Expanding Horizons for Modern Language Education in Schools

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My background in language teaching

• Cultural Revolution in Beijing, China – no formal schools
• Started learning English at 15, and became an English teacher at 18 before going to university
• Taught Chinese for 2 years at Newcastle university; worked as a bilingual teaching assistant; taught Chinese A-level at a complementary school
• Also taught English to adult ESL learner; and history tutor
Confucius philosophy about teaching

• 因人而异 yin ren er yi
• 因材施教 yin cai shi jiao
• 因地制宜 yin di zhi yi

• Vary the way you teach according to the person you teach
• Teach in a way that best suits the ability of the learner
• Teach in a way that makes the best use of the circumstance/context/material available
• Stop looking for the ‘right method’ because there isn't one. The best method is the one that suits the learner’s needs and improves the learner’s learning.

• As teachers, we have to know the learners, understand the context and then plan using a principled and evidence-based approach.

• Try things out, and share stories of success with others.

• Local grassroots initiatives are the way forward rather than centralised directives – there is no one-size-fits-all.
T Kens know their pupils best

Teacher-led and learner-centred curriculum innovation and pedagogical innovation are what we need, not policy-directed review after review; and no quick-fix

No place for ideological, theoretical and methodological dogma

ITE has a duty to ensure that our outgoing teachers have been exposed to a range of theoretical perspectives that they can evaluate critically and apply accordingly and have on-going access to their providers once they begin their careers to continue to experiment and grow in confidence.

University-based ITE crucial! Teachers are thinkers and innovators.
• The importance of keeping the content, and the pedagogy, of MFL teaching fresh, by
  • making them more interesting and enjoyable,
  • connecting them to the real life experiences of the students,
  • having more varieties of the contents, and
  • making cultural learning central to the language curriculum.
• Great to see the teaching community’s reactions to the GCSE review.


• Empower the teachers to play a central role in curriculum and pedagogy innovation – a collective message to DfE.

• Broadcast the success stories in MFLs in schools in some of the most socio-economically challenged areas to reinforce the notion that languages really are for all.

• Highlight cross-curriculum benefits and convince our colleagues in other subject areas too.
Cross-curriculum benefits

• https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/cognitive-benefits-language-learning/
Changing demography of school pupils

• Learners come to us as literate language users with many transferable skills
• We need to move away from models that fail to capitalise on the skills, interests and experiences of our learners
• We need to find ways to foster their capacity for autonomy
• Nurturing curiosity to help them learn more about themselves and the wider world is key
Pedagogy of vulnerability (Edward Brantmeier)

• Open yourself and contextualize that self in societal constructs and systems
• Co-learn, admit you don’t know and be human
• Take risks: risks of self-disclosure, of change, of not knowing, of failing
• Value the knowledge, values, and insights of all involved
• Unlearn cultural conditioning, and dismantle asymmetrical power relationships
Co-learning: from vulnerability confidence

• All knowledge (in all languages) is valued
• Reciprocal value of knowledge sharers
• Care for each other as people and co-learners
• Trust
• Learning from one another
Decolonising education/curriculum/pedagogy
Open up to Eastern philosophies; pedagogies of the Global South; Asia as Method
• Ask ourselves:

• What can we learn from modern foreign language education in other countries, including ELT (the biggest ‘foreign language’ in the world) in Europe, Asia and elsewhere?
• Don’t let any ‘theoreticians’ tell us practitioners that we can’t do theory!

• Mao (1937) ‘On Practice’ - dialectical-materialist approach to knowledge acquisition: knowledge is wrought through practice.

• Theory is based on practice and in turn serves practice.

• The process of theorization, or knowledge construction, involves a perpetual cycle of practice-theory-practice.
A ‘Practical’ Theory

• A practical theory goes for a holistic account of the practice.

• The theory should provide a principled choice between competing, alternative interpretations that inform and enhance future practice.

‘Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language’

• An important assessment of the value of a practical theory is the extent to which it can ask new and different questions on both the practice under investigation and other existing theories about the practice.

• It is also useful to recognize that practices can be of very diverse natures; for instance, the academic practices of knowledge production which include the purposes of the research articulated in specific socio-historical settings, language practices by the language users being studied, and professional practices such as language teaching in different social contexts.
Working together

• Collaboration is key; the pandemic forces us to think *why* collaborate and *how* we collaborate

• Working across ITE, teaching community, and university and teacher training agencies, research community

• Working across disciplines and subject areas
Thank you

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