

## Creativity in Action in MLPS

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**Abstract:** This article provides a description of the learning and teaching approaches adopted by a primary teacher to develop creative practice in teaching French in primary schools. Examples of cross-curricular projects and the use of IT are given and their value discussed in terms of helping children to engage with learning a new language. The motivational value of contextualising learning by embedding a language within the curriculum and using CLIL is evaluated. The development of this pedagogy led to this practitioner receiving professional recognition in creativity from the GTCS in January of 2013. The aim of this article is to inspire practitioners to look for creative ways of integrating a modern language into their classrooms.

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**Keywords:** Professional Recognition, Creativity, MLPS, French

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### How it began

I was recently awarded Professional Recognition in Creativity because of the creative approach I have taken in teaching MLPS. I was very flattered when the GTC approached me and encouraged me to apply for this award but I was also surprised as I had previously considered my area of expertise to be the teaching of French but I hadn't fully considered that what made this special was creativity. In this article I will describe the actions I took which led to this recognition and show the potential for creativity within modern languages.

My background has led to a passion for teaching languages. This has become stronger over time from studying French at University, teaching English abroad, being married to a Frenchman and having bilingual children. Languages have become an integral part of my life experience. My other desire was to become a primary school teacher.

Naturally, when this came about I was keen to make a modern language an integral part of my classroom so that the children could be involved in experiential learning of the language. Fortunately, the opportunity to fully develop this aspiration was given to me by my forward-thinking head teacher. She was very encouraging and supportive of the idea of teaching French across the curriculum and to the whole school. The school where I work is a small rural school. It comprises two composite classes which makes it simpler to teach the whole school, although differentiation issues are more complex.

It was decided that I would plan cross-curricular topics with as much French language content as possible and include French in our daily routines in class. Since then I have been constantly researching and developing projects to teach French in new ways.

## Combining Modern Languages, Literacy and IT

I feel it is imperative that language learning constantly involves making new and meaningful connections. Therefore, I always intertwine French with other curricular areas. At first, I began to develop topics which were based around picture books to create a focus on literacy. I began with familiar stories which are simple and repetitive. As the children already knew the stories they could easily follow them and this helped to improve their confidence. Repetition in the stories helped children look for patterns and notice differences and similarities between languages. Reading stories helped the learners think about how their own language works. Through open questioning I was able to get them to think about how sentences are structured and how all the parts of language fit together. Although the books were simple they were also versatile and could be used on many levels. Therefore, through questioning I was able to differentiate the learning. Games and songs were then used to reinforce the language of the text as these give plenty of opportunities to use the target language simply.

One example of this was our ‘Traditional Tales’ Topic. I used a storyline approach and the puppet ‘Annette la Chouette’ was the main facilitator. ‘She’ would send us letters in French with instructions for challenges we needed to accomplish. Through this we were able to explore many familiar stories in a creative way. In this topic we progressed towards the final outcome of a drama production for parents.

I have also focused on using ICT creatively through language learning. An example of this was our French-speaking avatar project. I wanted the learners to be able to talk about themselves in French. Our starting point was using a classical approach of completing a little booklet ‘All about me’. This booklet provided key vocabulary for the children to be able to write simple sentences about themselves. I then wanted the learners to take the knowledge they had gained and use it in a new and exciting context. I introduced them to the website ‘Voki’ where you can design your own speaking avatar. This ignited their imagination and they were completely motivated to produce French text in order to make their avatar speak. This allowed them to experiment with basic sentence structures in order to create new sentences with different information about their character. They also learned about the importance of using accents in French, punctuation and accurate spelling because if they did not their avatar could not pronounce the words correctly.

Another example of combining French, literacy and ICT was our French ‘Storybird’ project. We looked at simple story structures in examples such as ‘Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see?’ by Eric Carle. These stories use repetition, simple colour adjectives and verb structures. The learners were able to explore and identify similarities between the texts and then develop their own French stories using the ‘Storybird’ website. This site allows the user to choose artwork from many artists to illustrate their story. Again this was highly motivating for the children and gave real purpose to their French writing. They were able to produce their own beautiful French story books.

## Content and Language Integrated Teaching

The other approach which I have developed in my language teaching is CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Teaching). This method entails teaching a subject through the medium of a foreign language. In the primary sector I have found this approach to be very effective. As the content of lessons often involves simple concepts and instructions, it is very compatible with this approach. I have found that if the learning is active I can adopt this method. For example, much of our language learning is done through drama, dance, songs and games. Therefore, the children can be addressed in the target language as long as they are actively being shown what to do. There are many examples where I have employed CLIL, e.g. making crepes for Mardi Gras or les Galettes des Rois for the Epiphany. We have also had many art and craft lessons in French where the children have followed instructions in French because they have been accompanied by physical actions. This experiential learning in the target language has been crucial to bringing the language alive and making it real and purposeful.

I have also developed the teaching of mathematics through French. With infants this is through French immersion because many of the First Level numeracy outcomes are compatible with this. The children are happy to develop their numeracy skills in French because it doesn't matter to them what the numbers are called as it is the mathematical concepts which they are trying to grasp. Again this makes the new language real if they can learn maths using it. When working towards Second level maths outcomes I have tended to work on topics where I teach the mathematical concepts in English but include as much French Language content as possible. To see examples of this type of planning you can look at the Education Scotland website 'Passeport pour la Francophonie': <http://bit.ly/passeportfrancophone>. Each of the five countries has a mathematics section that contains my work.

## A New Dimension for Recurrent Topics

In the autumn term of 2012 I implemented a cross-curricular Halloween and Christmas topic in French. I feel that these familiar school topics can be revisited in a new dimension in French. For example, the upper school created magic potions recipes in French and then helped the infants to follow these and create their own edible magic potions at the Halloween party.

## Animation Project

I have experimented a great deal with digital literacy and learning a language and I am presently using technology to create animations. We began by studying animation techniques in the context of French animation films. We looked at how techniques have changed through history by doing comparative studies of several animations. We are now transforming this into a full scale project of learning about simple animation techniques and then building on these to create our own French language animations. We are using the films 'Princes et Princesses' and 'Contes de la Nuit' by French animator Michel Ocelot as a focus for this project. These are beautiful films using the silhouette

cut out animation technique developed by the animator Lotte Reineger in the 1920s. The stories are short fantastical fables, and the children are now developing their own versions of these. The infants are focusing on creating plasticine characters to create animations of classic French comptines e.g. ‘Une souris verte’ This project is involving a great deal of problem-based learning as making animations is technically challenging!

## Assessing Impact

Developing cross-curricular French has had a massive impact not only on the pupils but also on my professional practice because I have become a far more creative and reflective practitioner. I am now fully aware that creativity thrives when the learner can explore, experiment, and play with ideas. I also understand that creativity can be promoted through questioning. Questions which help create new connections by representing ideas in different ways e.g. visually, physically and verbally. I am now always on a mission to find new and exciting approaches of teaching French.

My pupils have benefited greatly from having language learning embedded in the curriculum. This has given them the opportunity to develop a broader linguistic and cultural perspective. As French has been an integral part of their learning it is very real and useful to them. For example, in the infant class I have observed children counting out loud in French while doing their maths in English.

The children have been given many opportunities thanks to this development. For example, my pupils and I were invited to facilitate a workshop at the **Creativity Conference** at the Glasgow Science Centre in May 2012. This allowed us to showcase a project we had recently worked on in class. The children were able to share their learning experiences of cross-curricular French by talking about their French data-handling project on Madagascan animals. I had a parent helper with me who commented on how confident the children were in this situation. They also performed their musical interpretation of ‘Le Petit Chaperon Rouge’ for the delegates and after, one of my pupils said to me that he never needed to be afraid again. Thus I feel that my pupils have gained confidence and self-esteem through learning French creatively.

When we received a visit from Fiona Fisher, former Education Scotland development officer for languages, and Laura Stewart, professional development officer from SCILT, the children had the opportunity to be filmed<sup>1</sup>. During this visit, when one of the pupils was being interviewed, she was asked if she enjoyed French and she said yes, because it was like “playing but learning in French at the same time, so it kind of gets memorised in your head”. This demonstrates how motivating it can be to learn through play and experimentation.

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<sup>1</sup> The product was then posted on the Education Scotland blog ‘The Chalkface’ (<http://bit.ly/1285xna>) and the SCILT website (<http://bit.ly/13XLdHn>).

Colleagues and the wider community have also benefited from the positive school inspection we received in April of 2012. The inspection report highlighted that one of the school's key strengths was teaching French across the curriculum.

I have also shared my knowledge and experience with others. For example, I presented at the SALT conference at Strathclyde University in November 2011 and ran a workshop entitled 'practical and creative ideas in MLPS'. This was a wonderful opportunity to share my knowledge and experience with others.

Phiona Fisher contacted me after her visit to my Primary School to ask if I would be interested in being part of a team of writers who were creating a new website for teaching French in the primary school. I was given the remit of creating mathematical challenges which were part of cross-curricular topics. This Education Scotland website is the aforementioned '*Passeport pour la Francophonie*' which was launched at the 2012 Scottish Learning Festival. It is a fantastic resource and I am very proud to have been involved in its creation.

I have also developed a close relationship with the Languages department of the local secondary school. In collaboration with the Principal Teacher of Modern Languages I was able to run a CPD session for primary practitioners in the local cluster to provide guidance and support. This event allowed for collaborative work and discussion. We are currently working towards an interdisciplinary transition project.

Recently I made contact with the Educational Support Officer for Languages in Argyll and Bute and expressed my interest in developing MLPS at a local authority level. We are now working towards developing French in the Early Years. The first stage of this development has been to implement a pilot study in several pre-5 and P1 classes. The study is currently underway and I am receiving very positive feedback from the staff involved.

## Concluding Remarks

The learning I have gained has impacted on my professional practice in many ways. I have constantly researched to find creative teaching strategies to enhance the children's learning of the language and to help them make meaningful connections between the language and their overall learning and experience. I feel I have given my pupils a key to unlock the door of learning a language and that key is called creativity. However, the same applies to me. I have unlocked a door in my teaching practice and the key I have used is creativity. For me, creativity is about making the possibilities endless. It's about asking: where can I go with this? Let's see! I say to my pupils: Let's go as far as we can and delve into as many areas as we can and that is now where I am when I think about my learning and professional practice. I want to go as far as I can with finding new ways of engaging pupils with language learning.

