

Subject knowledge skills audit and update

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When I started in this post and was trying very hard to familiarise myself with all the statutory and institutional requirements, I was quite convinced that the 'initial audit' carried out in the other PGCE routes was a mere formality in MFL. As the other PGCE routes at LJMU are PE, Science, Design and Technology and Art and Design, it is very straightforward to see how the degree subject and National Curriculum requirements may not be a perfect match; a graduate in Biology needs to audit his/her skills in Physics, Chemistry and Earth Science, and assess how he/she will develop or enhance knowledge in order to be able to teach science across Key Stages 3 and 4. A graduate in languages, however, is presumed de facto to be a linguist and various strategies employed at interview should indicate fluency, accuracy, accent, range, etc. So, surely subject knowledge is not a major concern for MFL trainees?

At first, five or six years ago, in order to comply with what the institution (and Ofsted) wanted, I devised an initial audit pro forma, based on the four skill areas. I asked the trainees to assess their own performance in listening, speaking, reading and writing in all their languages, degree level, subsidiary, A level etc, and to identify strengths and areas for development in each. I also asked them to devise strategies for developing and maintaining language skills.

As an adjunct to this and, as the size on the PGCE MFL cohort grew, I was able to timetable language specific sessions for the trainees. I am lucky enough to be managing my one-woman PGCE course from within the School of

Languages at LJMU with access to a wide range of staff and facilities, so I have been able to reach a point where now trainees are able to attend post-degree French, post degree Spanish, post-degree German, post-boosted course French and beginners' Spanish, as well as English as second or other (ESOL) Language.

These sessions, with the exception of ESOL, start out as very much grammar based, and gradually move towards the presentation of language in a classroom context – micro-teaching. Different languages, different levels and the ability to respond to the language needs of the trainees in relation to their teaching performance offer great opportunities to our trainees.

As well as supporting the trainees, language specific sessions reveal a much broader picture of the trainees' language skills and indeed of their deficiencies. I have steadily moved towards the inescapable conclusion that initial audits followed by self-selected improvement and development strategies do not necessarily go far enough in addressing trainee subject knowledge.

Over the last three years I have extended the initial audit to include a weekly skills update which is a required element within the school file. The pro forma is very simple, essentially 'what I have done this week', but there is space for the mentor's signature and for targets. From the outset, some trainees have made impressive use of this and most have been diligent in completing it. In order to tighten up the process, I have made it the focus of mentor development sessions. Mentors know that it is

part of the weekly routine and trainees know that it is part of the documentation to produce at the weekly meeting. In addition, mentors are becoming aware of the use of the 'target' section where they can identify language specific issues which have arisen in class when trainees are being observed. Trainees can be advised to put in more time speaking with the FLA, listening to native speakers, or it can be suggested that they tackle AS or A level past papers, for example. It's a useful way of addressing a difficult area; either the general feedback tends to focus on classroom management and teaching strategies or the mentor is reluctant to make what feels like a very personal observation about the trainee's subject knowledge. The weekly skills update is a university requirement which focuses on a very specific area, so both mentor and trainee can feel more comfortable with the dialogue.

While initially ambivalent regarding the relevance of audits to MFL trainees, I have never doubted the need for our trainees to enhance and develop subject knowledge. They need certainty and accuracy, and shortcomings are very starkly revealed in the classroom. I hope that the systems in place are helping to extend and support trainee subject knowledge, although I am sure that there are many improvements and adjustments still to be made. The main achievement will be if all MFL trainees see the award of QTS as being the beginning of their career as a linguist as well as a teacher.