# Modern Languages and Autism

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I work in Ruchill Autism Unit as a class teacher and would like to relate the experience of introducing French into our pupils' curriculum over the course of a school year.  Ruchill Autism Unit is one of four Autism units which serves one of four geographical sectors in the City of Glasgow and is run by Glasgow City Education Department. It shares a campus with Ruchill Primary School and at present has a school roll of twenty four pupils, five teaching staff and seven Pupil Support Assistants.  Children attending the unit have a diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder, the implications of which are well documented and Greater Glasgow Health Board issued a working document to interested parties explaining the condition and selected extracts with localised statistics for the inner city:

'*Autism is a disorder of development which affects 91 per 10000 […] and all people with autism have impairments in social interaction, social communication and imagination.* Documented research primarily over the past 60 years has advanced dramatically in terms of knowledge and management of the condition in terms of understanding and the strategies needed to assist the teaching process. Modernity recognises the basis of the impairment and, '*This is referred to as the triad of impairments* (Wing & Gould, 1979)

The pupil group with their diagnosis all have varying degrees of the Triad which does impact on their educational attainment and experiences. In addition to the Triad of impairment Glasgow Greater Health Board (GGHB) statistics suggest that between 70%-80% of autistic people will have an additional learning disability and within the study group 80% have in fact additional specific educational difficulties in comparison to their mainstream peers.

The pupils are all of primary age and are selected for places through Local Authority led admission panels.  All pupils accepted for the unit are deemed able to access the mainstream curriculum and benefit from the mainstream experience.  Integration with their mainstream peers is done routinely in the Expressive Arts and during joint campus parties, assembly and concerts, which occur through the school year. Integration also occurs on a child by child basis where a unit pupil will join, for example, their mainstream peers for maths or language sessions.  Recent examples would include joint Environmental Studies topics where unit and mainstream classes collaborated over a term on the Romans culminating on a joint visit to the Hunterian Museum in the city.

Integration requires collaboration and joint planning sessions, which are routinely arranged as part of the planning process, with teaching staff dividing the task and teaching commitments required over the planning period. The Heads of both establishments are committed to this inclusion process and display the pragmatic flexibility required to assist the process. Two recent HMIE Reports (2008a, 2008b), for Ruchill Autism Unit and Ruchill Primary School respectively, commented on the success of this collaboration and integration in a very positive light.

The unit class size is six and the adult to pupil ratio is one to two in classes that are designed according to the TEACCH (**T**reatment and **E**ducation of **A**utistic and related **C**ommunication-handicapped **Ch**ildren)Philosophy (http://www.teacch.com) where the emphasis is on providing structure and predictability through various methods including individual work stations, social areas and the visual timetable. The visual timetables are situated in a prominent class position and the focus for the initial discussions of the day's events for the class. The timetable displays in time sections the day's programme which in turn allows the pupils to visually predict their coming day. Younger pupils' visual timetables can be pictorial and as they progress through the unit classes they become written.  All unit teachers have attended the TEACCH Annual Conference at least once and are actively encouraged to develop and to further their own autism knowledge base through Authority sponsored training.  The classroom itself has very limited wall display, other than precise and clear instructions to minimise over-stimulation to the teaching environment. It should be noted that the typical primary wall displays occur in the corridor area of the unit. The use of the visual timetable and individual tasks are evident and used routinely in the classroom setting as are the reward stickers which pupils need to achieve to get their Golden Time (a reward of a chosen activity for 30 minutes) at the end of school week.

Pupils' educational needs are met on an individual basis and they will follow at their own pace the Primary Curriculum for the most part with perhaps the most noted difference being the percentage of time spent on social skills. Social skills are an important part of the day in the unit, where the design of the classroom in terms of social sitting and eating areas are used as social events.  Social situations are problematic for most of the group and the development of conversation skills and appropriate responses are modelled and practised at these sessions. In terms of Wing & Gould's *Triad of Impairment* the social situations and the response of the unit to addressing these needs does become an integral part of the teaching day

Pupils' educational and social needs are reviewed on an annual basis where unit staff, parents, psychological staff, and other related professionals are invited to review progress and to outline the plan for the child for the coming year. This, if appropriate, may be integration

back into their chosen  primary school and to date there have been over the past four years six pupils who have made this transition successfully. The transition process involves close co-operation between the unit and the receiving school over a three to four month period on average, depending on the needs of the child. The outcome of our pupils who come naturally to the end of their primary career ranges from marginal support at their local secondary, an equivalent in or out of Authority secondary Autism unit or moving into the Special school sector.

My own background was mainstream Primary and I was in the early cohort of French trained primary teachers whose qualification had expired but I had used my training as an add-on with my Autistic class. We did the *Bonjour* and *Au Revoir* followed by learning to sing 'Happy Birthday' at birthday parties. Birthday parties are important occasions in the unit calendar and every pupil birthday is celebrated with a class party and children are encouraged to invite their friends from other classes to attend. The teaching agenda is that a party is a perfect social event where pupils have to get used to social graces, sharing, good manners and the focus of attention on the special person for that time. It was apparent in the fun French sessions that the pupils took to it and there appeared to be potential in developing this further.

This potential was discussed at a staff meeting and a consensus emerged that a modern language appeared to be a deficit in our current curricular work.  We were sending our pupils either to a primary mainstream placement when they were ready or a secondary provision without an experience of a foreign language. This meant that potentially they might be the only pupil in their group who had no foreign language experience. The experience in the unit suggested that pupils on the spectrum found new experiences and unknown situations difficult and if they got off to a bad start it could be difficult to recover from.

In terms of the practicalities of learning a foreign language, research suggests that in real terms there should be no additional issues for autistic pupils' ability to comprehend a foreign language.  Indeed, Jordan and Powell (1995:152) asserted that:

> '*Provided the pupil has no difficulties with language learning (from specific or general learning difficulties), there may be difficulties in acquiring the mechanical aspects of another language. However , the cultural variations in language use will exacerbate the individual's difficulties in understanding and using language in its social context and modern ways of teaching that concentrate on pragmatic aspects will disadvantage the pupil with autism*'

This suggested that the concept of a foreign language would be feasible with the group as the criteria for entry in the unit is an ability to access the mainstream curriculum although offering a little caution to the methodology involved. The aspect of understanding within the social context is highlighted as an issue and is a recurring curricular theme within the spectrum. It should be noted that the issues in learning French would be similar to those of teaching mother tongue where these disadvantages are prevalent and an accommodation in teaching has to be made.

The next step was to make contact with the Local Authority Modern Language advisor for guidance as to our best way forward with the proposal and assistance in staff development and training. Luckily, another Autism unit had recently also introduced a modern language and the development officer, who had been involved in that project, was very keen to work with us.

It was agreed that the class would be split into two groups who would have a thirty minute session once a week. The groups would be kept intentionally small and during the pilot we would work with pupils from Primary 5 and above which at that point meant 75% of the unit would be involved in learning French. It emerged that there was a small group of P5 pupils from the mainstream who could join our younger group and form a beginners French starting from the same level. The second group would be the cohort of P7 who were going to secondary school the following session.

The use of mainstream peers within an integrated setting offered the study group a reality dimension to the teaching of French as it did with other curricular areas and afforded endless opportunities of social interaction which alluding to Bogdashina (2005: 259),

> Being exposed to mainstream life gives autistic children the opportunity to learn (even by rote) and get at least theoretical information about the way the majority of people experience life' and she further states' that quite a few people with autism express gratitude to their parents and teachers who have never made an excuse for autism' and perhaps for this study most tellingly that 'providing adjustments and compensatory strategies to help them cope with their difficulties.

The unit and mainstream integration is critical to the study group as it provides social markers for the autistic pupils in terms of next steps and helps determine the most suitable placement for pupils on leaving the unit. Ritvo (2000:107) alludes to the importance of integration as being a very important part of an autistic pupil's education and he states:

> *Each child in a special education classroom should be allowed to attend regular classrooms for as much of the school day as is appropriate. This is referred to as main streaming and is always beneficial, both for autistic children and non-autistic children.'*

The integration session's intention is that the process is a learning situation of equal merit to both sets of pupils, mainstream and the autistic study group.

Prior to the introduction of French it was agreed by the teaching group that critical to the process would be a course of Environmental studies on France to enable all the study group an experience of the country whose language they were about to learn. This was an attempt to pre-empt the issue of '*experiencing self* ' where the group would be given the visual links common to France and taste the food which can be sourced locally to give the group an experiential memory to establish confidence. In relation to Jordan (1996)

> *If one does not have an experiencing self then there is no sense of events happening to oneself, rather they just happen…*

An experiencing self is also important in memory processing and so a failure to develop this will lead to poor personal episodic memory. What was being attempted through the introduction of the culture was to establish a commonality with France which could be developed throughout the language teaching process.  With reference to Jordan's (1996) claim that teachers should realise '*[that] memories will need to be cued'*, it was hoped that the link to France through experiences would assist the language teaching process.  The unit philosophy is based on the TEACCH system and the supportive staff make the high level of preparation needed by the children for any change.  In order to set the scene for the language teaching two cultural aspects of France were targeted in the preparation, keeping in mind Jordan's maxim of '*Working to strengths – focusing on emerging skills using interests rather than suppressing them, using instruction through preferred media (i.e. visual rather than oral)* (Jordan 1996: 45)

Because part of the pupil social skills is shopping this was built on by shopping for French goods.  The Champions League and Rugby World cup gave opportunities to build on pupils' interest and knowledge base in sports.  The home school diary system developed parental involvement and influence on the topic. As with all topics, a high level of support was given.

The methodology of developing the language through the culture has parallels with other schools and an online article in the Guardian by Angela Spencer (2006) gave these examples of practice,

*Several schools are leading the way by building the study of other countries - their geography, climate, culture and language - into everyday learning. And they are finding that international work can be a strong motivator in teaching and learning across the curriculum.* […] *With this in mind, we try to bring the world into the school by taking every possible opportunity to celebrate international occasions such as the World Cup and the Olympic Games and to invite in people from other countries to share their knowledge and experiences.*

This was the experience sought for the study group and our approaches to the culture as a means to the language was designed to develop experiences for later use in the project.

The French cultural immersion involved our parent group coming to the unit for an open French afternoon with our pupil group acting as hosts. This involved sampling as many French food and drinks the pupils had sourced locally at the supermarket in the morning.  This was a useful exercise in its own right as some of the pupil group can have difficulty in trying different types of foods. It also involved parents working with their children in solving a French puzzle based on a wall display displaying different types of French shops which they had to identify. From our perspective this cued a visual memory for the group.  The afternoon saw the group start their memory bank of French, which they could return to during the teaching of the language.  At the same time it highlighted to the parents another area in which they could support their child's learning.

Gillian, our language advisor, brought energy to the lessons and very quickly established a rapport with the group which proved pivotal to the success of the project. The 30-minute length of the sessions proved to be about the correct time for the group, allowing the group to process an appropriate amount of information. The unit pupils displayed retention of facts on a week-by-week basis and they enjoyed their interaction with their mainstream P5 peers. The group worked through two units (a unit nominally takes a term) during the session and in terms of their workload this was about right.  However, it should be noted that a typical P6 mainstream group would be expected to get through four units in the same period.

As the project progressed through the session the group accepted that this was very much part of their school week and would look forward to their sessions and greet staff in French in the corridors. Given the normal levels of support and understanding the typical issues of turn taking and winning and losing evident in other areas of the curriculum French very quickly became an established part of the school week which the group accepted in a relatively short time

During the project computer use, in the form of authority supplied software and the use of the interactive SmartBoard technology,

emerged as a very notable teaching aid. The unit pupils' use of home computers and games consoles is a marked feature of many of their lives.  In news and social times it is a very popular topic of conversation and a currency that most are very familiar with.

The pupils easily transferred the computer knowledge base and this was exemplified on a visit to the Celtic Learning Centre by all the unit pupils studying French as part of an educational football related visit. The centre has a linked computer suite where the group were introduced to a series of computer games consolidating the French they had learned in class. After the briefest of introductions the entire group focussed completely on the tasks systematically for forty-five minutes despite the football related distractions and would have continued had more time been available.

The use of the interactive SmartBoard for a version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, where the group had to recall French vocabulary, also developed enormous interest generally and with one pupil in particular who had proved reticent in earlier sessions with his mainstream peers. The use of the technology allied to the high interest in all things computer related provided great stimuli for the teaching and reinforcement of the language.

The culmination of the session's work was a day trip to Paris. This involved the participants leaving very early and coming back very late and turned out to be a memorable learning experience. As with much of the Autistic teaching experience, meticulous preparation of the group for the event is essential, which was provided by Gillian with a virtual tour of the Paris sights through the SmartBoard.  On the one hand this stimulated and encouraged the group for the trip and on the other (with reference to Jordan) it cued a memory of what and where they were about to visit.

The trip proved to be a success.  The pupils were encouraged to engage with the locals in shops and they all came back stimulated by the experience. The benefits were far reaching in terms of confidence and self esteem for the group and best summed up by one pupil who said ,'*I can speak French to a French person and they can understand me.*' In terms of the ethos of the unit and the project this certainly made the efforts and commitment of staff worthwhile.

What lessons did we learn after the session? Preparation of culture, geography and cuisine of France provided background information that the group needed and enabled the group to develop confidence in all things French. The invitation to their parents to a French afternoon of French quizzes and food tasting likewise aided the acceptance of the language and culture. The visit to France, allied to the preparation of the pupils for the trip provided evidence that this is entirely feasible. The size of the group was important and the pace of the lessons had to allow a longer processing time for the group. This has implications for

advancing the integration sessions with mainstream as this group work at twice the pace and do not require the same level of over learning of the facts as the Autistic pupils. The time allocation worked although there is a case for fifteen minute sessions twice weekly and in the morning. Computer technology proved to be widely successful with all the group members and a very useful teaching aid for reinforcing vocabulary. Preparation and enthusiasm of the practitioner delivering in a supportive and nurturing environment making allowances for the condition is perhaps the key to the success of this particular project. The footnote regarding the success of the project would perhaps be the continuation of French as part of the curriculum this session and another member of staff training in Spanish which begs the location of next year's trip... Barcelona perhaps!?

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