

## Not just words – cultural artefacts for learning

### Camilla Smith and student teachers

The Languages PGCE at UCL IoE offers an enhancement for some Student Teachers (STs) to develop expertise in learning to teach pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) alongside their developing understanding of, and practice as, teachers of Languages other than English. These students may be unable to offer a second, 'mainstream' language, or have experience and/or a particular interest in the area. On 6<sup>th</sup> June 2023, a group of 19 of these STs, accompanied by Camilla Smith (PGCE Languages Subject Lead and EAL Enhancement Tutor) and Caroline Conlon (Director of Partnerships and Professional Development, NCLE) visited the 'Not Just Words' exhibition at the UCL Art Gallery

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/european-languages-culture/language-and-culture-show-and-tell>

The group consisted of a variety of language specialists (Mandarin, French, Spanish, German, Portuguese, Italian) and many of the group were native speakers of at least one of these languages, as well as English.

**The Languages PGCE team at UCL IoE believes that culture and language are inextricably linked**, and we work with our diverse ST cohort to develop their own intercultural competence, as well as encouraging them to do so with their own learners.



One of the ways in which we encourage our STs to understand the value of cultural artefacts in Languages teaching and learning is by practising a 'microteach' with their peers. We ask them to choose an artefact from one of London's many galleries and museums (while recognising the geopolitical issues the collections present), or one they may already own, to use as a stimulus for a teaching sequence which could be adapted for their school context. It was therefore very exciting to see that the languages departments (SELCS, SSEES, CLIE) at UCL, together with expert curators and colleagues at the Art Museum, had curated an exhibition along these very lines.

We went to find out about it, and Camilla asked the STs to record how it made them feel (emotional response being an important and often overlooked factor in the learning of languages and culture) about their own identity, about themselves as linguists, and how the experience might contribute to their developing philosophy of Languages teaching and learning. They were also asked to think about how they may use or adapt what they had experienced in the exhibition in the context of teaching EAL.

The reflections were unanimously positive. Many of the STs said the exhibition had strengthened their own excitement and passion for languages and cultures, while giving them a new perspective on their complex identities. Natasja reflected that she felt *“motivated and inspired – makes me want to learn more languages!”*. It also helped to remind her that *“we are not isolated! Culture and languages all influence each other – we learn more about ourselves by learning about others, their cultures and their languages”*.

It consolidated their belief that art and artefacts, history, geography, symbols and other elements of culture can be an inspiring and motivating way into language learning, whether EAL or another language. It was clear to them that this type of cultural instruction, where culture is prominent and language is secondary, can be truly inspiring even to beginning learners. Fran said about one of the exhibits how impressed she was to see that, *“the sheet used culture to introduce language and build for progression.”*

Much was made of how teaching languages through culture can develop intercultural perspectives. As Elizabeth said, *“In relation to learners with EAL, trying to find similarities and differences between their own and the target culture can be stimulating and spark interest.”* Mel recognised that *“all students have a mix of interests and prior exposure to other cultures’ history and societal values. We can address these differences in our use of art and objects to bring the new language to life.”* Pui Ying Wong had her position confirmed: *“If you want to learn a language to a higher level, you have to learn deeper and further – we do need to know about the culture behind the languages. Start to learn from the culture and information from the country – to learn from life, not only from grammar!”* And Nelly agreed, *“It is essential to teach language and culture in a holistic way rather than separate them”* and suggested we *“use artefacts to appeal to learners first, teach words in a creative context which gives learners a contextualised setting.”* Daisy was just as enthusiastic about how important the intersection of language and culture is, commenting how it was *“great to see an exhibition which reminds us language is so much more than phonics, vocabulary and grammar! Languages also embody thought, concept, emotion.”*

Areas of creative pedagogy were noted, including how the use of images can support language learning. Cassandra noted about one of the exhibits, that *“the use of pictures [can] allow students with EAL to associate their first language to the new one.”* Laurine felt similarly, observing that *“It was nice to see that words are not the only way to communicate, that symbols and pictures can also be used to convey meaning, and they represent culture. Using the symbols can be used by students with EAL to share their culture and stories.”* She also noted *“pictures were used to show the Norwegian national identity, so using pictures is a way to convey a message eg. nature, rivers, mountains. Matching TL vocab with pictures instead of the English word would help.”* Elizabeth enjoyed the use of maps and landscape, saying her preferred exhibit was, *“The old maps. They help to visualise how culture can be shaped in relation to natural surroundings such as ‘seaside’ or landlocked places, and the impact this has on groups of people.”* There were moving as well as still images in the exhibition, and Nicole enjoyed this from the perspective of engagement: *“I think videos and art have the potential to really engage your EAL learners with the content you present to them.”*

Natasja had some positive thoughts on what she might take into her ECT year: *“It’s a great way of introducing more languages briefly, whilst highlighting what makes them unique. It could be a model for a day of languages celebration in a school. Shows how connected European languages are (at least) which is often reflected in our identities too, with ancestors from different countries – something many people can relate to across the world with the movement of peoples.”*

As linguists, many were inspired by the section on Danish, where etymological connections were highlighted between Old Norse and English, and the Dutch one which was similar. Some reflected on how inspiring it could be if pupils were encouraged to develop similar connections between their home, heritage and community languages (HHCL) and other languages they spoke or were learning in school (whether English or others), and how they may try encourage their children to bring in artefacts to stimulate shared understandings and discussion. Fran observed how this exhibit showed how *“Students can make their own links between languages and add knowledge from their own languages.”* Daisy reminded us that *“learners with EAL can be from many different countries, and combining aspects of their visual culture can help to centre and unite them.”*

To return to the importance of culture in languages teaching and learning, here are a few more of the STs’ thoughts to conclude. Timothy reflected that, *“It’s always helpful to share the cultures of different peoples because it reduces discrimination and misunderstandings.”* Zhipeng echoed his sentiments, reminding us that *“Language is not just words! It closes the gap among different cultures and promotes people-to-people communication.”* And Jasmin put it more poetically: *“I feel like water – able to flow, and transcend boundaries of ‘nationality’ – and language is to thank for this.”*

As well as promoting language awareness and multilingualism, which were the aims of the exhibition, it seems the PGCE STs were inspired to reflect on something more: the peace-building function of Languages education, which is perhaps the greatest claim we can make for it.

### **Reading references contributed by colleagues in the ALL ITET forum:**

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Annis, Sheldon. 1986. "The museum as a staging ground for symbolic action". *Museum International*, 38(3), 168-171.

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