

Report on the University of Birmingham

Modern Languages Networking and Workshop Event for MFL Teachers

Tuesday 3 June 2014

Sponsored by the College of Arts and Law Experience Fund

This one-day event was designed to create opportunities for dialogue and networking between school teachers and university staff, to create a space in which to share experiences of teaching modern Languages and to reflect on how we might better support students in the transition from school to university.

After a welcome by Clodagh Brook, Head of the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Birmingham, and by the event organisers, Elystan Griffiths and Charlotte Ross, the day began with an engaging and thought-provoking address by the key note speaker, Angela Gallagher-Brett, the National Programme Manager for Routes into Languages (Centre for Languages, Linguistics and Area Studies). Angela's talk, entitled 'Languages recruitment, transition and motivation: where are we now?' drew on key documents produced by national bodies confirming the need for qualified language graduates (such as the British Academy's 2014 report *Lost for Words*), on her own PhD research into school pupils' attitudes to learning languages, as well as on several Routes into Languages projects and surveys. She first outlined the national situation: falling numbers of students are applying to study languages, they are mostly female, and the majority come from more advantaged backgrounds. She then spoke about the challenges faced by students as they make the transition from school to university--they are required to work more independently, and to read significantly longer texts in the target language—and the levels of anxiety that students can feel when learning a language, in particular in relation to oral classes and exams. On a positive note, her work with Routes in Languages shows that the enrichment activities that have been running in many schools, colleges and universities across the country do help to encourage students to develop more positive attitudes towards language learning and to consider continuing with their studies. Angela's talk inspired a lively discussion about how we might best begin to confront this situation, for example by emphasising the positive message about the need to language graduates in a range of careers.

This discussion was followed by the first of our themed sessions on 'Sharing Teaching Practice: using multimedia resources in language teaching'. Presentations were made by Marta Simó Comas and Raquel Navas, who both work in the Hispanic Studies section of the Department of Modern Languages at Birmingham, and by Dan Woodvine from the Shropshire Languages Society. Marta spoke about the VLE that we use at Birmingham, Canvas, and how it helps to promote learner independence, confidence in language learning and a reflective attitude, through functions such as self-assessment study tools. Raquel then shared some of the ways that she uses multimedia in teaching, including Padlet, an app that can be used on students' mobile phones, which she has used in teaching to encourage interactive activities. Dan shared some of the ways in which he uses games to stimulate student participation and inquisitiveness by fostering a sense of competitiveness in a

relaxed atmosphere that dissipates some of the anxiety around speaking another language. Many of the games he uses he has created himself using power point and free online software.

The second themed session was devoted to 'Sharing teaching practice: developing speaking skills', with presentations by Dorothee Sachse and Ruth Whittle, from the German Studies section at the University of Birmingham, by Juany Murphy from Warwickshire College, and by Hannah Valenzuela from Heartlands Academy. Dorothee spoke about the 'radio project' her first-year students prepare over the course of four weeks on a topic of interest to them. She described the benefits of the students being able to record their work multiple times out of class, which enables them to overcome their inhibitions and to receive feedback from other students. Ruth then outlined some of her strategies for encouraging critical reflection on the part of her Year 2 students on her Business German course, which include, amongst other things, student blogging and the opportunity to give and receive feedback to one another. Juany outlined some of the resources she uses in her classes, including ver-taal.com and podcastsinspanish.org, which enable her also to introduce cultural knowledge to the MFL classroom, and to support her students' listening skills with transcripts. Hannah then outlined the time pressures on her teaching, which can lead to speaking skills getting lost. She argued strongly in favour of the importance of speaking skills on the basis of recent research into learning processes, and outlined the benefits of asking students to brainstorm and then script a short clip. These included activation of prior knowledge, reinforcement and the promotion of collaborative learning.

The third themed session on the theme of 'Teaching Modern Languages through Film' featured presentations by Stephen Forcer and Elystan Griffiths, from the French and German Studies sections at the University of Birmingham, from Laura McCutcheon (Bromsgrove School) and from Deborah Smail-Ross (Solihull Sixth Form College). Stephen gave an overview of his teaching experiences in teaching French film at various levels, including reflection on the challenges of developing students' formal analysis and the broader issues of encouraging students to engage with unfamiliar and often provocative material. Elystan spoke about his experience of teaching a Year 1 course entitled 'Modern Germany: History and its Images', where he tries to develop students' skills in formal analysis of film alongside their knowledge of the historical periods in question. He also outlined some of the challenges and opportunities, particularly in the area of vocabulary learning, which the course had presented. Laura gave an overview of her experience of using film in the classroom, and presented lots of ideas for using shorter clips from films in a productive way for students' language acquisition. She also outlined some of the resources she has found useful in preparing film teaching. Deborah's presentation outlined how she has tried to link film teaching to grammar revision in her own AS German classes, and shared examples of how she has linked film teaching to students' work on the film *Das Wunder von Bern*.

In the final session Sophie Gavrois, the outreach co-ordinator for Routes into Languages and other activities organised by the University of Birmingham, presented details of our annual programme of events; then the session was broadened into a plenary discussion of how to move forward, while maximising the momentum gathered during this event. We decided to create an online space in which to store and share materials that had been presented during the day, and to set up an email discussion forum. We also agreed to make this an annual event, perhaps scheduled towards the end of June in future, and to build our network to include more school teachers, including primary teachers.

We would like to extend our thanks once again to all those who attended the event, and especially to external visitors who made presentations. It was an extremely interesting and productive day, which allowed us to begin forging links between university and school teachers of languages, and to develop a greater awareness of the different challenges we are facing, and how to share our resources in order to tackle them as effectively as possible. It also gave university staff an insight into the experiences and skills that our students have developed before they arrive at university, which will enable us to think about how we can best build on students' prior knowledge. The development of a better communication network, as determined in the final session, will help us to share ideas and discussion opportunities for collaboration between workshops.