

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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comment on the technical and practical approach to language of their modern languages counterparts, for example: "The modern languages student I worked with took a very pragmatic approach to getting pupils to access language whereas I tend to get bogged down with poetic devices". One English student teacher comments favourably on her partner's more confident approach to grammar, saying: "I tend to fear teaching grammar and sentence structure in terms of metalanguage – modern languages teachers have a much better technical working knowledge of language".

Several English student teachers responded positively to hearing their modern languages colleagues reading poems aloud and reflected on how it helped them appreciate sound patterns and rhythms in the less familiar language. One of them commented that "speaking aloud and pronunciation are important in conveying meaning".

A number of the English student teachers believed they had learned new teaching strategies from their modern languages partners. They mentioned the use of visual support, 'guessing' strategies, word games, listening strategies and active learning ideas which could be incorporated into English teaching.

There is also evidence of a development of a different, perhaps more 'multilingual' perspective among English student teachers. One of them saw value in "learning that there are not direct translations for certain words", and another commented "the modern languages approach altered my own reasoning behind the initial appraisal of the poem". Finally many of the English specialists commented on this practical exercise resulting in their better understanding of the language needs of learners, including (but not exclusively) those of learners with English as an additional language.

WHAT MODERN LANGUAGES SPECIALISTS LEARNED FROM ENGLISH

One of the most noticeable outcomes of this collaboration reported by the modern languages student teachers was what they learned about working with whole text. One of them said that the experience "makes you step back and look at the overall meaning and at techniques used to convey the meaning". Another described how it helped her to "start with the bigger picture". It is clear from most of the data that the collaboration with English moved them on in working at text level. An example is the student teacher who reported "the English student ... helped me to find more activities at the text level". Some of them compared this with their more usual focus, for example: "I worked more at text level (overall meaning) rather than just focused on words". Another reported: "It has given me a different perspective and food for thought. English teachers focused on the whole

poem and we MFL teachers look more on a language level to aid comprehension". Although text level work had been included in the modern languages subject sessions on the PGCE course, the insights gained from collaboration with English specialists gave them a more tangible understanding of the practice of working with whole text. It enabled them to see how it is sometimes preferable to start with global understandings and then select and analyse words, sentences and phrases in relation to this, rather than the other way around.

In working with the meanings in the poems, modern languages student teachers were particularly struck by the sensual impact of the texts studied. This exploration beyond the purely verbal information contained in the text stimulated much comment. Many of them mentioned the visual and emotional impact of the poems they were studying, for example: "Some of the English ideas could be applied to modern languages teaching, for instance, looking at the whole poem and thinking of the pictorial images and feelings that these portray". Another talked of the contribution of the sounds of the poem, saying she was "learning to rely on sound patterning when examining poetry in a different language". Poetic devices used to achieve this sensual and emotional impact are also mentioned in much of the data, for example metaphor and onomatopoeia. These devices are not usually given a great deal of attention in modern languages. If language learning can appeal to the emotions and senses in this way, it is sure to engage both learners and teachers at a more personal level, as Arnold (1999: 2) says: "stimulating the different positive emotional factors ... can greatly facilitate the language learning process".

Working with poetry necessitates exploring the relationship between reader and text. A previous article (Burley and Pomphrey, 2002) noted how modern languages student teachers showed a tendency to look for a given and unambiguous meaning within a text, while English student teachers expected to bring their background and experience to the task of constructing their own meanings from text. This collaborative exercise gave the modern languages student teachers an opportunity to interpret text more freely, as shown by the following comment: "It was good to share ideas about our different visions of our poems. It allowed us to have several interpretations".

Many of the modern languages student teachers were heartened to find within this exercise possibilities for increasing the intellectual stimulation of modern languages lessons. The words "thought provoking", "stimulating" and "inspiring" occur throughout the data. One student teacher reported, "I now see modern languages on a different level", and another commented, "It made me realise how we could achieve aims such as 'purposeful context' or cultural awareness in a language lesson." The possibilities of conveying complex ideas and

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emotions via sometimes very simple words appealed to many of them; “I tend to look for simple meaning, which makes my lesson maybe less attractive, when what I need is simpler words”. There have been many recent calls to increase the intellectual demand of modern languages, such as Coyle (1999) and Grenfell (2000). Both argue that the transactional content of many modern languages lessons frequently fails to present sufficient cognitive challenge to pupils. Just as pupils can be demoralised by treating topics which do not provide sufficient intellectual stimulus, so too can teachers and student teachers. After the session, some of the modern languages specialists said informally that the session had restored their commitment to the subject by providing a way of increasing the enjoyment and intellectual challenge of the subject.

Like the English student teachers, the modern languages group felt that they had gained access to some new teaching strategies as a result of their collaboration. These were usually much appreciated, as in the case of the student teacher who said, “I came to the conclusion that a MFL teacher can pick up ideas from English ... – and teaching MFL requires a lot of tactics”. It was particularly striking how positive they were about these new strategies, as in the example of the student teacher commenting that her English partner had, “an excellent idea to do a storyboard illustration”.

USE OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE

One topic of discussion for the modern languages student teachers following this session was the use of the target language. Although many of the language-focused tasks were planned for target language use by pupils, the more reflective responses required for interpretation of whole-text meaning could be very challenging for most Year 9 pupils to conduct in the target language. Reflection on the breadth and depth of potential meanings in the poems would need to take place in the L1 for learners at an early stage of L2 learning. Without the use of the L1, or at least of code-switching between the L1 and L2 (as proposed by Macaro, 2001), learner responses to the text could be reduced to multiple choice ‘given’ opinions which inhibit a more personal interaction with the L2 text. Many researchers and writers on modern languages methodology are now reviewing previous hard-line approaches to use of the target language in modern languages classes (see Macaro, 1997, 2001; Grenfell, 2000). The arguments that for earlier stage L2 learners the L1 is the language of thought (Cohen, 1998) and the language of identity (Phillipson, 1992) are relevant here. If learners are to be encouraged to develop personal responses to poems in the L2 they need to feel free to resort to the L1 to express these thoughts and feelings. While this may imply a loss of opportunity for target language production by the learner for the duration of the reflective part of

the lesson, this is balanced by the opportunity to interact at a deeper level with the personal voice of an authentic writer of the target language.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

When asked about the effect of the collaborative work on views of their subject, many student teachers showed a shift in perspective. For most of them this involved broadening their understanding of the subject. One example is the English student teacher who wrote: “I had viewed English much more as a text level subject before. These lessons have shown how important language is at word and sentence level”. Another member of the English group stated how it helped her to “realise that I am teaching English as a language”. Many of the modern languages student teachers also talk of a broadening of their perspective, saying, for example, that this collaboration has led to “an appreciation of language as a whole”. One of the modern languages group commented, “I have acquired a much more profound and broader idea of language teaching”, and another reported “It also helped me to keep in mind that learning languages is not just about learning structures and words, but about conveying meaning”. Such evidence suggests that in gaining further understanding about each other’s curriculum, the English student teachers seem to have moved towards a greater focus on formal structure in language while the modern languages specialists have been able to consider the place of context and meaning in the study of language.

CONCLUSION

It is very apparent from the data discussed in this article that the collaborative planning exercise has enhanced these student teachers’ professional understanding and practice. It is hard to prove, but it is highly likely that the outcome of this particular session would not have been so overwhelmingly positive without the earlier sessions on language education. These earlier sessions (as described in Burley and Pomphrey, 2002) set up habits of cross-subject dialogue, broke down some of the barriers and preconceptions inhibiting communication between the two groups and challenged narrow thinking about language and language teaching. Other attempts to bring these two subjects together have often focused more narrowly on the teaching and learning of grammar (e.g. Turner and Turvey, 2002). It is sometimes assumed that the main purpose of such collaboration should be in order for English teachers to teach grammatical concepts which can be built upon in modern languages lessons. An event organised in February 1999 by the QCA aimed at considering commonalities between the two subject areas was significantly titled “The teaching of grammar in English and modern foreign languages.”

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Collaboration of the kind described in this paper has had an effect on the participants which goes beyond issues related to grammar. As one of the modern languages group said, "It made me realise how English and MFL are in fact related and the fact that it is really important for the two departments to be involved in meetings and discussions". The collaborative work has deepened professional understandings, stimulated new perspectives on the subjects involved and provided new teaching strategies for each subject. It has created a broader understanding of the professional roles and responsibilities of the language teacher in each subject area. This claim clearly needs further investigation and the next step with this project is to begin tracking some 'case studies' through the PGCE year and into the first year of teaching to consider in greater depth the effects of the collaboration. The hope is that this broader perspective will encourage teachers who are capable of being critical, autonomous language teaching professionals with a sound understanding of principles related to all aspects of language education. As Brumfit says, "Ultimately we have to see teachers as contributors ... to the creation of language learning theory" (Brumfit 2001: 165). What is most rewarding is the obvious enthusiasm generated by this collaborative activity. As one participant said, "you improve and develop ideas together. I love our ideas".

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