

An Experience of Citizenship in Modern Languages

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Abstract: As part of Scotland's new educational reforms, Curriculum for Excellence teachers of all subjects will be asked to develop interdisciplinary approaches in order to develop their pupils into "successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors". This article reports reflects on the possibilities of incorporating citizenship issues into the teaching of modern languages.

Key words: Curriculum for Excellence, Citizenship, Resources

As part of Scotland's new educational reforms, Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), all teachers are now charged with contributing to the so-called four capacities, "successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors". In citizenship, we create experiences to extend learning and make students reflect on the situations in their own lives by comparing and contrasting these with equivalent situations in other countries. In that respect we encourage students to explore, engage, participate and contribute in order to become effective citizens thereby developing core skills, such as communication, working confidently with information and working well with others.

Many Modern Language teachers are delivering citizenship without realising it. Incorporation of cultural information into lessons is a classic example of this. It is also already very well done in the primary sector and with the new Modern Languages outcomes for CfE the importance of cultural awareness has been further underlined. We see transferable skills from other curricular areas such as expressive arts (music, art, drama), social science (history and geography), and even physical education or home economics. Pupils do not just learn lists of vocabulary but songs, or information about artists. They get the chance to use their foreign language skills in a drama as well as learning about the country and important events in the history of the country through social sciences and expressive arts. Looking at the overarching experiences we can see how Modern Languages contribute to creating an awareness and appreciation of life in another country:

- I gain a deeper understanding of my first language and appreciate the richness and interconnected nature of languages
- I enhance my understanding and enjoyment of other cultures and of my own, and gain insights into other ways of thinking and other views of the world
- I develop skills that I can use and enjoy in work and leisure throughout my life.

Citizenship in Modern Languages is more than some posters on the wall and a token nod to the breakfast customs in another country. It is about looking at that particular society, pattern of daily life, education and work, economy and social issues. My particular area of interest is citizenship in courses at Higher and Advanced Higher levels. There are implications for curricular material and for staff development. This need not be an arduous task, it just requires a little “thinking outside the box” and a few good extra resources. There are also opportunities for working together with teachers of other disciplines in order to facilitate collaborative learning.

Citizenship is a notion best explored through experience and interaction between others – not only pupils with other pupils, but through staff interaction as well. Connections between Modern Languages and other areas of study allow students to examine issues in their own society and then look at similar issues or situations in another culture. Developing international links with other institutions give staff an opportunity for continuous professional development as well as the transfer of skills for both students and teachers.

The study of a foreign language opens windows in to a different culture and different ways of thinking and making connections. Learning to communicate in a foreign language helps pupils to develop intercultural awareness and to understand the need to act with sympathy and responsibility towards others

With this in mind, citizenship at Advanced Higher level can provide an excellent platform for exploring issues such as: pattern of family life, gender issues, technology, media and the arts and European issues. Resources are widely available on the internet so the biggest problem is merely time to look these up and then prepare and adapt them for class use.

One example is the “Human Rights in the Curriculum” pack developed by Amnesty International and the Education in Human Rights Network in French and Spanish. It provides lesson plans, activities for class and resources making it ideal for teaching topical and cultural issues. In other words, it is user-friendly once teachers have identified the areas where it can enhance existing course work.

If incorporated appropriately, this – and other similar resources – can help pupils make linguistic progress as well as increase their social awareness of problems and situations in other countries. They should also lend themselves to formative teaching with many opportunities for collaborative learning. Students are encouraged to communicate not only in pairs and groups, but as a whole class. By enabling them to do some peer assisted learning as well as taking part in discussions and taking part in decision making they become *effective contributors*.

Pupils’ linguistic skills are developed by the adaptation and manipulation of language which can be used in both speaking and writing but there is also the chance to extract meaning from contexts and to draw inferences of meaning from unfamiliar language. The practice of glossaries, word banks and dictionaries as part of these tasks helps them to develop into *successful learners*.

Some activities require students to conduct interviews and surveys as well as writing formal letters. In other words, students are encouraged to think in the foreign language and build on previous structures and language learned. They are then more able to express their feelings and ideas, ask questions, use the language more creatively, and in the process transform themselves into *confident individuals*.

Finally, providing students with an opportunity to practice and develop their language through the discussion of moral issues allows them to examine their own thoughts and feelings about issues such as homelessness, racism, and poverty, which helps them to mature into *responsible citizens*.

When I trialled the resource in one of my classes, many of the students were hesitant to comment on the issues claiming they did not have an opinion or that they were too young to be bothered. However, this changed during the lesson covering the rights of the child. The aim of the lesson was to consider rights and their matching responsibilities. Students were given two sets of cards with one half of a statement on them. Pupils were required to cut the cards up and match them. They had a chance to read for information before having discussions. Each group had different cards so could feed back to each other in the class. The follow-up lesson to this was on letter writing. Students were asked to write in Spanish to an agony aunt about a human rights issue. This generated a lot of lively discussion about the various different situations in Spanish-speaking countries regarding the treatment of children. Two major outcomes were therefore achieved: Language promotion and awareness of social issues in another country. As a spin-off from the citizenship activities, some of the pupils felt so inspired that they then signed up to do some voluntary work in the community. Surely if children feel enthused to make a small difference in their local community by learning about another community that is worth celebrating!

