Moving Towards a Curriculum for Excellence in Modern Languages

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Abstract Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), the curriculum reform programme introduced by the Scottish Government, is not a prescriptive framework for learning and teaching. Teachers will need to reflect continuously on what they have taught, how this was done and then change or fine-tune the teaching and learning experience for the learners to make it as effective as possible. This article outlines the two main focus areas underlying the projects described in the study, namely Literacy and Citizenship, with particular reference to Developing Global Citizens. The projects were undertaken in an S1 German class. The conclusion highlights the fact that the implementation of CfE will rely heavily on trust in the ability of the practitioner to provide experiences for learners to achieve the outcomes. Another important feature of CfE is its focus on cross-curricular working, particularly in secondary schools where teachers can make contributions to experiences and outcomes from more than one curriculum area. This implies the development of a collaborative ethos as opposed to a competitive ethos within the school. The outcomes of these projects have informed the new S1 Modern Languages course for German and French in the school.

Introduction

Curriculum for Excellence, the curriculum reform programme introduced by the Scottish Government, is not a prescriptive framework for learning and teaching. Teachers will therefore need to reflect continuously on what they have taught, how this was done and then change or fine-tune the teaching and learning experience for the learners to make it as effective as possible. Moon (2000) refers to this type of reflection as an ongoing awareness, thoughtfulness or mindfulness in pedagogical situations. She goes on to state that this reflection in and on action is focussed on changing the quality of the outcome of the teacher's practice. It therefore brings about changes to how one does one's work.

Wildman and Miles (in Moon 2000) site three principles that facilitate reflective practice in a teaching situation. They are:

- support from administrators in an education system;
- time and space;
- development of a collaborative environment with support from other teachers.

The activities outlined in this article have been informed by the above principles in as much as they:

- require support from the school management in line with current developments in the school and in education
- are dependent upon time and space being created to put them into practice and
- can only be successful if carried out in a cooperative manner to include other teachers and practitioners.

This article outlines the two main focus areas underlying the various projects and which are two of the aspects of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) which, according to Templeton (2010), need to be carefully planned for, namely: *Literacy and Citizenship*, with particular reference to *Developing Global Citizens* (Scottish Executive 2008). The projects described here were undertaken in an S1 German class and include the English / German Grammar Unit and the Finland Initiative. The conclusion highlights insights about the nature of the practice based enquiry that have emerged during the process of addressing the above-mentioned projects.

Literacy

The action plan had as its main focus the development of literacy through the learning of modern languages because, as the CfE guidelines clearly indicate, the development of literacy is the responsibility of practitioners in all subjects:

> Literacy is fundamental to all areas of learning, as it unlocks access to the wider curriculum. Being literate increases opportunities for the individual in all aspects of life, lays the foundations for lifelong learning and work, and contributes strongly to the development of all four capacities of Curriculum for Excellence. (Scottish Government 2009, online).

Competence and confidence in literacy, which includes competence in grammar, spelling and the spoken word, are seen to be essential for progress in all areas of the curriculum and therefore all teachers, including teachers of modern languages, have the responsibility for promoting language and literacy development. Within CfE, literacy is defined as:

> the set of skills which allows an individual to engage fully in society and in learning, through the different forms of language, and the range of texts, which society values and finds useful (ibid).

The literacy experiences and outcomes recognise the importance of listening and talking and of effective collaborative working in the development of thinking and in learning.

Based on the principles of *Literacy Across Learning* as outlined in CfE, teachers need to ask the question, 'How am I meeting the literacy needs of the learners in front of me?' It means that teachers need to think about the kinds of literacy experiences provided for young people. These experiences are not limited to the English classroom but could and should be provided through collaborative working with other departments and agencies. In assessing the literacy level of learners, teachers will be asked to identify the

extent to which children and young people can apply their literacy skills across their learning.

The introductory statements on *Literacy Across Learning* state that the learner will develop and extend his/her literacy skills when they have opportunities to:

- communicate, collaborate and build relationships;
- reflect on and again explain their literacy and thinking skills, using feedback to help them improve and sensitively provide useful feedback for others;
- engage with and create a wide range of texts in different media, taking advantage of the opportunities offered by ICT;
- develop their understanding of what is special, vibrant and valuable about their own and other cultures and their languages;
- explore the richness and diversity of language, how it can affect them and the wide range of ways in which they and others can be creative;
- extend and enrich their vocabulary through listening, talking, watching and reading. (Scottish Government 2008)

Both the projects described here provided learners with a wide range of just such opportunities to develop their literacy skills.

Developing Global Citizens

On 4th March 2010, the Scottish Parliament debated a motion on 'educating children and young people to compete in a globalised 21st century'. The debate was opened by Mike Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, who said

> *in order for Scotland and its people to succeed and flourish in the globalised 21st century that we live in, we must all become and live as global citizens* (Scottish Parliament 2010)

'Global citizens' were described as citizens who

- have a knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it;
- are confident about travelling widely for jobs and working with other nationalities, and who enjoy speaking other languages;
- are respectful of other cultures, traditions, religions, beliefs and attitudes;
- appreciate that their behaviour and actions have an impact on their environment and the environment of others in other countries, and who acknowledge that we must change our consumption habits to ensure that we have a sustainable world for future generations;
- care about their society and locality, and who appreciate the good things that we have in our lives, in comparison with millions of others in less fortunate places. (ibid).

Russell went on to emphasise the key role played by education in developing global citizens, and this theme is recognised as a key context for learning within CfE. Specific

reference is made to young people 'developing a knowledge and understanding of the world and Scotland's place in it' (Scottish Executive 2006). Citizenship and International Education are deemed to be two of the important themes which need to be developed in a range of contexts together with enterprise, sustainable development and creativity. Citizenship is described as being about

> the exercise of rights and responsibilities within communities at local, national and global levels; and making informed decisions, and taking thoughtful and responsible action, locally and globally. (Scottish Government 2008)

Within the area of citizenship, there is a focus on global citizenship which enables young people to actively participate in an increasingly global society and this served as the particular focus of the Finland unit.

The study of modern languages is seen to be at the heart of this development as it provides children and young people with a means of communicating directly with people from different cultures, enhancing their understanding and enjoyment of other cultures and of their own and supporting them in gaining insights into other ways of thinking and other views of the world. Learning other languages enables children and young people to make connections with different people and their cultures and to play a fuller part as global citizens (Scottish Executive 2006).

Project 1: English / German grammar unit

This unit addressed the delivery of literacy across learning as outlined in CfE, with particular reference to the development of competence and confidence in the knowledge and application of English grammar as a prerequisite for making progress in modern language learning.

In describing what is meant by 'literacy', CfE states that literacy experiences and outcomes promote the development of skills in using language, particularly those that are used regularly by everyone in their everyday lives. These experiences and outcomes also include the ability to apply knowledge about language (Scottish Executive 2006).

Within the *Literacy Framework*, the tools sections outline important skills and knowledge about language, for example in writing it includes such matters as punctuation and accurate sentence structure and arranging sentences to make meaning clear. With regard to the study of Modern Languages, CfE states that

> children and young people will be enabled to develop a secure understanding of how language works, and use language well to communicate ideas and information in English and other languages. (Scottish Executive 2006)

An example can be found in the *Reading Outcomes and Experiences* document. Under the heading 'Using Knowledge about Language', it is stated that the learner will "recognise features of words in the language I am learning and use them to make sense of vocabulary and of the connections between words" (MLAN 3-11b) and in writing the

learner will be able to "check the accuracy of my writing using my knowledge about language […]" (MLAN3-4a) (Scottish Executive 2006).

From the above, it is clear that learning about language and the structures within language is seen to be essential for the development of reading and writing skills in both English and Modern Languages. However, in my experience of teaching German from S1 to Higher Grade level in Scotland over a number of years, this is the one area where pupils do not have the competence and confidence based on a sound knowledge of their first language, English. Despite their lack of knowledge and understanding of the elements and structures of English, learners are expected to grasp new structures and apply rules of grammar in the new language. An example in German language learning would be that pupils are taught that all nouns are written in capital letters. This assumes that learners know what a noun is and can identify a noun in a sentence. Learners are taught that verbs must agree with the noun, that adjective endings have to agree with the gender of the noun if they precede the noun but not if they are written after the noun. This would be most bewildering to a learner who is not clear on the difference between a noun, a verb and an adjective. It also completely ignores the principle of building on prior learning which is essential if teachers are to activate the learners' interest and curiosity, and infuse instruction with a sense of purpose (Moses 1990).

I decided to address the issue of English grammar in S1 to find out how that would impact on their German language learning. Black and William (1998:13) state that in deviating from the curriculum in this way, "teachers have to take risks in the belief that such investment of time will yield rewards in the future, whilst 'delivery' and 'coverage' with poor understanding are pointless and even harmful". In my experience simply covering the curriculum has indeed been harmful as pupils lose the confidence and motivation to engage with the language because it is all a grey area to them.

Pupils were given a simple diagnostic test to ascertain their knowledge and understanding of aspects of English grammar. According to Pennington (2009), diagnostic assessments are essential instructional tools for effective English-language Arts and reading teachers. This assessment also provided information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which the learners were engaged (Black and William 1998).

Perhaps not unsurprisingly, most pupils showed a complete lack of understanding when asked to identify aspects of English grammar, e.g. nouns and verbs. Pupils were then given a lesson on some aspects of grammar such as verbs, nouns and adjectives to ensure that they would be able to identify these in a sentence and also use them to make up their own sentences. To reinforce this knowledge, two cooperative learning lessons followed – one in English and another using German vocabulary . Pupils were assigned to groups and created graffiti boards around the aspects of grammar. Peer learning and teaching was incorporated into the lesson. After engaging with the grammar lessons and related activities, the results of the second assessment in English grammar showed a marked improvement and the final assessment which was based on

similar aspects, but this time in German, showed even more improvement in their understanding of the grammar points covered.

The pupils were particularly enthusiastic throughout the lessons which reflected Black and William's (1998) view that learners become actively involved in their own learning when they see that there is a gap in their current knowledge and are given a way to close this gap. Based on the evidence provided by this project, the relevant aspects of English grammar are now regularly included as an introduction to the German grammar lessons.

Project 2: Finland Initiative

Through the mediation of the Modern Languages Support Officer for Perth and Kinross Council, Dr Meryl James, I made contact with a teacher in Finland, Leena Kallunki, who is keen to improve the literacy skills of her pupils, particularly in English. The school is situated in a village called Sotkamo. The Finnish pupils, aged between 9 and 10 years, produced a piece of writing in Finnish, introducing themselves to my S1 pupils. With their teacher's help they then translated the letters into English and sent them on to Scotland.

In line with the focus on developing global citizens, I put together a unit of work in collaboration with Dr James which was based on this contact with Finland. The premise here is that pupils can learn about countries other than those where the target language is spoken, drawing the emphasis away from the actual language learning and incorporating fresh content. This contributes to the motivation and enthusiasm with which pupils tackle the new information as it also enables the teacher to teach more age appropriate materials than those presented in the traditional subject content. This is very evident in my S1 class and I have had reports from parents who are quite surprised and pleased at the level of interest that the pupils have shown in the project when talking about it at home.

The pupils each received a letter from their Finnish counterparts. We then proceeded to study the country, its culture, its people and bits of the language through a variety of activities which included a slide show, worksheets, quizzes, a Moomin video, etc. Pupils were referred to the relevant German vocabulary and phrases to describe what they were learning about the country. They replied to their Finnish friends' letters in English, introducing themselves, their families, school pets and town. Pupils were then introduced to Moomin, the Finnish cartoon character. Some pupils were already familiar with this character and this was a great motivator. The Moomin character was used, e.g. to learn vocabulary about body parts and illnesses under the heading: 'Moomin ist krank'. Pupils drew the character and indicated which parts of his body were unwell. Pupils concluded this unit by creating an imaginary Finnish character, based on Moomin, and wrote a letter introducing themselves, their family, home and interests based on the information they had gleaned on life in Finland. Instead of describing a Scottish or German home, for example, pupils wrote about a Finnish home. They also included hobbies and past times which would be typical for a Finnish young

person based on what their pen friends had told them as well as writing about enjoying dishes such as reindeer meat.

As the Finnish pupils progress in their command of English and my S1 class expand their German vocabulary and language skills, we will be able to cover more topics in the letters. The pupils now communicate via email.

This initiative has informed the development of the S1 course for this session in line with CfE. In this way pupils will come to appreciate and celebrate the diversity of Scotland's history, culture and heritage whilst engaging with other cultures and traditions around the world.

Concluding Remarks

In accordance with the principles sited by Wildman and Miles (in Moon 2000) referred to in the introduction, these initiatives were developed with the support and consent of the Headteacher and other members of the management team in my school. This support shows trust in the teacher's ability to achieve the positive outcomes of the projects which have already been and will still be undertaken. The implementation of aspects of CfE bring with it a degree of uncertainty and this is in line with the view expressed by Battacharya, Devinney and Pillutla (in Groundwater-Smith & Sachs, online) that "trust cannot exist in an environment of certainty ... " and that it needs to be exercised if changes are to be made to practice. They go on to say that

> trust is a reflection of the expectancy that a party in a social or economic interaction characterised by uncertainty will engage in behaviour that will have non-negative consequences for the other party.

This trust is seen as a kind of "social glue that binds individuals and groups together for the purposes of action." (ibid)

The implementation of CfE will rely heavily on trust in the ability of the practitioner to provide experiences for learners to achieve the outcomes, as the framework is less detailed and prescriptive than previous curriculum advice. It therefore "provides professional space for teachers and other staff to use in order to meet the varied needs of all children and young people" (Scottish Executive 2006), reflecting the second principle sited by Wildman and Miles (in Moon 2000).

Another important feature of CfE is its focus on cross-curricular working, particularly in secondary schools where teachers can make contributions to experiences and outcomes from more than one curriculum area. This implies the development of a collaborative ethos as opposed to a competitive ethos within the school. It is what Groundwater-Smith & Sachs (online) refer to as the "the other side of standardisation of practice" which is concerned with a standardised practice rather than with quality. They go on to say that in such an ethos, "isolation and privacy are preferred to collegiality and cooperation" and that this "stand[s] in opposition to a generative or change embracing culture ...".

Groundwater-Smith & Sachs (online) describe the characteristics of the 'activist professional' who "hold[s] the best interests of the clientele at heart in recognition that needs vary, are contextualised and require careful and thoughtful decision making". According to them, the cornerstones in the development of teachers as activist professionals are the principles of collaboration and collegiality and they recognise that this aspect will be a challenge for some teachers and might be challenged by others. In CfE, teachers will have to be trusted to come up with initiatives which explore ways of delivering the curriculum.   Sachs, in an address presented at Herriot Watt University in Edinburgh (2003) recognises however, that "people are fearful to commit themselves to ideas which might have some risk associated with them". This risk might include risk of failure or the risk of possible conflict with colleagues. Sachs (2003) goes on to say that "in activist professionalism trust, obligation and solidarity work together in complementary ways" and in initiating projects within the school, my experience has already been that teachers with an activist ethos are enthusiastic in their support of working together in a collaborative manner.

The outcomes of these projects have formed the basis of further initiatives and projects in the area of literacy development and the development of global citizens as well as the new S1 Modern Languages course for German and French.

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