

Weird In a good way.

An Open Letter to trainee Languages teachers about to progress to being NQTs in September and to NQTs approaching the end of their year.

from Steven Fawkes . Membership Officer of ALL.



Language, languages and international culture have never been more important to our country .

Far from being ‘just a subject you do for a while at school’ learning a new language, any new language, is literally life-enhancing! It can have important beneficial effects on your brain; it can introduce you to a whole new world of sporting, cookery and cultural activity online (or in the flesh when times permit); it can put you in contact with people you would never otherwise meet who become friends for life, as is my case personally; it can help you understand your own language and discover new ideas about lifestyles, and it can of course have a great impact on your job opportunities.

At the moment Little Britain has become even ‘littler’ than usual as our horizons are limited by the very sensible constraints imposed by Governments, but there is still a world out there with beautiful things to see, places to go - even if virtually – performances and exhibitions to be inspired by, and people .. ! People are individual, clever, amusing, provocative, informative and downright weird, of course, not only here at home, but all over the world, and their antics in video (e.g. with funny cats) are no less funny because they are speaking another language! That is especially clear In an Olympics year (a very long Olympics year this time around).

As Language teachers we (you!) have a complex job to do because we are encouraging people (of all ages) not only to learn (vocabulary, sounds, grammar etc.) but also to use what they learn - straight away - in a live performance – in writing and speech – in another language! When it goes well it is a hugely positive experience which boosts everyone’s confidence and self-image! We (you!) are the people carrying that torch! But the process of motivation and inspiration (of learners) means that Language teachers need ongoing communication with each other – to keep our own flame alive!

You are currently having a very weird time, one that nobody else has had in living memory, if ever, and you may have been deprived of some professional experiences which others in your position would ‘normally’ have under their belt... By contrast you have also coped, one way or another, with that same unprecedented context, and have developed other skills in that process. Part of the experience has undoubtedly been the group of people you have been with – tutors, fellow trainees, mentors, colleagues and pupils – either in real, or in virtual life – and many of them are undoubtedly also weird, or provocative, or supportive, or imaginative or ... human, in short.

That feeling of entourage, of being in a team, is precious in supporting us as professionals and maintaining our connection with the importance of Languages, and it is something I encourage you to hang on to. You may not have the same familiar contacts as you move forward in your career, but there are others you haven’t yet met,

and many of them keep in touch through the Association for Language Learning, **our** Association for Language Learning (ALL).

Do remember as you proceed that ALL is a charity that supports language learning particularly through teaching and through teachers, by bringing them together – either through ALL publications, newsletters, magazines or webpages, or at events (real and virtual) . We need each other! Don't allow yourself to get professionally isolated when you lose the community of trainees /tutors and mentors you have been supported by.

ALL has local groups (listed on the website) which are continuing to try to support teachers in the regions also. In the North-East I chair the ALLNE Branch and have a mailing list through which updates, announcements of events and competitions and occasional special offers are circulated. The same happens in other areas, so find out if you have a group. If you haven't, maybe you can talk to a colleague about creating one, and joining in with a Language family you don't yet know around the country ?

@StevenFawkes on Twitter

PS I am permitting myself to write because, in normal times, I would meet quite a lot of you at events during your training or NQT year, which have largely been cancelled this year.

If I have not met you yet, I do look forward to doing so, and I attach an article so you can get to know me a bit in advance ☺ It was written for PIXL who gave me the title and permission to share it. I have had great times working with language learners and teachers, and I wish the same for you .

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Making languages magical

Steven Fawkes, ALL

This personal piece was written for the PIXL Languages Conference 2019 - to a theme they requested - and is reproduced here by kind agreement.

PIXL is a partnership of over 1,600 secondary schools, 500 sixth forms, 830 primary schools and 75 providers of alternative education. <https://www.pixl.org.uk/>

Get your motor running, head out on the highway,

Looking for adventure

And whatever comes our way.

Steppenwolf's lyrics from 1969 still bring with them energy and drive fifty years later. Although we are not all '*born to be wild*' we do like a bit of adventure, and happily for us, language teachers are permitted, even required, to provide it. Where else do we find words with the same potential for excitement as those above?

*'Learning a foreign language is a **liberation** from insularity and provides an **opening** to other cultures. A high-quality languages education should foster pupils' **curiosity** and deepen their **understanding of the world**. The teaching should **enable** pupils to **express** their ideas and thoughts in another language and to understand and*

*respond to its speakers, both in speech and in writing. It should also provide **opportunities** for them to communicate for practical purposes, learn **new ways of thinking** and read great literature in the original language. Language teaching should provide the foundation for learning further languages, **equipping** pupils to study and work in other countries.'* (1 : NC PoS)

This is our **purpose of study**, enshrined in our National Curriculum Programme of Study (PoS). It empowers us and our learners to take on the role of Easy Riders travelling into the excitement and challenge of new languages, new cultures and new relationships through the teaching and learning that we plan. It does not (unlike most other subjects) prescribe the topics we should teach – so the world is our linguistic oyster and *whatever comes our way* can be the hook for acquiring and exploring the elements of language we want to convey:

Scheme of work: the world, and the people and experiences in it.

Of course, in the 2020 world of performance measurement, there comes a time when we need to focus our learners' attention on the specifics of examinations as well, but our first imperative must be to motivate them, to intrigue them and to bring them into our world, where language is used for more than getting things right, where exploring new cultures brings insights into our own culture and into ourselves, and where personal development is as much part of our aims as is mastery of specific knowledge. Making motivation on a regular basis feels like a magical feat to me!

And what is the key motivating element in the Language classroom? It is surely YOU – the teacher - who orchestrate the learning activity and plan the experience learners will have, who select the resources and the interactions that go with them, who offer the feedback and celebrate the progression. You can, and are encouraged to, conjure up learning games, images, video clips, texts, songs, online quizzes to disguise some of the hard work, and keep attention and motivation going.

So - what do you like? What drew you into the language you teach? Culture? Humour? Music? History? People? Grammar? The sound of the language? Literature? The places you have been or want to go? If it motivates you, there is every chance it will interest some of your learners too, or at least introduce them to a field of exploring the world that they were not familiar with. To make it personal for them, we sometimes have to (take precautions and) talk about things that are personal to us too. People are interested in other people: when we ask our learners questions about their lives, as we do very often, we maybe need to give something back about ours (... or about our fictional lives anyway.)

Language is, in itself, a magical thing, allowing people to communicate, tell stories, build relationships, transact necessary exchanges, as well as to puzzle, move, excite and annoy others, to build bridges or to tear them down, to amuse, entertain or inform. Learners need models of how this happens – probably in any language - but certainly in a new language they are just picking up. And language teachers are just the people to model how to do that magic: we use our arcane skills not only to convey understanding of how the language works and how to build up a body of vocabulary, but also to get individuals in our classes to interact with us and each other - through a language they may be only just beginning to learn. As Language teachers we support learners certainly in understanding, memorizing, reproducing and manipulating language but we can also add that individual sparkle of developing interpersonal skills – the awareness all human beings need of how they want to present themselves to each other, what effect is made by choosing certain behaviours or words, and how to be social beings.

On the Venn diagram of what schoolteachers do, which other areas of the curriculum have such a personal dimension? Where else do we ask children, adults or teenagers to overcome embarrassment and reluctance on a daily basis, to have a go at integrating their ideas with the challenge of expressing themselves in another code they don't yet know perfectly - with a whole new system of spelling, grammar and sound? Other teachers focus on aspects of these challenges, but not all at the same time.

The ingredients of the spell we cast in our lessons include our learners'

Knowledge + Memory + Individuality + Performance skills + Interaction strategies

and our own

Choice of stimulus + Design of learning activity + Sense of progression

+ Skills in maintaining relationships + Narrative

to get them to produce or understand something that they may well not have 'learnt' before, something they want to say or to write, something which can have an effect on the world around them.

ALLNE has been running an annual writing competition for the European Day of Languages for many years now, and when I wrote this we were in the middle of judging the thousands of 2019 contributions (on the theme 'A magical trip' as it happens – Steppenwolf get everywhere!) What comes through every year, and really excites the judges (all volunteer Language teachers giving their time willingly) is the effort children and teenagers make to be distinctive in their creations – striving to make themselves stand out, and often overreaching what they have acquired linguistically as they attempt wit or poetry or thoughtfulness; in other words as they rise to the challenge of expressing their personalities in a new way.

These attempts are the jewels that give sparkle to our day: learners trying to delight us with their language. They may not appear very frequently, but we can entice them to do so, by building in the sorts of learning activities that encourage them more. We could plan regular slots for experimentation (*alchemy* in my magical metaphor) - time-constrained, unthreatening and with the clear criterion that we are at that moment valuing self-expression. These could be 'games' which encourage the sort of spontaneous speaking we see in the PoS; reading, or listening to, texts for reasons other than extracting their meaning; writing activities that value style and narrative skill more than accuracy (for the time being). This may be where, as Ofsted writes:

'... pupils embed and use knowledge fluently and develop their understanding, and not simply memorise disconnected facts.' (Ofsted EIF para. 181)

Stories, in the broadest sense, are brilliant resources in the Language classroom; the teacher can narrate anecdotes on the (fictitious or true) personal themes mentioned above, at the same time recycling language the learners should remember, building in questions and opportunities for speculation and recall, and weaving a rich and engaging linguistic experience.

We can also borrow the nature of a story to track, or outline, learners' progression – recounting the things we have learnt to do during the course of the past half-term and looking forward to the great things we have ahead of us. We put on our Advertising Agent hat to accentuate the positive of what we will be learning to do, ideally with a clear motivational outcome: 'After the holidays we are going to be learning how to build up a story text, because we'll be producing a class magazine to sell (and/or recounting your best stories) at Parents' evening'. This can lead the learners into suggesting content for the lessons themselves –

'What will we need to learn? What do we already know about?'

'A story needs characters, descriptions, events, conversations...'

which will very probably be what you have already planned anyway (work on vocabulary, adjectives, verbs and dialogues.) The trick though is in making the story more of an exciting achievement, than a list of grammatical and linguistic items to cover.

What is the best story you can tell your learners at the start of a term about what they will be experiencing, and able to do by the end? Or when they move from one sector to another?

Our new Ofsted Inspection Framework is returning the spotlight to the curriculum, to the richness of the learning experience, and to the work schools undertake to give their learners (whatever their background) the ambition and aspiration to increase their cultural capital and develop in their school days the attitudes that will bring them a satisfying adult life.

To my mind, this is where the magic resides.

As Language teachers we can convey these positive messages about personal efficacy in our daily practice implementing the spirit of the curriculum: we can stir up curiosity around carefully selected authentic resources, create the need for communication through what seem to be games, develop growing confidence through the learning steps we know about, rehearse communicative strategies, offer challenges to cultural and social stereotypes and spot the potential for moments of creativity.

Language teachers can transform learners' attitudes and expectations and make a huge, often unrecognized, contribution to the whole school, which we need to celebrate.

And what is the key magical element for the individual teacher of Languages?

As well as the generic competences outlined in the Teachers' Standards we know and love, as Language teachers we need an almighty dose of our own curiosity about life and other people, our own motivation and enthusiasm, our own willingness to *look for adventure* in some shape or form, and enjoy *whatever comes our way* in the unpredictable, often stressful scenario of the Language classroom, as well as in the outside world. And that is why Language teachers need each other, need opportunities to get together, to remind each other what it is we are about and to *get our motor running*.

We need to keep the magic in our lives to keep the magic in our lessons.

1 : National Curriculum Programme of Study for MFL <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-languages-programmes-of-study/national-curriculum-in-england-languages-programmes-of-study>

2 : Ofsted Education Inspection Framework

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-eif>

3: European Day of Languages competition

<https://www.all-languages.org.uk/news/all-ne-european-day-of-languages-competition/>