

What French can Shrek teach us?

Primary Languages Lead Teacher Project

"I grew up watching TV and seeing films in English; we were used to hearing it from an early age, it was just there".

So answered Dutch friend Yvonne to my enquiry as to why she and seemingly all Dutch people speak excellent English. Logical if you think about it: listen to it, absorb its sounds and patterns, speak it, then learn to read and write it later at school. Just the way we do with our own native language. Of course we know this is how we learn languages, but could the right conditions for language acquisition be re-created in the primary classroom using authentic, natural material? How far would a class of 32 Year 5's be able to develop their confidence in French and their language learning skills?

A constant diet of French TV was neither available or desirable. Something within the grasp of children with a basic knowledge of French..... Yes! A children's film already familiar to them, popular with both girls and boys, something humorous and many-faceted that no-one minds watching several times. The first Shrek film, known to all the children, proved popular. I noted with satisfaction that there was no resistance to the choice of film, nor to the explanation we were going to watch it all in French and see how much we could understand and learn. The DVD had a choice of English or French sound and subtitles, as well as other languages. As the aim of the project was to see how children responded to listening to French matching linguistic sounds to the visual, I decided not to use the subtitles. Running the English ones would have switched the children off from their listening altogether and the French ones were far too fast and way above the French reading level of the children. The French of the subtitles was incidentally also very different from the spoken dubbed French! Reading and writing French would play a part in the project, but would need more careful preparation at a suitable level.

"What French can Shrek teach us?" ran over several weeks with time allocated regularly to watching Shrek and doing related activities. After seeing the film in English once and making storyboards to refresh the children's memories, the class was ready to embark upon watching it in French, in short sections. Vitally, the confidence of the children was now high and they felt comfortable as the film started to play for the first time in French. Near the beginning there is a moment when a toilet flush sounds and Shrek emerges from an outdoor toilet cubicle to a crowd of fairytale animals rushing towards him and the toilet. Shrek shouts out "Pas par là!" ("Not that way!") and immediately children in the class spontaneously started calling out "Pas par là!" In subsequent lessons I noticed this happening in other parts of the film, particularly when the children felt

involved in an exciting piece of the action. Their French was well-pronounced with excellent intonation and they obviously understood what was meant by the words; they were using their natural language acquisition skills without anyone telling them how. Listening to the native French and deducing meaning from the visual context led the children to the level of confidence where they could reproduce whole phrases competently and naturally.

However, in order to become a proficient language learner, it is also necessary to develop an awareness of useful techniques which can be employed consciously and selectively. With this in mind, the children were given a worksheet of French and English words which look and sound similar to each other (princess/*princesse*, prince charming/*prince charmant*, flames/*flammes* etc) and matched them up in columns. They then watched the Fairytale Book section at the start of the film in which all these words are spoken and placed ticks in the last column as they heard each word. Again, the confidence of the children was high as they considered their achievement, firstly of reading and understanding so many new French words and then of identifying them easily when listening! They were keen to get all the words ticked and asked for the section to be re-run a couple of times to check they had them all. During the exercise they repeated the words over and over to themselves in the most natural way without being asked and I was needed only to correct and model some specific sounds, notably the French “r” which the children found hard to emulate.

Using English as a starting point for working out meanings of French words became a skill the children were quick and keen to develop. Moving on from single items of vocabulary, they were soon able to tackle dialogue extracts from the film. After watching the relevant part of the film on screen (in which Donkey is running after Shrek through the wood desperate to be his friend) the class was then given this section of dialogue. The children wrote the English translation of any words they already knew, or could deduce from the context of the action, under the French:

SHREK: Ecoute, petit âne. Regarde-moi bien. Je suis quoi?

DONKEY: Uh.....très, très grand?

SHREK: Non! Je suis un ogre!

.....

DONKEY: Je t'aime comme tu es. C'est quoi ton petit nom?

SHREK: Shrek

They then had to find meanings they couldn't work out using dictionaries; a challenging activity but rewarding. I later used two other dialogue extracts from other sections of the film and the children came to understand how much they could actually work out for themselves by careful listening and watching in the first place, followed by grammatical considerations of sentence structure that would permit deduction of meaning, along with any similarities to the English. The dictionary was needed only for odd words, they were relieved to discover! We considered how true this is for the way we learn English, too. The other very important realisation for the class with this intensive work on dialogue extracts was that finding meaning does not always involve word-for-word translation. Children saw that the adjective usually comes after the noun in French, but obviously has to be placed before the noun when translated to English. They also worked out that certain set phrases, for example "Mirror, mirror on the wall" do not sound good when translated literally from the French "Miroir, miroir, magique au mur!" to "Mirror, magic mirror on the wall!" More able children were able to render longer sentences into acceptable English, changing word order and finding suitable turns of phrase.

Intensive language work was complemented by roleplay in French of some dialogues studied from the film. The children made Shrek and Donkey masks and proved exceptionally eager to come to the front of the class to act out the roles. Language reinforcement was achieved by the children for their peers and the standard of pronunciation and intonation was very good. Many quite shy children felt confident enough to come up and shout "Non, je suis un ogre!" from behind their masks. The children were very comfortable with the fact they were speaking French and did not see this as a barrier to participation in the activity, which many of them said had been their favourite in the evaluation at the end of the project.

As with the phrase "Pas par là!" it was often possible to deduce meaning from visual cues. When Donkey refuses to leave Shrek's cave at bedtime, Shrek shouts the word "dehors!" at his obstinate new friend repeatedly and points to the door firmly, indicating he wants Donkey to sleep outside. The children had no difficulty in deducing the meaning correctly as "outside" and then thoroughly enjoyed the intensive listening activity of counting how many times Shrek shouted "dehors!" during the rapidly spoken extract (nine). They were confident and successful at the task.

Only some selected sections of the film were used for detailed language activities; the majority of it was watched and enjoyed by the children in the same way they would watch a film in English. No-one in the class, including the least able children, once asked for me to turn the English sound on. Concentration, and importantly appreciation, were high. At the end of the film, children were able

to work out deeper layers of the story, such as the meaning of true beauty and how our usual expectations of fairy tales had been challenged; useful practice in literary analysis.

The final task for the class was to complete an evaluation form “Shrek: What have we achieved?”. Asked to give their favourite activity from the project, children wrote various answers ranging from “Making the masks because it was fun”, to “When you had to pick out the French words that sounded the same as English”. The most difficult task for many children was the translation work ; one child wrote: “ The most difficult activity was writing down dialogue because at first the French dictionaries were hard to use”.

But had these 10 year-olds increased their level of confidence in French and discovered new language-learning skills as a result of watching the whole of Shrek *en français*? These specific questions aimed to find this out:

Would you try to watch children’s TV while on holiday in France?

(Yes: 75%)

Then of these “Yes” answers to the above:

Would you have done this before watching Shrek 1 in French?

(No: 60%)

It appeared that the children had indeed increased their confidence significantly. They also seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed their learning:

Did you enjoy watching a film in French?

(Yes: 85%)

The answers to this simple question show surely that this group of young people will greet future language learning opportunities with an open attitude and enthusiasm, helping to break down barriers during their schooling and beyond. Merci, Shrek!

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