

Case Study: Tamil

Cross-curricular Tamil language and South Indian dance project

Siva Pillai and Jim Anderson



The project arose from a collaboration between, Downderry Primary School in the London Borough of Lewisham, a local complementary school, the Tamil Academy of Language and Arts and Goldsmiths Department of Educational Studies. After-school classes in Tamil language and South Indian dance (Bharatha Natyam) had been running for some years at Downderry, but the classes had operated independently of each other.

Colleagues wondered if there might be a way of integrating work in the two classes and set about designing a cross-curricular unit of work. A key link was established through the fact that South Indian dance is based on dramatised versions of song stories which often draw on cultural or moral themes. It was suggested therefore that in language lessons the main aim could be to develop understanding of the song stories and the messages underlying them whilst in dance lessons the focus could shift to expressing the meaning of the stories through the medium of dance.

Through a series of meetings between colleagues, detailed plans were created to support the integrated approach with an emphasis on ways to encourage active engagement of learners through pair and group work including peer assessment. A range of resources was also created to scaffold the learning processes. These included posters, Powerpoint presentations containing a wealth of colourful images, worksheets and research tasks to be set for homework. It was also planned that the work should lead up to a performance at a school assembly.

The integrated approach began with the Tamil language teacher telling the simplified story to the class in Tamil, drawing on visuals to convey the meaning of key words. She then introduced the song with a musical recording, modelling a number of gestures and facial expressions suited to the Bharatha Natyam dance style. Next she had pupils sing the song copying gestures and facial expressions. It was found that the incorporation of these kinaesthetic and musical elements supported language development and led to greater enjoyment and better retention of new vocabulary.

All of the children are very happy. I can tell. They always like stories but this time, they learn more than just stories. They do movements and songs. They really like that. (Tamil language teacher, DPS)

This work was built on in dance lessons drawing on students' increased awareness of how combinations of words, music and gesture can combine to enhance communication and leading naturally into more extended expression through dance movement. The dance teacher, teaching almost entirely through the medium of Tamil, found that students were more confident in their dance lessons because they had a better understanding of the story elements which translated into a greater sense of purpose when it came to expressing themselves through dance. In spite of limited rehearsal time, knowing that they were working towards a performance to schoolmates, parents and teachers served to focus students' minds.

Commenting on the assembly performance, the headteacher noted not only the sense of achievement and pride felt by those involved, but also the concentration and interest of the children in the audience who were seeing their classmates and another culture in a new light. She was also clear how the work connected with wider school priorities:

The cross-curricular dance-language project is such a great idea ... It's a very exciting and useful way of actually learning the language. We are trying to do that as a school with our broader curriculum, for instance we are trying to link in literacy with other subjects including dance. (Headteacher, DPS).

Parental involvement was encouraged and important bridges built between school and home:

Parents are very involved and very supportive. They work with me and Navaraj all the time. They help the students do the homework and printed out things for the students from the Internet. They helped make invitation cards and sort out the costumes (Tamil language teacher, DPS).

Developing this more integrated approach with an emphasis on active learning and creative expression was found to provide a more stimulating and supportive context in which to develop both linguistic and dance skills.

This project inspired us to think how we can teach in a different way, such as the language teacher working with the dance teacher. Previously the language and dance classes were separate, so children didn't make connections. The teachers have also learnt different teaching styles and techniques. We tried different things in classrooms. We also learnt to use ICT in our classes (Tamil language teacher, DPS).

A key outcome from the project from the project was a detailed scheme of work for the unit and a set of companion resources which we hope may inspire teachers of other languages. We also make these available on this webpage:

- a) Unit for a scheme of work: South Indian classical dance, 'Bharatha Natyam'
- b) Appendices: South Indian classical dance, 'Bharatha Natyam':