

Works for the boys

How the Love Language project is reversing the trend for male students to drop languages

A few years ago, I heard two teenage boys, not known for their academic ability, speak what seemed (to my untrained ears) to be fluent German. Only after a while did it dawn on me that they were using erotic language. The repetition in the material they had viewed had obviously proved successful! This made me realise more clearly than ever that if someone has an interest in the topic, they will learn with an unmatched eagerness and the foreign language will embed itself more naturally.

The Love Language project, aimed at addressing the gender imbalance in language education that sees more than twice as many women in MFL education as men, was born after I mentioned this story to my colleagues on another language education project. Although erotic material was deemed inappropriate, the partnership of 13 adult education, counselling and vocational guidance institutions in 13 European countries was able to identify plenty of alternative interests to stimulate young male learners.

Co-funded by the European Union's Grundtvig Programme, the two-year project, which ended last month, was designed to help young male adults with "foreign language learning resistance" to find a "love for language". After health, language is the second highest female-dominated area in education. In some areas, the ratio is as high as 3:1. Men are much more likely to drop out of language courses.

Although there has been some research into the reasons why there are relatively few male language learners, little is being done to address the discrepancy. Research shows that men do not find language courses interesting, and that they often consider them to be oriented towards "female" subject matter. Men frequently associate language learning with "feminine" roles and many young male adults do not consider language learning to be "cool".

Love Language developed a handbook and toolbox of adaptable lesson ideas and materials, which can be used by teachers and trainers to motivate male students, based on these findings. Its target group was young male adults who have not integrated well into the education system and are considered to be at risk of dropping out. The concern is that a lack of MFL education reduces the possibilities for these disadvantaged young men to participate in wider society, access information and enter the European labour market.

Aimed at teachers and trainers interested in understanding language learning from a psychological basis, the handbook includes an overview of different methodologies and tips on dealing with – and motivating – problematic learners. There is an emphasis on personal development, self reflection and aspects of conflict management and resolution, plus information on how to create a positive learning atmosphere, social skills training, self-directed learning (ie putting learners in control of their learning), team-building and addressing vocational issues. The toolbox contains "male-focused" lessons, using typically male interests such as sport and cars.

Initial success

In autumn 2007, several modules from the toolbox were tested by four Love Language partners: the BEST Institut für berufsbezogene Weiterbildung und Personaltraining in Vienna, Città della Scienza in Napoli, Volkshochschule Cham for migrants in Germany and Godalen Videregaende Skole for people with disabilities in Norway. Altogether, 82 disadvantaged young men took part, with positive results.

Among the most popular modules were those that involved listening to music in English and using the internet. The Austrians described English chat rooms as "really cool" and the Germans enjoyed playing computer games in English and surfing the internet, while the

Italian trainers reported that the use of technology and competition generated a more effective response. Watching films in English was rated highly by the Austrian students, who also enjoyed watching football games on Sky sports. However, there was little interest in the sports topics among Norwegian and German students.

On the whole, trainers reported that the contents of the toolbox met the whole range of individual interests and that the topics were motivating to students. However, tasks were considered to be too long, and students were not able to concentrate for more than 20-30 minutes.

Some modules were too difficult for most learners, but abilities varied between the institutions. The German and Italian students preferred writing and reading tasks because they were "afraid to speak foreign languages", but the Norwegians found the speaking tasks easier. Although the Norwegian trainers felt that the modules could be taken directly into a school setting to use with young men who were at risk of dropping out, the Italian teachers were concerned that many of the units would not function well in an Italian school context. It was suggested that the toolbox could also be used for special teaching courses for young adults who have already dropped out of school.

Overall, the pilot scheme was a success, and every institution concluded that interest-focused teaching was the only way to reach the target group. Changes are now being made based on the feedback from this pilot, and lessons will be significantly shorter and less difficult in the new version.

In July, the results of the pilot were announced at a free one-day conference in Bradford, organised by the UK partner, Careers Europe. The evaluation from the professionals who attended the event was encouraging, with many describing the day as "inspiring", "useful", good for lower ability, relevant to the real world and full of ideas and approaches.

There were talks on a range of subjects, including the use of technology and sport to motivate learner in the language classroom, and Careers Europe now hopes to make this an annual conference. However, since the Love Language project ended last month, there is some doubt over future funding. Volkshochschule Cham, the German partner, has put in a bid for an extension of the project under the name YELL (Young Europeans Love Language), and a decision is expected from the Grundtvig Programme soon.

Conclusions

Although Love Language was aimed at adult males, the themes could be used with all ages, subjects and sexes. The principle lies in using material that interests the learners. The pilot suggests that if students of any sex, background or age are to focus on learning, they must be interested in the subject matter.

Getting students to talk about the things they really love can also improve student-teacher relations and make for a better classroom environment. The feedback from the Bradford event suggested that teachers want practical ideas, inspiration, confidence to try new things and support in dealing with "difficult" students. The Love Language handbook and toolkit aims to give teachers the tools, training and confidence they need to present language learning in a fun way. The intention is not necessarily to improve marks, but to enable teachers to convey their love for languages to students, using subjects that the students love, in order to improve uptake and retention.

For further details of the Love Language partnership or to download the handbook and toolkit free of charge, visit www.love-language.org. For information about the Careers Europe event, including the text of the presentations, see www.careerseurope.co.uk.

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