What can languages do for you?
Interdisciplinary Project for the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages

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Project Proposal & Plan (Extracts)

I am going to research the importance of languages and language qualifications to Scottish business and Scottish higher education institutions. I plan on contacting two Scottish universities, a Scottish lawyer specialising in overseas work and two Scottish businesses, in order to obtain evidence, information and views from a wide range of sources. I will make contact primarily by e-mail and telephone; however I do plan on using a personal contact for part of my research. In my initial background research I also plan on making use of internet websites and resources. In addition, I plan on carrying out a survey of pupils in their second year of secondary education at Hutchesons Grammar School, to gauge pupils' enjoyment of languages at this age enjoy and how they rate their value.

After my research, I will collate my information and create a PowerPoint presentation, to be given to the same pupils in February/March 2010, the period in which they will be making their subject choices for their Standard Grade /Intermediate 2 courses. I feel this age group is a good target audience, as they are at a crucial stage in their schooling.

I hope that my research will show that languages are considered important to Scottish universities and businesses. Primarily, I feel passionately that languages are central to a rounded education so my reason for pursuing this project is personal. However, I am also very interested in politics and economics so am keen to find out what value higher education places on languages and language qualifications, and how Scottish businesses rate the importance of languages as the country comes out of the economic downturn. Finally, I plan on studying Law and French next year at university, so I feel this project will help develop my research skill and prove an interesting tangent to my studies as a pupil of Government and Political Studies.

Progress Log - Extracts

October 2009

Agreed title of project and finalised the objectives for my research. I can now begin my background research and start preparing the questionnaire.

The Depute Rectors for Careers and for Curriculum have given their approval for my presentation to the S2 pupils later in the session.

November 2009

Have sent e-mails to two universities and Company A (soft drinks export). I, naturally, now await replies but hope that any responses I do receive will be useful.

Have received an e-mail reply from University A's Student Recruitment and Admissions. This was an excellent response, full of useful information. I will now have to look at its content in more detail and follow up on the links to the University's website contained in the message. I still await a response from University B.

Have received an e-mail reply from a Business Development Manager (International) at Company A. This was, also, an extremely helpful communication, which directly answered my questions. The information struck a balance between the anecdotal and 'factual', and I believe I will be able to use the succinct data given in my presentation.

Questionnaire completed and handed out to class teachers (e-mailed in advance) who will distribute and collect the questionnaires from the S2 pupils. Expect the results in the next few days, when I will begin analysing the data.

December 2009

Have now reviewed and collated the information of the questionnaires. The responses were much as I had expected, with most pupils saying they plan on studying one language for S3/4 and that employers and universities consider languages as "important" or "very important". Have converted the data into graphical form, to be included later in my final PowerPoint.

February 2010

Have sent an e-mail correspondence to FL, local businessman and whisky entrepreneur. We have discussed possible dates to meet, but due to FL's busy schedule, we have postponed our meeting until 1st March.

Have sent an e-mail to a German-speaking solicitor. Having received a response, I have been in regular communication in order to arrange a suitable date to conduct an interview. Unfortunately, we have decided that time does not allow for a face-to-face meeting, but we set a date for a telephone conversation.

March 2010

This evening's meeting with FL was very helpful and thoroughly enjoyable. Witty and informed, FL has provided me with useful information. Again, it was a mix of personal experience and cold business sense, but was nonetheless extremely beneficial.

My telephone interview was extremely beneficial with the solicitor, providing an insight into the role of languages in the legal world. I took notes throughout the interview, which was a novel experience and a challenge for me, and will utilise these in my eventual presentation. Overall, it was very successful.

Evaluation and Self-Evaluation (Extracts)

Overall, I feel my project has been successful. I have created a PowerPoint presentation outlining the advantages of having languages qualifications and the application of languages in the Scottish workplace for Secondary 2 pupils and this was my original target. There have been some weaknesses in my planning and time management, but, under the time constraints, I feel I have gathered a range of information and statistics from a variety of sources making my presentation accessible, practical and relevant to today's economic and employment situation.

I begin by discussing the successful aspects of my project. I feel from the outset my clear goal and strategies provided a focus to my research and work. My first goal was to contact Scottish universities, which I did. Although I only received one response (from University A), I utilised this information and did follow-up research on the advice of a Student Recruitment Officer at the University. By acting swiftly to contact universities I believe I got the 'ball rolling', thereby encouraging me to continue my research in a similarly professional and speedy manner.

Following the response from University A, I was conscious to return the focus of my presentation onto the practicalities of languages in the business world. I contacted Company A, one of Scotland's largest drinks exporters, knowing that this company could provide an interesting insight into languages and business. Again, I received a quick response from an exports manager who provided me with some concise but useful information. This communication could be viewed as both a strength and a weakness. It was a strength as I had followed my plan correctly and efficiently, yet also a weakness as Mr F's information was very brief and, arguably superficial. I believe this was a key learning point for me: my initial questions in my e-mail to Company A had been too open and 'woolly', leading to insufficient responses. This taught me that a face-to-face or telephone interview might be a more effective means of communication in the future.

As set out in my plan, I carried out a survey of the S2 pupils in order to gauge their interest in languages. The primary strength of my process and outcomes was that I now had a meter of the S2's view of languages, which undoubtedly provided a slight change in focus in my project. From this point, I appreciated that my project would have to inform but also alter opinions and perceptions amongst the S2s.

A further strength of my project, and possibly the most enjoyable aspect, were my interviews with businessman Mr L and solicitor Miss G. During my face-to-face interview with Mr L, I had an unrivalled opportunity to ask him questions and develop an interesting conversation. This experience undoubtedly improved my interview and communication skills, and I felt I grew in confidence as the interview went on. With Ms G I conducted a phone interview, which I felt was an improvement on the e-mail communication with Mr F at Company A. During both these interviews, I had to think 'on my feet', be responsive and take notes simultaneously – at that time an

undeveloped skill. Overall, I felt that these interviews not only provided me with excellent, useful information and advice to include in my presentation, but also provided a platform for developing my communicative and inter-personal skills.

I would also identify the actual presentation itself a significant success of the project. After putting much work into creating an accessible yet informative PowerPoint was I was pleased with the positive feedback and comments I received from the Secondary Two pupils. However, the key strength of the presentation was the Question and Answer session that followed. This session provoked an interesting discussion between both the pupils and myself and amongst the pupils themselves. Clearly evidencing the success of my presentation in communicating my findings and the importance of languages, one of the pupils gave interesting suggestion as to how the studying of foreign languages could be made more accessible in the school's curriculum, which has since be investigated the teacher present at the presentation. This experience has undoubtedly challenged and developed my presentation skills, whilst also confirming my existing proficiency in presenting ideas.

Nevertheless, there were undoubted weaknesses in my process and outcomes. I believe there were four key weaknesses:
- Time-management and maintaining a log book
- Processing the survey results
- Public presentation of findings

Primarily, throughout the project I often found it difficult to find the time to maintain a detailed, accurate log book. Due to other time constraints my project and my initial analysis was frequently not prioritised, meaning I would have to review developments later than I would have liked. I feel this could be enhanced for future research by creating a research 'timetable', in which I set aside time each evening to go over and reflect on developments and progress in the project being undertaken. Although this did not hinder the overall outcome of the project, I did feel a better, more structure research process could have given me more time at the close of the project to present my findings and reflect holistically on the project as a whole.

After receiving the completed questionnaires, it was sometime before I fully analysed and collated the results. Once again linked to external demands on my time, I feel this delay meant that I did not have sufficient time to reflect and then act on the results. Instead, I was forced into a hastier, clinical response to the survey results. Moreover, there was also a flaw in the wording of the questionnaire itself, with respondents often 'ticking' two boxes, although I could only process one response per question. I, therefore, had to eliminate some responses from the overall results, which has been duly noted below each graph in my PowerPoint presentation. Naturally, this has been a clear learning point for me: I need to set better deadlines for myself and stick to these, whilst also making sure that the wording of correspondence and questionnaires is clearer and more precise.

How effective were my communication methods?

I believe that the communication of output from my report has been very effective. During my interviews with Mr L and Ms G, I was able to discuss my intermediate findings. I kept my tutor fully aware of progress at all stages and sought advice from appropriate sources throughout my project, improving and developing new communication methods. By having remained in regular contact with my tutor throughout, I was able to better evaluate my process, findings and the project as a whole.   Throughout the project I took advantage of a number of opportunities to utilise my languages, particularly in the primary research and my telephone interview with Ms G, a German-born solicitor. I was reassured that my communication both in written and spoken German was effective due to the positive information I received from Ms G and my ability to understand and process data from foreign-language sources.

Is there any aspect of the project that could be taken further?

My project certainly raises questions about the role of languages in Scottish schools and society. Having identified a need for language qualifications or aptitude in many areas of Scottish business life, it is evident that further research could be carried out to identify possible ways of boosting the profile and uptake of modern foreign languages in Scotland's schools and colleges. As I stated earlier a suggestion by one of the S2 pupils to introduce modern languages as a "twilight" option for S3/4 pupils is already being pursued by my school. It will be interesting to see how the uptake of languages is affected not only at this stage, but also to see its impact upon the number of Scottish Baccalaureate candidates in the 2013-14 session. This is perhaps the most exciting and promising aspect of the project that is being taken forward already and it is satisfying to see my research lead to practical and positive steps to boost the profile of languages in at least one Scottish school.