

# Professional development through collaborative curriculum planning in English and modern languages

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This paper describes a collaborative planning exercise undertaken by PGCE student teachers of English and modern languages as part of a programme of cross-subject language teacher education. A brief account of the overall programme is given together with some reflection on the use of literary texts in modern languages. The paper then describes how in mixed-subject pairs the student teachers planned a Year 9 lesson using poems in English and other languages. The paper reports the evaluations of the participants showing what they have learned from each other's subject approaches and how this has informed their overall professional development as future language teachers.

## INTRODUCTION

This article relates to the PGCE programme at London Metropolitan University (formerly University of North London) described in Burley and Pomphrey (2002) in which student teachers of English and modern languages work together in a language education programme aimed at generating a dialogue across these two curriculum areas. The goal is to encourage future teachers to gain a more complete understanding of language, language teaching and language learning. The tendency of modern languages as a discipline to neglect consideration of the whole (including the social) context for language learning has been commented on in the past by, for example, Hawkins (1984), Mitchell and Myles (1998) and Brumfit (2001). The aim of these language education sessions is to explore the contribution of each subject to the language education and development of pupils as well as to create some common purposes and approaches across the two curriculum areas. An important motivation for the development of this programme has been the findings of the study carried out at Southampton University (Mitchell *et al.*, 1994) which found differences between teachers of modern languages and English in their approaches to 'knowledge about language'. Since this study, and particularly since the development of the National Literacy Strategy (DfEE, 1998), there has been a greater interest in finding commonalities between these

two subject areas (see, for example, Turner and Turvey, 2002).

The original language teacher education programme contained six sessions of importance and interest to both subjects. The original programme as described in Burley and Pomphrey (2002) covered the following areas:

- language diversity
- first language acquisition
- learning in an unfamiliar language
- knowledge about language
- reading whole texts
- language teaching approaches.

Each of these sessions is taught to a mixed group of PGCE English and modern languages student teachers. An important dimension of the whole programme is the continuous process of reflection which informs different aspects of the programme in different ways. This process relates to the broadly social constructivist approach to language teacher education advocated by Roberts which 'recognises the interdependence of the personal and social dimensions of teacher development' (Roberts, 1998). The focus at the start of the programme (language diversity, language acquisition) is on personal experience and prior understanding of language use and language development. Reflection on the diversity of languages and language varieties in the personal repertoire is used as a starting point for later reflection on the construction of an identity as a language teacher (learning in an unfamiliar language, language teaching approaches). The sessions entitled 'knowledge about language' and 'reading a whole text' contain reflections on, and analysis of, the structures which underpin words, sentences and texts in all languages, enabling student teachers to compare and develop their understandings of these aspects of language.

A session was added to this programme in June 2002 which gave student teachers the opportunity to apply the knowledge and experience gained

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throughout the PGCE to a collaborative, practical task planning a lesson on poetry in different languages. This article focuses on student teachers' evaluations of this newly added session, showing the practical and professional gains of working collaboratively, as perceived by the participants.

From the data collected, the session was clearly an overwhelmingly successful and positive experience, with 36 of the 38 participants strongly supporting the practice of such joint planning and the remaining two generally positive but with some reservations and caveats. This has added further weight to the evidence collected from the previous sessions (see Burley and Pomphrey, forthcoming) which suggests that the cross-curricular dialogue between trainee teachers of these two subjects has benefited their overall professional development in a number of ways.

## PRIOR SESSION – COMPARISON OF LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACHES

The poetry session followed closely on the session focused on comparison of language teaching approaches. In this prior session student teachers had analysed and compared the different language teaching approaches encountered in both subject areas over the course of the PGCE. They were asked to identify and compare teaching approaches at word, sentence and text level, terms used by the National Literacy Strategy (see DfEE, 1998). They also discussed approaches to learning about socio-cultural aspects of language. The latter included identifying and discussing different uses of language in different settings or with different interlocutors, different levels of politeness or formality as well as the social and political history of different languages and language varieties, such as the history of the English language or *la francophonie*. In this prior session areas of similar practice as well as a number of specific differences between the two subjects were identified. By engaging in analysis and comparison, student teachers were able to learn from each other's teaching approaches. English student teachers reported learning from their MFL peers a range of activities at word and sentence level as well as strategies for highlighting grammatical patterns and providing visual support for language learning. Modern languages student teachers said they gained ideas for working with textual meaning and inference as well as ideas for dictionary work and for examining cultural influences on text.

## PLANNING A POETRY LESSON

It was decided to explore further what the two groups could learn from each other by setting up a practical task in which student teachers were asked to plan teaching activities collaboratively. The teaching plans were to involve textual

analysis, a practice familiar to both curriculum areas. The purposes of textual analysis, however, tend to be different for each subject. In English the objective is usually to give a critical interpretation of the text in relation to audience, context and purpose. In modern languages, however, textual analysis is often more focused on extracting from the text a deepening understanding of the way in which lexical and grammatical features of the target language are used to construct meaning. The collaborative planning exercise would allow for a sharing and synthesis of these different purposes, enabling English student teachers to consider in more detail the language learning potential of the text, while their modern languages peers had an opportunity to look more widely at the relationship between author, text and reader.

The decision to use a literary text rather than a factual one for this collaborative planning exercise challenges the usual separation of language and literature in the curriculum. This dichotomy between language and literature has been criticised as being unhelpful to the process of engaging learners in foreign language learning because it results in an impoverished experience of the target language and culture (Kramsch, 1993). Carter and Long (1991: 7) suggest that a language-based approach to teaching literary texts "means that the teacher becomes an *enabler* (author's italics), working with students and creatively intervening to ensure a relevant and meaningful experience through a direct contact with the text." This "direct contact" with the text we hoped to achieve for pupils by bringing together the language-focused experience of the modern languages student teachers with the experience of studying and teaching literature of the English group. Kramsch (1993) reveals the limitations of recent approaches to literature in modern languages when she states: "Even when literary texts are chosen to teach reading because of their general interest and cultural appeal, language teachers seem constrained to teach these texts for their information value only". Kramsch shows how the use of literary texts with foreign language learners enables them to experience the 'particular voice of the writer' as opposed to the less engaging 'generic reality' represented by texts designed specifically for language learning.

Very few of the modern languages student teachers had considered using literary texts in their own teaching up to this point and were unsure before the session how useful it would be to plan a poetry lesson. Indeed they tended to consider the use of literary genres as something to be studied perhaps at A level and beyond but not in Year 9. In the current literature on modern languages the use of literary texts tends to be discussed as an advanced level activity only (see, for example, Pachler and Allford, 2000). In English lessons, on the other hand, poetry and other literary texts feature prominently at all levels. Thus, the use of poetry for this planning exercise enabled

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the modern languages student teachers to engage with a less familiar text type and to learn from the more literary experiences of their English counterparts.

In choosing poetry as the focus for this collaborative planning exercise, we wanted to explore the possibility of using literature and ‘whole text’ with Key Stage 3 learners. It was decided to use poetry for a number of reasons. The main reason was to use a text type that would enrich the student teachers’ own future teaching. John Trafford (2003) suggests using poetry among other strategies to revive pupils’ interest in modern languages and to promote intellectual challenge, enjoyment and imagination, features which he believes are often lacking from the modern languages curriculum as a result of the recent policies. Many poems are concise enough to enable the study of complex ideas compressed into a few simple words. An example used by one of the student teachers consisted of a few lines taken from the poem ‘*Oda a la cebolla*’ by Pablo Neruda which combined humour with imagination and social awareness in contemplating the humble onion in relation to the cosmos using simple vocabulary, including several near-cognates.

It is possible to find concise, simply expressed poems in most languages understandable even to L2 learners in the early stages and yet interesting in their imaginative and intellectual content. The layers of meaning within a poem allow a reader to construct a personal meaning in responding to the text, the ‘direct contact’ described above by Carter and Long (1991). The selection of the poems to be studied by the student teachers themselves meant that they were bringing texts which already had some personal connection to them. Personal engagement is central to the language teacher education programme and to the student teachers’ own teaching.

## COLLABORATIVE PLANNING SESSION

The stated objectives of the poetry planning session were to gain:

- Experience of working together to plan learning tasks and processes (the what and the how)
- Reflection on the experience to inform future practice

The student teachers were asked to bring to the session a poem in the appropriate target language suitable for use with a Year 9 class. In cross-subject pairs they were asked to read the poems to each other and agree the key meanings and the key language features used to convey the meanings. They then planned activities that would enable learners to gain an understanding of the meanings in each poem and the use of language to convey these meanings. They were asked to plan activities at word, sentence and text level. Several pairs presented their plans to the whole group and student teachers then completed a questionnaire

reflecting on the experience. The questionnaire contained three open questions as follows:

- 1 How has it been valuable to work with someone from another subject in planning this work?
- 2 Is it valuable for teachers of English and modern languages to talk together?
- 3 How has being involved in all the sessions focusing on language affected your view of what your subject is?

## SELECTION OF POEMS

A wide range of poems in different languages was brought to the session. Not surprisingly a number of modern languages student teachers had selected poems and rhymes written for younger children in order to minimise language difficulties for Year 9 pupils. However, the modern languages selection also included poems by well-known writers such as Pablo Neruda and Jacques Prévert. One student teacher selected a poem in German written by a 14-year-old Turkish boy (published in the textbook *Gute Reise 3*: 132). Another had written her own poem in Spanish. Those selected by the English cohort included poems by Tennyson, Adrian Mitchell, Sylvia Plath and Wilfred Owen.

## TEACHING PLANS

A variety of approaches to exploiting the poems were planned. These brought together the different purposes of textual analysis identified earlier. They included typical modern languages learning activities such as gap-filling, dictionary work, selection of cognates or key words, arranging the order of sentences, matching parts of lines or sentences, matching visuals with language, listening and ticking on a grid etc. Others reflected English teaching approaches aimed at exploring meaning, often at whole text level. These included use of prediction strategies, drama, storyboard illustrations, identifying and explaining metaphors, looking for synonyms or contrasts etc.

Several pairs also produced ideas for working beyond the text, giving pupils opportunities to produce their own creative expressions based on the meanings extracted from the text. An example of this was a letter to the classmates of the Turkish pupil who wrote the German poem mentioned above.

## WHAT ENGLISH SPECIALISTS LEARNED FROM MODERN LANGUAGES

An analysis of the English student teachers’ responses to the first part of the questionnaire reveals what they have learned from working with their modern languages peers.

Many of the English student teachers found it valuable to experience the way in which modern languages specialists tend to deconstruct language and language learning tasks. They

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