

Bringing life into language learning

Encouraging take-up of languages at GCSE is often a challenge. **Tina Rice** explains how a flexible and relevant approach to learning has brought languages to life at Linton Village College in Cambridgeshire

The inspiration behind Language Futures at Linton Village College came from our deputy principal. Although she isn't a language teacher herself, she has always been fascinated with the educational dilemma that faces our country: why is it that our students find language learning so difficult and are so often disengaged with languages when our continental counterparts are able to become so fluent and are often highly motivated?

Over a number of years, she came to the conclusion that it had to do with two issues which are fundamentally important to how language is acquired by learners: the need for relevance in language learning, and the need for immersion. She realised that the constraints of the curriculum, both in the structure of the timetable and in the limit to specialist language teachers, rendered it difficult to teach language in a way that is naturally learnt.

This has led to a best fit model of language teaching, and our MFL colleagues do a tremendous job. However, our question was this: can we transform the whole structure and pedagogy of language learning in order to engage our learners, and develop their language learning skills so they become confident and independent learners of language?

Language teaching in our schools is superb. The problem we have is motivating pupils to learn a language, so we need to address existing apathy and rise to the challenge of bringing languages to life and making them relevant. Unfortunately, everything our young people are interested in – games, music, TV, films – is in English and easily accessible to them. In the Netherlands and Belgium, it's different because pupils there need to be bilingual to keep up with the times.

At Linton, we decided to look around for alternative learning styles with the aim of finding a way to re-engage pupils in languages. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation's Musical Futures model, based on relevance, co-construction, blurring in/out of school learning contexts and changing the learner/teacher relationship, struck us as particularly innovative and we made the decision to see if and how it might be adapted to language teaching at our college.

Four years ago, with funding from the Foundation, we embarked on a three-year pilot programme of Languages Futures for Year 8. It was quite scary because although we had the outline of the Paul Hamlyn technique we knew we would have to invent a lot of content as we went along. Fortunately we had the help of a languages consultant, who helped us develop clear schemes of work.

To date the college had only been able to offer two languages – Spanish and French – because of timetable

constraints and the specialisms of our language teachers. Pupils study French in Year 7, take on Spanish in Year 8 and choose their options for GCSE in Year 9.

What we have introduced with Language Futures is a personalisation of the curriculum where in Year 8 some of our pupils are given a choice of which language they would like to learn – a language which is relevant to them. This year, our fourth, we offered the project to 30 mixed ability Y8s and they decided to learn Spanish, Italian, Mandarin and Russian.

So this is a new pedagogical approach to language learning, which engages and motivates learners because they learn through a language of their choice. One of our pupils, for example, wanted to speak with his grandfather in China over Skype. It was a huge motivation to learn Mandarin, and he achieved his goal.

Total immersion

Language Futures is based on a much more independent way of learning languages than the traditional model. Pupils become enquiry-led learners. We give them clear learning objectives, set them a task and then ask them to become language detectives – for example we might ask them to investigate the present tense in their language. The latest software, digital media and technology, including iPads and apps, backed up by dictionaries, grammar books, etc are all at their disposal. It's a creative, engaging and interactive approach to learning.

French is used as the model language, so the pupils start by discovering whether or not their language has any similarities. We then ask them, together with their peers – they never work in isolation – to feed back to the class how the present tense is formed. In this way we become a multi-cultural lesson.

We also try hard to give a cultural context to the language learning, for example by taking over the food technology department for a lesson, getting pupils to choose a recipe in their language, cook it and then share it with the rest of the class. So, learning is a far cry from the traditional classroom lesson and going home with homework.

Pupils learn to immerse themselves in the whole language and its culture both at home and at school, thus resolving the potential constraints of a traditional curriculum. Blurring the in/out of school boundaries is key and we've done that by recruiting volunteers from the community, through press releases and posters, to become mentors in Languages Futures.

Our mentors are either native speakers or specialists of the languages pupils have chosen. We train them and

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offer ongoing support through emails, phone calls and regular workshops. At the beginning of the year they come into the school and make a presentation about the country/countries their language is spoken in. After that they come in for two or three lessons a fortnight, run lunchtime clubs for the pupils and work alongside them, helping with their pronunciation, grammar, etc.

We currently have 10 mentors, although two of these are utilised for mainstream French. The challenge for a rural college like Linton, however, is both to find enough mentors in the community and to keep them because issues like lack of public transport can be problematic. But there are advantages for those who join the programme because many of them are quite isolated, and this has been a way to create new friendships and links with the community.

And there are many advantages for us, too. We are now looking at setting up a reading scheme in the school where we bring in mentors to listen to and encourage the pupils in their reading, so Languages Futures has challenged us to look at the resources we have in our community.

Parental involvement

Since immersion in the chosen language is key to promoting this independent and self-access style of learning, it's vital to get parents on board from the beginning of the project. A letter is sent home explaining that Languages Futures will be presented to Year 7 in an assembly and followed up with an open evening for parents, including a Q&A session.

The next step is for the pupils to fill in an application form, explaining their motivation for learning their chosen language. Then there's a meeting with the languages department to discuss with their teachers whether it would be an appropriate course for them to take. They have to be willing to be independent learners, so it isn't for everyone.

Having said that, we have had a pupil with quite severe dyslexia in the Languages Futures programme who made a real success of it. It did wonders for his confidence, realising that he could do something on his own.

For me this is one of the great rewards of the project – seeing young people grow in confidence. When we first tell them they have to make a presentation in their chosen language, they panic, but once they've done it the sense of achievement is enormous. So, the techniques used in the programme teach wide learning skills that can be used throughout life.

Next, parents and pupils are asked to fill in an 'immersion chart', confirming whether they have switched their mobile, Xbox, sat nav, etc to the language and whether they are watching films and listening to music in it.

The results have been very positive. Many parents have become involved in the project themselves, sometimes choosing to learn the language alongside

A radical transformation

Vivien Corrie-Wing, deputy principal of Linton Village College

'I think Language Futures is phenomenally important for the life of language learning across the country. Everybody knows that the traditional ways of learning mean that we in the UK are among the worst across the world in learning languages. I put that down to the constraints of the timetable, the specialists we have and a lack of motivation because English is an international language.

'So we need to look closely at doing things differently. Languages Futures is not a tweak but a radical transformation of the way in which children learn. We are really taking the way we understand language is learnt - and the science of that - and applying new principles to learning.

'Unless we achieve a transformation we will continue to struggle with children in our country learning languages, and have to deal with the issues this raise. In many schools, for example – although not our own – language classes are often where there are behavioural issues due to lack of engagement.

'The way ahead for Languages Futures depends on funding and advocating bodies if it is really to become a new way of learning. But at Linton we are committed to carrying on with it, developing the techniques and using them across other mainstream subjects.'

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their children. We meet with them regularly and keep them informed of the evaluation process and its results.

We are developing our own assessment strategies using the KS3 National Curriculum levels, and at the end of the year pupils receive a Languages Futures Certificate with an overall National Curriculum grade.

Learning to learn is a wider goal of the project, and we have seen Languages Futures pupils become more independent learners. We have also witnessed an increase in uptake in languages in KS4 with many Spanish pupils continuing onto GCSE. Even those who haven't continued Spanish have opted to continue with their French because they've realised the value of language learning.

At the end of the day we want our pupils to realise that the skills they have learned in Languages Futures are transferable, so if one day they are working in banking, for example, they will believe it is perfectly possible to learn Mandarin or another relevant language.

Moving on

Since September 2011, we have been working with two new field trial centres: Castle Manor in Haverhill, Suffolk and Swavesey Village College in Swavesey, Cambridgeshire. More recently we have been joined by Gladesmore Community School – a multi-cultural school in Tottenham, North London, who are keen to encourage students' independent learning of their home language, including Polish, Hebrew and a variety of Asian languages. On Friday 3 May, Gladesmore will be hosting a Language Futures conference which is open to all interested parties.

If we can get funding for the future, we hope to share good practice with other schools and institutions, as well as designing and developing resources to be shared with schools nationally.