

Teaching Languages in Further Education

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As a Language teacher in the Further Education sector for the past fourteen years I would describe my job as challenging, varied, satisfying, interesting, frustrating on occasion, but never dull.

At a time when languages seem to be in decline across the sectors, but in particular in Further and Higher Education, there is a need for our very survival to look for new opportunities.

Traditionally in Further Education the 'bread and butter' of the Language Department has been servicing. To the layperson this means the provision of language courses, normally of a vocational nature, to students on full-time courses, for example students of Travel and Tourism, Business Studies etc. However, in our College languages are only a compulsory or core subject on our Travel and Tourism courses and are an option on only a small number of other courses. For this reason the majority of full-time students do not have the opportunity to choose a language. Of the relatively small number who do have this opportunity it requires, first of all, the support of the Course Leaders and secondly, fairly vigorous canvassing of the students themselves. If you add to this other problems such as the reduction of options on courses or pressure on departments to teach as many of the subjects within the department and you can see the precarious nature of servicing. To rely solely on servicing, therefore, would be synonymous with terminal decline so we have to constantly look for other opportunities for languages.

Ideally departments that have a mix of servicing and their own language courses are in a far stronger position. In our department we have a number of part-time NQ courses including a very successful one-year Spanish Immersion Course which feeds into our Higher and Advanced Higher Courses. Our part-time courses tend to attract more mature students, but can also accommodate students from the College's Highers Programme. We are currently developing a new one-year beginners course aimed at the use of language skills at a basic level in the work place.

In addition to our traditional courses we have a very healthy evening programme offering conversation classes in five languages as well as certificate classes in Spanish and a Community programme which involves our staff travelling to Community Centres within the area to deliver language programmes to eager learners.

Commercial activity is now a crucial area financially for Further and Higher Education Colleges and we have had moderate success in the last six years in obtaining contracts from local companies for language training, providing courses tailored to specific needs. This is an area which we would like to develop further with the support of the College Business Unit.

This diversification of activity is essential for the survival of languages, but we also require support such as government initiatives with financial investment to promote language learning, a will on the part of management, course leaders, staff in general, learners themselves, industry and finally the inclusion of languages as a core subject in our national curriculum. It is simply not enough to say that languages are important and represent a skills shortage in industry; we have to do something positive about it. Language teachers and lecturers work tirelessly to try to win some of these battles and will continue to do so for a long time to come.

On a more positive note, the bright side of teaching languages in Further Education is meeting students aged from 15 to 80 from a wealth of backgrounds, experiences, many of whom are fired with enthusiasm, some lack confidence, some have to be coaxed, cajoled, perhaps even nurtured, some have poor past experience of education, some are returning after a long break from either work or school, some have difficulty understanding they must attend regularly. Yes, it is a challenge, but when a student tells you, 'I used to be hopeless at languages but this is great' you know why the struggle is worthwhile.