

Maintaining language skills in the initial training of foreign language teachers

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THE PROBLEM

Modern Foreign Languages student teachers of today spend two thirds of their Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) course in partnership schools. Their timetables have to fit in with what is on offer at those schools and they may be called upon to teach their second or third foreign language in addition to their main language. It is of course to their advantage in career terms to have gained early experience in more than one foreign language. For the profession as a whole, dual (or triple!) linguists are to be welcomed if the hoped-for language diversification in schools is ever to be realised fully.

In order for students to feel sufficiently competent in these second or third languages, it must be ensured that their linguistic skills are maintained, refreshed or improved as appropriate. Language teaching today requires extensive and careful use of the target language in order for the teacher to act as linguistic model, and in many ways, the linguistic inspiration for the pupils. This requires both confidence and competence. The latter is, of course, assumed to be present as a result of undergraduate studies. A number of important questions challenge this simplistic assumption:

- When did they graduate?
- Linguistic competence in what sense?
- What was the scope and nature of their foreign language learning in their undergraduate course?
- Will they only be teaching the language(s) they have studied to degree level?
- Does a degree guarantee competence in all aspects of grammar, even at a basic level?
- Have they, for example, had substantial oral practice in the type of language used in the classroom? Even native speakers have difficulty on occasions in selecting the appropriate register and vocabulary for teacher talk.
- How long did dual linguists spend in each country in their residential year?

- How did they spend their year – work/language assistant/at a University?
- How do they compare their competence in each language in the case of dual linguists?
- How do they assess their own ability in each language?

The vast majority of student teachers are linguistically competent on paper. What must be ensured is that this is transferred effectively to the classroom.

It has been found that there is a surprisingly high level of complacency amongst graduates about their own language ability, and that the motivation to improve their practical language skills may be at a dangerously low level (Meara 1994). If this complacency or perhaps over-confidence were present in the case of PGCE students, then the quality of language teaching would surely be threatened.

Taking account of the above points, it was decided to include in the PGCE course at the university of Warwick a programme of linguistic refreshment. This was to comprise both independent learning and timetabled language classes. These Language Centre classes were also advertised to final year language undergraduates as an opportunity to refresh their second language, especially for those students who were considering training as language teachers. There was considerable take-up of this offer for the French post-A-level (or equivalent) class from single honours German or Italian students.

THE STUDENTS

The PGCE in Modern Foreign Languages at the University of Warwick caters for students with French or German, or both. It also provides school experience, where possible, for those with Spanish as a second foreign language. This means that those students who have only one language to degree level are encouraged to pick up a language they have studied in the past, or to start a new language.

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The following details relate to the 24 students completing the course in the year 1994–95.

All students except one had French at some level; the majority (19 out of 24) at least to degree level or as a native speaker. Ten students had both French and German to degree level. Thirteen had worked prior to the start of the PGCE course, some in positions of considerable responsibility for a number of years in management or personnel. The majority had worked as foreign language assistants in the residential component of their degree, and the French native speakers had served as language assistants in schools and universities in England. Many had also had considerable experience in TEFL. The majority had attended state comprehensive schools. There were three native French speakers and one native German speaker, all four of whom had a second foreign language as well as English (German or Spanish).

In the main, PGCE students are highly committed students and are keen and able linguists. Their perspective shifts very quickly at the beginning of the course, however, to focus on developing their role in the classroom rather than their own linguistic skills. The PGCE course is by its nature very intensive, so any language element which is to be built in must fit in with this tight schedule and the pressure of both teaching practice and assignments.

University based subject sessions are held both at the Institute of Education and at the Language Centre, and students feel part of both. The Modern Languages Subject Tutor is based at the Language Centre. The independent learning element fits more naturally into their full week, as they are already 'on site' at the Language Centre one day a week for a method seminar.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE

This format means any extended language work has to be concentrated in those periods where substantial time was to be spent at the university. This kind of programme is something which would be almost impossible to organise within the school-based component of the course. It was decided to use the first term for independent learning in the Language Centre. This would also enable the students themselves to attempt a diagnostic evaluation as to their linguistic needs. The block of time in the second term was designated the main input for language sessions.

INDEPENDENT LEARNING

The first priority was to clarify the aims of the independent learning element of the language input. The students were initially given an introductory session to the Language Centre in the first week, when they were shown round and given advice. In the words of one student, the session was found to be 'a useful and reassuring experience'. The stu-

dents needed to feel the Centre was a place where both technical and academic help were on hand and where facilities were available when they were needed, in the context of a welcoming environment.

Students worked independently there for the first term, up to the start of their first teaching practice. Once this practice had started, time was obviously restricted for them to carry on in this way, but it was still possible, as the Centre was open in the evenings during the week. Some students made use of this during their teaching practice. Basic suggestions for independent study were provided in the Foreign Languages handbook as follows:

- IT MFL applications. (e.g. CD-ROM, authoring packages)
- Language lab consoles.
- TV/Satellite/videos.
- Use of cassette recorder.
- Resources used in schools (books, cassettes, videos).
- Magazines, newspapers.

Two main areas were emphasised:

- their own linguistic competence.
- language and resources in the classroom.

The handbook advice will be revised in the light of evaluation. (See Appendix 1.)

Students were asked to keep a log of their independent activity in their handbook and to evaluate this each week. These logs were collected in at the start of Term 2, and were, for the most part, very detailed, showing considerable commitment to the continuation of their language learning and the acknowledgement that it was needed. The students investigated different strategies for maintaining fluency, as well as combining this study with a methodological focus regarding materials and hardware used. The logs revealed a wide range of linguistic needs, with students making reference to their wish to improve in such areas as grammar, colloquial expressions and pronunciation.

Table 1 Structure of the course

	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thur	Fri
Week 1	Initial	experience	week in	school in	home area
Week 2	Introduction	to PGCE year	and primary	school	experience
Week 3	School	School	Subject	Subject	Education
Week 4	(As	week 3)			
Week 5	(As	week 3)			
Week 6	In	school	all	week	
Week 7	(As	week 3)			
Week 8	(As	week 3)			
Week 9					
to	First	Block	Practice		
Week 14					
Week 15					
to	(As	week 3)			
Week 23					
Week 24					
to	Second	Block	Practice		
Week 35					
Week 36	Exam	Board	and	induction	

As they began to appreciate overtly their role as a linguistic model in the classroom, they became more self-critical. One of the most successful activities was using the interactive CD-ROMs and working with the record and playback facility. The students found this extremely useful in the evaluation of their own pronunciation and intonation and, of course, experienced at the same time how such equipment could be used in the classroom.

The exposure to extended, authentic target language was seen by the students as vital. This was provided partially through watching the satellite TV and partially through the use of audio resources. These activities served a dual purpose:

- The improvement of listening skills
- The continued maintenance of awareness of the target culture.

The activities were widely perceived by students as being exactly what was needed to refresh the language after what was for some of them a substantial break. Their attention was focused once more on language *learning*. One very positive aspect of the satellite TV facility was that it provided students with contextualised language in an authentic setting. This was, surprisingly, a new experience for many students, even some recent graduates. Of course it was also very enjoyable and provided a wide choice of material. Some students made extensive use of the recorded news facility, playing it back several times to study the extract in detail. One student described this process as 'de-rusting' – and, most importantly, while the group was still at an early stage in the development of relationships, the independent study gave the opportunity to 'de-rust' in private!

Even those students who had graduated recently felt the need to regain a feeling for the living language and culture which they felt they had lost, at least partially, over the holiday period. For some, the experience was salutary, in that they realised they needed, for example, a lot more practice with colloquial or current affairs vocabulary. This highlighted for them the fact that pupils will be in the same position if the teacher were to speak TL at too high a level or introduce too many unknown elements. Coping strategies, therefore, were developed and recognised relatively quickly. These coping strategies illuminated many of the approaches they would adopt with their pupils, such as the use of context, the repeated playing of a specific linguistic element and the appropriate use of reference materials. This was particularly important for students wishing to teach their second or third language.

The students showed a great deal of honesty and self-awareness in the log entries, concluding unanimously that they needed a lot more practice. As one student typically commented, 'I need to practise my spoken German particularly, but would also like to go over basic grammar points which are needed for GCSE'.

Many felt they needed to note the language which they understood passively but could not produce in any active way. The language learning process itself was becoming clearer to them in their new role.

Another common activity undertaken in this period was reading current magazines and newspapers. This provided, of course, important cultural and linguistic exposure and also enabled students to begin to appreciate the importance of text selection for their future more advanced language teaching. Students also looked at common school course books giving them an insight into the sort of vocabulary and structures involved, for example, at GCSE level, and what sort of target language instructions are used. This last activity was especially useful for native speakers.

LANGUAGE LESSONS

Having taken account of students' needs during the Autumn Term, the following classes were created:

- 'Post degree' French,
- 'Post degree' German,
- Post A level (or equivalent) French
- Post A level (or equivalent) German.

In the second term, in the build-up to their second Block Practice, students opted for the class at the most appropriate level, based on guidance from tutors and their own independent work in the first term. Dual linguists selected the language about which they had more concerns.

Each class was to be ninety minutes in duration, with an additional thirty minutes to be used as the tutors wished, for example, for the preparation of a simulation or for IT use. In reality, most tutors filled up the two hours with active teaching.

Formative evaluation of language classes

In the course of Term 2, a formative evaluation was carried out. This took the form of an open-ended questionnaire presented during a subject session, discussed in pairs and small groups and finally the collation of written responses. This discussion and subsequent written answers took place approximately two weeks in to the language classes.

Students were asked how confident they felt with their languages. Only a few felt happy with their level of competence, and the majority expressed concerns especially when teaching A level or teaching up to Key Stage 4 (GCSE) in their second foreign language. The majority saw the need for increasing their fluency, and therefore confidence, when using the target language in day to day classroom situations.

Many were worried about being able to give clear, grammatical explanations and examples