

Try lingual

Markos Tiris, from the National Teaching and Learning Change Programme, explores developments in language training...

We can all see the value of learning languages. Knowing a foreign language helps us to understand and learn from each other, and facilitates work, study and travel in an increasingly globalised economy. To support key values of democracy, equality, transparency and competitiveness, the EU Heads of State and Government have set a long-term objective for all EU citizens to speak two languages in addition to their mother tongue, and 56% of Europeans can already speak one additional language. The European Commission's research through Eurobarometer surveys has found that the vast majority of Europeans believe that knowing foreign languages can be useful, and recognition of the benefits is increasing. What's more, intercultural dialogue is a day to day reality for most Europeans, with two-thirds of respondents able to recall interacting with at least one person of a different religion, ethnic background or nationality than their own in the week prior to being questioned.

Language skills give employers and employees a clear competitive advantage in a global market. With the growing influx of migrant workers, the business community has also recognised a need for language skills to communicate more effectively with the workforce. Though languages are increasingly important for work, a survey of language service providers to business carried out by BLIS in 2005 found that group training for larger organisations is on the decline in the UK. There are more requests for localisation and cultural training services as a

consequence of increased globalisation, but there is a shift to coaching on an individual basis, and distance learning.

In the UK, 81% of those surveyed by Eurobarometer believed that knowing foreign languages is or could be useful for them personally, and yet the majority of the population (62%) indicated that they did not know any foreign language. Communicating the importance of language skills to all sections of the population is essential for increasing take-up. Lord Dearing's Languages Review of 2007 suggests that employers have a role to play in promoting the value of language skills for business, and giving stronger market signals to young people about language skills and employability.

Businesses place value on speaking and listening ability in several languages, and cultural understanding, particularly in markets where they are selling goods and services. The Institute of Directors has suggested a GCSE for schools covering several languages, set in a business context, to help people in business develop their working relationships. More flexible language courses with international and business orientations, and the development of basic competence in the spoken and listening elements of several languages are preferred to knowing a language in-depth. The challenge for language training is to find new ways of engaging learners more readily.

With this evidence in mind, the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) has developed a number of innovative resources to stimulate improved teaching and learning in Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) as part of the National Teaching and Learning Change Programme (NTLCP). The Government established the NTLCP in 2003 as part of a long-term investment in reforming the further education system to enhance economic growth and to increase social mobility. Working with colleagues in adult learning, colleges, prisons, schools with sixth forms, sixth form colleges and work-based learning, NTLCP aims to transform the quality of teaching, training and learning by embedding excellence in practice and supporting the professional development of the sector's workforce.

The NTLCP consists of three parts, known as 'enablers', to ensure learner success: teaching and learning resources; subject coaching networks; and a Professional Training Programme. At the heart of the programme is the learner. Subject learning coaches provide an essential 'glue' between these three elements. They attend the subject networks where they share good practice and develop coaching skills by completing the professional training programme; they then use these skills in conjunction with



the QIA resources to transform teaching and learning, and make changes to practice in their organisation. Subject learning coaches are also encouraged to lead action research projects in order to maximise the impact of the three enablers and share their findings in their virtual community of practice: the SLC community.

Resources available to practitioners include support for developing their practice of initial assessment and imaginative suggestions for starter, main and plenary activities. Bernard Sénier, Network Development and Delivery Advisor at the Learning and Skills Network (LSN), leads the national MFL networks and works with over 800 centres. He explains that the resources have really made a difference: "Since we launched the resources two years ago, teaching and learning in the sector has been transformed, with a positive impact on the engagement and retention of learners. The injection of new ideas has been inspiring for practitioners and enabled them to meet the needs of learners more effectively."

One popular resource based on a soap opera has been a huge success with practitioners as it inspires them to develop imaginative communicative activities. Initially a poster-based resource featuring a block of flats and a conference centre, it allows the practitioner to use activity prompts and character cards to facilitate role play and discussion embedded in the context of everyday interaction or the business environment. The flexible nature of the resource has enabled practitioners to develop activities suitable for their learners.

Now the resource has been extended to increase practitioners' familiarity with e-learning. Soap opera video clips in French, Spanish, German, English and, soon, Italian are provided as a stimulus for role play. Each clip ends on a cliffhanger, allowing the learners to imagine possible outcomes. An interactive storyboard creator is provided to enable learners to build the resulting dialogue between characters and record their audio. Teachers can customise activities and environments, and use the resource – known as Cliffhanger Studios – for a wide range of creative language learning outcomes.

Hilary Hall, Executive Producer for Illumina Digital, who produce the NTLCP resources on behalf of QIA, comments: "This is a very exciting resource for teachers as it provides a stimulating way to immerse students in languages and encourages spontaneous role play. The resource was planned to ensure that every level of



MFL resources can include e-learning in the form of user-friendly computer software

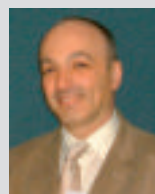
language expertise could benefit, and so provides the facility for teachers to personalise and customise activities at every stage." Early feedback from teachers using the resource has been excellent. A teacher already using the resource in her classroom says: "It enables students to use many skills, take the initiative and use their imagination."

So, although there is a long way to go to meet the EU's foreign language objectives, those of us involved in the development of these new resources really feel that they will meet the needs of learners, and have the desired impact of improving the quality and extent of language learning in time.

Resources are available to download from the QIA Excellence Gateway at <http://excellence.qia.org.uk/>.

The MFL resource can be found at <http://teachingandlearning.qia.org.uk/#mfl>.

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