

Pedagogy and Curriculum for Excellence: Finding the Opportunities

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Abstract:

This article is a personal reflection of how the languages department in an inner-city school addressed the impact of changes brought about by Scotland's new education policy, Curriculum for Excellence. It outlines the opportunities that the department seized to promote languages within the new arrangements whilst addressing a range of challenges including learner engagement, language diversification, and structural changes in the curriculum.

Keywords: pedagogy, curriculum, experiences, building, team

Context

In January 2012, I joined the languages department in St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary in Glasgow, as Principal Teacher, where the core language taught was Spanish. The department had moved to delivering Spanish in S1-S4 (ages 11-14) in lieu of French a few years before my appointment and whilst they embedded Spanish into the curriculum as the new core language, French gradually began to disappear. In the context of the Scottish Government's educational policy, Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Government, 2004, henceforth CfE), learners were able to opt out of languages at an earlier stage. With no set initiatives in place to maintain or increase uptake of French as the additional language and no overall focus on language experience to ensure a healthy throughput in both languages from Standard Grade to Higher, the department decreased in size. However, with the introduction of the Scottish Government's 1+2 language policy in 2011 (Scottish Government, 2011) my leadership appointment to the department provided the school with an opportunity to reinvigorate the delivery of languages and thereby motivate and inspire learners to continue with their language study into the senior phase.

To the department in St. Thomas Aquinas I brought with me a natural enthusiasm for learning and teaching and most importantly positivity towards building the new curriculum. I always regarded CfE as an opportunity, one that signalled an exciting time of change in education. Having joined the profession in 2004, when the so-called 5-14 curriculum policy was still in place nationally, I embraced the principles of CfE on their arrival as they articulated more closely with the pedagogy of my classroom. In other words, the aims of the policy, namely to create "Successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors." (Scottish Government,

2004) which perfectly encapsulated the goals I strived for in my language teaching. From the start of my career, I put learners' experiences at the heart of my learning and teaching, I wanted to create a classroom climate where language learning is enjoyable and valued by all. Thus Dylan Wiliam's assertion that 'pedagogy is curriculum' would reverberate in my mind as I took on the new role of principal teacher at St. Thomas Aquinas,

A bad curriculum well taught is invariably a better experience for students than a good curriculum badly taught: pedagogy trumps curriculum. Or more precisely, pedagogy is curriculum, because what matters is how things are taught, rather than what is taught. (Wiliam, 2011: 14)

In the middle of every difficulty lies opportunity. – Albert Einstein

With a national decline of nearly a quarter of Higher entries in a 20 year period up to 2011 (Reynolds and Kemp, 2013) uptake had long been a challenge for modern language teachers to motivate learners to continue with their language to higher or advanced higher level. Whilst being in the core ensured that most learners received certification for their language, to keep attainment high, modern language teachers still had to convince young people all the benefits learning a language would bring, which in an English speaking culture is no easy feat. When changes to the curriculum structure arrived because of CfE, the guidance on when young people could abandon their language study became nebulous with some schools allowing for an exit point as early as S2 for their learners. This created an additional challenge for language departments across Scotland where languages in most schools had continued to be in the core until the end of S4 despite the notion of language as an entitlement being introduced in 2001 (Scottish Executive, 2001). According to the newspaper *The Scotsman*, schools were experiencing a decline in the number of children continuing with languages into S5 with only 1 in 10 S5 pupils taking foreign language courses (Reynolds and Kemp, 2013). With a school roll of approximately 900, this was evident in my own setting where there were only six pupils in the Higher Spanish class and ten in the Higher French. As we embarked on a journey of self-evaluation, we would discover that the key to our success in meeting with the challenge of uptake would be in finding the opportunities to promote languages within the context of the new curriculum.

Finding the opportunities: Engaging learners

"I think mini-whiteboards are the greatest development in education since the slate," (Gilbert, 2010 quoting Dylan Wiliam)

This is certainly a favourite quote for me and one that colleagues in my department would agree is extremely apt as mini whiteboards were the first resource I purchased for every classroom! Early experience in the profession taught me the value of continually looking for opportunities and gathering information in partnership with colleagues to observe, evaluate and discuss what great classroom practice looked like across the curriculum so that I would continue to learn and enhance my pedagogy. My involvement in a Dylan Wiliam's Teacher Learner Community, in particular, had

significantly shaped my teaching and learning practice and I brought this experience to my new role as a principal teacher in St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary. With CfE, a framework for assessment was produced in 'Building the curriculum 5', which promoted the principles of 'Assessment is for learning',



Assessment is an integral part of learning and teaching. It helps to provide a picture of a child's or young person's progress and achievements and to identify next steps in learning. Assessment approaches need to promote learner engagement and ensure appropriate support so that all learners can achieve their aspirational goals and maximise their potential. (Scottish Government, 2011: 18)

When considering the challenge of uptake we agreed that as a department we needed to focus on 'learner engagement'. If we wanted our young people to continue with their language study beyond the broad general education, we had to review our current classroom practices to ensure all learners would experience success in their language and a success upon which they could build. Curriculum for Excellence delivered the perfect vehicle for this change through its framework for assessment, BTC 5. We began a process of self-evaluation by measuring our current performance against the indicators in 'How good is our school' (3rd edition) and using the reflective questions in BTC 5. Regular discussions about learning and teaching as well as peer observations facilitated the process of change as we worked together as a team to achieve our goal. We wanted all learners to have positive language learning experiences and we believed that the embedded practice of formative assessment would enhance our pedagogy and give our pupils greater ownership of their learning; thereby increasing motivation to continue with their language beyond the broad general education. Formative assessment became firmly rooted in our daily classroom practice and many of the assessment techniques developed informed the learning and teaching in real time and reflected our flexibility of approach to the delivery of languages as we used instant feedback from pupils to lead the learning. All staff were invested in the practice of formative assessment; success criteria, thinking time, self and peer assessment tasks, show-me board activities, no hands up, questioning techniques, exit passes, problem solving activities, amongst many others which have since become regular features of our classroom practice. We also built regular learning checkpoints into our courses to encourage learners to identify what they could do and guide them in developing next

steps to support their progression. We knew our approach to encouraging learners to take ownership of their learning was effective when our pupils started to assume leadership roles in the classroom, began asking to correct activities, looking for opportunities to explain their learning to other pupils, setting their own homework tasks and asking relevant questions. Benjamin Franklin describes it best: *'Tell me and I forget, teach me and I might remember, involve me and I learn.'*

Finding the opportunities: *Vive le français!*



As previously intimated, as a consequence arising from the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence secondary schools began changing their curricular models to ensure that learners would experience a broad general education in their first few years at secondary. This change was significant in the context of modern languages, as learners would no longer have to continue their language study beyond the BGE phase to certificate level. Additionally, during this period of adjustment, a number of modern language departments saw their period allocation for languages in S1-S3 reduced as well. In St. Thomas Aquinas, we had the full support of the senior leadership team and were fortunate to retain our 3-period allocation in S1-S3 for Spanish with an exit point at the end of S3. We were delighted! However the challenge of reintroducing French into the curriculum remained. With personalisation and choice as one of the seven principles of curriculum design, we believed that it was essential that young people in our school had a choice of languages which would create a learning pathway towards language study in the senior phase, if they so desired. With all staff being dual-language qualified, the skills were there to place French firmly back into the curriculum. Following a formal discussion with the head teacher in the January of my appointment, and through school evaluation procedures, it was clear that everyone would welcome any initiative that would allow our learners the opportunity to experience French as part of their broad general education. Thus, our journey began – *Vive le français!*

Discussions in the department led us to the decision that the best plan of action would be to create a taster course for our S2 learners. We then gave them the option of studying French in S3 in addition to their study of Spanish. To ensure this was a successful project we had to consider carefully how we would deliver this course and its content. With the statements below taken from *How Good is Our School 3*,

- 'Our learners are motivated and eager participants in their learning.' (HM Inspectorate of Scotland, 2007: 22)
- 'Our programmes and courses are stimulating, challenging, relevant and enjoyable' (ibid: 27)

at the forefront of our thinking, we began to plan a three-week programme for all learners in S2.

Our vision, from the outset, was to provide an experience of the language that would meet the needs of our learners as well as be enjoyable and engaging and consequently one would which would motivate learners to choose French as a subject moving into S3. We therefore decided to design a programme of work that would reflect a balance of language and culture, culminating in a final whole-year activity. This would allow our learners to celebrate with the school community their learning and la culture française! We were extremely pleased with the results of our project. Following evaluations, it was clear that our taster course had achieved our aims, with many of the pupils commenting positively on the cultural aspects of the course. The event at the end of the taster helped to promote French amongst pupils further and promoted our status as a Modern Languages department. Interestingly, French became the 'novelty' language; some of the learners involved had only ever experienced Spanish and therefore enjoyed the exposure to a nouvelle matière. The positive experience also resulted in over twenty pupils opting to study French in addition to their study of Spanish in S3. The range of learners in the class showed that we had captured the imagination of many through our taster programme. Most pleasingly of all, the young people in that particular year group would drive us towards delivering for the first time the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages four years later.

We successfully used the model pilot to promote French as the second language for another two years, until the opportunity arose within the S2 elective cycle to give our learners their full entitlement to L3 in the BGE. From session 2015/16, all learners have received an additional 20 hours of language in S2 as outlined in 1+2 language policy.

Finding the opportunities: Making the curriculum structure work for us

Curriculum for Excellence gave schools greater autonomy in deciding curriculum structures. Senior leadership teams made decisions on the number of columns and in which one(s) languages would feature for learners moving into the senior phase. When Standard Grade examinations were in place learners would study eight subjects however with CfE, many schools changed the number of certificate classes to seven and in some cases six, and of course, languages were no longer compulsory. In St. Thomas Aquinas, learners were in a structure of seven and the place of languages within these columns would be critical to our uptake. The senior leadership team in the school gave us the opportunity to explore through the learner voice where best to place languages; consequently, Spanish appeared in two columns and French in one. The placement of the second language was extremely important as often we would lose dual linguists to science and therefore the option for learners to study both sciences and languages was made available. Discussions with senior leadership teams on the place of languages in the curriculum are thus clearly essential to positive uptake into the senior phase.

Finding the opportunities: Learning beyond the classroom

Our courses provided our learners with a wide variety of opportunities to explore Spanish and French culture through music, film, literature, food, and festivals. However

to really exploit the cultural references we had to look beyond the classroom. We therefore organised regular trips for our pupils to local Tapas and French restaurants. These were and continue to be popular nights where pupils have the chance to socialise outside school with their classmates and teachers in settings where they are immersed in the language; restaurant staff communicate in the language the pupils are learning and encourage them to respond in the appropriate language. When opportunities arose for learners to visit the Alliance Française or participate in the Multilingual Debate at Heriot-Watt University we signed up. Again, these were enjoyable experiences where learners were able to see the importance of languages and in the particular case of the debate, how they link in with the world of work. Our French breakfast takes place annually and has been an additional opportunity for our learners to take their learning out of the classroom to enjoy a croissant, *pain au chocolat* and a *jus d'orange*.



We also wanted learners to experience the culture by visiting the country and consequently introduced a Barcelona trip. This was a chance for our learners to take the language they had been learning in the classroom and use it in a real life context therefore the first trip was launched in 2012. This has been a highly successful venture and S6 pupils often cite this in their yearbooks as the most memorable experience of their time as a pupil at St. Thomas Aquinas. Both pupils and staff enjoy the Barcelona trip, and it has become a feature of the life of the school.





Effective marketing meant that languages became a popular choice as an area of study in the school. Pupils who had participated in the school trip we led every year to Barcelona were keen to explore other Spanish speaking cultures. In response to their interest, we investigated possibilities. The most suitable destination for a range of reasons was Nicaragua. Pupil involvement in the expedition required them to engage with their local communities to help raise funds to participate in this great opportunity. These events were attended by parents, staff within the STA learning community, and local councillors. The expedition itself was a life changing experience. As part of our itinerary, we spent 5 days in one of the poorest communities in León in Nicaragua. We gave pupils the task of building a stage for the first high school graduation, and they spent their afternoons leading activities for the children in the primary school. This was an invaluable experience for our pupils as they were able to contribute and actively engage with another community using the language skills they had been learning and have a greater understanding of their role as global citizens. This expedition also further raised the profile of languages in the school and local community.



More recently we invited the Scottish European Educational Trust into the school to promote the 'Our Europe' competition (now rebranded as 'Our World'). All our S3 learners were encouraged to submit a storyboard around the themes provided by SEET to enter the competition. Many of our teams organised time to meet outside class to create their storyboard and 12 entries were submitted. While only one of the entries was successful in making it to the next part of the competition, our learners were motivated to work together outside the classroom to complete storyboards which supported the message that languages are important. Of course, we were delighted when our young people received the 'Peer Choice' award at the Scottish Parliament for their final video entry 'La gente hace Glasgow'.

We have also been in an extremely fortunate position where we have been allocated language assistants on an annual basis. Whilst only having a few hours of their time, the experience of communicating with a native speaker has been invaluable to our learners as they learn to engage and communicate in the language they are learning outside the class.

To improve uptake learners need as many opportunities to use their language in contexts outside the classroom therefore as we move forward as a team we will continue to provide our learners with as many as these opportunities as possible.

Finding the opportunities: Change of culture

La diligencia es madre de la buenaventura. – Miguel de Cervantes

Recently, while out at a careers' fair in my seconded role as a Professional Development Officer with SCILT, an S2 pupil asked me, "What is the point in learning a language?" In his mind, he had the figure of approximately 1,000 hours of his time to learn a language and wondered whether it would really be time well spent.

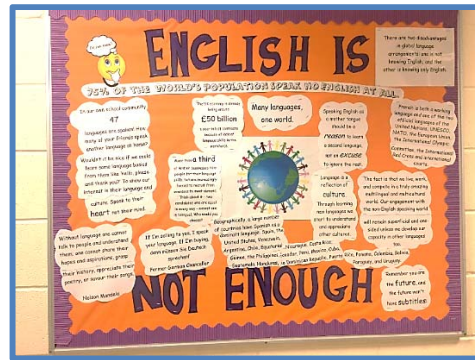
His question highlighted the fact that languages DO take time to learn and naturally, he sought reassurance that his effort and hard work would be worth it. Changing attitudes towards language learning and convincing learners of the many benefits they will bring is a challenge with which many language teachers may identify. How do you market the place of languages in a curriculum for the 21st century to pupils, parents and staff? In St. Thomas Aquinas, we had successfully done this through our learning and teaching as well as through experiences that took learning beyond the classroom. However, we had one additional strategy up our sleeves.

'Registered teachers ensure their classroom or work area is safe, well-organised, well-managed and stimulating, with effective use of display regularly updated.'
(GTC Scotland, 2012: 16)

A prime location on the first floor of the school building, through which many pupils, staff and visitors, pass regularly, provided us with the perfect opportunity to promote our department through our wall displays. In his book 'Strategies for Closing the Learning Gap' Hughes talks about the importance of the physical learning environment in classrooms and highlights its significance with this quote from a Modern Languages Teacher:

'When they walk into my room, they'll walk into France. They'll see, hear, smell and 'feel' France. They'll speak French, they'll feel French – they'll almost be French.' (Hughes & Vass, 2001: 89)

For me this quote captures the critical importance of creating an environment that motivates and inspires young people to learn languages; the environment has to be immersive and this includes the physical environment. As a team, we want to ensure that our corridor displays celebrated language learning through displays of pupil work, photographs of events and information that promote the benefits of learning a language. These displays provide a window to the department, they reflect the learning and teaching, support the ethos of the classroom and celebrate pupil achievement. Moreover, in the department at St. Thomas Aquinas they are a fundamental part of our advertising campaign – Vive les langues! We update the displays regularly and there is a folder in the department where we store photos of our wall displays.



A further strand to our advertising campaign has been to promote languages to our parents. As language teachers, how often do we hear parents say the words ‘I couldn’t do languages at school’? We recognised as a team that we needed to identify opportunities to change some misconceptions held by parents around language learning. There were a range of events organised by the senior leadership team where parents could visit the school and individual departments. These events allowed us to speak to parents directly and highlight the learning and teaching of the department. We created departmental brochures, which parents could take away and gave out copies of pupil course plans so they could track their own children’s language progress.

‘As a result of our family learning classes, families have increased aspirations as individuals and as a family.’ (Education Scotland, 2015: 40)

More recently, we organised an event that brought parents into the classroom with their children so they could experience a typical language lesson. Studies show that parental engagement has a large and positive effect on children’s learning. We therefore knew it was essential that we engaged and promoted language learning to parents. Parents involved received this event positively received so this is something upon which we will build in the next school session:

“Thank you for such a lovely experience, wish I could go back to school now!” (Parent)

A change in culture and attitudes towards language learning is essential to ensuring high uptake in the senior phase so we do need to ‘sell’ languages to all.

Finding the opportunities: **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore



I remember the words of the headteacher in my previous school, *'There is nothing more important than the way we treat each other.'* While there were many jokes, even by him, about how often he repeated this phrase, there is much truth in that philosophy and this phrase was always in my mind. When I was appointed to the post of Principal Teacher, I wanted to ensure that I would be the type of leader who would inspire not just through my enthusiasm

and commitment to language learning but in the way I treated those around me. I held the belief that the success of the department would rely on my ability to build positive working relationships with both staff and pupils. I always considered myself very fortunate to be a member of the team at St. Thomas Aquinas Secondary and perhaps from the outset this was evident to both pupils and staff and therefore a positive starting point. There was a wealth of experience in the department and it was in my recognition of this experience that I began to build a rapport with the members of my team. At this time of educational reform, it was important that I led an inclusive approach to change in the department, which had to include a clear rationale for any actions to be taken forward. As already cited, I used key national documentation, *'Building the curriculum'* and *'How good is our school' (third edition)*, to support change AND improve uptake. With national changes to curriculum, we had to review all our courses from broad general education through to senior phase but we had a shared vision. Through the departmental improvement plan, we shared the workload, discussed and monitored our progress and using a visual display we ticked off each task as it was completed; we were a team. This spirit of collegiality fostered a strong teaching and learning environment in the department for all learners, where they felt respected and well supported in achieving their language goals and therefore motivated to continue with their studies into the senior phase.

Concluding Thoughts

Uptake of languages in the senior phase of St Thomas Aquinas is testament to the positive learning experiences and language opportunities received by pupils and the success of courses we developed. For session 2017/18, we successfully secured eight senior classes: two Higher Spanish classes, four National 4/5 Spanish classes, one Higher French and one National 5 French class. Nevertheless, uptake remains a challenge. Education is never stagnant. Every year the young people who come through our department are different and we have to sell the benefits of languages through our pedagogy, experiences and environment that must continue to evolve and change with our learners.

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Appendix: Former Pupil Testimonials

The gratitude I would like to express to the Modern Languages Department at STA is nothing shy of overwhelming. The study of modern languages at school is itself embedded in communication and all of the staff there truly epitomise the importance of communicating with their pupils. They consistently went above and beyond with talks, presentations, games, outings, trips and language related activities to really show us young learners where languages could take us. Now years on I know none of it was bravado – I'm on an exciting and diverse career path which I would never change. I put it down in part to years of never-failing support and encouragement from an outstanding group of teachers at STA. Even now as an undergraduate student I know I can always rely on them. **Marc Finland studying French and Spanish M.A. Hons at the University of Glasgow**

I studied both French and Spanish in St Thomas Aquinas, continuing Spanish to Advanced Higher level, whilst simultaneously undertaking the Scottish Baccalaureate for Languages during my final year in the school. This was an invaluable chance to combine the academic curriculum with personal research, allowing me to explore questions about language learning and equipping me with critical skills in preparation for university where I now study Spanish and Linguistics. The department as a whole was an incredibly supportive environment, not just in terms of SQA qualifications, but also in all aspects of school life and beyond, particularly in their continuous encouragement of my university application. I feel incredibly lucky to say I am a current undergraduate at the University of Oxford, and am hugely grateful to all of the STA language department for the part they played in granting me this opportunity. **Catherine Smith studying for a B.A. in Spanish and Linguistics at the University of Oxford**

