



Using The Gruffalo to inspire language learning

Children's author Julia Donaldson inspired students and teachers at a multilingual 'Gruffalo day'

Biography

Jane Harvey

Jane runs multilingual 'Gruffalo' workshops for local schools. She is a member of ALL's Council and also runs the ALL Border Marches Network, which hosts a full calendar of events throughout the year for language practitioners across all Key Stages.

Author of over 60 best-selling books for children, Julia Donaldson was the Children's Laureate from 2011-2013. She is a linguist as well as an author, song writer and performer in French, Italian and German. Julia wrote a multilingual version of her best-selling book *The Gruffalo* for a meeting with her international publishers. I have known Julia since university in Bristol and suggested to her that this version would be a great basis for a language awareness event for primary school children who, of course, all know the story. She agreed that we could use her multilingual version for this event.

The ALL Border Marches network, which is based in Monmouth, took up this idea with enthusiasm. After our highly successful day for year 6 to year 10 pupils in 2015 based on fairy stories, we wanted to promote another day that would encourage enthusiasm for language learning and above all, be fun. Hilary Phillips, head teacher of Inglefield House, the junior school of Haberdashers' Monmouth School for Girls, and herself a French specialist, offered to host the day. We were delighted that the Goethe Institut agreed to sponsor our languages day again this year.

Preparing the event

Being on the border between Wales and England, we had to decide how to deal with the different language provision in Welsh and English schools. We were clear that French (taught to year 4 in one participating English state school and the two Welsh independent schools) and Welsh (taught in three participating Welsh schools) would be two of the languages featured so all pupils would be familiar with one language. The other languages were to be new to everyone. We decided on German, Spanish and Mandarin, chosen because we had senior students who could help the younger students with these.

An action-packed day

On Thursday, 26 May 2016, 79 year 4 children and their teachers from six local primary schools (Redbrook, Osbaston, Trellech, Llanfoist, the Grange and Inglefield House – four in Wales and two in England) took part in our Gruffalo day , with the help of year 10-13 students from Monmouth Comprehensive School, Haberdashers' Monmouth School for Girls and Monmouth School. As the year 4 pupils arrived, the secondary school students were waiting for them with icebreaker activities based on recognising names of the characters in different languages. Everyone then enjoyed a performance, by Julia and her guitar-playing husband Malcolm, of the multilingual version of *The Gruffalo*. The different characters who meet the mouse on his travels through the deep dark wood speak French (the fox), German (the owl) and Italian (the snake) while the Gruffalo himself is a lowland Scot. The narrator starts the story in English, but when the fox speaks to the mouse in French, the mouse replies in French and changes languages as the other characters speak to him. The year 4 pupils were enthralled by the performance, following the well-known story without difficulty. Julia then talked about some of the challenges of translating her books, which are available in over 70 languages, and how different the name of the Gruffalo is in different languages: for instance, he's called *Te Tanguruhau* in Maori and *Mörkyll* in Finnish! To end this first session, Julia taught everyone the chorus of *The Monkey Puzzle* song using Makaton, which was a huge hit with pupils, students and staff! At Julia's request, year 10 students from the Welsh Department of Monmouth Comprehensive School then gave a costumed reading of the Gruffalo in Welsh.





From left Students of all ages enjoyed the day, which featured a performance of the multilingual version of *The Gruffalo* from Julia Donaldson and her husband Malcolm

Language fun

Language teachers from the three secondary schools had worked together to divide the story into short scenes and prepare their students to help the primary school pupils. During the rest of the morning, year 4 pupils were able to try out three different scenes in three different languages. After lunch, it was time for everyone to have a go at a new scene in a language they had not tried in the morning. They had 45 minutes to rehearse and record their scene on iPads and it was fantastic to see how involved everyone was, the support and encouragement from the older pupils and the determination of all to produce a good final performance. The day ended with two multilingual performances of the story, with each scene in a different language, the first one by the year 4 pupils and then an encore by the secondary school students.

A very successful day

The day certainly achieved our aim of being a fun-filled experience, with a variety of different languages. The success of the scenes acted out in Mandarin, where the pronunciation and accent were excellent and no copy of the text was given to the pupils, meant that we could easily do the same with other languages. Using senior students as learning coaches worked very well: they really took to their coaching roles and it was great to see how this increased their own confidence in speaking. The language teachers from Monmouth's three secondary schools have formed new working relationships which will last well beyond the event. There are plans too, for secondary school pupils to take their own target language version out to primary schools and to replicate the event as a year 8 project in one school next year.

Hilary Phillips from Inglefield House was full of praise for the pupils and students: "Pupils got used to the idea of trying different languages and soon felt relaxed about getting it wrong in front of their friends. It's about breaking through the barrier of 'I don't want to open my mouth and sound silly'. Not only have they been faced with different languages; they're getting on and working with people they don't know, they've been chatting and making friends and becoming part of a bigger community. I think the senior students have got the most out of this – they've discovered that you learn better yourself when you're teaching others."

Julia Donaldson was also very pleased with the day. "I am passionate about the importance of languages and delighted that my Gruffalo story in different languages has been inspiring pupils today. Learning a language at a young age makes it much easier to learn a second and a third later on, as well as increasing understanding of other nations and cultures."



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