

How to...

engage students through culture

Photo credit: Tom Gill



Biography

Natascia Servini

Natascia Servini (Twitter: @MissServini) has been head of languages at Sarah Bonnell School in East London since September 2015. She leads a dynamic department which offers French, Italian, Spanish, German, Urdu and Arabic as well as offering students the opportunity to gain qualifications in the many home languages spoken in the diverse, multicultural community. Prior to this she worked as Lead Teacher of MFL in Delamere School at Stationers' Crown Woods Academy in South-East London. She was awarded the ALL/Routes into Languages Secondary Language Teacher of the Year Award in March 2015 for her work in reviving languages in her inner London school and sharing good practice and resources with fellow practitioners.

Natascia Servini, our 2015 Secondary Language Teacher of the Year, shares her ideas on attracting the attention of even the most reluctant language learners

We've all had the conversation that makes any language teacher despair: "Why do I need to learn (insert any language other than English) anyway? I'm never going to go to (insert any country outside the UK) anyway."

Undoubtedly you will have been ready with your ammunition of well-versed reasons as to why learning a language is a worthwhile endeavour. But how do we engage those students who have never crossed the channel or been on a plane? How do we show them that learning a language is relevant to them?

Yes, we must do all we can to make our lessons engaging, accessible and take all opportunities to 'sell' our subject, but I also believe that through a greater emphasis on cultural understanding and tolerance we can make our modern foreign languages a little less... foreign. Not only is this an important new requirement of the new National Curriculum and new GCSE specifications, it inspires curiosity and you will be bombarded with questions and opinions even from your most reluctant language learners.

So how can we go about this? Here are a few practical ideas to get you started.

1 Discussing current affairs and controversial topics

Debating in a foreign language is a huge challenge for our students at Key Stages

3 and 4, but we can encourage them to express their points of view – it can be done if structured in a way that they can access. Here are a few ideas:

- **Show a statement on the board:** Pupils have to translate the statement and show if they agree or disagree by showing red or green cards or thumbs up or down. Give pupils a list of responses they can use to justify their answer – for example: "it's not fair".
- **Create an opinion line:** Show a statement on the board and ask pupils to line themselves up according to how much they agree or disagree with the statement.
- **Show pupils a series of images:** Ask them how they make them feel afterwards. To really stretch students, you could ask them to create a question they would like to ask, inspired by the image.
- **Allow pupils to debate freely in English (when you feel it is appropriate):** They may not be using target language but if they are enjoying the topic and are curious about it, it will engage them for future lessons.

2 Homework projects

Tired of receiving 30 paragraphs typed up with the suspicious grey shadow behind the text, a telltale sign of Google Translate? Why not set a cultural project as homework? Research shows that pupils who have some choice over their homework



are more likely to complete it – so let them choose what they want to research. This is of course a great opportunity for you to get to know your students better. Pupils could then present it to the class, which creates a sense of responsibility and accountability. The presentation can be peer-assessed (no marking – hooray!) and then the class can vote on their favourite – you can then plan a follow up lesson to explore the issues raised further.

3 Use names, places and cultural references wherever possible

This will require little extra planning, but is absolutely vital: I have been asked by pupils what Bologna, Pascal and Etienne mean, and if our pupils don't know anyone from your target language country or have never been there, we can't expect them to know. Fill your classroom with maps and images of a contemporary vision of your target language country – please don't let them think that the images they see in their textbooks are a reflection of what that nation really is! If you're not feeling creative, Pinterest and Twinkl have lots of ready-made displays, and tourist boards will send you maps, posters and brochures in the post for free. YouTube is full of videos made by children from all over the world for school projects and there you will find numerous

sources of children the same age as the pupils you teach, talking about their country and culture. Play music when pupils are doing a quiet or writing activity: tunein.com is a free online world radio station, and is even better than playing YouTube videos as they have to listen to target language adverts and news.

I hope that these ideas will trigger further inspiration within the classroom. The following mantra will undoubtedly be repeated over and over again in the course of the next few years: "(we must) develop awareness and understanding of the culture and identity of the countries and communities where the language is spoken" (from the DfE GCSE subject content and assessment objectives: <http://tiny.cc/GCSEObjectives>) – so let's not allow it to become a burden, but a challenge that we and our pupils embrace.

Let's show our pupils that not only do language lessons teach you to read, write, listen and speak in another language but provide "liberation from insularity and an opening to other cultures... A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' curiosity and deepen their understanding of the world." (DfE National curriculum in England: languages programme of study: <http://tiny.cc/LangPoS>).

Above Encouraging the pupils to debate in a foreign language can be implemented in several ways **Below** Many tourist boards will send maps, posters and other items for free, ideal for use in the classroom



For more information about this year's Teacher Award winners, go to page 26

"Fill your classroom with maps and images of a contemporary vision of your target language country"