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Community languages, the arts and transformative pedagogy

Jim Anderson and Yu-Chiao Chung

Consistent with the goal to pass on heritage to the next generation, teachers of community languages always build a strong cultural focus into their teaching. This often includes an arts dimension, such as work around festivals and traditional tales. This article, based on qualitative research in four London schools in 2009-10, explores different ways of incorporating an arts focus into community language teaching and the importance such work has for the children's learning and confidence.

The study draws upon democratic and universalised understandings of creativity as espoused by the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE) (1999) and reflected in the recent revisions to the National Curriculum (QCA, 2007). There are close links between this approach to creativity and a socio-cultural view of learning which is also relevant (Craft, 2005). Such a view prioritises process over production, emphasises the importance of social and cultural context and seeks to establish links to learners' prior knowledge and experience. This holistic approach accommodates cognitive and affective factors and recognises the importance of learner agency in building confidence. It also recognises that creativity is a culturally saturated term and that significant differences have been identified between Eastern and Western perspectives (Fryer, 2004).

There are good grounds for believing that use of art works as a stimulus for learners' own creativity are particularly valuable for those from a bilingual background. Given the greater mental agility found to characterise bilinguals from a young age, it is important to incorporate activities which draw on and enable learners to extend this ability. One way creativity is manifested in bilingual communication is how bilinguals switch between and mix their different languages. This phenomenon, now commonly referred to as

'translanguaging', is a strategy which can facilitate the introduction of different perspectives, cultural nuances, emotional dimensions, even humour (Garcia, 2009). More fundamentally, the different cultural worlds inhabited by bilinguals simultaneously, and the interrelationships and tensions arising from them appear to be an important stimulus for the creative impulse.

We believe that, as well as enriching and deepening the learning experience for those studying community languages, arts based work can empower learners by legitimising forms of knowledge which tend to go unrecognised within mainstream discourse. However this presupposes pedagogical approaches which are transformative in orientation and may not sit easily within traditional frameworks.

Settings for this ethnographic study were two mainstream schools (one primary, one secondary) and two community based complementary schools where Arabic, Mandarin, Panjabi and Tamil are taught. Data was collected on a series of three arts based tasks carried out in each of the four settings. Some background on the four schools, including the tasks carried out in each, is provided in the table below.

A striking feature of the project has been the range of arts based work that teachers incorporated into languages lessons: painting, story, song, dance, drama, puppetry and film-making. The choice of art form reflected the strengths of the teachers, but also the interests of the students. For example, the idea at RACP to create a dual language (Panjabi-English) comic book based on the 'Happy Families' drama – which had been devised and scripted by students – came entirely from the students themselves. They saw this as an effective means of getting their message across to members of their community.

School	Task A	Task B	Task C
Sarah Bonnell School (SBS) (Mainstream secondary girls' school in Newham) Class: Yr 7/8 (Students from diverse backgrounds, but mainly beginners in Arabic) (Age 11-12)	Art work integrating images and text (Exhibition)	Dual-language storybooks (Presentation in local primary school)	Puppet Show (Performance in class)
Downderry Primary School (DPS) (Mainstream mixed primary school in Lewisham) Class: Yr 3-6 (After school) (Age 6-10) (Tamil)	South Indian Dance based on song stories	South Indian Dance based on song stories (Performance in school assembly and local Tamil community event)	Drama and digital film-making based on song stories (Presentation in class)
London Mandarin School (LMS) (Mixed primary-secondary complementary school in Hackney) Class: Yr 1-3 (Age 5-7) (Mandarin)	Song based on three word chant	Scrapbook (Slide show posted on school website)	Drama (Performance in school talent show)
Rathmore Asian Community Project (RACP) (Mixed primary-secondary complementary school in Greenwich) Class: Yr 3-12 (Age 6-17) (Panjabi)	Drama (Performed for school and community members)	Drama & Dance (Performed for school and community members)	Dual language comic book (Presented to school and community members)

Also significant is the range of ages and attainment levels covered in this project and the contribution arts based work can make to a wide spectrum of learners. It is a common misconception that students who have a background in a community language and culture are fully competent and require little support to develop their skills. In fact, given its importance both in education and socially, English rapidly becomes the dominant language for most students and across the generations competence in the community language can easily fade – particularly their literacy and higher order cognitive functions. However, as well as supporting students' linguistic development, teachers of community languages are also aware of their role in acting as mediators between cultures and the importance of enabling learners to feel a sense of pride in their mixed identities. This means drawing on learners' lived experience rather than on essentialised notions of the culture of the country of origin.

In this short article we cannot possibly describe all the work carried out in the four schools. However,

the key strands to emerge from the range of video, interview and other data collected offer examples which give a picture of some of the tasks and students' responses to them. The key strands identified and briefly discussed relate to:

- language and literacy
- cognition
- intercultural understanding
- personal and social development
- pedagogy and professional development.

Language and literacy

Given the perceived shortcomings of both traditional approaches to second language teaching and of so-called communicative methods as applied in the UK, the importance of treating language as a medium for learning rather than as an end in itself is now clearly understood. This means giving more careful consideration both to contexts for language learning and the tasks students are set. Hence we are seeing, at both at

primary and secondary levels, renewed interest in using creative works, such as stories and drama, to engage learners and provide an appropriate level of cognitive challenge. Our study locates itself within these developments.

Data from interviews carried out with students and teachers about language learning supports the view that deeper learning occurs when language is embedded in a rich context which allows personal and affective associations to be made and encourages the building of mental images. Such culturally imbued images represent powerful elements in the generation of thought and imaginative processes, and can be important for bilingual learners in mediating between different cultural worlds (Datta, 2007). A related point made by a number of students was that they remembered new words more easily when these met a genuine communicative need rather than appearing in a list to be learnt from a text book.

The data also highlighted ways in which creative tasks can provide scope for bilingual/bicultural students to develop their linguistic and intercultural skills more holistically as an integrated resource. Whilst main emphasis was given to the community language and culture, no artificial separation was made from English or the other languages spoken and this created opportunities for the development of dynamic and syncretic literacies (Gregory, 2008). In two schools, for instance, students chose to create dual language story books, the kind of works that Cummins (2006:60) sees as examples of 'identity texts' because they involve cognitive engagement and identity investment and 'hold a mirror up to students in which their identities are reflected back in a positive light'. Teachers commented on how the work involved here developed students' translation and reference skills as well as their awareness of language, for example the understanding that word order and the cultural connotations of words may be different in different languages.

Also evident in the students' work and from interviews with students and teachers was increased appreciation of the way in which cultural meanings are communicated through different media. At SBS, for example, students learning Arabic produced paintings which drew on

symbolic use of colour and national emblems to reflect their diverse backgrounds, but also incorporated text in Arabic in the tradition of Islamic art. At LMS, much younger children created scrapbook posters on the seasons which combined images with Chinese characters. At DPS the verbal language of song stories combined with the facial expressions, symbolic gestures, body movements and costumes involved in South Indian dance.

The teachers saw that establishing clear end goals that entailed presenting or performing work to an audience was vital. They all commented on the positive effect on the students' skills and their confidence in oral communication and particularly noted how greatly the students who generally struggled with the language or were passive or disruptive in regular lessons benefited from the project.

Cognition

At a fundamental level, the cross-curricular nature of the project enabled students to make connections between different areas of learning, so providing an important scaffold to meaning making. At DPS there was ongoing collaboration between the Tamil language and South Indian dance teachers, with the language teacher supporting comprehension of song stories and the dance teacher enabling their reinterpretation through the medium of dance. Significantly, this led to more kinaesthetic and musical approaches being adopted in language lessons and a more conscious approach to language, including specialist dance terminology, in dance lessons. Teachers commented on increased learner engagement and confidence, which stemmed from their enhanced understanding and sense of purpose. Our interviews with students strongly supported this view.

Across all the schools we observed an emphasis on student collaboration and independent learning. Video as well as interview data revealed how, given a supportive context, creative arts based tasks can stimulate imagination and the generation of ideas. At LMS the traditional story of the 'Monkey King' was reinterpreted by students as the 'Monkey King comes to London', where he met the Queen, Michael Jackson and David Beckham.

Students at RACP devised the theme and ideas of a drama related to an issue they considered important for their community, namely the situation of young women when they marry and in particular the unfair treatment they may receive from their mother-in-law. Once the content had been agreed by the whole group, a script was put together in Panjabi by two of the older students.

Teamwork and collective problem solving emerged as key features in the process of carrying out tasks. The data also revealed that students were able to develop independent reference and research skills, drawing on books and dictionaries as well as web-based resources. At RACP, for example, students involved in producing the drama script searched on the web and in the local library to extend their knowledge about Sikh weddings. At SBS students used the web to find information about different Arab countries, and looked up words they needed in an online dictionary.

Intercultural understanding

The fact that arts related work can provide a natural and engaging context for developing cultural knowledge and understanding is widely recognised and was amply affirmed by our findings. Thus at DPS students not only learnt technical aspects of the classical South Indian dance style *Bharatha Natyam*, but also learnt about its symbolic language and how music and costume contributed to that. More broadly, by drawing students' attention to the ancient dancing Shiva statue, they were able to gain a fuller appreciation of the spiritual dimensions to *Bharatha Natyam* and a sense of its importance in the history of Tamil culture. Similarly at RACP the discussion and research involved in creating the *Happy Families* drama deepened students' understanding of traditional expectations and practices within the family in Sikh culture.

More than simply gaining new knowledge, however, the study revealed how the imaginative world of the arts can provide a dynamic and safe space for engaging with culture and for positioning the self within and between different cultural frames. At LMS work on the seasons in the children's textbook led to them being asked to create scrapbook posters for homework using flowers and leaves from their own gardens. This

provided a natural context for comparing differences between the seasons in England and China.

At DPS students were asked to think of scenes to illustrate moral messages contained in song stories, such as helping others. This emphasis on moral and spiritual appreciation permeates Tamil culture and is seen as crucial to children's education. Ideas included going to the aid of an injured person, offering one's seat in the bus to an old person, and telling off a child for stealing sweets from the local shop. These scenes were then scripted in Tamil, with the support of teachers, rehearsed and filmed by the children themselves using digital cameras.

Personal and social development

The transformative power of the arts is felt most strongly where learners are given a voice in shaping the direction and process of tasks. This requires a willingness to rethink traditional teacher and student roles, to look at curriculum content in more flexible ways, to provide space for experimentation, but also to incorporate ongoing student-led review.

This study provides clear evidence that, where learner agency is engaged and where a sense of collective responsibility and ownership are fostered, levels of student motivation and confidence improve markedly, as does the quality of learning. In the SBS task aimed at creating dual language story books, students requested teacher support to enable them to write more ambitious texts than had originally been envisaged. The teacher was genuinely surprised both by what they were able to achieve and by the pride they took in telling their stories to children at a local primary school.

At RACP tasks were negotiated from the beginning with students and several mothers who became involved. Indeed the headteacher, who led the project there, made clear that it was up to the group to decide what the theme and approach to the tasks should be and also what contribution each student would be making. As observers, we were struck by the purposeful and supportive environment created and in particular by the collaborative ethos as students from a wide range

of ages and attainment levels worked together with mothers and teachers. Importantly, the parental involvement in this project and in the poster task at LMS referred to above highlighted the benefits of drawing on funds of knowledge in the home to support children's learning.

Notably, the students at RACP were actively exploring and giving voice to their perspective on a serious social issue through the varied media of drama, song, dance, writing and drawing. In this sense – and this was clearly within the thinking of the headteacher – the work represents active citizenship in practice, and is something from which mainstream colleagues could learn a great deal.

We hope this article has enriched understanding of the value of arts based work for the learning and teaching of community languages. Our project shows how such work can enable a dynamic and cognitively challenging interaction with heritage and culture, how it can support and extend children's multiliteracy development, how it can empower learners and develop a pride in mixed identities, and how it can provide an effective means of drawing on funds of knowledge in the home. Running through the data presented here are important implications for pedagogy, which involves:

- breaking down curriculum boundaries
- redefining teacher and learner roles
- allowing learners to make sense of art works in terms of their own lived experience
- setting tasks which require generation of new knowledge, develop a sense of agency and give learners a voice
- emphasising process, but working towards presentation /performance
- involving learners in reviewing their work and setting targets for improvement.

Whilst lip service is paid to inclusion and the valuing of diversity, our education system as a whole fails to recognise and support the linguistic and cultural capital within our communities. Findings from this study reveal how arts based work can open up educational possibilities which enable our bilingual learners to fulfil their potential but also provide a basis for deeper intercultural understanding for all learners.

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Further information and resources related to this project will be available later this year on a new Goldsmiths 'Multilingual Learning' website linked to the Centre for Language, Culture and Learning site. <http://www.gold.ac.uk/clcl/>

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