



Artistic expression in modern languages: skills improvement and self-actualisation

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Abstract: About a year ago, I arrived in Edinburgh to work as a French language assistant for nine months. Without any specific training but with a true interest in educational issues, I got the best practice I could ask for: working with small groups of teenagers every week to teach them my native language. Convinced that teaching languages was more effective through cross-curricular activities and collaborative learning, I built up most of my work as an assistant on those two concepts. This is how drama, music, dance, and arts became tools, if not the basis, of most of my projects. It is a blend of feelings and reflections on how artistic expression is a key to the pupils' academic and personal actualisation. This article introduces some of the activities that I employed during my assistantship.

Keywords: Foreign Language Assistants; artistic expression, cross-curricular activities, collaborative learning; self-actualisation

Introduction

A foreign language assistant (henceforth FLA) is a living example of language learning. We leave our home country to go and work abroad for almost a whole school year (nine months). We take this opportunity to improve our language skills while teaching our mother tongue to young people. But it turned out to be much more than that for me: it was an opportunity to develop my very own way of teaching through projects I was allowed to create and lead with pupils from S1 to S6.

Knowing from my own experience that artistic expression can unlock many doors on the way to self-actualisation, and considering the latter as a crucial element in the learning process, I tried to figure out how I could link both to establish a different and efficient way of teaching French.

Starting with a short overview of what is at stake today in teaching and how that influenced the way I conceived my projects, you will then read about effective activities mixing language learning with music and drama, and in the third and last part, the example of participating in the French drama festival *Les Rencontres Théâtrales*.

The age-old educational paradox: what is at stake?

Having spent all my school years in France, it took me a little while to understand the features of the Scottish education system and Curriculum for Excellence. Soon enough though, I realised Scotland faced the same paradox almost every school system has: Assessment practices may sometimes seem at odds with the expressed goal - in the

case of language learning - to become a good (if not a fluent) speaker of another language.

I realised this paradox when I was asked to prepare S4 and S5 pupils for a speaking test. They had learnt off by heart a piece of writing as well as the answers to possible questions, and they had to recite it all as a practice for the official test. Once the main part was checked, I picked a few questions from the list at random. When I asked a Higher French girl *As-tu des frères et soeurs?* (Do you have any brothers or sisters?), she replied: *J'aime partir en vacances avec mes amies* (I enjoy going on holidays with my friends). This inability to respond appropriately and flexibly indicated that the pupil was not yet ready for the exam, but it would also be difficult for her to take part in a conversation with French people.

Artistic expression seemed to me a possible way of overcoming this paradox. It would help learners gain confidence and spontaneity when speaking, and develop many other useful language skills for the exams and for real life as well. Here are a few examples of activities.

Classroom/period format artistic activities to improve language skills

Language is music: melody and rhythm, pronunciation and word stress

In my view, every language is like music, composed of a melody - pronunciation and intonations - and a rhythm – word and sentence stress. Therefore, singing turns out to be a very helpful medium to teach languages. Using the melody of *Bella Mama* and *Wade in the water*, I made up two short songs in French with harmonies to focus on the "_oi_" syllable, pronounced [wa] and often difficult to assimilate by English speakers. As a tongue-twister, the sentences repeat the same or almost the same sound through words with different spellings:

Emmène-moi là-bas.

Ecoute la voix.

Quand les gens autour de toi ne voient pas.

When working with higher level groups, it is possible to insist on other syllables with common sounds such as "_an_" / "_em_" / "_en_" , mute endings or tricky combinations like "_qu_" pronounced [k]. When the pupils sing while looking at the lyrics, they memorise the spelling as well as the pronunciation of the words, and since the sentences are short and repeated, it enters the long-term memory. Results of such an activity are easy to observe: when reading an unknown text afterwards, the pupils made no pronunciation mistakes of the sounds as practised in the song¹.

Rhythm can be practised at any time to emphasise intonation and word stress. French has an easy stress pattern to learn because it usually falls on the last syllable of a word.

¹ Lyrics and recordings of the songs are available on demand at annelise.becavin@gmail.com

Therefore, when my pupils mispronounced a word in French, I asked them to repeat the word and stamp their feet when pronouncing the syllable which had to be stressed. Extended to a sentence, it becomes a rhythm exercise which helps the pupils memorise how to stress words and sentences at once. Like the song, the rhythm is internalised and eventually becomes out natural when speaking in French.

Learning through music offers a more intuitive, instinctive approach to a foreign language. Not only does it help with pronunciation and intonation, it also develops listening skills. It is much easier to understand native speakers when you know their use of word and sentence stress because the key words become clearer, and thanks to music the ear is trained to spot the differences of tones, essential to discriminate a question from an interjection for instance. On a more personal level, it definitely increases self-confidence. When I suggested the choir activity to Intermediate 2 and Higher pupils, most of them were very enthusiastic, although some were too shy to feel comfortable singing at first. So it became a collaborative learning exercise: to begin with, those who wanted to sing sang, and the others listened to their friends, corrected pronunciation mistakes and gave advice on how to make the song sound nicer. Eventually, however, the group dynamics worked in such a way that everyone joined in and ended up performing in French in front of the departmental staff.

Language is drama: staging and interpreting, gestures and intonations

Music then can help a good deal in mastering the pronunciation and intonation of a language, but so can drama. Just think of all the diction work an actor has to do so s/he can be understood by anyone under any circumstance - on stage, in a noisy hall, shouting, whispering... Tongue-twisters have become very popular in modern languages classrooms, but there are of course many more possibilities.

I found the following activity with pupils from Intermediate 1 to Higher French both fun and effective: Select a number of short texts in the foreign language that belong to different registers: a sketch, a poem, a political speech, a letter... Then imagine characters the pupils could imitate when reading those texts; an old woman for example, a statesman, a very sad person or someone losing their temper. In the classroom, ask each pupil to pick up a text and a character at random, give them about fifteen minutes to familiarise themselves with the text and find out how to read it (or should I say "act" it) and let them read it out loud in front of the class. No worries for shy pupils: everyone is free to stand up, go in front of the class or stay at their desks to read the text. Since they focus on their characters, they take their time to read the text clearly and work on pronunciation without even being aware of it.

Another form of drama is improvisation. In the ball game for instance, the pupils stand up and form a circle along with the FLA or the teacher. The latter throws an invisible ball to one of the pupils, and gives it a name (e.g. a colour, family member, or a word from any vocabulary list the pupils have to learn). The pupil pretends to catch the ball and throws it to someone else repeating the word, and so on. If things are going well, other balls with different names can be added to increase the teenagers' concentration.

This sort of improvisation also seemed to enhance spontaneity with those of my learners who were moving towards Higher and Advanced Higher levels. A good starter activity was story-telling. One pupil has to start a story he/she makes up with one sentence only. Then, someone else adds another sentence to continue the story, and the activity is declared over when everyone has given at least one sentence and a proper ending to the story has been found.

All the possibilities given by drama enabled me to bring my pupils closer to the real language experience where conversations can come up at any time, with anyone, and on any topic. Acting in character facilitates the understanding of the world from different perspectives, develops self-confidence and a capacity of adaptation.

In the next section I give details about a more complex project which again sets artistic expression at the centre of language learning.

French and artistic expression in larger projects: *Les Rencontres Théâtrales*

Organising large projects over several weeks or months certainly demands more time and effort from the teacher or the FLA, but they provide excellent learning experiences for the young people in the long run. I found I had to ensure that everyone had a role play and work with other partners for it to be a perfect collaborative learning activity.

First lesson: commitment.

The *Institut Français* (French Institute) in Scotland organises an annual French drama festival called *Les Rencontres Théâtrales*, which is held in a number of locations across the country. In both the secondary schools in which I worked I supported a French drama club with the ultimate aim of taking part in that competition. Below follows a detailed account of the project at School A. It involved volunteers from S1, S2 and S4, who dedicated a lot of time to it at lunch time, and sometimes after school or during exam leave. This project demanded a huge commitment, which was probably the first thing the pupils had to come to terms with.

Drama as defined earlier, has many advantages to offer for language learning, and it is ideal for collaborative work. The fields involved are language (the text itself, its meaning, pronunciation, intonation, and so on), staging - an excellent way of approaching body language and the cultural differences in gestures -, costumes, setting, musical background, lighting and choreography when needed. In each field there are possibilities for a pupil to find his/her place and be a part of the project. The main challenge is time. In my case this was particularly acute as I was aiming for the first available performance date in March. Then, as luck would have it, School A could not take part at that time because the pupils had to prepare their exams. However, we decided instead to postpone our performance to the last available date, which then gave us more time to prepare and perfect our play.

Second lesson: enjoying oneself

The first step was to brainstorm with all the participants in order to find out what they would enjoy doing on stage. We decided to mix two stories in one: the French

Revolution and Cinderella. With those two topics we had something of cultural interest as well as something fun and original. So we adapted and mixed together a French sketch by *Les Inconnus* called “*La Révolution*”² and the fairy tale. We imagined the main parts of the play, and the pupils themselves asked to include singing and dancing in it, first because it went along with the Disney atmosphere of Cinderella, and also because they liked the idea of a musical where everyone can express themselves.

Third lesson: it is not worth doing (or saying) anything if you do not understand it in the first place.

Once the script was done and coherent, we dedicated a few weeks to read it and make sure everybody understood the whole play. Pupils realised they could not act out the scenes properly without understanding what they were saying – and I was thrilled to find that some of them started to feel the same about their speaking exam essays, which they had previously simply learned off by heart without fully grasping all the intricacies of meaning.

Making the play their own through staging and interpreting

We began our first rehearsals at the beginning of January and worked out how to stage a play. Even though the main stage directions were included in the script, the pupils gave their opinion on cues and positions for each character, and they suggested ideas regarding the interpretation. They were by now really actively taking part in the project, making it their own. I found it really rewarding to reach the point where I could let the pupils take it from there. When they started getting involved in the very organisation of the project, a real team atmosphere appeared. From then on, I began to hear comments such as “I’ll take care of the choreography we need for the ball”, “I’ve found a dress for Cinderella”, “Could we book the assembly hall to rehearse on an actual stage?”, or “I have an idea on what setting we should have at the back”.

When you reach the double aim of seeing them grow as pupils and as young men and women

Without even realising it, the pupils took charge of almost everything. Apart from correcting pronunciation and intonation when needed, I felt as if I had reached my true goal: accompanying young men and women through a pupil-centred learning process where they were the actors and actresses of their own personal achievement.

The positive outcomes were numerous. In class, the learners showed a better understanding of the modern language as well as an improved pronunciation. They also felt more confident and so their participation in class lessons increased. They were less nervous about trying to say something, even if they did not possess all the necessary vocabulary. They started using coping strategies to compensate for a word they did not know and even added gestures to make their meaning clear. Being involved in a drama project also taught pupils a methodology for exam preparation: they felt the need to understand first, which helped them memorise essays or lessons as a meaningful whole and no longer as a mere series of words or sentences. The risk of ‘having a blank’ on the

² *Au secours, tout va mieux*. By Bernard Campan, Didier Bourdon and Pascal Légitimus. (1989) Comical show. Palais Royal Theatre, Paris. Performers: Bernard Campan, Didier Bourdon and Pascal Légitimus.

day of the exam was reduced because they were able to remember the main ideas and could then try expressing them in different ways.

Last but not least, there was a significant evolution on a personal scale. Each pupil was able to work in a team, contribute to and participate in a project until the end, face difficulties and figure out how to fix any problems as they arose. The shyer pupils gained self-confidence by finding their place in the group and contributing to the project, and also by performing on stage, in front of an audience and judges. The pupils ended up winning the Glasgow competition of *Les Rencontres Théâtrales* last June but that was just the cherry on the cake for they were already very proud of themselves, of all the hard work and effort they had put in over the preceding months.

If we sum all this up, these young people improved their French a great deal (**successful learners**), they found a way to express themselves within a group (**responsible citizens**), to take charge of an entire project (**effective contributors**) and be happy with who they are and what they do (**confident individuals**). They developed skills that will serve them for their exams, but also for future life. And it all started with someone asking one day: "Would you like to learn French through drama?"

Concluding Thoughts

The paradox we face in many educational systems is not impossible to overcome. The more we promote cross-curricular and collaborative learning, the closer we will get to what is awaiting our pupils in the future. And the more we promote artistic expression, the more we help our young people to know who they are and find their place in society. Although the activities described in this article clearly do not provide the answers to *all* the issues teachers have to tackle today they have certainly proved to be effective for my learners.

If there was something to remember from all this, it would be that happiness and enjoyment is the road to success. Happy pupils are good learners. And it goes for teachers too! Most of the time, happiness makes people gather to be successful together. My projects worked because they were based on and emerged from group dynamics. I owe a lot to everyone I have met and worked with during my assistantship for their invaluable support. I owe my pupils too for teaching me about myself and help me know who I am today. We are all a teacher to someone on the road to happiness.