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Intercultural education through children's literature

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to consider the potential for using translations of children's literature alongside the original text in increasing awareness of other cultures. This is done through a reflective evaluation of work undertaken in *Only Connect*, a two-year EU project funded by Comenius.

The project aimed to:

- introduce teachers to the potential of working with literature from other cultures;
- increase children's understanding of other cultures;
- introduce children to learning another language;
- increase the body of literature in translation for children.

Similar projects exist, such as Cotton's (2000) European Picture Book Collection (EPBC), which uses European children's literature to implement a European dimension in primary education. Cotton has developed a collection of European picture books and a set of suggested activities which teachers in English-speaking schools can trial in their classes with particular reference to the National Literacy Strategy (1998). Her work is a valuable contribution to this field of inter-cultural awareness yet differs from the *Only Connect* project in that many of her ideas have yet to be used in schools.

Outline of the project

The *Only Connect* project aimed to promote greater interest in other EU languages and cultures by enabling children to read books in translation from Greece, France Spain and the UK. It used new translations by foreign language students of children's literature, selected to represent contemporary life and cultural diversity. Four university departments of education from Greece, France, Spain and the UK were directly involved, supported by tutors from modern foreign language departments in these countries.

The project required that in each university department the tutor ran in-service education sessions to train student teachers and teachers in a variety of activities related to intercultural education and the use of literature. The students and teachers then introduced the books and activities to a class of children, with discussion focused on the particular themes of language, culture and citizenship. The students and teachers gathered evidence of the children's work and brought this back to the university for evaluation.

The books chosen were selected because they represented contemporary children's experiences within their specific culture. However the language of the books was also important for the translators, as it needed to be challenging yet short enough to use with student translators to make the task satisfying and worthwhile. This meant that selecting texts became a more complex process and raised the questions:

- what is good literature for children?
- what is a country's culture and can it be represented effectively?

Some texts are illustrated whilst others are not. Schools in the first cycle of the project who worked with the texts found the illustrations useful, so where possible illustrated books are chosen. (See Appendix 1)

At Exeter University we have just completed our second cycle of work with ten primary student teachers, ten class teachers with whom they are going to work as part of their training, and about 300 pupils between 5-11 years old. In England alone we work with 300 pupils each year and with over 1000 across Europe.

From the outset it was imperative for everyone involved to have a shared understanding of what was meant by 'intercultural awareness' in this European context. Many schools in England are already familiar with the importance of promoting intercultural awareness. The National Curriculum (KS1-2) for Citizenship is underpinned with the belief that children need to:

learn to understand and respect our common humanity, diversity and differences so that they can go on to form the effective, fulfilling relationships that are an essential part of learning and life. (p136)

Anti-racist teaching is often seen as an important aspect of promoting positive ideas of citizenship in our multi-cultural society. The study of different localities often focuses on non-European countries or European countries within an historical context e.g. Ancient Greece. Teachers were aware that children were given few opportunities to learn about their European neighbours, despite often spending holidays in Europe. In England at present, primary school children do not generally learn another language and may have few opportunities in school to learn about language diversity.

We decided to work with student teachers and class teachers as we believed that they would benefit from collaborating and learning together. We hoped by encouraging dialogue that the partners would talk through what they were doing at a 'higher level' and that this would facilitate a greater impact of the project on them at a personal level.

The underpinning rationale for this approach comes from a belief that learning is a social process and that social interaction supports an individual's learning in constructing his/her knowledge.

Vygotsky (1962) concluded that novices working alongside experts can 'borrow' their understanding of tasks and ideas to enable them to work successfully. He termed the gap between what a learner can do alone and what they can do in collaboration with others the 'zone of proximal development'. So our hope was that student teachers would benefit from collaboration with experienced teachers and would learn more as a result.

Lave and Wenger (1991) believed learning to be a situated process. Everything we learn happens in a context. We hoped the *Only Connect* project would provide a particular context for sharing the knowledge and expertise of students, teachers and members of the academic community and as such provide a useful model of how collaborative research can develop and inform classroom practice.

At the start of the project teachers were introduced to the books and given a broad picture of the themes within them. The first part of *¡Qué desastre de niño!* was also displayed and they were asked to work out what it might say. The teachers identified Spanish words they recognised and started to piece together the meaning of the text drawing on cueing

strategies; grapho-phonetic, visual (including picture) semantic and syntactic (Barrs et al. 1987). They were able to recognise the value of using the texts in their original form before introducing them to the translations. In so doing, they were given strategies for using the text in its original form and were then given the opportunity to plan a scheme of work together that was appropriate to their particular school context.

How the project was evaluated

In order to ascertain the impact of the project I drew on a variety of sources: tutor and student evaluations; interviews with a sample of teachers, student teachers and pupils; observations; student teacher lesson evaluations; and pupil work. The range of data collected provided a clear picture of the project's impact from the perspectives of all those involved.

Findings

A worthwhile project?

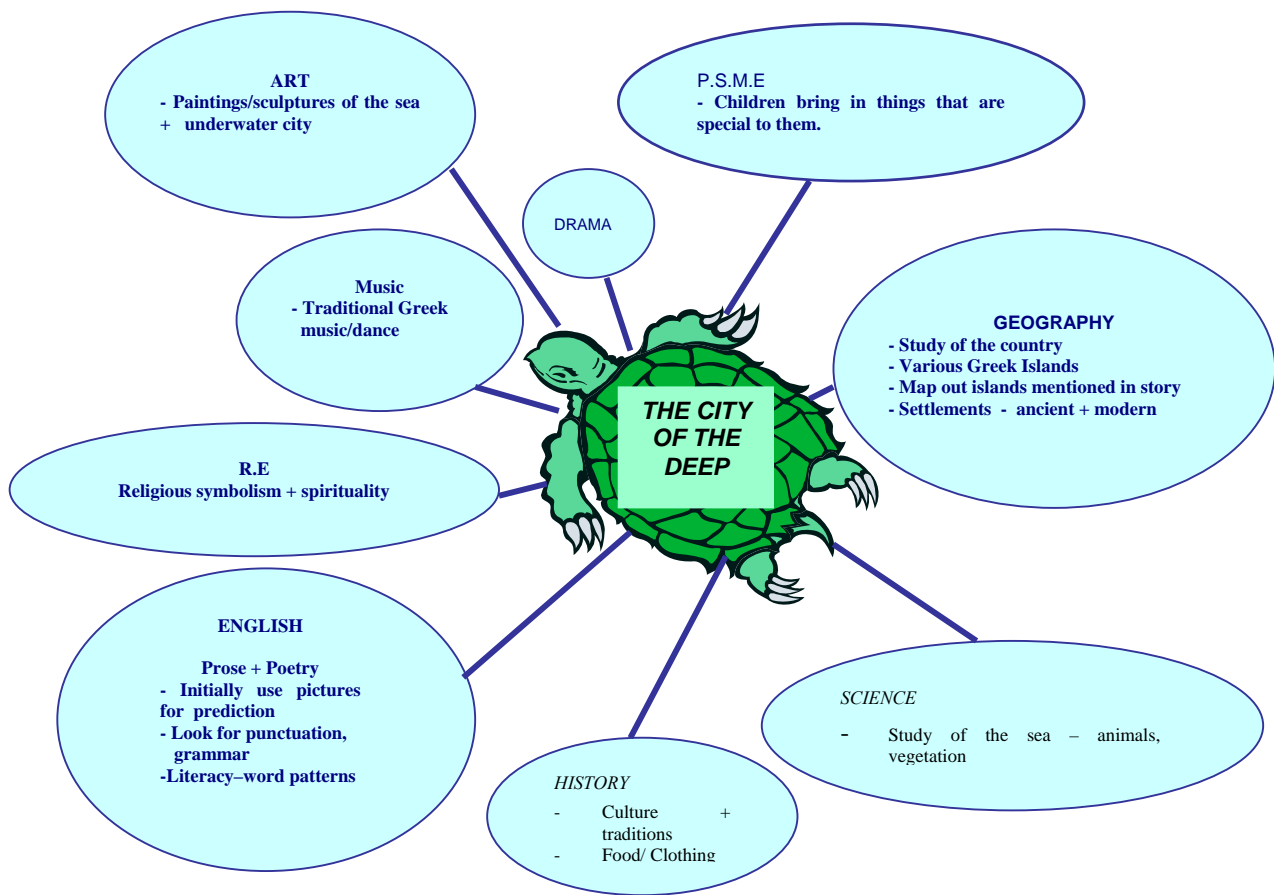
Everyone involved in the project saw the value of using translations of children's texts with pupils. Because many texts are written in English it is unusual for children to have access to translations of books alongside the original texts.

The stories selected by the different countries involved in the project were diverse and teachers saw this as both strength and a weakness. Some texts such as *Shadé à Monmatre*, and *City of the Deep* gave more information about the country of origin than others. The participants did not see that other texts did not describe the geography of their country of origin as problem. As one child put it:

Stories are stories, books are books and children are children everywhere.

Many of the teachers agreed with this:

Increasing cultural awareness - very successful because we are actually thinking about other countries and other books. They are actually getting a feel for it. Broadening their outlook.

Figure 1 Planning Ideas for 'City of the Deep'

Usefulness of collaborative planning

In most pairings the class tutor and student teacher agreed on the book(s) they were going to use with their class and then worked together mapping ideas they could incorporate into their planning. This concept-mapping approach was useful in that it enabled links to be made across a range of curriculum areas and meant that the books were not constrained to a 'literary' context. For example in Figure 1 we find that the Greek text *City of the Deep* is linked to English, drama, music, art, geography, history, science, religious education and personal, social and moral education (PSME).

In a Reception and Year 1 class (4-6 year olds) the French book *Dutch without tears* was used as a basis for a series of different activities. These included creating a role play area of a travel agents and a drama activity based around going on a camping expedition. An older class of seven year olds approached the book differently and focused on the idea of creating made-up languages, as the boy Jean-Charles had done in the story. They discussed what type of character Jean-Charles was and many children were able to empathise with him

Another class of 7-8 year olds used the Greek story *The City of the Deep* to explore a range of themes. The class brought into school things that were special to them, which was reminiscent of Maria's shell. They then discussed, drew and wrote about their objects and made their work into a class patchwork of special things. Here pupils were able to identify with Maria by making links with their own personal experiences.

Impact on teachers

Both experienced and novice teachers found working collaboratively worthwhile. Students felt they learnt more from working with their class teacher than if they had worked alone and in turn teachers felt working with their student gave the project a sharper focus.

Teachers commented on the way the project had influenced their teaching:

I don't think I would have thought about this before the project. I had always thought of cross-cultural links as being remote but actually it's these near ones that are important. Particularly the European ones, and this business of being European.

The opportunity to talk in depth about what they were going to do was appreciated by both experienced and student teachers. One experienced teacher listed what he felt the benefits were as follows:

- reawaken the joy of using quality literature
- helps to remember the balance in education
- 'What is it we really want to teach children?'
- time away from the coal face and pressure from schools to reflect on the above
- strengthen and build relationship/bond between student and teacher *before* the practice starts
- nice to be a student again.

A student teacher wrote:

Looking at books in different languages and introducing this to classes is going to be enjoyable - this would not necessarily be available (or thought of) to me in other situations.

Sharing texts with colleagues was very useful and enlightening - others in the group raised issues I had missed.

Another said:

Using translations of books is brilliant and children are fascinated by it. Especially using the Greek because the letters are different as well. The children felt it was amazing that I could read it before I explained about translation.

Another raised some interesting points in her evaluations. She had used the Spanish book *What a terrible child* as the basis for a series of English lessons. Although she found references to intercultural awareness in both the National Curriculum 2000 and The National Literacy Strategy she found it hard to identify a range of specific objectives from either documents in her planning. She wrote:

The National Literacy Strategy, like the National Curriculum, seems happy to suggest that children read literature from other cultures, but fails to provide any guidelines as to how teachers can make use of this literature in a meaningful way.

Fortunately in this case the class teacher and student teacher felt confident to 'fill in the gaps' and create a meaningful scheme of work for their class. However there are still issues here that need to be considered at a national level. Teacher knowledge and expertise is vital to translating and transforming government directives on curriculum and pedagogy.

Factors that supported the success of the project

Where the books seemed to be most successful, clear links were made between the original written text and the translation. One teacher commented that she found that her lower ability children (9-10 year olds) particularly enjoyed investigating texts in other languages, which had surprised her. She found that they were less inhibited in class than they were usually

...because it was a level playing field for them and they could have a stab at words.

Some teachers commented that they had had to modify the texts in some way when using them with their class. With younger children often the story was retold in parts using the pictures and cues. Sometimes the vocabulary used in the translations was thought to be hard to understand by the children. One student teacher wrote:

I have found it exciting to look at books that aren't quite right because of the translations.

Teachers used these moments to discuss, often at a sophisticated level, what word they might have chosen instead and this included considering the intentions of the translators. As Oittinen (2000) says, 'there is no silent translation'.

Conclusion

Our work with schools to date has demonstrated children's books from other countries and their translations can be used as effective tools in promoting intercultural awareness. From reading the books in the project children are often as surprised by the cultural similarities as they are by the differences. Giving teachers access to resources, and time to plan effectively, are also important factors in the project's success. Ideally teachers and student teachers involved in the project should be given a set of books to keep and use in future years so that they can continue to develop the activities they undertook in the project. In the future we hope to establish links between European partner schools so that pupils can compare their views about books and gain greater understanding of intercultural awareness.

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Appendix 1

Books translated for the *Only Connect* project to date

Country	Book	Author/Illustrator
France	<i>Shadé à Monmatre</i> (Sadie in Monmartre)	Anne Laflaquiere/Helene Boulmier ISBN 2211 034 52 7
	<i>Le hollandaise sans peine</i> (Dutch Without Tears)	Marie-Aude Murail/Michel Gay ISBN 2211 047 20 3
Greece	<i>Τα μαγικά μαξιλάρια</i> (The Nightmare Pillows)	Eugene Trivizas ISBN 960-293-731-9
	<i>η nonutεία του βυθού</i> (The City of the Deep)	Mar Louizou ISBN 960-240-428-0
Spain	<i>¡Qué desastre de niño!</i> (What a terrible child)	Pilat Mateos/Federico Delicado ISBN 84-348-3667-x
UK	<i>The Mousehole Cat</i>	Antonia Barber/Nicola Bayley ISBN: 0744507030
	<i>The Mum Minder</i>	Jaqueline Wilson/Nick Sharratt ISBN: ISBN: 0 440863023
	<i>Grandpa Chatterji</i>	Jamila Gavin/Mei-Yim Low ISBN: 0749717165