

Learning through wonder imprinting wonder in language learning for lifelong engagement

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Potential impact	low
Timescale	ongoing
Keywords	wonder, outreach events, inspiration, intercultural competence, cross-curriculum links

What is it?

Motivation to learn starts with wonder and the breath of wonder transcending curiosity, which Piaget (1969) defined as the urge to explain the unexpected and Engel (2011) as the urge to know more. When wondering, learners express the desire to know what they do not know, as well as what they already know. In the modern languages curriculum, a language learner who uses ‘wonder’ is driven by curiosity for the language(s); has questions about the place and the people; has a wish to know more about various cultures; and eventually become a lifelong linguist. When we introduce learning design based on the pedagogy of wonder, we implement an approach that allows learners to become agents of their own learning by initiating the questioning themselves. L’Ecuyer (2014) defines the emotional response to this type of pedagogy as a possible consequence of wonder, rather than wonder as such.

McFall (2013) has experimented with the effectiveness of the pedagogy of wonder by designing a five-step process: *anticipation, encounter, investigation,*

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discovery, and *propagation* to allow learners to go beyond the initial awe. Learning through wonder has been effectively used at primary school level in various subjects, but mainly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, and this article illustrates how activities using this pedagogy can offer an opportunity in modern foreign languages.

Example

A practical example of this activity is an outreach event that has been developed by colleagues at the University of Southampton (UoS). *El día de los muertos* (The day of the dead) is a holiday celebrated throughout Mexico which the outreach team at UoS has been using for over a decade as a teaching and learning catalyst event for learners of Spanish.

Local secondary schools and sixth form colleges are invited to share the experience with UoS language staff and students. A whole range of language activities are prepared to be completed on the day but also as take away tasks for further classroom development and practice: quizzes, puzzles, investigations, etc. Outreach activities like this one tend to be more attractive when facilitated by undergraduate language ambassadors, who can add to the excitement by talking about their own travelling experiences in Mexico during their year abroad or a holiday.

Benefits

This type of outreach activity works at its best when set up as a concerted effort between visiting schools and UoS, and using the five-step process described by [McFall \(2013\)](#). In Step 1, teachers are in charge of creating *anticipation* by using links with other subjects including religious studies, history, art, or philosophy.

Teacher and UoS staff both contribute to Step 2, *encounter*, by organising the visit day. [McFall \(2013\)](#) stresses the importance of focusing on ‘how the quest begins’ and, in this case, this is achieved with the introduction of the cultural

and language elements of the Mexican altar (Figure 1) devoted to remembering dear lost ones.



Figure 1. Left: the altar display; middle: objects on the altar; right: Realia from Mexican tradition displayed on the altar. All pictures are kindly supplied by Irina Nelson, Teaching Fellow of Spanish, UoS.

With Step 3, *investigation*, the unknown and unusual objects, posters, pictures, etc. displayed on the altar, music, and videos, as well as presentations of the event and interactive discussion with facilitators, will contribute to make the encounter a multi-sensory experience, sparking wonder and eagerness to know more. Then a concerted action involving all parties – the realia collected by UoS staff throughout the years and now displayed on the altar allows learners to have a fully immersive experience, as well as enhancing their language vocabulary skills, through the target language communication going on during the day.

Step 4, *discovery*, then follows and this is when learners are able to make connections between preparatory activities and what they see/experience/learn on the day, which enhances their willingness to investigate more.

Step 5, *propagation*, concludes the process by allowing learners to go back to their class and share their knowledge with others. As these outreach activities are for limited numbers, it is useful for attendees to be able to share their experiences

and allow the same process to continue in a different context but using the same principles.

Potential issues

There are potential risks when using sensitive issues given that death is the topic of the outreach event described in this article, and therefore teachers should always run a pre-event risk assessment. It is hoped that the cross-disciplinary activities linked to this one will help make the event part of a cycle of interconnected activities whose scope will overcome some of the risks related to talking about death, and raise awareness of intercultural competence and understanding in a wider sense. Inspiring future generations to *wonder* about languages is getting more and more problematic according to the recent report published by the British Council, which sadly confirms that

“Global English is perceived by teachers as being a growing threat to foreign language learning in England. Pupils have the perception that English is enough” (Collen, 2020, p.19).

This also negatively affects language learning uptake in secondary schools and sixth form colleges, where some parents seem to wrongly see Brexit and leaving the EU as an excuse not to encourage their children to study languages.

The domination of the traditional curriculum in modern languages and an excessive focus on testing at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and A-level has also contributed to making languages an unappealing subject for some. These factors do not allow teachers any space for explorative approaches should they wish to divert from a traditional curriculum to include a pedagogy of wonder approach. Not even the use of technology, reported as a strong motivator in foreign languages (Woodrow, 2017), has managed to translate learners' initial motivation into genuine interest for languages. The 'Innovating pedagogy report' (Ferguson et al., 2019) expresses reservations about an education entirely based on technology and suggests that more creative and informal teaching methods –

such as learning through wonder – might allow experimentation and imagination in the way students can explore topics and experiment with languages.

Porter's (2020) research also provides evidence that starting from primary school, children enjoy opportunities to experiment with foreign language use, reinforcing the need for a concerted effort in providing an organic approach throughout the education cycle. This is where outreach activities come into place, linking primary all the way to higher education.

From primary schools, where “primary languages are embedded in policy, but not in practice” (Collen, 2020, p. 3), all the way to higher education, there is a need to counter the lack of inspiration and wonder in language learning. University language departments are already providing schools with opportunities to taste, learn, and experience a variety of languages through Language Days. In addition to this, as shown with *The day of the dead*, some specific cultural and meaningful events can offer inspirational opportunities for a pedagogy of wonder.

Looking to the future

Language day outreach events organised for schools, if conceived as a concerted action and linked to primary/secondary/tertiary curriculum, could easily open the doors for new learning cross-curricular processes and ways to think about languages as a well-rounded subject, including cultural awareness and intercultural competence starting from a very early age.

This article has provided an example of an activity which goes beyond the stereotypical picture of language learning and instead allows learners to think outside the box whilst making connections with other subjects and other ways of dealing with the same topic.

By breaking down the risky topic of death and analysing it within different subjects, it allows a better understanding and sensitivity.

It is hoped that by potentially reinforcing the importance of such activities, similar ones might be developed at all transition stages of education in order to create a supportive sustainable network between schools and universities to inspire each other and compensate for the flaws of a language curriculum which is way too rigid and assessment-driven.

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Resources

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