

## Helen Hill's Development Work **Empowering students in language learning** at The John Warner School, Hoddesdon

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Helen is subject leader for Italian at The John Warner School. She sees language learning and cultural awareness as inextricably linked so she had set up links with two schools in Italy. She wanted her students to take more active roles in language lessons but they seemed to lack confidence to do this. She consulted key colleagues and devised a plan to work with one of her Year 8 groups and focus on ways in which students could be encouraged to speak Italian more frequently and confidently in lessons.

Helen began by asking her students to tell her their views of Italian lessons and also to make some suggestions as to how to make language learning more fun. She was surprised by the negative responses she got from some students. Helen herself had been enjoying the lessons and assumed that the students were also. They made a number of suggestions as to how their lessons might be improved, including working with partners and being given the opportunity for more speaking practice.

Although these suggestions were already quite obvious to her, Helen made it clear to students that their comments were invaluable in helping her to develop the curriculum. She followed up these initial responses by talking informally and in more depth with a small group of students. Helen then adapted the Year 8 scheme of work taking into account the students' perceptions and suggestions. Her adaptations included:

- bringing in items of clothing with Italian labels – students used this stimulus to practice their vocabulary through discussion activities
- giving students 250 'virtual' Euros and asking them to 'spend' this on Italian clothing stores' websites to clothe a family of four
- encouraging paired work with activities such as card sorts
- asking the students to plan and stage a fashion show with the compere's script in Italian.

Helen asked students to help her to chart their progress as she used the new scheme of work and found that they believed they were learning more effectively. To do this they completed the progress checker below on a weekly basis. They gave themselves a score of 1 if they thought they had fully achieved the objective described in the statement, 2 if they had partially achieved it and 3 if they had not achieved it at all.

*Figure 1: Year 8 student progress review checker*

	1	2	3
I learnt five new words / phrases			
I can remember at least three new words			
I spoke sufficient Italian this lesson			
I am happy with my progress			
I enjoyed the lesson			

This tool was successful both in encouraging students to see themselves as partners in learning with their teacher and in building their confidence by making their achievement more visible.

Following discussion with her Head of Faculty, Helen looked for further strategies to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. She investigated the use of the internet to support active language learning (Dudeney, 2001). She looked into the way in which Wikis were being used to support language learning in other Hertfordshire schools. It seemed that a Wiki can provide an excellent way to showcase students' work and a safe way to stimulate a dialogue about learning. Helen set up a Wiki for her students which they used to share work with one another. She then looked into how she could develop its use to allow dialogue between students at The John Warner School and young people in the partner schools in Italy.

At the point at which Helen compiled evidence of her development work, it was already clear that students' learning and their enthusiasm for Italian had been enhanced. She also reflected on the fact that the project had changed her own views of her subject.

*I found that the project re-awakened my interest in my subject. I started to look at new ideas and resources and consider how I could use these in my every day teaching.*

At that point, the full impact of Helen's project had yet to be realised. She was determined to find further ways to involve students in the development of their learning. She shared an account of her development work with teachers at her own school and at a regional 'Strategic Learning Network' to enable others to build on what she had discovered and to get feedback from a wider circle of colleagues.

## **References**

Dudeny, G. (2001) *The internet and the language classroom – a practical guide for teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.