

## TRR 9: How can curriculum planning meetings support how practitioners feel about planning and teaching MFL lessons to SEN pupils?

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### Introduction

Learning a Modern Foreign Language (MFL) is a subject within the National Curriculum that can present pupils with the chance to explore other cultures, develop communicative strategies in another language (Wight, 2015) and encourage young people to appreciate different communities and cultures around the world (McKeown, 2004). Despite these advantages, it has been suggested for some pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) that this subject should be excluded from their curriculum. D’Almeida (2015) asks, “learning a FL is every child’s right – but is it right for every child?” This research aims to explore how practitioners feel about teaching MFL to SEN pupils and also the strategies that are used.

### Research Setting

This is a small scale action research project delivered within Tor View Specialist Learning Community, an Outstanding Generic Special School that facilitates pupils from 3-19. Currently, French is taught to Key Stage 2 (KS2) and Key Stage 3 (KS3) pupils across ages 7 – 14 years, to a range of pupils with Profound and multiple Learning Difficulties (PMLD), Severe Learning Difficulties (SLD) and Moderate Learning Difficulties (MLD) with additional needs.

I teach French to KS3 pupils across all abilities and a number of primary practitioners and HLTA’s teach French to KS2 classes. A range of SEN practitioners across Lancashire have also taken part in a questionnaire to gather a larger range of views. These include practitioners that have in the past or that currently teach MFL. In this paper the term MFL will include French, Spanish, German and Italian languages though French is the language taught in my current setting so this will be the language used in the Focus Group analysis. Throughout this paper, the term practitioners will include both Teachers and HLTA’s. The term ‘pupils’ will include both pupils with SEN including MLD, SLD and PMLD and additional needs in both KS2 and KS3.

### Research questions

- How do practitioners currently feel about teaching and planning MFL lessons to SEN pupils?
- Are there a range of strategies that practitioners currently use to teach MFL lessons to SEN pupils?
- Are there any strategies that practitioners would like training in to teach MFL lessons to SEN pupils?
- How can curriculum planning meetings support how practitioners feel about planning and teaching MFL lessons to SEN pupils?

### Existing Research - Teaching Strategies

MFL is seen by some as a fun and enjoyable subject (Wilson, 2003) and there are a number of practical activities that teachers can do to enrich the learning experiences for SEN pupils including; using songs, rhymes and poems and an array of multi-sensory approaches using smells, actions, sounds and touch (Holmes, 1994). The use of games in teaching MFL is also a common teaching method, Stephenson & Rumley (2005:143) argue that playing games in the classroom are intrinsically motivating and the pleasure “associated with the game also becomes associated with the foreign language. Language learning can be very repetitive, D’Almeida (2015) argues that due to pupils’ lack in memory skills, subject knowledge will need to be repeated often and lessons may not progress quickly, however “in the context of a game or a song, repetition is transformed into something welcome, familiar and enjoyable”.

Using repetition alongside the same visuals and materials reduces confusion for pupils along with establishing the same routines for lessons can support pupils with SEN, McKeown (2004). It has been argued that in order for pupils with SEN to be successful in learning MFL teachers should be provided with skills, support and knowledge to teach SEN pupils effectively (McEachern-Kelly, 2008). McColl (2005: 107) summaries that at whatever level they are working; students can experience success as learners”.



Figure 1 – Games and activities used in MFL lessons at Tor View School

## Research process

1	<b>STEP 1 – QUESTIONNAIRES</b> Gather my colleague's views on how they felt about planning and teaching MFL to SEN learners at my school, through questionnaires.
2	<b>STEP 2 – FOCUS GROUP</b> Further explore my colleague's views through a focus group held. We discussed benefits for the pupils when learning French along with challenges that we face when planning and teaching MFL lessons.
3	<b>STEP 3 – BRIEF ANALYSIS</b> Looking at the initial sample of questionnaires and transcribing the focus group conversation.
4	<b>STEP 4 – PLANNING MEETING 1</b> From the focus group, leading a meeting with 2 colleagues in my setting to plan collaboratively for the summer term. We discussed activities we may do for the topics and looked at the resources available to support this.
5	<b>STEP 5 – FURTHER DISTRIBUTION OF THE QUESTIONNAIRES</b> Through discussion with my research colleagues, I decided to distribute the questionnaire further to practitioners in different SEN schools across Lancashire, using contacts I had acquired.  <b>STEP 5 – FURTHER ANALYSIS</b> Another deeper look into the focus group led me to focus the planning meeting and develop a planning meeting pro forma that included areas to find the vocabulary for the topic, activities that we could support the pupils along with ICT links and opportunities to practice the words.
6	<b>STEP 6 – PLANNING MEETING 2</b> I met with two of my colleagues and using the pro forma described we planned for the following half term topic.
7	<b>STEP 7 – FOCUS GROUP 2</b> After my colleagues had taught a lesson of the new term, I then led another Focus Group exploring how they found the planning meeting had helped them.
8	<b>STEP 8 – WRITE UP</b> I gathered all my information together, I read the existing research and made sure my research questions were clear then brought together the findings.

## Findings

### HOW DO PRACTITIONERS CURRENTLY FEEL ABOUT TEACHING AND PLANNING FRENCH LESSONS TO SEN PUPILS?



Figure 2 - Practitioners' feelings when teaching MFL to SEN pupils.

When looking at the questionnaire data, all practitioners said they enjoy teaching MFL. The levels of confidence varied, though overall most practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that they were confident in teaching MFL to a range of abilities including PMLD, SLD and MLD pupils. There were also a number of practitioners that didn't have strong feelings so could either be interpreted as being confident but not interested in the subject. This was reflected in the findings when practitioners were asked to list emotions they felt when teaching MFL as the most popular emotion given was 'confident'.

In regards to planning MFL lessons, the most felt emotion was 'challenged', followed by 'engaged'. During the focus group we explored the planning element further which will be explained in more detail further below.

### ARE THERE A RANGE OF STRATEGIES THAT PRACTITIONERS CURRENTLY USE TO TEACH FRENCH LESSONS TO SEN PUPILS?

Within the existing research, there were a number of strategies identified as motivating teaching tools for use when teaching MFL. For instance, using games, multi-sensory approaches including music and games and repetition.

I asked the practitioners which of these strategies they use or have used within their teaching and found that these strategies recommended replicated in the classrooms. The most popular teaching strategy is to use songs and rhymes, repetition and French music.

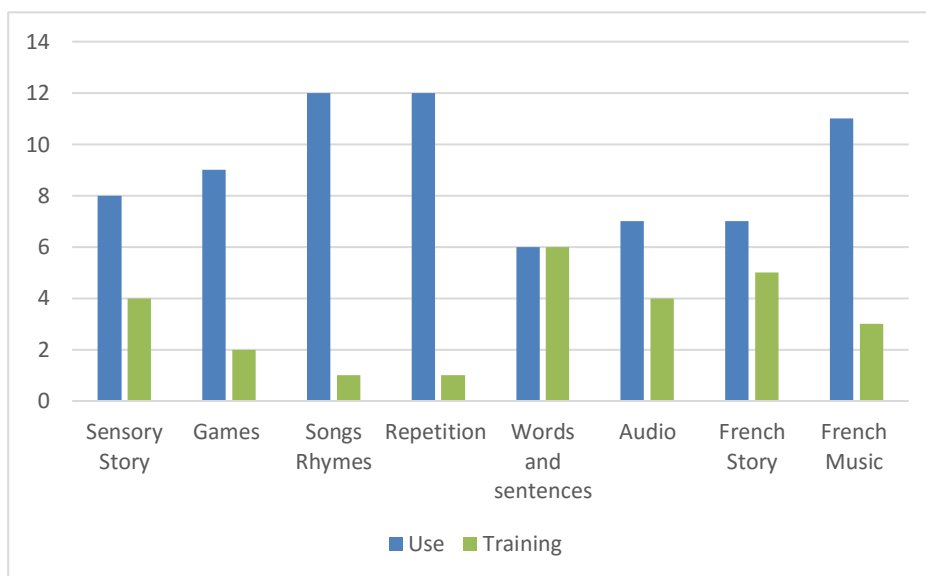


Figure 3 - The use and training needs of teaching strategies when teaching MFL to SEN pupils.

## ARE THERE ANY STRATEGIES THAT PRACTITIONERS WOULD LIKE TRAINING IN TO TEACH FRENCH LESSONS TO SEN PUPILS?

I also asked the practitioners through questionnaires if they would like any professional development training in specific areas of MFL. I split these into two categories, the sample from my school setting and the sample from the wider network of practitioners asked. There were patterns across both sets. The school sample was based around requiring training for ‘developing words and sentence structures’, this was similar to the wider based network along with their preference of using French stories and sensory stories. It is interesting to note that the same number of practitioners who used ‘developing words and sentence structure techniques’ also would be interested in accessing further training in this area. It would be interesting to find out why in further research.

### Focus Group

A focus group was held in my school setting with my colleagues, these were practitioners that had taught French in previous years along with practitioners who are currently teaching French. There were four practitioners and I led the conversations and asked questions. These questions were based on the findings from the initial questionnaires.

The following table captures the key findings from the focus group, including the benefits, teaching strategies, challenges and the proposal for a planning group, which was an unintended outcome of this action research project, which has already proved very useful.



### Focus Group

Benefits	Teaching strategies	Challenges	Planning Group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develops pupil’s communication.</li> <li>• Confidence boosting.</li> <li>• MFL is a valuable tool for the pupils to succeed, enjoy and experience a different culture.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Games including bingo, find the missing cards.</li> <li>• Having a similar structure to the lesson every week.</li> <li>• Repetition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pronunciation - this can affect the level of practitioners confidence.</li> <li>• Where to get the correct pronunciation from.</li> <li>• Which activities can support the learning of vocabulary?</li> <li>• How much subject context.</li> <li>• Where to go next?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It was suggested that we get together to plan French lessons collaboratively.</li> </ul>

Figure 4: Table Summary of the benefits, teaching strategies, challenges associated with teaching MFL

## BENEFITS OF LANGUAGE LEARNING

When speaking with my colleagues it was clear that the group could see the benefits of language learning, particularly in respects to developing pupil's communication. We also discussed other benefits including how confidence boosting it is for the pupils, ***"they find themselves really clever if they can do it"*** - Jordan and how MFL lessons are a valuable tool for the pupils to succeed, enjoy and experience a different culture.

'They seem to learn more through repetition - Alex'

'They (the pupils) enjoy the repetition and the games, they enjoy French. - Jordan'

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

We discussed the teaching strategies and activities the practitioners used, including those that the pupils were most engaged with and enjoyed. Two of the practitioners agreed that using repetition and games, such as bingo and find the missing cards to teach the words. Having a similar structure to the lesson, particularly for the pupils in our setting can help the pupils, ***"it has to be structured so that they can predict what is coming"*** - Alex. Using music and songs is also a motivating tool – ***"I find YouTube really useful because it uses songs the children are familiar with, like nursery rhymes but changes the words with French vocabulary in...they are used to the song and they like that because they feel they can do it"*** – Anna.

## CHALLENGES

We then discussed challenges, one feature that came up when asked "what challenges do you face when planning, and teaching French?" was pronunciation. For some practitioners this can affect their level of confidence when teaching the subject knowledge to the pupils. The questionnaire data showed that there were varying levels of confidence felt in the group and when asked if pronunciation may influence their confidence in teaching MFL, it was agreed to an extent as a group, ***"we need to come across confident to engage some pupils that may not be keen on the lesson, it is important that the practitioners feel confident in order to make the new language happy and exciting"*** - Jordan. Furthermore, knowing where to access correct pronunciation from is sometimes a challenge, ***"I tend to check 2/3 sources just in case ... it would be good if we all had the same website we could use"*** – Alex.

"Pronunciation is a difficult one, making sure you are getting it right" - Beth

Also, knowing which activities could support the learning of the vocabulary and how much subject content to include in their planning and teaching, knowing where to go next. It is a challenge for some to set the correct pace in order to push some pupils but not be too advanced for others, due to the varying capabilities of pupils in the class.

## CHANGING WORKING PRACTICES: ESTABLISHING A PLANNING GROUP

The focus group was an important element of this research as it directed my focus onto the next steps. During this conversation, it was suggested that it may be helpful if we got together as a staff team to collaboratively plan the French lessons for our pupils *“If we had a planning group we could all get together” – Jordan, “Sharing ideas and activities then the pupils know what to expect and so do the (class) practitioners so it’s easier for everyone then” – Anna*. After this discussion, I reviewed the questionnaire data to identify common suggestions. As written above the majority of the practitioners had chosen ‘developing words and sentence structures’ as an area for further professional training. I decided to put in place half termly planning meetings and implement these needs into the format, along with focuses on activities, pronunciation of words, useful ICT links and sentences as these were challenges brought up during the focus group discussion.

### HOW CAN CURRICULUM PLANNING MEETINGS SUPPORT HOW PRACTITIONERS FEEL ABOUT PLANNING AND TEACHING FRENCH LESSONS TO SEN PUPILS?

Both staff involved in the meeting were very positive about having this meeting and said it had supported both their planning and teaching of MFL lessons. Both staff said they felt more confident, particularly with their pronunciation of key words. They also felt that they had support from each other *“I felt more backed up as I know there are more people doing the same subject and lesson as you and theme so if you are struggling you can go and ask them” – Alex*. They identified advantages of holding the planning meetings as being “on the same sheet”, having good support and getting together to bounce and brainstorm ideas. They recognised that disadvantages may include the time and practicality of holding these meetings however the value of the meetings was expressed by Jordan who suggested that *“We need to carry on doing it because it’s helpful”*. The findings of the areas identified as training needs in the data are summarised below

Areas of difficulty	How the practitioners now felt about these
<b>Pronunciation</b>	More confident knowing that we have practiced the words leads to us feeling more confidence in the classroom.
<b>Useful ICT links</b>	This wasn’t mentioned specifically however when asked, it was said that everything was covered within the meeting.
<b>Developing sentence structures.</b>	It was good to write down a list of the key words. More confidence in being able to push the group further.
<b>Activities</b>	We talked about different activities for each week and they know where to go next. Pupils are enjoying the variety of games and the new resources that were found (in the French resource cupboard).

### Recommendations

- What can school do as the next steps for my school?
- What are the next steps for my school?
- What can other schools do to replicate this?
- What package can I offer as a Specialist Practitioner of Education for MFL?.

## RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

- Can schools work together to replicate this or support each other?
- Can we develop a network of MFL SEN practitioners?

## Further Research

- The planning meeting is also being used in another subject at my school but having structured the proforma and making it very subject specific, this is something that I can develop and implement in the subjects I teach and lead.
- Within the Focus Group, one staff member mentioned how they had noticed an increase in communication by one particular pupil and how his engagement in the lesson had increased. Further research could be completed in relation to this and the correlation between MFL lessons, the strategies used and pupil's communication and engagement in lessons.
- As mentioned in the data analysis, it may be interesting to explore the reasons behind practitioners' needs and feelings for further training in different areas.

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## Acknowledgements

I would like to firstly thank my colleagues at Tor View School, Haslingden for their time and participation in this research project along with the practitioners in the wider network across Lancashire for submitting their views in the online questionnaire. I would also like to thank Dr Ann-Marie Houghton and Georgia McCrone for help with this paper and the research process.



East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership <http://www.elip.org/>

Referencing this article:

Fearon, H. (2017) *TTR 9: How can curriculum planning meetings support how teachers feel about planning and teaching MFL lessons to SEN pupils?* East Lancashire Learning Project  
Available from: <http://www.elip.org/research-and-development/research-briefing-papers>