

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

SUE BALMER TACKLES A PAIR OF SUBJECT-SPECIFIC DILEMMAS FROM TS READERS...

Q I was recently appointed as a teacher of languages at a small secondary school in the NE of England. I am a British citizen, but spent many of my formative years in Spain. Spanish is one of the languages offered to our students, alongside French and German (all of which I am able to teach), and having sat in on a couple of lessons delivered by my colleagues in the languages department, I am concerned about the level of competence with which it is taught. Not only are the accents poor, I have picked up on some pretty basic errors of idiom. My question is, should I be concerned, as long as learners are able to pass an exam at the end of Y11? And if so, what would be the best way for me to go about making improvements within the department, given that I am still very junior?

A It is wonderful to have teachers or FLAs in a languages department who can bring authenticity to lessons and to whom staff and students can refer when unsure about an idiom or a slang expression. I hope that you are happy and successful in your new post, but put aside any arrogance. Your passion for the language makes you want the learners to have the best possible opportunities to develop and hone their language skills. You are right to do so, but realise that established staff may not appreciate such early and unsettling advice from a newcomer. Take a back seat and make sure that you are correct in your assumptions or you might raise their hackles! You have only observed a couple of lessons. Your colleagues may have considerable skills and expertise in French or German. You may find that you need their support with the finer points of those



ABOUT THE EXPERT



Sue Balmer is a member of the Executive Council of the Association for Language Learning. With over 35 years' experience as a secondary teacher and AST for languages, she has developed CPD for teachers and managers and led initiatives in international linking. She supports networks of language teachers, delivering workshops and organising events. She is a trainer for teachers' immersion courses in France.

languages or with classroom management, so be sensitive. Knowing your background, the teachers you observed may have been apprehensive, but they welcomed you into their classes nonetheless. Once you have settled in, offer to create and share new resources for Spanish, aimed at increasing students' knowledge of the Spanish-speaking world and culture and at improving accuracy in the production of the language. Share all freely with your colleagues. Use your contacts to initiate links and create real situations for students and staff, leading to opportunities for real communication with Spanish partners.

Q I am head of languages at an academy, and have recently been encouraged by the SLT to establish an after-school 'languages' club. I think it's a great idea, but am struggling to come up with a programme of activities that will keep students coming back for a whole term. We will be covering French and German, and I'd like to appeal to learners from Y7 right through to Y11. So far I've thought

about comparing foods from the two countries, and watching films – but any other ideas you have would be gratefully received!

A An after-school languages club is an excellent idea to give students a chance to relax and enjoy the languages they are learning or want to learn. There are so many activities to choose from, you will be able to enthuse all year groups. Holding the club each week for a term, you will only be planning for about 12 sessions, but plan carefully so that you are never short of enjoyable activities. Start with a quiz about the countries, to get some idea of their knowledge and interests, but don't make it too serious. Include up to date facts about life in the countries, sports personalities or celebrities. Add surprising elements to catch students' imagination e.g. videos of snappy advertisements. Introduce competition, mixing age groups in teams. Comparing foods is a good idea, especially if you can have a tasting or cooking session. In fact, comparing many aspects of the two cultures side by side will be illuminating, as the students will have been learning the languages separately in class. Compare sounds, expressions and proverbs, practising pronunciation and enjoying the fun of tongue twisters. All students like music; introduce them to songs from each country and ask them to vote for their favourites. Use film, but choose short clips with an injection of humour. Shorts, between five and ten minutes, in both languages, are readily available for downloading. And finally, don't forget the quiet youngsters. They will appreciate peaceful moments, reading cartoons, poems or texts and creating their own.