

Foreign Language Teaching and ITS

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Ms Ruth Azzopardi (front row, first on right) with a group of ITS students while on a visit to France

Languages are important both for personal enrichment and for extrinsic gains. They help individuals to communicate within and across cultures, to foster an understanding of, and respect for, diversity and to develop literacy skills and cognitive and critical thinking skills. Within the Hospitality Industry, multilingualism is also essential to find employment and further career prospects. Multilingualism is today considered to be one of the key elements of a modern Europe, given that learning foreign languages permits citizens to enrich their lives, to grasp new ideas and to benefit from European cultural diversity. Being a vocational educational institution, the Institute of Tourism Studies (ITS) can

be perceived as a bridge between the classroom and the job market, providing students with necessary skills and attitudes to boost employability. In the field of adult education, the ties between the world of practice and institutions of higher education or vocational colleges have been discussed in various contexts (for example, Tran and Soejatminah, 2017; Tucker 2019). In the case of language education, students are encouraged to learn that investing in a foreign language could mean an investment in a career.

Languages are integral to almost all courses at ITS. As a teacher of French in a vocational institute, my primary concern has generally been that of transmitting linguistic skills to students with rather specific needs, such as using the language in settings associated

with food and beverage services, hospitality and tourism management or tour guiding. The task of making education relevant in a language class involves: carrying out a needs analysis about the specific places of work that students are training to work in, preparing vocabulary lists, phrases and grammatical structures that are regularly used in specific situations, helping to improve listening and speaking skills that could catch the attention of potential employers or broaden career options locally as well as overseas.

Foreign language teachers also have very specific professional development needs - they need to have language skills as well as cultural knowledge, and keep track of changing teaching methodologies and the use of online and other technologies in

the language classroom, particularly now that the pandemic has made so many educators rethink their pedagogies. In other words, language teachers need a high level of proficiency in the language as well as a sophisticated preparation in pedagogy and ICT, including blended learning and other forms of contemporary instructional design (Toci, 2016).

All language teachers at ITS prepare their own programmes, schemes of work, lessons, and so on. They also prepare all forms of assessment schemes, examinations and decide about criteria for assessing students. There is no fixed programme established by an administrative body at ITS. Even the number of credits dedicated to a specific language in a programme on a yearly basis may change from one year to another.

Teacher competences are quite specific to foreign language teaching at ITS. Important skills, knowledge and attitudes for teaching a foreign language at ITS include an awareness of industry needs and the manner in which the tourism industry operates. Language teachers are also expected to have a good knowledge of communication techniques, linguistic skills, and a good sense of communication. Apart from their expertise in one or more languages, language teachers in an institution like ITS also need to possess skills related to tourism and how to deal with tourists.

Language education is time-consuming. One of the challenges faced by foreign language teachers at ITS is that students come from different educational backgrounds and levels of linguistic preparation. Students with special needs offer very specific challenges for teachers. Students expect all language teaching to be relevant to their specific careers and to combine practical aspects with more theoretical concerns. In order to reach a broad range of students' requirements,

language teaching at ITS addresses a variety of skills, including public speaking, general communication skills (fluency), lexical range, familiarity with diverse media, grammar, creativity and cultural awareness. The latter component (cultural education) forms an integral part of language teaching. The amount of cultural education in foreign language teaching at ITS varies between courses with limited contact hours and more extended courses, which usually present a more explicit inclusion of cultural aspects in lessons. Cultural education is not merely additional material but serves as a window onto other cultures, often helping students learn more about their own culture as well as language skills. One should know the culture of another country in order to understand native speakers (like tourists) more fully.

A language cannot be studied in a geographical or cultural vacuum. While the learning of foreign languages would seem to be aimed primarily at the possibility of communicating with those who possess a different mother tongue, this very possibility brings learners into direct contact with cultures inhabited and experienced by themselves and/or others. Encountering a foreign culture during a language class thus implies learning how to shift one's own position, expectations and ideas in line with another culture. Once we start to relate the learning of a language to the wider cultural sphere, we enter an area fraught with political dilemmas, cultural hierarchies, and even violence suffered by linguistic minorities. Many language teachers and examination syllabi seem to recognise the importance of incorporating cultural competence into the language classroom and, by implication, they also recognise the inadequacy of methods that focus exclusively on grammatical and communicative competences. Most educators working in the field of language will readily accept or champion the idea that learning a language is not simply a case of acquiring skills in the use of verb

tenses and new vocabulary but should include some element of cross-cultural understanding. Idiomatic expressions in a foreign language are not only 'different' because they reflect linguistic foreignness but also because they are one of the constituents of cultural differences.

In conclusion, language teaching in a VET setting needs to be understood as a holistic process that takes account of linguistic skills as well as cultural aspects that impact on and construct linguistic worlds. Simulated experiences specifically geared for languages have already been introduced at ITS while work placements in other countries help to expose students to foreign languages in real contexts. ITS can continue to build on its strengths by developing more community projects that help to shift the focus from economic work to social work. ITS can also consider occupational clusters rather than single vocational disciplines. This would increase students' knowledge base and interests as well as boost their employability and ability to adapt to different life situations. The ultimate benefactors are our students as they continue to participate in meaningful language and cultural activities.

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