

Creating Links with Business and the Community

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Abstract: The falling number of candidates choosing a foreign language past S2 has been an increasing problem in many Scottish secondary schools. I wanted to find an appropriate, straightforward and low-cost solution for my department that would help prepare my pupils for the global market. Involving local international businesses provided part of the answer.

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Introduction

One of the aims of the new Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) is to create or expand links between learning & teaching, the world of work and the wider community. However, I can selfishly admit this was not my priority. My major goal was to deal with some of the issues that have plagued many modern languages departments over recent years i.e. those pupils, parents, and, let us be honest, senior management teams, who question the relevance of learning a foreign language in a 21st century secondary school.

Personally, I think that, for example, the holiday aspect of learning a foreign language has sometimes been overused and is not a strong enough argument for our youngsters. Many go to Florida or to Spanish Costa resorts where it is easier to find a café advertising full British breakfast than to indulge in a plate of paëlla! I really wanted to focus on the advantages of being able to handle a foreign language in terms of business potential and/or better job prospects, and demonstrate what is happening right on our doorstep. After all, for most young people, money often talks more loudly than any other incentive. Therefore, whilst I was still in post at Keith Grammar School, I decided to look around our area and find out how much foreign languages are used in Moray. I had no idea how big the potential would turn out to be.

First steps

I started by writing to the local distilleries, which seemed the most obvious choice in Moray. The Glenfiddich Distillery replied that they would be happy to help.

As I wanted to start my links with local businesses on a small scale, I focussed on a previous Higher class. With the help of a newly acquired link – Brian Robinson, head of the visitor centre at Glenfiddich - I organised a private guided visit of the distillery in the target language. It was an opportunity for my students to ask questions about the job and for the guides to showcase how much they use their language skills at work. We learned that guides are paid more here than in other local distilleries because being able to cite foreign language skills on their CV is a requirement. Native English speakers are

often not aware that many tourists coming to Scotland (or the UK) have little English and certainly not enough to understand the complex terminology of whisky-making. Following the tour Brian Robinson gave my students a presentation about the business, and explained to them how being able to converse in a foreign language – even as an ice-breaker – can make or break business deals abroad.

Mr Robinson suggested I meet with Ludovic Ducrocq, the distillery's brands ambassador. Ludovic started his career as a guide at the distillery and worked his way up to his current position. Whilst his ability to speak three languages may not have been the overriding factor in his career path, it was definitely an asset. I met Ludovic two weeks later and video-recorded a ten-minute interview about his job. I now use the video as part of an incentive to continue studying languages with my S4 class, just at the time they make their course choices. They particularly enjoy the sequence when Ludovic describes his job when abroad: flying business class, staying in fancy hotels, dining in the best restaurants and then presenting the products to potential buyers. Breaking the ice or conversing fluently in the local language can make the difference when faced with stiff competition.

A few months later, I organised a private visit to Strathisla Distillery, but this time with our S3 pupils. They were welcomed and guided by Ann Miller who is a brands ambassador for Pernod Ricard - a French owned company. I got in touch with Ann thanks to a parent who worked there. Again, following the private visit, Ann gave the pupils a presentation about her job and the role of languages in her business. She also highlighted the fact that she got the job thanks to both her selling skills and her ability to speak several languages. Indeed, this made the difference between her and the other candidates.

Soon after, I managed to organise a talk from Steve Hutcheon of Highland & Islands Enterprise to our S4 classes. I had obtained his contact details thanks to Ann Miller of Strathisla Distillery. He was able to give us an overview of the use of languages in all the companies based in Moray. He talked about the wide variety of local businesses using languages in Moray. In addition to the distilleries, there are Baxters, Walkers Shortbread, Johnston's Woollen Mill, a fishery, plus other smaller companies that export. All employ people with language skills. He explained that these companies often find it an advantage if a secretary or a salesperson has another language. Indeed this can save them a lot of money on translation of documents and it makes trading more appealing when the companies make the effort to speak in the customers' language. The potential foreign buyers do feel individually catered for and it instils a sense of trust in the trading company.

Continuing the links

When I moved to Elgin Academy in August 2009, I decided to bring along with me these business contacts I had made while at Keith Grammar School, since both schools are located within the same authority. Elgin Academy holds an international week in October for all S2 pupils. I decided to celebrate it by inviting local businesses to talk

about the international potential on our doorsteps in Moray. I simply used the contacts I had and in the past two years we have been lucky to hear from representatives of Walkers Shortbread Glenfiddich Distillery, as well as Highland & Islands Enterprise.

We gathered all the S2 pupils into the assembly hall where they listened to the presenters, asked questions and at the end of the session, in groups, they noted what they had just learned on post-it notes and pinned them all on a board. The representative from Walkers explained how her language degree meant that she had been put in charge of international trade, which also meant she got to travel to various destinations worldwide. Brian Robinson from Glenfiddich Distillery confessed that had he chosen a foreign language during his secondary school instead of chemistry he would not have missed out on so many opportunities to travel for business, whilst his polyglot colleagues left for fancy destinations. The feedback from our pupils was very positive. They had obviously understood the message that ‘English is *not* enough’.

Involving charities

On the theme of creating links with the community and learning in context, my S3 French classes study life in the Democratic Republic of Congo one period each week for two months. They watch online videos and look at websites in French.

They learn about the culture, the history, the geography, and the current crisis within the country, mostly through the medium of French. The original idea of the Congo came from a video and booklet compiled by SCIAF (Scottish Christian International Aid Fund) which was published a couple of years ago.

The reason I mention this project is that I took it further and contacted one of the charity’s coordinators – Clea Fergusson- who appears on one of the videos. In it, she describes in French what her job is all about and how her knowledge of French has helped her meet people in the various countries she has visited through her work.

To make the whole project become even more meaningful, I emailed Clea and asked if she would be willing to come and speak to our pupils about her job and experiences, which she agreed to do in June. In the meantime, I involved the Modern Studies department in our school, thus turning it into an interdisciplinary project.

Creating relevance for S1 pupils

Finally, I had to think about a new approach to our S1 course in line with the new Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) guidelines. I predominantly wanted the course to be relevant, coherent and show progression, in accordance with the principles of the new curriculum. I therefore thought of a theme that could be developed throughout the year. I have kept more or less the same topics as before, but they are now all taught in the context of: *You are staying at your parents’ luxury hotel in Elgin, and you experience and share your life there with the hotel guests.*

For example, our S1 pupils no longer learn the different rooms in a house, but instead must describe the different rooms of a hotel for inclusion on a website or leaflet.

Clearly the vocabulary is very similar, but by putting it into a work context it becomes less tedious and – possibly even more importantly – less personal. Indeed, the outcome of being able to describe the rooms in a hotel sounds slightly more useful to me than *'telling your pen-friend what there is in your bedroom'*. What 12 year-old would describe their green rug to another 12 year-old in a real situation? Why would they?! Pupils have to be more imaginative if they are to become effective contributors to their community.

One of my colleagues pointed out that 12-year-olds might not be au fait with how luxury hotels work. I took this on board and wrote to the Mansion House Hotel, a four-star hotel situated a short distance from our school. The management agreed to welcome each of our S1 classes in August for a tour of the hotel and to answer potential questions. Thus every S1 pupil starts with the same background knowledge about luxury hotels – whether they have been to one before or not. They find out what businesses there are just five minutes down the road from their school.

Each time a topic is taught, pupils are asked to think back to that visit in August so they can keep the topic in context. Their first assessment is to welcome and get details from foreign guests arriving at the hotel. This obviously involves the usual introductory vocabulary in French or German, but they also learn what qualities and skills are expected of a receptionist in a luxury hotel: smiling, standing straight, maintaining eye contact, speaking loudly enough to cover lobby noise, pace of voice, etc. They are now not only learning a foreign language, but also skills for work.

The next assessment will involve creating a leaflet in the target language about the hotel. Each S1 pupil will produce their own version, which will be both teacher and peer-assessed. Then, groups will be formed to try to create the best leaflet, which will be chosen by a panel consisting of the hotel manager, a member of the Senior Leadership Team and the Advanced Higher French class, in the course of a Dragons' Den type of event. It is hoped that the selected leaflet will be printed and colour copies made to go on display at the hotel for the foreign guests to use.

Final comments

Sustainable links have now been created with local business, and the pupils have a course that is linked to their community, with vocabulary put into context and therefore relevant to their future. The above examples demonstrate that with perseverance, and perhaps a little bit of luck, it is possible to create strong, meaningful links with businesses and the community, thereby increasing motivation for both teaching and learning a foreign language. Unsurprisingly, these links were praised during a recent HMIE inspection.

I would suggest the following strategies: make use of the resources that are available (staff, parents, local companies, etc.) to create a network of people who use languages. I found it relatively straightforward to get companies and people on board and to build up contacts. I found out by chance that our local MP, Angus Robertson, is a keen German speaker and he offered to come and teach some German songs in the target language to our S2 classes later this year.

The success of the initiative can be demonstrated by the fact that, in neither Keith Grammar School nor Elgin Academy has a second year pupil asked why they should learn a foreign language. The figures speak for themselves: uptake in S3 and S5 has increased by 20% and over 30% respectively. Is that a coincidence? Of course, it is too early to conclude if these initiatives will have an impact on attainment. Although the latter was not my primary aim, I believe that if pupils see the relevance of what they are doing, higher achievement will follow.

