

10 PRACTICAL
STEPS TO
OVERCOMING
MOTHER TONGUE
CYNICISM

BACKGROUND TO MOTHER TONGUE AT THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF MODENA (ISM)

I am amongst other roles The Mother Tongue Co-coordinator at a small international school in Modena Italy, which has only 20 students in the middle school. Despite being small the student population includes 11 different nationalities and we offer 9 languages as mother tongue. We started our MTP in September 2004 and it is still developing and being improved. However to get to this stage I not only had to overcome my initial scepticism of the idea but that of the staff as well.

When I started at ISM in September 2002 I remember there being a staff meeting and it was mentioned that students should spend some time doing work in their own language. I along with all the other staff shook our heads and immediately came up with several reasons why this would be impossible, it was just another ill thought out trendy idea from someone with nothing else to do. I had only been at the school a couple of months and was concentrating on other matters and felt this was not a priority.

I forgot all about this until in November 2003 I attended the ECIS conference in Hamburg and attended a speech about the importance of the development of a student's mother tongue, I then went to a presentation by the MTP co-coordinator of The International School of London which demonstrated how they introduced Mother Tongue. From these two speeches I realized that a MTP was not only very important but also possible and in September 2004 it was introduced at ISM. This workshop will hopefully show how problems were overcome and to show that if a small provincial school can introduce a MTP then most schools should be able to make some provision for it as well.

AIM

The aim of this workshop is to help teachers in schools who are implementing or thinking of implementing a Mother Tongue Programme (MTP). This will be achieved by looking at 10 problems which affect the implementation of MTP and I will demonstrate how we at The International School of Modena overcame or are planning to overcome these problems, there will then be an opportunity for those attending the workshop to contribute their own ideas and then all teachers will be able to leave with practical help and contacts to take back to their own school. These ideas and contacts can be written in the space entitled Key Points and on the summary sheet at the back of the booklet.

WE ARE ALREADY AN INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL WE DON'T NEED MTP THEY CAN LEARN IT AT HOME.

- Most new research shows that all students especially new students need to continue learning in their mother tongue to maintain higher order thinking and prevent students becoming frustrated. Study at home does not always provide the necessary support and students can also feel they are being punished.
- MTP has helped the school show the importance we place on each student's different educational background. Parents appreciated that we recognized this fact and this in turn helped the parents feel more involved with the school.
- We are like most international schools privately funded and MTP has helped give ISM a competitive edge to respond to students and parental needs in a focused and constructive way.

KEY POINTS

WE DO NOT HAVE THE TEACHING STAFF WITHIN THE SCHOOL

- The teaching does not have to be done by staff already at the school. The most important thing is that they are Mother Tongue teachers. Part of the co-coordinator's role is to guide and help the incoming Mother Tongue staff with lesson ideas. The Mother Tongue teacher can then develop the language teaching with the guidance of the co-coordinator.

KEY POINTS

WE CAN'T FIND THE STAFF ELSEWHERE.

- Current teaching staff can cover some but not all the languages so some external support is going to be required. Large cities provide greater options but Modena has only a population of 100,000, yet managed to find help for all the languages.
- One obvious resource is parents and we managed to find amongst them enough teachers to cover all the languages. In addition parents don't necessarily teach their own child, very often parents and their children have different Mother Tongues. In addition, when parents found out about the introduction of MTP they were very supportive and many asked how they could help.
- Even if the parents hadn't have helped, I had enough contacts through talking to parents and language schools to cover all the languages anyway. It surprised me the wealth of languages that can be found in even a relatively small area.

KEY POINTS

IT WILL COST TOO MUCH TO STAFF

- By using parents as volunteers this can help keep costs down. We pay for petrol costs and the parents are more than willing to help as they automatically saw the benefit of the programme and realized its importance.
- Another cost cutting measure is that MTP staff come in every other week, and leave work for students to do the following week supervised by the usual teaching staff. This is not ideal but would cut costs if external teachers were used. The MTP staff concentrate on speaking and listening, leaving written work for the following week.

KEY POINTS

WE DON'T HAVE THE RESOURCES

- The facile answer would be use the internet and we do use this is an important resource. However there can be too much information to use it efficiently and lessons obviously need a focus and it lacks human contact.
- If you do IGCSE's, first language exam papers can be printed off to be used in lessons
- I have found parents more than willing to order or bring in resources from home which students would be using in their own system.
- Some countries such as Sweden have a well developed learning grid over the internet, the parents were more than willing to pay for access to this. A system like this really helps MTP as it is directly relevant to the home education system.
- Our school had hidden resources which had been forgotten about.

KEY POINTS

WE DON'T HAVE A CURRICULUM

- In MTP I have found that you need to be flexible with regard to curriculum. Each language area is following a different path which has been reached in consultation with parents and teachers. At the moment nothing is formally written down, the most important thing was to get started.
- As mentioned Swedish follows the Swedish Education System via the internet.
- Spanish is adapted from IGCSE as a first language.
- The Portuguese students are all Brazilian and parents wanted them to know more about their home country and they are producing a project.
- English students can study Shakespeare which is not always covered during first language English lessons.
- Italian and Latin students are following the course for the Terza Media (Italian Exams at age 14). This is given by an Italian native so replicates the home system.
- Other languages such as German and Polish follow course books from their own system.
- Flexibility and communication with parents are the keys I have found to making the curriculum work.

KEY POINTS

WE CAN'T ASSESS STUDENT PROGRESS

- Teachers are concerned that it would be difficult to assess pupil development and have consistent grading across all languages. I feel MTP does not always need standardised marking as each language is being led by different learning outcomes.
- However this is an area I have highlighted for development. A lack of assessment is I believe not a barrier to starting a MTP, the most important thing is to get the students studying in their Mother Tongue. Once the curriculum is place then the assessment can develop later. Already assessment at ISM is coming out of the work being done.
- In Spanish students were having problems with spelling so more regular spelling assessment can take place.
- Swedish is assessed externally following The Swedish Education Authorities criteria.
- English follows the SATS principles.
- Though this is not taking place this year, projects such as the one being done in Portuguese can be assessed using Middle Years Programme assessment criteria (MYP). In this way language can be separated from presentation.

KEY POINTS

WE CAN'T FIT IT INTO THE TIMETABLE AND WE HAVEN'T THE ROOM

- We timetable MTP all at the same time on a Wednesday morning. This means all staff and rooms are available. We use all rooms including music, science and the art room. This adds a further international element as each language can display its own work in their room.
- The space on the timetable comes down to the importance placed on MTP and hopefully by overcoming cynicism then space can be found to incorporate a MTP. In this respect each school has its own aims and internal politics, which affects its timetabling requirements.
- We cut out one PSHE lesson a week. This provides MTP one 40 min slot a week, which is not much but after a positive reaction from parents, teachers and pupils this could now expand. As we move to follow MYP this will allow us more flexibility in our timetabling and hopefully allow us to provide an extra 40 mins.

KEY POINTS

WE HAVE CHILDREN WITH MORE THAN ONE MOTHER TONGUE

- The choice of language was taken with the involvement of the parents and we asked them what they wanted their children to study.
- One student who is Mother Tongue Spanish and Italian, chose Italian because he will be going to Italian school when he leaves.
- Another student, who is Italian needs to study Latin in order to attend his chosen school, although not strictly Mother Tongue the MTP could accommodate this. This situation would not suit all schools and can lead to complications.
- MTP has been structured with consultation between parents, staff and students.

KEY POINTS

WE HAVE NO-ONE TO CORDINATE ALL THIS. WE DON'T HAVE THE TIME.

- I am also the ESL teacher so I already knew about the educational background of the students and this helped considerably.
- I know we are a small school but it did not take that long to contact people to help. Once parents knew about the idea they were only to willing to offer their help or suggest names of others.
- Once up and running, the teachers started to swap ideas and needed less and less support. I now have to spend very little time administrating MTP and can spend more time on how to develop new ideas such as assessment.
- Events such as this and contacts made here will hopefully make finding resources and fellow teachers to discuss things with much easier.

KEY POINTS

THE THREE KEY POINTS I CAN TAKE AWAY WITH ME FROM THIS SESSION ARE :

1.

2.

3.

EMAIL ADDRESSES

WEBSITE AND RESOURCE INFORMATION