



Interdisciplinarity: A sharing of practice

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1. Introduction

I teach foreign languages in a school where one of the main pedagogical focuses is the interdisciplinary work. We call these sessions “workshops”. The workshops are created with a pair of teachers, one of the characteristics of these innovative classes. I particularly enjoy getting to know how a fellow teacher works in his field of study, seeing a colleague handling a classroom with routines or personal tricks that are different of my own and above all, preparing a lesson as a team. This is one of the main dimensions, which makes teaching interesting, rich and fun. It is in that spirit that I wanted to write this paper: as a sharing of practice.

For years, I have seen many workshops of different kinds and objectives. I am amazed by the creativity and the intelligence of the teaching crew in my school. The gym and physics teachers with a workshop about shapes and strengths and the required forces for the balance of a human pyramids, the art and philosophy teachers about advertising while making the students create their own ad campaign whose prints were funny and beautiful, the geography and science teachers about the floods in Belgium studying the why’s and how’s of these natural catastrophes... all these examples show the possibility and the diversity of pair working. As for foreign languages, I will focus on three workshops for this paper: one about “Justice” with the social sciences teacher, another about “Beer” with the science teacher and a last one about the “2016 US election” with the social sciences teacher.

The key into creating a workshop is to maintain a certain pedagogical focus. Both teachers must exploit the skills of their subject but the activities and the evaluation must put the learner in a position where he must use the skills of both disciplines. Hence the questions: How can interdisciplinarity be an asset or an obstacle for the foreign language learning? What are the limits of interdisciplinarity regarding a language course?

2. Diversity, pleasure and motivation

The interdisciplinary classes break the walls of the more traditional classes with one teacher for one subject. As I have shown in the examples above, the diversity of the themes is large. This is a first major asset. In an interdisciplinary class, the language teacher has a comfortable role. Indeed, the foreign language classes allow you to travel and cover a large range of subjects: personal traits, history, geography, science, politics... The interdisciplinary class with a foreign language helps the student work about subjects he would not have in a traditional class, a picture which legitimates the study of a foreign language to motivate the learners to open themselves to the world, to people and to cultures.

It is also important to note that working in pair teacher puts each one in a learner position as both must answer the needs of the students regarding any question about the studied subject.

The interdisciplinary courses are a tool to make the foreign language live differently in the classroom. The studied idiom can be used to analyse scientific texts to solve a problem in biology or chemistry. The language can be used for communication purposes: creating election ads when studying the US election with the sociology teacher. And finally, the language can be mobilized in a social and cultural objective (e.g. still in the case of the US election workshop, meeting young Americans and breaking the students’ representations). Putting aside the theory and the grammar, interdisciplinarity has a more pragmatic approach of the language learning.

The workshops also allow the learner to exploit his strengths and weaknesses in both subjects. This is an important source of pleasure and motivation as interdisciplinarity helps the learner to create bridges between both subjects. For example, during the “Justice” workshop, we decided to study a real case



from the media. The idea was to analyse and understand the Belgian justice system, then the English one to replicate the trial in the Crown Court under a role-play. The skills for social sciences: understanding the law, the institutions and identifying the types of infractions, the roles of the members of a tribunal... In English: understanding the actors and what is at stake for them when reading an article from a British newspaper, being able to interact in a fake trial while respecting a role... During the trial, I have seen students who are not at ease with the speaking skills taking important position because the social science subject really interested them. At the opposite, some learners comfortable in English made sense of the law and the justice system thanks to the study of authentic sources in a foreign language. The pair working settles a comfortable environment in the classroom because the learner is in a position where he lands in uncharted territory while having the necessary beacons to find his way in the unknown.

3. Avoiding multidisciplinary and full immersion

One of the main difficulties of the workshop is creating activities which really mix the skills of both subjects. Interdisciplinarity means that the learner must really work with both subjects and not by both subjects. The slide to multidisciplinary is to be avoided. As a foreign language teacher, the margin is very narrow. The use of the native language is well often needed to have a deeper study of the other subject. For example, in the “Beer” workshop, during an activity about the ingredients, the concept of pH solution was explained for the water. This kind of very specific input was commonly decided to be done in French to make sure the students understood well these necessary concepts for their chemistry curriculum. The difficulty relies in maintaining a class where the foreign language makes part of the activity.

The logic is to follow the final objective of the lesson. During the “Justice” workshop, the objective was the role-play at the end in English. Some activities about the Belgian justice system were done in French as it would have been too difficult to realize in a foreign language and because it did not make sense to do in English. As soon as the social sciences inputs were done and to avoid an approach too multidisciplinary, it was important to quickly switch back to an activity where they would compare both systems in the target language.

Another error would be that the course becomes a full immersion class. Some schools offer classes in full immersion: students learn some subjects in a foreign language (science, history, geography...) completely in the target language. The objective of these classes isn't to learn a language per se but to make the students learn the subjects of a specific field and be able to master the skills of those subjects (understanding a chart, reading a map...). We move away here from the interdisciplinary approach as the language learning skills are not identified or evaluated.

4. Feedback and (auto)evaluation

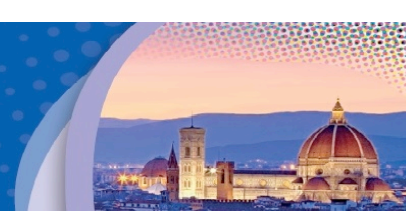
As it is just pointed out, the students must have a clear representation of the learning objectives. The remaining challenge of the interdisciplinary classes mixing a language is to point what is really at stake during these lessons. Students can often be confused on what they must learn and miss the opportunity to grow from these lessons. For example, during the “Justice” workshop, the students had to portray a role during a trial. The objectives were to gain the necessary vocabulary and to use the narrative tenses to be able to express themselves fluently and spontaneously. Many of them did not focus enough on the grammar and more on the case. They ended up having difficulties during the trial despite a very good role preparation.

It is therefore interesting to highlight the learning objectives for both disciplines and to give them a feedback, which illustrates the achievement (or not) of the skills of both disciplines. This feedback must be used in the “traditional” discipline course. For example, still about the “Justice” workshop, it became necessary to revise the past tenses during the English classes.

It is also highly important to allow the learners to draw personal objectives after an auto-evaluation in the feedback process. The objectives can be worked during the discipline classes and emphasize the importance of what has been done during the workshop.

5. Conclusion

The interdisciplinary classes in pair teachers offer a large possibility of subject to study. It is very rich to share the practices with a colleague, to learn about a new subject and to push the limits of your own discipline. Mixing courses help the learners to find motivation and pleasure thanks to their pre-owned strengths or affinities with the subjects.



As for language learning, it is clear that the teacher's job is to allow the student to improve his language skills and to learn new knowledge but it remains challenging to keep the language ever-present. Nevertheless, the interdisciplinary sessions are highly interesting to make the language alive in the classroom without having to focus on theoretical inputs. With a proper definition of the learning objectives and a clear evaluation grid, the learner will find his way into his work.

On conclusion, having pointed out the challenges and the advantages of language learning through interdisciplinary lessons, I am convinced that the collaboration between teachers, the fact of pushing the limits of different knowledge and skills from several school subjects help the learners to improve and raise motivation into learning in general.