

CLTeacher: Teachers in the Spotlight

Monica Bertuzzi – St. George's International School, Italy

Monica Bertuzzi currently works for St. George's British International School in Rome. She has a background in marketing and translation (English, Italian and French) and worked in Thailand for a number of years in the International school sector. Upon returning to Italy, she joined St. George's and was asked to introduce Chinese to the school's curriculum offer. She began teaching Chinese there as a minor subject about 5 years ago, and in addition, has responsibility for the EAL programme and teaching both IGCSE and IB English.

Monica finds working in an international school setting both challenging and satisfying – there is a great deal of freedom to introduce creative approaches to teaching languages. In her school students in year 7 have the opportunity to try out three languages over a year and then choose the one they want to study. For this reason, there is a lot of flexibility around what happens in the classroom, and no need to have a set scheme of work each year. Instead, she can adapt to each group's enthusiasm for a particular aspect of language or culture. In the case of Chinese she explores a variety of topics from for example, Qi Gong to calligraphy, to paper-cutting, whilst simultaneously working through key language areas such as salutations, numbers, family and personal details.

Monica says, 'my main objective is to create a buzz around everything Chinese, and to allow students to make personal connections with the language. I also realise that some students won't go on to study Chinese, so ensuring the lessons are interesting for those students is important.' Monica also believes that classroom interaction is vital and you can achieve this by consistently asking open ended questions – even the simplest ones. She says, 'I like students to think and respond as much as they can so for example, before I teach them the characters 中国, I will ask them to think about what sort of symbol, or graphic representation they might use for 'middle.'"

Monica has a strong interest in using technology – not just to help practise the four skills, but as a springboard for students to find other interests and areas to study and research further. She points out that 'no matter what subject we are teaching, we can't work assuming that we will always be

ahead of our students. Technology is evolving so quickly, so we have to view it as a way to simply ‘open doors’ so students can ‘enter’ themselves. Also, as I live and teach in a western environment, my students will always struggle to have opportunities to use Chinese in the real world, or even see it modelled in the real world so using technology creatively is crucial...I try to make good use of songs, podcasts, films, TV shows – anything authentic, to try and bridge this gap.’

In her experience, Monica finds that the teaching of tones is the biggest challenge – like many teachers. She believes that modelling and repetition are crucial, but also recognises that students don’t often see the relevance of accurate tone usage until they are fully engaged with the pitfalls of their misuse. To help with this she regularly has her students interview peers with their smartphones to record their voices. In addition she says, ‘as students build up more vocabulary I ask them to create cartoons of the more humorous tone mistakes they hear – this has an inherent element of fun, and it can be a great project to share with the whole school.’

She also finds that students underestimate the importance of correct stroke order. She feels computers and technology are partly to blame. Even when students are writing in English she points out that at a certain level teachers aren’t actually checking to see if students are writing their letters of the alphabet correctly anymore, e.g. have they written a ‘t’ or a ‘p’ starting from the bottom? To address this Monica tries to build in regular brush and ink sessions to do calligraphy. She recommends using the ‘magic’ paper that allows you to write with water. She says ‘when students start appreciating the thickness and swooshes of strokes, they start to appreciate the logic of the order, and can then also apply this to new characters more easily.’

Monica feels strongly that as teachers we need to show our passion for language learning, but we also have to be prepared to listen to the likes and dislikes of our students – and adapt accordingly. For example she recognises many teens love computer games, she says ‘I am not a big fan of computer games myself, but I recognised a real value and student engagement when I asked my students to prepare a presentation on what cultural, geographical, or lexical references to China and Chinese they saw in the games they most liked to play. It was a real eye opener for me, and the students loved it!’

The International school sector has its own particular challenges ahead for the teaching and learning of Chinese. The hardest obstacle to overcome is in Monica’s view ‘student mobility.’ Students in the

sector are often moving for family reasons (job changes, relocations etc.) so it makes developing a sound syllabus for a language like Chinese very difficult. Monica says for example ‘students might join our school in year 8 and then leave in year 10. They may have come from a school where Chinese was taught, and can join a class with little difficulty. Conversely they may come from a school where it wasn’t offered, so it is impossible for them to join in where 2 years of language learning has already taken place. This has a real yo-yo effect on class sizes and progression which can only be helped if all schools recognise the worth of introducing Chinese in the curriculum.’

Monica feels that a lot more can be done to educate and inform a generation of parents, and school decision makers, not only about the value of language learning , but the value of learning a language like Chinese instead of more traditional European languages.

*Macmillan Education would like to thank Monica Bertuzzi for her input into this issue of CLTalk, and for being our ‘Teacher in the Spotlight.’ You can download Monica’s activity **Be a Pop Star** also in this issue at: <http://www.mydiscoverchina.com/cltalk-issue-15/>*