

Association for Language Learning

The New Secondary Curriculum: acting on pupil feedback

Vincent Everett, Northgate High School, Dereham

In this article, Vincent describes how his school has responded to the views expressed by pupils about their language learning, and the feedback they have received in follow-up interviews. The findings of the initial interviews can be read in the July edition of the ASPECT newsletter, downloadable from <http://www.all-nsc.org.uk/files/ASPECTJul09newsletter.pdf>.

The Initial Pupil Interviews

In June 2007, the languages department conducted interviews with groups of Year 9 pupils who had been learning French in key stage 3. They gave us a very strong message that they wanted more opportunity to use the language they were learning. It was also clear that we needed to give them a much clearer picture of how to make progress in French. In the light of these findings, our priorities in the introduction of the new secondary curriculum were:



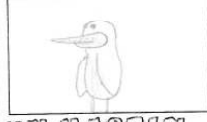





- Sharing the rationale for topics with our pupils
- Making the criteria for progress and success more explicit
- Tackling the sound/spelling link early on
- Strengthening knowledge and understanding of life in target language countries
- Giving pupils ownership over a core of language they can use to express themselves
- Giving pupils opportunities to use their language for real from early on
- Matching topics to pupils' interests and maturity
- Balancing the emphasis on memorisation with the development of other skills
- Setting up projects for pupils to work together creatively.

Creative Projects

To meet these objectives, we built a series of projects into our scheme of work. Each of these projects had to allow pupils to draw on the language they had been learning. There was always a finished product, where possible commissioned by an external client. This made the pupils responsible for the delivery and quality of the project, and placed them in the role of 'expert'. The projects followed the model: Launch → Create → Celebrate.

A good example is the Gressenhall Farm Stamper Trail. Gressenhall is a Norfolk County Council museum and farm. The farm manager and the learning manager came to a Year 7 assembly and commissioned from our pupils a French version of the farm's popular stamper trail. Following the assembly, all pupils worked in lessons on producing their own versions of the trail.

Ryan P 7A

 <p>UN COCHON</p> <input type="checkbox"/> fait 'groin, groin' <input type="checkbox"/> fait 'cui, cui' <input type="checkbox"/> fait 'Hihan'	 <p>UN CANARD</p> <input type="checkbox"/> habite dans la salle de bains <input type="checkbox"/> habite près de la rivière <input type="checkbox"/> habite dans la cuisine	 <p>UN MARTIN PÊCHEUR</p> <input type="checkbox"/> et bleu et vert <input type="checkbox"/> et rouge <input type="checkbox"/> et multi	 <p>UNE VACHE</p> <input type="checkbox"/> mange des canards <input type="checkbox"/> mange de l'herbe <input type="checkbox"/> mange des gens
 <p>UN MOUTON</p> <input type="checkbox"/> fait «Bèèè» <input type="checkbox"/> fait «Ouah, Ouah» <input type="checkbox"/> fait «coin, coin»	 <p>UN CHEVAL</p> <input type="checkbox"/> s'appellent Suffolk Punch <input type="checkbox"/> s'appellent Red Poll <input type="checkbox"/> s'appellent Large Black	 <p>UNE LIBELLULE</p> <input type="checkbox"/> est verte ou brune <input type="checkbox"/> est bleu <input type="checkbox"/> est blanche	 <p>UNE POULE</p> <input type="checkbox"/> fait «cot cot cadet» <input type="checkbox"/> fait «coco coco» <input type="checkbox"/> fait «Midou»

Northgate High School
Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse
Stamper Trail Project 2009

All the pupils' work was put on display at the farm. The public voted for their favorite by putting stickers on the work. The best was chosen and turned into a printed sheet for visitors to use to collect a stamp for each animal as they went round the farm. It was inaugurated by a group of pupils from one of our feeder primary schools who went to the farm and did the trail in French. The staff from the museum came and awarded prizes at a celebratory assembly.

Other projects include:

- The Year 7 Francovision Song Contest. Each group learns and films a French pop song. These are shown in a series of assemblies and a winner is chosen by popular vote.
- The Year 7 French Staff Café. Year 7s act as waiters to the school staff. The canteen puts on a special menu and everyone speaks French.
- The Year 8 Greenscreen Film Days. Year 8 pupils have one day to script, shoot and edit a film. They use greenscreen technology to insert different backgrounds to their finished film.
- The Year 9 Castle Story Resource. Year 9 pupils visit the Castle Museum and write a story in French centred around different exhibits. The stories serve as a narrative resource for visitors to follow as they explore the museum.
- The Year 9 Child's Book. A local primary school commissions stories in French (book or powerpoint) for young learners of French.

Changes to the Scheme of Work

To make such creative projects possible, we had to change our scheme of work. In Year 7, we put a greater emphasis on the sound spelling link. In Year 8, we emphasised a core of transferable structures. These were sent home to all parents to be stuck on the family fridge:

Year 8 French. It's only one page - learn it!

Talking about what there is:
 Il y a un - there is a...
 Il y a une - there is a...
 Il y a des - there are some...
 Il n'y a pas de - there isn't a...

Talking about the Future:
 je vais - I'm going to
 je ne vais pas - I'm not going to
 je voudrais - I would like
 je veux - I want to
 j'espère - I hope to

Giving an opinion:
 J'aime - I like
 Je n'aime pas - I don't like
 J'adore - I love
 Je déteste - I hate
 Je préfère - I prefer
 Je voudrais - I would like

Talking about the past:
 je suis allé - I went (boy)
 je suis allée - I went (girl)
 j'ai joué - I played
 j'ai décidé de - I decided to

Explaining:
 parce que - because
 je peux - I can
 je ne peux pas - I can't
 je dois - I have to
 je ne dois pas - I don't have to
 je veux - I want
 je ne veux pas - I don't want

Connectives
 et - and
 mais - but
 alors - so
 donc - so
 parce que - because
 par exemple - for example
 si - if
 surtout si - especially if

Here are examples of the way you will be using these words in each unit:

Unit 1 In Town
 I live in Shipdham.
 There is a post office
 but there isn't a cinema.
 I would like to live in Dereham
 because if I want to go to the
 cinema
 I have to go to Dereham.

Unit 2 At School
 I love French because I can speak
 in French, but I can't go to the
 toilet when I want. I prefer
 geography because I can look out
 of the window, but then I have to
 copy Harry.

Unit 3 Free Time
 I like to watch sport on the TV,
 but I prefer to play sport,
 especially at the weekend. For
 example, last weekend I played
 football. Next weekend, if it is
 sunny, I would like to go
 swimming.

Unit 4 On Holiday
 I prefer to go on holiday with my
 family, for example last year we
 went to Hembsy. I went to the
 beach and I ate icecreams. Next
 year, if I can, I would like to go to
 France because it is sunny and I
 would like to go windsurfing.

In Year 9, we introduced new topics to concentrate on story-telling or non-fiction. We wanted to avoid "fakery" with material only created to practise the language being taught. Topics included a crime story, Normandy, and jobs with languages.

The projects themselves bore the weight of much of what we wanted to achieve:

- The Francovision Song Contest met all our initial objectives on transfer from primary school: Memorisation, pronunciation, sound-spelling link, culture, performance. Being obliged to learn the song to a deadline made teachers experiment with different techniques and discover what suited their ability group best.
- The French Café introduced the idea that creativity meant using the language you have been taught to handle an unpredictable situation. The logistics of being a waiter took over from the French. We are working with a local hotel who last year provided the banqueting ware. This year we hope to use them to train the Year 7 waiters professionally.
- The Gressenhall Stamper Trail project gave the opportunity for pupils to learn about creativity in that they brought to the project French that they had learned in different

contexts. They created questions about where the animals lived and what they ate using the French they had been studying in previous units.

- The Greenscreen Filming days were a real test of our Year 8 curriculum. The activity was staffed by teachers without particular language skills, helped by Year 11 and Year 12 volunteers (language leaders). The success of the activity showed to what extent the pupils had internalised the core language they had built up in Year 8. (In contrast, pupils who had not learned how to use their French would have written a script using a dictionary and produced incomprehensible Franglais.) The videos show that they were very aware of their own repertoire of French and how to use it effectively.

Follow up interviews

In the summer of 2009, two years on from the original feedback from pupils, we conducted a second round of interviews. We again created different focus groups, using the model developed by Dr Terry Lamb, former president of ALL:

Lower achievement, high motivation: The Grafters

The grafters said they could now “speak French”. They very quickly identified the ability to keep talking and write paragraphs about themselves and their interests. They said connectives and opinions were key to this.

The pupils still depend on the teacher to tell them when they are doing well and to set targets, but they were able to explain that Year 7 work was “just a line” and in Year 8 you could put your own ideas together.

Lower achievement, low motivation: formerly known as The Angry Victims

Immediately, the pupils talked about vocabulary learning: different sports, places in town, things you do at the weekend. They then did say that giving opinions was important.

They depend on praise from the teacher to know when they are doing well, and said the criteria would be presentation and layout. They identified “paragraphs of different sentences”, opinions and connectives as the important things to learn in Year 8.

They said sometimes you get mixed up and write things that are complex but muddled. The problems arise when you “write stuff out of your head” and losing the booklets was a problem. Another problem was that they made it hard for themselves by not putting enough effort into learning. They gave a very clear description of how your French “should build up with opinions and everything”. They blamed their own behaviour and poor concentration for not making a better job of it.

They identified others in their set as being very good at French and able to talk spontaneously and write paragraphs. They were impressed by what these pupils could do, but also believed that they themselves were capable of achieving similar levels.

They said the topics were OK, but sometimes you forget stuff by the time you get to the test. They enjoyed doing projects because it was “cool” and interesting and “not just in books”.

High achievement, high motivation: The Sophisticates

The Sophisticates immediately said that in Year 7 they had learnt whole sentences which restricted their expression, but in Year 8 they had learnt to build their own sentences. They identified the expressions they had stuck on their fridge (core Y8 expressions sent home to parents at beginning of year) as the key. They said they had built up their French over the year, both in terms of adding to the core and in reducing their reliance on reference materials.

They used sophisticated terminology freely (“complex sentences”, “connectives”, “range of language”) but also gave very clear explanations (“avoid lists”, “build it out of French you know, not things you don’t understand”). They enjoyed the freedom to use the French they had learnt, and spoke fluently about how they used a core of language from topic to topic, adding to and expanding their repertoire.

As well as more independence/creativity in the classroom, they talked about using/seeing the need for French for themselves. They enjoyed using their French in creative projects, and were keen for their work to be read. Families helped with French, and they were keen to show their work at home. They volunteered the fact that their teacher gave them good feedback on their work and targets for improvement. When asked, they said they had been involved in self assessment, which they enjoyed. They didn’t enjoy the experience of peer assessment, with peer issues interfering.

High achievement, low motivation: The Frustrated

The Frustrated had very little to say about their learning. They mentioned the list of topics they have covered with difficulty. They think doing well in French is about learning spellings. They eventually mentioned writing paragraphs. They said they used the booklets to piece together sentences. They couldn’t identify what the elements of the sentences might be. Eventually they mentioned connectives and a dice game that we use for sentence building. They don’t use the key expressions displayed in the classroom, and they don’t have any sense of building up their own core of French. Only one had looked at the core structures sent home at the beginning of the year.

They said that if you could speak French, that would be great, but they had no idea of how to go about learning it, it seemed impossible ever to be fluent so not worthwhile trying. Their strategy for learning was to “keep looking at spellings until they stick”.

Conclusions and Priorities

It was clear from the interviews that the majority of pupils had understood the importance of building up a core repertoire of the target language. Pupils had a very clear view of their own progress and were able to use their French creatively and with a feeling of success. Compared with 2007, the pupils did not mention their frustration at not getting to use their French. On the other hand it was striking that they had little to say about the projects they had been involved in. Instead, they spoke coherently and confidently about the underlying learning and strategies that we had been developing to make the projects possible!

Where this personal internalisation of a growing core of French had not been taken up by the pupils, they had made very little progress. This seems to be in a small minority of under-achieving boys in higher sets.

We have several approaches to tackle this problem. Firstly, it is made very clear that the French teachers will hold special meetings to look at the quality of work produced by all pupils. Letters of congratulation are sent home for outstanding work. Pupils whose work is not up to standard come in after school to re-do the work.

Secondly, we will use the creative projects to identify pupils who are not taking on board strategies for creativity, for example those who employ word-by-word translation. The project model puts the responsibility and motivation on them to deliver the product. We need to be vigilant and support them with adequate strategies so they can be successful.

And finally, we are developing incentives for those pupils who want to make a commitment to using their creativity and independence in French. We will be launching a Languages Challenge with a series of tasks pupils can complete to be awarded a prize and a certificate. Our aim is to have pupils who pursue an interest in French in their free time to the same degree of dedication as they show in their other hobbies. We want to appeal to a wide spectrum of pupils including those who are already successful, but also those whose independent learning style can bring them into conflict with the teacher's demands in the normal French lesson.

For more details of what we have done and what we plan to do, please visit <http://languagesatnorthgate.wordpress.com>

Vincent Everett
Northgate High School
Dereham

Vincent Everett is head of languages at Northgate High School, Dereham in Norfolk, a medium-sized comprehensive school with a specialism in literacy, art and drama. He is an elected member of the Executive Council of the Association for Language Learning and has co-written several coursebooks for Oxford University Press.