

I decided to focus on my French club setting for this action research project and selected research methods, which would give me a fresh, objective view of what I was actually doing in my lessons. I needed to analyse these observable behaviours in a way that would enlighten me as to the causes and effects of these behaviours. My methods needed to be both quantitative and qualitative, offering both hard data about how much English and French I use in lessons, as well as thick description of how the interaction between my beliefs, attitudes and actions may contribute to the relative amounts of each language used.

I collected data from 4 sessions. A native-speaking French club colleague observed the first two sessions. Sessions 3 and 4 were tape-recorded. I carefully scripted each session beforehand, planned in appropriate strategies for each session and made detailed field notes in order to aid the process of reflection.

This combination of 'hard data' from the recordings about the quantity and nature of TL being used, with the 'thick description' from semi-structured observations and field notes enabled me to understand more

fully the inter-relationship between my use of TL, my implementation of the range of strategies and pupil responses to these. A fuller understanding of the dynamics of the teaching situation gained across four sessions allowed me to adapt my teaching in order to achieve maximum TL use.

Although I did not tell the children that they were involved in an action research project, I did make explicit to them my desire to use French as much of the time as possible, and praised their attempts to respond to this. This was one of the 12 strategies.

## Results

### *The Strategies*

#### **1 Reinforce familiar vocabulary in different activities and across sessions**

In Session 3 'petit' and 'grand' were presented to the children, firstly as a colouring activity sheet where they coloured snails according to size. Later in the same session they played a 'role play' game requiring them to move around like snails and then organise themselves in order of size. The same vocabulary was later revisited in Session 4 where children were asked to identify the size of snail puppets. (These activities also provide evidence that I was encouraging a physical response from the children at this stage).

#### **2. Select and adapt activities to make full use of non-verbal communication**

In Session 3 the colouring activity sheets and felt tip pens were laid out before the children arrived. The physical presence of the materials thus provided a context-rich environment in which I could embed the target language 'Coloriez'. The expectation that the session would begin with colouring was also achieved through the development of a predictable routine for each session, allowing children to predict the type, order and duration of each activity from experience. This enabled me to communicate what I wanted the children to do with minimum need for language.

#### **3. Praise and reward children's attempts to understand what is being said**

In session 3 I had planned to formally praise the children's attempts to understand my French. There is also evidence of me confirming or acknowledging correct attempts to guess what was being said in both Session 3, where I reply "C'est ça" and in Session 4 where I reply "Bien, Joshua".

#### **4. Expect that children will cope**

In session four I planned to introduce 'new' activities in French, whereas, in Session three I had planned to introduce a new activity using English. My expectation that children could cope had thus increased over the two sessions. In session 4 'Charlotte, est-ce que tu peux t'asseoir là-bas?' shows my expectation that Charlotte would be able to cope with a complex request in French.

### **5. Allow creativity and mistakes**

Both transcripts show evidence of children mimicking the target language when used by me or heard on the CD. The transcript for Session 4 shows a child's creative response to the question 'Comment ça va?' as "I'm mal as well". This response was accepted and praised. However, the limited opportunity for creative use of language by the children is a concern raised by the analyses of the transcripts, which will be discussed at a later stage.

### **6. Accept that a wrong guess is better than no guess**

The plans and transcripts show evidence of children being given ample opportunity to guess the meaning of the TL, with minimal use of English.

### **7. Produce a script and rehearse language to be used**

Each of the plans was written out as a script with virtually all of the language to be used in the session written down. This script was created by carefully considering how each activity, as well as the transition between activities, would flow. Anticipating the potential stumbling blocks to communication proved invaluable in the setting up of opportunities for successful two-way encounters, where meaning could be negotiated.

### **8. Write up a detailed account of what worked and what did not**

Each of the sessions was followed up immediately by a critical evaluation of the implementation of the relevant strategies and their effects on pupil responses and TL use. The observer participated in this evaluation after the first two sessions. These evaluations were then incorporated into each plan. For example, in session 4 the evaluation raises some concern that an opportunity for increased cognitive challenge was missed in the activity linked to size.

### **9. Take account of evaluations in planning the following session**

In session 3 my evaluation shows that I was concerned the children's lack of focus during the register, where I was asking each child "Comment t'appelles-tu?" I thus planned to use a ball in the following session in order to help focus the children's attention on each other, thus engaging them more fully in the communication process during this activity.

### **10 Allow silent time**

Each lesson plan shows the language that I would be expecting the children to use highlighted in bold. There are relatively few words highlighted in this way. This clearly shows that my emphasis is on the children responding physically to lots of new language, through actions, rather than producing language orally. The highlighted language to be produced by the children is very simple and repetitive at this stage. The emphasis is on the children producing limited language in a variety of contexts, within and between sessions.

### **11 Provide cognitively challenging contexts rather than 'renaming'**

In session 3 the children needed to organise themselves in order of size. This mathematical concept represented a different, and more cognitively challenging context for the consolidation of the new language 'petit' and 'moyen', than the selection and colouring of different sized pictures in the introductory activity.

### **12 Facilitate two-way communication, where meaning is negotiated**

The eliciting of a physical response to a wide variety of instructions necessarily required a negotiation of meaning between me as teacher and my pupils. Initially, the children were required to read my non-verbal communication and use contextual cues in order to interpret 'new' language that they could not possibly 'know'. In turn, the children's physical response provided me with visual feedback about their level of understanding. I could then adjust my language or non-verbal cues, in order to refine communication.

For example, some children in session 3 responded to my instruction 'Coloriez' by asking me if I meant 'Colour it in'. Others simply demonstrated their understanding of the meaning of 'Coloriez' by colouring in their activity sheet. I was able to show the children who were colouring that I recognised their correct response by smiling, nodding my head or putting my thumb up. I accompanied this reinforcement with the verbal cue "Oui". This provided further feedback to the children who had not yet correctly interpreted my instruction.

### ***The Observer***

The discussions with the observing colleague after the first two sessions provided information about the degree of success of my TL use. This, in turn, had an effect on my subsequent teaching. The semi-structured nature of the observation process meant that the observer was focused in a broad way on elements within the session. Firstly, she was forming an impression of how much TL was spoken during the session. Her second focus was 'children's responses'. This could incorporate children's understanding of and engagement with the TL, as well as their attempts to use the TL.

Immediately after each session we gave our own estimate of the percentage of TL used by me in the session. We then shared views on how the children had coped or engaged with the TL. The observer was very positive on each occasion. She consistently estimated that French was the language used most of the time. She also expressed her enjoyment of the sessions. She expressed astonishment that the children responded so enthusiastically and confidently to fluent French.

In her capacity as a native French-speaker, she confirmed that the French spoken was also fluent, accurate and authentic. This feedback



increased my self-confidence in my ability to deliver a strongly communicative approach.

Of the twelve strategies implemented in this study, the observer particularly noticed strategy 4, my expectation that the children would cope with the TL. As a practising French club teacher herself, she was unfamiliar with the strongly communicative approach and accustomed to using English the majority of the time in her own practice. She was impressed with the success of the approach, commenting that the children were confident and seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves. Her observation also gave validity to my perception that the children sustained concentration well.

The general agreement between the views of the observer and me, about what had worked well and what had not, helped me to gain confidence in my ability to monitor my own practice. After each discussion, the strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of the various strategies were written into the evaluation part of the lesson plan. The process of discussing lessons with the observer, helped focus my attention on the strategies which had worked well and those that I needed to implement more rigorously. The positive views of the observer also helped maintain my self-confidence in using the TL. Her estimates of TL use were consistently greater than mine and her perceptions of pupil engagement with the language were consistently as positive as my own.

### ***The Transcripts***

As the third and fourth sessions were tape-recorded, it was possible at this stage to ascertain through a process of triangulation, whether our perceptions of TL use and pupil response had been accurate. Quantifiable data about the amount of TL used in session 3 enabled me to adjust my perception of TL use. This enabled more accurate judgements to be made about TL use in the fourth session.

In order to quantify the large amount of information produced by the transcription of the two sessions I counted the actual number of words spoken by me in French and English. Table 2 below shows the percentage of target language and English used in both tape-recorded sessions.

**Table 2: Percentages of TL and English used in Sessions 3 and 4.**

	<b>French</b>	<b>English</b>
<b>Session 3</b>	82%	18%
<b>Session 4</b>	90%	10%

These results confirm that during the course of this action research project I managed to use the TL for considerably more of the time than I used English. The implementation of the twelve strategies certainly seemed to have had a positive impact on my ability to sustain TL use,

although important differences between the pilot study and current study will be addressed later. Discourse analyses showed that I had moved away from wordy 'explanations' and towards types of utterance that perhaps facilitated a more communicative approach, such as instructions, demonstrations/modelling and questions.

### ***Children's Responses***

As my confidence has grown in my ability to deliver a strongly communicative methodology using the target language, so too has my belief in the positive effect of this on the children. The comments offered by the observer confirmed my own perceptions of the children's responses to this change in approach. They seemed relaxed and confident when being spoken to in French.

Furthermore, the children were keen to support each other in negotiating meaning. For example, those children who were quick to guess what was being said were often keen to share their knowledge with the group. There is often a competitive tone to this calling out, but more often a feeling that they are concerned that the rest of the group 'get' the message, as they have done.

This does correspond with my own perception that 'negotiating meaning' is a more challenging learning experience than being 'told' what language means. I felt that for the children who were seeking a greater level of challenge the sustained use of the TL offered this. Those children who were not so confident were happier to rely on the 'challenge-seekers' to negotiate the meaning on their behalf. Further investigation could potentially reveal whether certain strategies are more beneficial to children with particular learning styles or personality traits.

## **Discussion**

### ***Limitations of the Study***

Although this methodology inherently offers a greater level of cognitive challenge than the use of English to 'teach' a foreign language, I still felt that the strategy on which I had focused least attention was strategy 11 'Provide cognitively challenging contexts – not renaming'. The integration of French with another curriculum area, as seen in the Walker Road study is less easy to simulate when following a traditional 'French' curriculum. The 'renaming' of familiar concepts characterises the LCF and QCA curriculum. The opportunities for negotiation of meaning arising from the giving of instructions in the target language is more challenging than the 'manageable chunks' or 'Present, Practice, Production' methodologies, but do not offer cognitive challenge in the same way as the subject based 'immersion' approach – or Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL).

Although the results outlined here do show that I have achieved my goal of sustaining TL use the majority of the time within two sample sessions, they need to be considered in the wider context of my practice over time and in a variety of contexts. The restriction on what can be communicated when maintaining TL use is at times frustrating. There are occasions when the quality of interaction would be enhanced if English could be used for selected exchanges.

Some practitioners establish this sort of 'code switching' in their language lessons. The DfES guidance does acknowledge that teachers may wish to 'support language work with explanations in English' (DfES 2004, p. 3) It is difficult, however, to establish a 'TL only' ethos if one resorts too quickly to English as the language of communication. Equally, it is important to consider the quality of the language being used and the contexts within which that language is embedded.

The relative contribution of each of the 12 strategies is not revealed in the context of this study. Each strategy would need to be implemented in isolation in order to establish its effect on a teacher's use of the TL. Nor is it possible to determine the effects of a combination of various strategies – or of any interaction between the strategies and teacher or pupil characteristics.

The success of this study must also be considered within the context that the study took place. The French club sessions took place in the same school, with the same group of children. Hence, any statements made about this methodology may not necessarily be applied to other settings. Unlike the sample in the pilot study, the group size was relatively small, favouring the emphasis on non-verbal communication. It is much easier to maintain eye contact with individuals and make full use of a body language to communicate meaning, when teaching a small group of children.

The age of the children could also be a key factor in the outcomes of the study. If younger children really do have the 'innate language acquisition device', then this might make them more receptive to a strongly communicative methodology. Older children or adults may respond differently, thus restricting any generalisations that can be made from this study. Motivational levels may also have been higher in this sample than in that of the pilot study. The children at French club are there by choice, rather than obligation.

### ***The Role of Teacher Cognition on the Outcomes of the Study***

Finally and perhaps most importantly, one of the key variables in this study, that would be impossible to replicate, would be the teacher! The personality and crucially, the knowledge, beliefs and attitudes of a teacher are unique to him or herself. As the teacher in this study, I am aware that, to some extent, these cognitions can change over time.

Beliefs, knowledge and attitudes can evolve, as a result of the teaching experience. In turn, these changing cognitions can then affect teacher behaviour in such a way as to affect learning outcomes. This cycle of cognitions is complex since cognition affects behaviours, behaviours determine outcomes, and outcomes in turn change cognitions.

A turning point in my professional development was reached on reading the preliminary report into the Walker Road Early Partial Immersion Study. Finding an apparently successful application of a strongly communicative approach in a primary school setting facilitated a major change in my cognitions.

The successful outcomes of the current action research project must therefore be considered within the context of my knowledge, beliefs and attitudes at this point in time. My beliefs about the desirability and practicability of sustained TL use were clearly not the same as they were at the time of the preliminary study. Consequently my attitude was more positive. Furthermore, the positive feedback from the children, who responded well to my attempts to sustain TL use in the French club setting, as well as the reassuringly positive feedback from my observing colleague, helped engender greater self-confidence and a more positive attitude to this approach.

This study suggests that teacher efficacy is related to teacher knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. The success of the government's drive to promote early language learning using non-specialist teachers will depend upon teacher cognitions, as much as on frameworks of objectives or schemes of work. Successful models, such as the Walker Road EPI study, are therefore crucial if non-specialist teachers are to succeed.

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