

1+2 Evaluation visit to Madras College, Fife

Title of the project: Modern languages: a new focus

Aims of the project: From the school's perspective, the overall aim was to encourage young people to come back to their first modern language and take up another, at S5/S6. The department aimed to provide a more vocational approach to languages for those who found the traditional route of Higher and Advanced Higher less attractive.

The emphasis was on transferable skills. Young people would develop skills such as interview skills, presentation skills and skills in writing a CV. They would use their languages in very practical ways and make connections between what they learned in school and the world of work. Young people were to be presented for the Languages for Life and Work Award in French and Spanish.

Discussion of self-evaluation paper: key messages from the school

Background

The school has approximately 1300 pupils and is spread over a junior and a senior building. Staff travel by car between the two buildings. There is a good uptake of languages after the BGE with classes at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher in French, German and Spanish. The curriculum leader wished to offer a more vocational course and an additional opportunity to study two languages in the senior school.

Initially, the pilot was to involve French and Mandarin. However, considerations of staffing and sustainability led to a decision to deliver the course in French and Spanish. At the development stage, plans included the business education department and the teacher of travel and tourism. This approach became too difficult when the school changed to a seven period day, given constraints over staffing and travel between the two buildings.

Resources/methodology

The course was timetabled for three periods per week with the curriculum leader working on the Languages for Work unit in French and three periods with a class teacher working on the Languages for Life unit in Spanish. The Building Employability Skills unit was to be incorporated at a later stage in the course. Work experience and links with local businesses were to be integrated into the course in November and February, times suitable for the businesses concerned.

Children's experiences and achievements

The school feels that the young people involved have made good progress in their learning. In French, they have studied vocational contexts through the themes of hotels and tourist information for example. They have been writing in French using vocational language. They have used dictaphones to record each other in role plays suited to the work place. In Spanish, they have advanced from no knowledge to being able to read, talk, listen to and understand Spanish.

Support for learners

Young people have experienced different learning and teaching approaches. Learning has been supported by staff and through the use of dictaphones to interview each other and people outwith the classroom. Pupils support each other, often through peer assessment.

Successes of the pilot (from the self-evaluation)

The school expects almost all young people to achieve the award. Staff feel that the main positive has been the enhanced profile of modern languages through their use in different contexts. The school has arranged work experience with local businesses where languages are of particular benefit such as a local hotel and Visit Scotland.

The school wanted to offer young people the opportunity to study two languages with a vocational slant later in the senior phase, in a way which would engage them. The school feels they have achieved this. The curriculum leader hopes that uptake will be greater next year as other young people learn of the course through this session's cohort.

Issues arising (from the self-evaluation)

It is unfortunate that the introduction of the course coincided with the changeover to a seven period day. This meant more travelling between buildings for staff. It was not possible to timetable the business education teacher and the travel and tourism teacher to teach this group one period per week as originally planned. Next session, the school is moving to a five period day and these timetabling difficulties will be resolved. Staff have had to rewrite the course in the light of these changes but would like to go back to their original plan if timetabling allows.

The school feels that the project has not achieved all of its original aims for the reasons stated above. However, the small group has been motivated by the new approach to language learning. These are pupils who would have opted out of language learning completely at S5/S6 in the past but they have engaged with this course.

Overall evaluation by Education Scotland based on evidence during the visit

The pilot programme changed direction due to concerns about the sustainability of Mandarin staffing and changes in the timetable which posed significant problems in terms of input from the business education department. The decision was taken to do the Languages for Life and Work award instead of the Languages for Work Purposes unit originally planned, in order to offer young people the opportunity for accreditation at award level. The degree of flexibility shown by the department in continuing with the initial aims and adapting to new circumstances has enabled young people to benefit from a new experience. The department has plans to continue with this award next year and to incorporate the business education link which was not possible this year, with the aim of setting up a virtual company.

The class is entirely made up of young people who would not normally choose a language at S5/S6, and whose previous experience in language learning varies. It includes young people who 'dropped' a language after S2 and young people who have a number of Highers from their S5 experience. A market has appeared for young people who can benefit from a less academic course which also teaches employability skills and for young people who return to language learning post Highers for interest and to 'add another string to their bow'. There are 10 young people in the class, all of whom have done some French previously and are now doing French and Spanish for the award. These young people have quite different needs and it will be important to allow for this in planning and resourcing this course in future. The class benefits from a generous six periods per week. Despite extensive promotion of the course the previous session, numbers opting for it were low. It is hoped there will be a higher uptake next session, following feedback from the current cohort.

Young people are enjoying their learning and benefiting from a variety of tasks including pair and group work and using songs for listening practice. They are developing all four key skills. It is to the credit of the teachers that these young people, many of whom were not enthusiastic about doing the course initially, now value their learning. They can see a purpose in it, both for employment and holidays. The fact that they are aiming for an award is motivating for them. They feel they have made progress. They feel the teachers have made the course fun and yet they feel have learned a lot. They say that doing two languages has made them think more and they do not find that they confuse the two. Those doing Higher courses in other subjects have found that there is less pressure in the languages course and that they can enjoy learning. They are very motivated by the prospect of two days of work experience in a local hotel.

The young people say they have learned to address people correctly, using formal and informal registers. In class, they demonstrated their ability to understand the spoken word, in particular when known vocabulary was used in different contexts, such as a RAP song. They were coping with recognition of a variety of tenses. Learners were engaged in peer assessment of recorded speaking presentations, using a traffic light system. This involved good class discussion around the reasons for their judgement. This could also be done in pairs for part of the time, to vary the approach. Young people were learning about Spanish culture and developing in all four skills although there was scope for more challenge for some young people.

Young people have been given some choice in the themes covered in the course. The department agree that some of the resources used, particularly for the Spanish 'life' part of the course, could have been better suited to the maturity level of the young people involved and could have had a more vocational slant. The topics chosen for the French section involve hotel and tourist information materials. These should build more on prior learning on these themes further down the school. The school's plans for work experience in a local hotel will enable young people to develop their communication and social skills. The school intends to approach international students to act as 'customers' who only speak the modern language. A similar approach will be tried in the tourist information office. This has the potential

to make the learning even more relevant and ties in very well with the local context of a university town which is also a popular tourist attraction.

The school is assessing young people in line with the requirements of the award and aims to present them at level 3 or 4. Young people should be encouraged to attain at the highest SCQF level they can, building on prior experience of learning a language. A greater level of challenge will ensure all learners maintain their engagement and achieve even more.

The school should seek to build in assessment opportunities to their planning and to develop a pupil profile which would register achievements. Assessment opportunities would include the self and peer assessments as well as ongoing assessment through other classwork and tests as appropriate. Young people would be involved in maintaining and discussing their profile.

The award has a full column in the timetable structure. Consideration could be given to covering this award in that time along with units/awards in other subjects, or to delivering it as an additional part column option. It could be introduced at S3 for targeted groups of young people.

The department will evaluate the programme at the end of the session and will make changes as appropriate. The department will also continue to publicise the advantages of the course, promoting it to parents and pupils alike. The course has involved the curriculum leader in setting up links with local businesses and tourist attractions. This is not essential for the award but is desirable in the interests of relevance and challenge. However, this is time consuming and difficult to achieve in addition to a busy timetable. The school has done well to make these links for the benefit of their young people.