

## ¡A Mi Me Importa! Making Language Learning Relevant to the Weans

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**Abstract** There has surely never been a more perilous period for language teaching in our schools. As the design principles of the *Curriculum for Excellence* reforms, such as *personalisation and choice*, 'kick in' every and any subject, including the so-called core, is arguably 'up for grabs'. The Golden Age (sic) of 'Languages for All' as an automatic 'given' in our Scottish schools is effectively over. It is time to consider to what extent we can justify the place of languages and as a starting point we could do worse than to reflect on the degree to which what we offer the pupils is relevant to their present and future lives. In this article the author argues the case that **relevance** is the most urgent design principle for safeguarding the future of language teaching in our schools.

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**Keywords:** Curriculum for Excellence; pedagogy; relevance; educational exchanges; Spanish School of the Year

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At a recent SCILT<sup>1</sup> Conference in Glasgow I asked an audience of language specialists, LTS<sup>2</sup> and HMIE<sup>3</sup>, two questions. The first was, "If you were on **Family Fortunes** and you were asked by Les Dennis, "*Name a skill adults regret not having when they're older*", what would your top answer be? It was an eclectic bunch that day and one or two of the answers such as, "*origami*" and "*tap-dancing*", I assured them, "weren't there". But the majority agreed that the top two answers would probably be, "*playing a musical instrument*" and "*speaking a foreign language*".

The second question I assumed would prompt eager responses; "Can you name the CfE Curriculum Design Principles?" and after a blatant disregard for the AifL 'no-hands up', 'no shouting out' principles, they duly got them all. I then displayed, in true Blue-Peter fashion, a list I had prepared earlier of the aforementioned principles and asked them to name the one that was missing. This took a while and it was a wee bit naughty of me but given it was a group of the great-and-the-good of the Language Teaching World gathered to discuss the future of the teaching of modern foreign languages in our schools, it shouldn't have taken them long because the missing principle was "relevance".

Now, I know that the design principles are not hierarchical and that, like the four capacities, depending on the purpose of your dialectic, a case can be made for the crucial importance of any over the others or for the critical importance of recognising their interdependence, but I am absolutely convinced that unless teachers of modern

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<sup>1</sup> SCILT, Scotland's National Centre for Languages. <http://www.strath.ac.uk/scilt/>

<sup>2</sup> Learning and Teaching Scotland. <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/>

<sup>3</sup> Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education. <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/>

foreign languages adopt “**relevance**” as their top design principle many of them will soon be out of a job.

Any Depute Head Teacher will tell you that one of the most frequently asked questions they are posed by weans particularly in the middle school in relation to modern languages is, “*Why do I have to do this, Sir?*” They are asking us to justify the place of languages in the core curriculum and too often there isn’t a convincing answer:

*“It’s good for you, son. Trust me”.*

*“We live in a shrinking global marketplace. You might need it for a job one day.”*

*“Now, you don’t want Scotland to become a monolingual backwater, do you, Willie?”*

*“A whit, Sir?”*

But this ‘syrup-of-figs’ approach to justifying the teaching of languages just doesn’t wash any more. It’s not only the weans that are exercising the principle of Personalisation and Choice, some School Leaders are doing it for them and taking languages out of the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)<sup>4</sup> core. They are counting the hours the pupils receive exposure to the Modern Languages outcomes and experiences from primary 6 or even earlier and once they are sure that particular ‘entitlement’ has been met, they are dropping it like a hot tortilla. Modern Languages teaching is at a crossroads and one of the roads ahead increasingly looks like a cultural cul-de-sac.

There are pretty obvious ingredients required to ensure the future of this subject in our schools the first of which is the enthusiasm of the teaching staff; the degree to which they care about their subject. Now, I know it isn’t particularly fashionable in some quarters in these enlightened times to be seen to love your subject as this might get in the way of focusing on our duty as ‘teachers of children and of skills’ and the development of the “how” rather than the “what” - but I am old-fashioned enough to believe that it is absolutely fine to love your subject - I do and always will love the teaching of English and the day it doesn’t matter to my staff what they are teaching, is the day children will stop being inspired to be writers, chemists, artists and musicians. I don’t encourage a departmental siege mentality in my staff and I engineer a plethora of ways to make it easier for the ‘world’ of my school to shrink to the size of the Principality of Liechtenstein through imaginative, exciting interdisciplinary work but I still love to see weans tremble with excitement in the presence of a teacher whose subject is a personal passion because that way they know that, for whatever reason, this subject changed the life of the human being in front of them- as it did mine; if it matters to the teacher it is more likely to matter to them.

Secondly, there must be culture within a school- not just in a department, which screams out that languages are important. We need to immerse the children as much as possible in languages as a means of communication as they go about their daily lives. We must exploit every possible opportunity to lift the language out of the text books

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/understandingthecurriculum/>

and into the lives of the pupils helping them to make connections between the study of languages and their **current** and not only their future lives; to find ways to let them learn languages by almost subliminal exposure. So all signage in our school is in both Spanish and English, including the toilets (which also focuses parental minds on Parents' Nights!).



Posters around the school relating to key *Health and Well-Being* issues like bullying are duplicated in both languages reinforcing not only the Spanish but the child welfare issues. In Physical Education, where the inspirational posters of sporting heroes are visually self-explanatory, the wording on the posters is exclusively in Spanish. So too is all information related to uniforms and pupil traffic-

flow and instructions for silence during exam periods. So too are the menus at the canteen, though admittedly finger-pointing is still the preferred mode of communication for indicating culinary choice in Burnbank!

In the classrooms across the school, Spanish is given its place. For example, in every Maths classroom the numbers on the wall are in Spanish as are the names of the geometrical shapes, while teachers play, “¡Yo No Digo Nada!” (“I’m saying nowt!”) the Spanish adaptation of “Buzz”, to drill tables. In Business Education, pupils will be met with a greeting of *¡Hola!* and, *¿Qué tal?* from teachers who have enrolled in the weekly staff lunchtime conversation class run by an enthusiastic colleague from the Languages Department. IDL (Inter-Disciplinary Learning) Projects are adjusted to include a Spanish dimension. Thus, during S2 Citizenship Week the “Trading Trainers” activity is set in Latin America and trading has to be ‘attempted’ in Spanish or the Bank doesn’t pay out. The Seismology Group focuses on earthquake experiences in Chile and our Fairtrade Group link up with a co-operative in Chile. Meanwhile, the S2 Rock Group Project sees the band doing a ‘virtual tour’ of Spanish cities where the band members are ‘interviewed’ by local Spanish radio stations about their lives and interests and tastes in music (planned to coincide with this unit in the S2 Spanish curriculum).

However, wherever and whenever possible, we must also make real human connections which are valuable in themselves through whatever means available to the school.

When I took over as Head Teacher of John Ogilvie High School in Hamilton (Burnbank, actually, but you might not know where that is) in 2007, I was intrigued to know that there was a developing twinning partnership between the school and Francisco Tárrega School in Vila-real, Spain. The original catalyst for the twinning had been a football match coupled with the tragic story of a footballer’s son who died of cancer in 2004 uniting two football communities in a grief and friendship which lasts to this day. However, we were fortunate to be in the right place at the right time to contribute to an educational link between the two communities and the John Ogilvie-Francisco Tárrega Exchange Links were born. Over 400 pupils of our current school roll of 920 have had a direct personal link with Spain and the Spanish people in the region of Valencia.



The annual S1 tour of the region is as educational as it is 'vacational' while the annual exchange visits see groups of thirty plus Spaniards and Ogilvie pupils live together for a fortnight in a community where the locals, be they in Burnbank or Vila-real, make strenuous efforts to communicate in the language of their visitors, but communicate they do and the relationships between the pairings long outlive the period of the exchange (with a certain

low-cost airline a principal beneficiary of the vibrant success of the project throughout the Summer and Christmas breaks). When they aren't actually on Spanish soil, the pupils talk animatedly of conversations on *"Tuenti"* the popular Spanish social network site and exploit skype and video links to the wee small hours of a week-end (I know, I shouldn't encourage it....) The point is that the language in these situations matters- the pupils see the relevance of learning the language because it has relevance to their lives- it is the gateway to a culture and a community of friendships which affects their lives in a positive meaningful way. There is no need for the syrup-of-figs-double-glazing-salesman hard sell with them. They love to learn the language because it brings them closer to their pals. I hear you saying, *"That's all very well but not everyone can afford to go to Spain with the school and not everyone who can afford it will get the chance."* This is true and that's why some students also have e-pals in Torpa School in Gothenburg in Scandinavia where a group of Swedish students are learning Spanish as a foreign language. With English not being a barrier here, the focus is on the shared experience of learning Spanish and through the exchange of videos of school life and the social networking, our pupils see an example of a place where it is clearly 'cool' for 'cool school-kids' to learn 'another other' language. The Geography curriculum also gets a boost here too! *"¿Dónde está Gotemburgo, Miss?"*

All of which brings us back to Curriculum for Excellence and the place of languages. The "application of their learning in challenging unfamiliar situations" (Have you ever tried living with a foreign family for a fortnight who don't speak English?) ensures a depth of learning which few other subject disciplines can match, while the principles of the Outcomes and Experiences documents such as, *"understanding and enjoying other cultures and gaining insights into other views of the world"* (for Modern Languages: 1)<sup>5</sup> or *"understanding what is special, vibrant and valuable about my own and other cultures"* (for Literacy & English: 1)<sup>6</sup> become self-evident.

To summarise, then, in our approach to the teaching of modern languages in John Ogilvie High School, we believe:

- our emphasis on connections with real people through cultural and educational links as well as on the daily practical application of the language in the lives of

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<sup>5</sup> <http://bit.ly/axPBo2>

<sup>6</sup> <http://bit.ly/bKmFfA>

the pupils lifts the language off the pages of a book and into their real life experiences of our pupils and so gives the language meaning and purpose and importance and relevance

- through the friendships, cultural exchanges and e-twinning, our pupils realise that learning a language is a gateway to other friendships, families and cultures which will enrich their lives now and into adulthood
- the future of Modern Foreign Languages lies in the commitment of specialist staff to the promotion of the study of languages first and foremost as a means to enrich pupils lives, to change their view of the world beyond their town and to open up the opportunities which gave themselves as teachers the passion and love of their adopted country whatever that may be.

We were therefore delighted when these beliefs were endorsed by the Spanish Embassy in London who recently awarded us the title of “Spanish School of the Year for 2010” - the only Scottish school to receive the award this year.

I would like to finish with reference to perhaps the most important statement from Modern Languages Outcomes and Experiences (online: 1) in terms of the thrust of this article:

“I develop skills which I can use and enjoy in my work and leisure throughout my life.”

The answer to the **Family Fortunes** question, “*What skill do people most regret not having as adults?*” is of course, “*being able to speak a foreign language.*” You know this as an adult as much as I regret not having learned to play a musical instrument despite being surrounded by musical opportunities in my childhood. We know we have these regrets as adults. Let’s not make a decision at Secondary School level to condemn future generations of adults to that fate. Let’s make the teaching of languages relevant to the weans now - their hearts and minds and ultimately their gratitude will follow.



