

# “Students engage in lessons with confidence”

At the Anglo European School, creating a positive environment enables exceptional language learning to happen

Most of us can still recall an embarrassing faux pas or two from our own school days, and as educators it becomes clear that modern foreign language (MFL) lessons, with their emphasis on speaking, role play, comprehension and response – all conducted in the target language – provide above average opportunities for self induced embarrassment.

Discussions might arise, for example, in a German lesson, around a pupil's choice of verb, ‘kann’ or ‘darf’, when seeking permission to go to the toilet. Selecting the wrong verb might bring about the dry response, “I hope you can go to the toilet – but do you mean to ask whether you may?”. It sounds a lot like the sort of reprimand our parents or grandparents might have given us as youngsters; but there is a real difference in meaning for German speakers – so it is important to explain this to learners. In a Spanish lesson, meanwhile, a pupil might seize upon a ‘false friend’, like ‘embarazada’. Intending to say that she is embarrassed, she in fact tells the class that she is pregnant. Cue laughter all around.

Mistakes like these are common, and a necessary

part of language learning. And while they won't all create as much amusement in the classroom as these examples might, the way teachers deal with such errors can make a huge difference to the child's, and their peers', attitudes to language learning going forward.

## An active approach

We mustn't let mistakes slide. After all, we don't want pupils on an exchange visit in Spain telling their host families they are pregnant if they are not – so we need clearly to identify this sort of error for the whole class to learn from. But, it is really important to create a classroom environment in which mistakes can be identified without learners feeling dejected, and without pupils rejecting the pursuit



of language learning entirely, as a result of feeling that participation is too difficult and risky.

At Anglo European School in Ingatestone, Essex, we do a few things that enable us to create an environment in which language learning is celebrated, rather than feared or scorned, and our successes are achieved within the usual financial and resourcing constraints of being a state school.

## Everyone learns languages

While we agree that it can be difficult to achieve the top grades in foreign languages, we don't think that is a reason to opt out – there are too many benefits for pupils, and the UK, associated with language learning. Our priority is to equip pupils for their

lives beyond school, so all Year 7 to Year 11 pupils are required to study two foreign languages to GCSE.

We are entirely happy for sixth form pupils to stop learning the languages they have taken at GCSE; many will be satisfied with the level of proficiency they have reached and so, instead of progressing the language to a higher qualification, they might prefer to take an entirely new language at introductory level. This is fantastic, as they will then have access to three or more foreign languages!

## We give students ownership

To ensure our ‘languages for all rule’ remains attractive, we provide a broad enough range of options to enable pupils to take ownership of their learning, by choosing which they study.

There's no denying that this presents resourcing and timetabling difficulties, and some of our MFL class sizes end up being quite small. But we are committed to offering a genuine, baccalaureate style education. In the sixth form this is delivered through the DP, but the



IB's philosophy permeates through the school: we strive to ensure all pupils benefit from a broad and balanced curriculum, with an international and citizenship focus. Cutting costs on the breadth of languages we offer is not an option for us.

Essentially, all pupils begin their language GCSEs by the start of Year 8, and this long-term approach delivers success – both in building confidence but also in terms of examination results. We use the first couple of years of the pupils' time with us to go through the basics. For instance, we instil a language's phonics, grammar and vocabulary; run pair/small group

exercises; are tactical about firing questions at pupils in front of the whole class, instead visiting groups to check pronunciation; and do dictation exercises, or ask pupils to check something on the board and report back to a partner who writes it down. This all ensures that by the time students reach their teens, they already have a sufficient grasp of the language to engage in lessons with confidence, without the fear of embarrassment.

## We encourage exchange visits

Every year almost half our pupils will undertake a foreign exchange visit – going abroad to stay with a host family, immersed in

the language and culture, before welcoming their foreign exchange partner to stay with them in return. All who want to go, go: we financially support students who otherwise couldn't afford it; we allow young people to participate who in other schools would not be allowed because of poor behaviour. Exchanges offer such vast benefits. Like the Apollo 17 mission's full-view photo of the earth (for the first time), pupils experience a different view of the world, and a different routine, and this year we're looking forward to putting on our first Japanese exchange.

One of the reasons we are able to run so many exchanges is because teachers of all subjects are asked, at interview, to verbally commit to going on exchange visits to any one of our 20 partner schools abroad. Whether they speak the language or not, rubbing shoulders with our linguists and experiencing the challenges that our pupils face on such visits is key, as is having the capacity to chaperone the number of trips we run! We have an international office, which organises the practical aspects of all of our exchanges – home and away – which is an extra, but essential, cost to the school.

## We attract and retain the best teachers

We are a truly baccalaureate school in the original sense of the word. We were also the first state school to adopt the DP, in 1977, which has meant that IB values have permeated the school for the past four decades. Because we sincerely value all subjects equally, it follows that all of our members of staff feel valued equally.

At a time when school budgets are squeezed to breaking point and head teachers are making heartbreaking decisions

about timetabling and staffing the arts, humanities, sport and languages, we are exceptionally proud to be able to make the bold claim that we hold all subjects in equal esteem – and apportion timetable time accordingly. This is not without difficulties – for instance, our science and mathematics teachers are teaching their subjects in fewer hours than their peers in other schools – but the reality is that in valuing all subjects equally, all should receive equal attention, funding and resourcing.

## We apply for additional funding

All of our decisions have financial implications, and it's always difficult to fund everything we would like. Everything costs money, and of course, schools across the country are currently underfunded.

One way we have been able to offer a broader range of languages is through accessing external funding. With Arabic being added to the sixth form extra curricular programme from this year, for example, we were thrilled to note that we now offer all five of the official United Nations languages, and we receive additional funding from the Qatar Foundation to support this. We are also one of only two state schools in the UK to be part of the government's Mandarin Excellence Programme, which seeks to develop fluent Chinese speakers, and for which we also receive funding.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**  
David Barrs is headteacher at the Anglo European School, Ingatestone, where Cate Peeters is head of languages.