

Meeting the needs of PGCE students wishing to teach their second/subsidiary foreign language

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Many schools working in partnership with Higher Education Institutions prefer to offer placements to Modern Foreign Language (MFL) trainees who are able to teach two languages, in order to give MFL departments a greater degree of flexibility. This presents a problem, however, as only a minority of language undergraduates study two languages to degree level and an insufficient number of these are subsequently attracted to teaching. This article considers attempts at Kingston University to provide tuition for trainees wishing to improve their second/subsidiary teaching language with the intention of contributing to the debate within schools and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers about how best to address this issue. The opinions of trainees from two successive cohorts (1998-99 and 1999-2000) were sought by means of informal discussion and questionnaires. The research is, therefore, invariably impressionistic, based on local, qualitative feedback data, rather than quantitative information.

INTRODUCTION

Schools within the South West London Teaching Consortium (SWELTEC) generally prefer to offer placements to Modern Foreign Language (MFL) trainees who are able to teach two foreign languages, in order to give MFL departments a greater degree of flexibility in timetabling. This is cause for considerable concern, however. As James Coleman's research suggests (Coleman, 1996: 27), there are only a minority of language undergraduates who study two languages to degree level and, according to the Nuffield Inquiry (Nuffield, 2000: 7), an insufficient number of language graduates are subsequently attracted to teaching. That is to say, few trainee teachers can be called “genuine dual linguists”.

The purpose of this article is to consider attempts at Kingston University to provide tuition for trainees wishing to improve their second/subsidiary teaching language, with the intention of contributing to the current debate within schools and Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers. This article includes:

- reflections on the need for such refresher courses;
- the level of competence required by trainees;
- course design and course delivery;

- a discussion of strategies trainees have developed for teaching a language in which they feel less confident;
- the role of the mentor and university tutor in correcting language errors;
- and finally the difficulties of providing suitable tuition.

The opinions of trainees from two successive cohorts at Kingston University (1998-99 and 1999-2000) were sought by means of informal discussion and, in the case of the 1998-1999 cohort, also by means of a questionnaire. The evidence base for this article is, therefore, limited. Nevertheless, it should be possible for colleagues to draw certain conclusions for their own context.

HAS A PGCE TIMETABLE THE SPACE FOR TEACHING A SECOND/SUBSIDIARY FOREIGN LANGUAGE?

There is enormous pressure on the timetable of any Postgraduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) course, as trainees have substantially more contact time than on undergraduate courses. The PGCE course at Kingston University includes fourteen weeks that are university-based. During this part of the course, trainees spend two days in schools and have three days almost entirely filled with a subject application course (how to teach a given subject) and a common core course (issues in education). In addition, during the PGCE year, they have to write assignments, carry out investigations in schools, fill in countless forms and successfully complete teaching practices, which include keeping a file of all their lesson plans with materials and evaluations. When this workload can make the hardest of trainees wilt, how can we expect them to undertake the study of a foreign language as well? Indeed, when the Kingston PGCE was validated, one member of the panel felt that such an additional commitment

could not, and should not, be asked of them. A local deputy head teacher challenged this view, however, claiming that "mono-foreign linguists" would not be considered for a post at her school.

This position would appear to reflect the job market within modern languages departments nation-wide. Indeed, the following posts were advertised on a given day in the state and independent sections of the *Times Educational Supplement* (3rd November 2000):

- eleven posts for teachers with equal ability in two languages
- twenty-six posts for teachers with two languages, not necessarily to the same level of competence
- nine posts for teachers who can offer one MFL (six of these were only temporary covers)
- eight posts not stipulating whether the candidate should offer both the languages taught in the school (all of these posts carried a management allowance)
- two advertisements which failed to state which languages the school offered.

At Kingston University we do not want to turn away good prospective trainees simply because their second teaching language is weak. Indeed, for many applicants learning a second foreign language is a distant memory. This is true, for example, of some of the French, German or Spanish native speakers, who have an excellent command of English but who stopped learning their second foreign language at school. Part of the interview process at Kingston, as elsewhere, involves an oral and a written assessment in both foreign languages. The topics discussed during the oral test vary according to their linguistic background and whether or not it is the candidate's first teaching language. It may be a discussion of the applicant's degree course, the nature of their year abroad or their teaching experience to date. On the other hand, it may be a (sometimes rather faltering) discussion about their interests, their home town or their holidays abroad. In the applicant's first teaching language, the written test is a short essay on an educational theme, while in his or her second teaching language an applicant is required to complete a gap-fill exercise, in which certain verbs must be conjugated in a given tense or mood. However, if the candidate is otherwise strong, and particularly if he or she is in a position to offer German, we are reluctant to reject on the basis of any weakness we discover in the second language.

The conclusion was reached that prospective trainees should be advised at the time of interview on how to improve their second language and subsequently be offered tuition and support throughout the course. Owing to the time constraints within which we are working, trainees can be given only ninety minutes' contact time per week for fourteen weeks, although we expect them to undertake further language work of

approximately two hours per week. Trainees are usually directed as to the type of work they should do in non-contact time and this generally incorporates the learning of vocabulary, the reading of texts, grammar work, translation exercises into the target language or pronunciation practice. They generally see this part of the course in a positive light, and in fact some relish the opportunity to improve their subject knowledge. Others show some reluctance, but are generally pragmatic and recognise the need for some tuition. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence suggests that many former trainees are now successfully teaching - and enjoying teaching - languages that, at the time of their PGCE interview, they were not sufficiently competent to teach.

WHAT LEVEL OF PROFICIENCY DOES A TRAINEE NEED IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE? ESTABLISHING THE BASE LINE

The question of how good a person's command of a foreign language needs to be before they should be allowed to teach it is certainly problematic and this does not merely apply to the second/subsidiary teaching language, as a degree in a language is not always an accurate indicator of proficiency. In line with DfEE Circular 4/98, we would generally expect at least 50% of an applicant's first degree to be in the foreign language and for this to have involved a prolonged period in a country where the target language is spoken. Since graduating, however, some will have been employed in posts that did not allow them to use their language(s) frequently, or even at all. Others will have a good degree classification, but this may be a reflection of their performance on non-language modules, modules that may have been assessed at least partly in English. James Coleman's research suggests (Coleman, 1996: 7, 40) that there are immense discrepancies in levels of foreign language proficiency across British universities, a situation he attributes to the autonomy such institutions enjoy and the widely differing aims of degrees such as Single Honours French and Mechanical Engineering with French. University PGCE tutors, therefore, have to make a professional judgement of the trainee's first and second/subsidiary teaching languages, and make this recommendation known to the individual schools. This is based on the trainee's performance at interview, their previous language learning experience and, despite the difficulties outlined above, the nature of their qualifications. In the case of an applicant who could teach a given language only to a very low level, we would consider this a subsidiary foreign language and it is unlikely to be assessed within the course.

With effect from the academic year 2000-01, trainees are also required to complete a subject knowledge audit in which they have to make

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subjective judgements on areas of their expertise within the MFLs they can offer. These areas include:

- oral skills (their fluency, accent, grammatical accuracy and range of vocabulary)
- written skills (their range of vocabulary and grammatical accuracy)
- listening skills (their ability to understand television, radio and commercially produced materials)
- reading skills (their ability to understand literature, GCSE-style materials and newspaper and magazine articles)
- knowledge of grammar and linguistic structures
- cultural knowledge (their awareness of aspects of life in the contemporary country).

The starting point for the design of the audit was the requirements of GCSE and A level. This is not meant to be demanding in terms of time and so trainees merely have to complete a checklist or questionnaire, rating themselves on a scale of one to five, and circling the appropriate figure. This could help inform tutors' decisions, but in practice it serves mainly to give the trainee a clearer, more realistic view of the level of language required to teach Key Stage 3, GCSE and A level, and to pinpoint areas where work needs to be done. Indeed, trainees are required to carry out this exercise at three points during the year and, where appropriate, to account for any improvement. The design and effectiveness of the audit is to be reviewed at the end of the academic year 2000-2001.

Designing a questionnaire to evaluate a trainee's language expertise is problematic, as trainees have a tendency to "talk down" their ability in their second/subsidiary language: a GCSE or A level becomes a 'rusty' GCSE or A level, and *baccalauréat* standard is equated with GCSE or even "near beginner". Coleman suggests (1996: 8, 41) that language students assess their own proficiency very inaccurately, and in the context of a PGCE, it is probably the natural product of two concerns that the trainee may have. Firstly, if they are to battle with a myriad of difficulties such as lesson planning, classroom management, differentiation and assessment, they do not relish the potentially stressful classroom situation of being at a loss for words. Secondly, they are genuinely reluctant to teach a second language if they feel they will do the pupils a disservice. Indeed, Shirley Lawes (Lawes, 1996) quotes a trainee from her institution as saying: "Children deserve to be taught by a specialist and I am not a specialist".

Despite these feelings of self-doubt, trainees generally go on to teach their second MFL. If we take the first teaching practice of the academic year 1998-99 as typical, all those with subsidiary degree level in a language were expected to teach

it, at least within Key Stage 3. All but one of those with an A level or its equivalent had to teach Years 7, 8 or, in one case, a Year 6 class in a feeder primary school. Those with a GCSE were generally not required to teach it, but the majority were asked to support a regular teacher, an arrangement which proved very beneficial to the trainee and also gave the teacher an extra pair of hands in the classroom.

To gauge the trainees' level of confidence, the same cohort was asked to complete a questionnaire. This revealed that trainees with a GCSE felt that, by the end of the course, they could teach the early part of Key Stage 3, and would be prepared to go beyond this only if it were *essential* for the department. Among those trainees with an A level or equivalent, the majority felt they could teach Key Stage 3 with confidence, but, if absolutely necessary, would be prepared to teach weaker classes at Key Stage 4. Meanwhile those with a subsidiary degree level felt they could happily teach Key Stage 4. These perceptions will no doubt change as they grow in confidence as teachers and as, through teaching, some of their passive knowledge of vocabulary and structures becomes more active. One trainee, for whom German had merely formed part of her *baccalauréat*, commented that her confidence grew and her ability to use the language increased as she progressed through the six weeks of her first teaching practice.

The delivery and design of the language refresher course

It is essential that any language course is delivered to a "PGCE-specific" group, because if it is part of an institution-wide language scheme, in which trainees are taught alongside undergraduates from other disciplines, their very specific needs cannot be fully met. Furthermore, the tutors involved should have a thorough knowledge of secondary MFL teaching and the National Curriculum, in order that they can model what is generally considered to be good practice in schools. Should the PGCE tutors also be responsible for the course provision, this presents an added bonus, in that it enables staff to get to know the cohort in a different and smaller setting.

At Kingston University PGCE tutors now teach the Spanish, French and German refresher courses. They based the course design on lesson observations with previous cohorts and their perceptions of the trainees' needs, although this has been modified in the light of feedback and the heterogeneous nature of the group, as is discussed later. The broad objectives were as follows:

- **To reinforce the vocabulary trainees will teach**
Given the limited amount of time, a rather arbitrary choice of topics had to be made, but questionnaires completed by the 1999 cohort reveal that this was perceived as the most important part of the course. However, the delivery

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