4 "I'm just a linguist – all I can do is teach or translate". Broadening language graduates' horizons through employer engagement

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Abstract

Employers in the UK recognise that a lack of language skills can limit their company's international growth. Many students on language degrees, however, feel unprepared for working in a business environment. The final year 'Working with Languages' module on Leeds Beckett University's language degrees aims to help the students to expand their career horizons beyond teaching and translating through real-world engagement with local employers. This chapter will summarise the implementation and impact of this core module and highlight some extra-curricular employer engagement[2] activities for students on language degrees. Language graduates can bring much more to a small, medium or large international business than they may think. Employer engagement, whether embedded within the curriculum or offered as an extra-curricular option, can help them to realise that they are not 'just a linguist' and can add value through their communication skills and international mind-set.

Keywords: languages, jobs, employability, employer engagement, work-related learning, authentic project.

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1. Introduction

Ask anyone, including some students on language degrees, what jobs you can do with languages, and the first two answers they may give are teaching or translation. Both of these career paths are valid for linguists, but should be selected as a career choice rather than through a lack of awareness of other options. Universities can broaden language students' horizons through the involvement of local small and medium-sized employers, either within or beyond the curriculum.

This chapter presents some practical ways in which businesses and students of languages can collaborate for mutual benefit, leading at times to recruitment solutions for the businesses and life changing career decisions for the students.

2. What do employers want?

Recent reports show that 45% of businesses recognise foreign language skills as beneficial to them (Confederation of British Industry/Pearson, 2015) and that the UK loses out almost GBP50 billion a year in international business opportunities due to poor language skills in the workforce (All Party Parliamentary Group on Modern Languages, 2014).

Graduates with language skills, particularly graduates with language degrees, possess many of the skills required in today's global economy. Employers' job descriptions may not specifically state a language requirement, but language graduates should not underestimate the value they can add to companies. They possess cultural agility, an ability to approach a situation from multiple perspectives, as well as intercultural, global and communicative skills as a result of living abroad and integrating into another culture (British Academy, 2016; Holmes, 2016).

At an employer forum run twice a year to enable contacts at local Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs) to feed into the language degree curriculum

and related extra-curricular activities at Leeds Beckett University, the employers were unequivocal in their views on how universities might best prepare their language degree students for a business environment: "Get students out to businesses and get businesses into universities".

3.   Getting students out to businesses and businesses into universities

Employer engagement with university students of languages can either be embedded within the curriculum or offered as an extra-curricular activity.

3.1.   Embedding employer engagement within the curriculum

One way to show students how they can use their languages in a context other than education or translation is to require them to do so and to assess them on the outcomes.

One example of this is the award-winning[3] 'Working with Languages' module for all final year students on any language degree at Leeds Beckett University for which I was the module leader. Using their language skills to find relevant information which is not as easily accessible to the employers due to their lack of language competence, their intercultural and communication skills, as well as their access to a wealth of market data and other resources through the University's library, the students carried out an authentic market research project in small teams to help a local company (usually an SME) to move into a new export market. Each project brief was written by the company according to guidelines provided by the module leader to ensure parity of task and workload across the different briefs. During a one-off visit to the company, the students gained a deeper understanding of the project brief and useful information about the company's product or service. They were also able to clarify any queries throughout the project with a named contact at the company (typically

3. UK Trade and Investment Languages for Export award.

a marketing manager). The companies ranged from small businesses with less than 50 employees up to larger organisations with around 700 employees and a turnover of about GBP100 million per business year. The module ran throughout the academic year and consisted of seminars, team tutorials and an innovative Employer Day. More interactive than a graduate fair, the Employer Day was more like a 'speed-dating' event in which the students made professional, rather than personal, contacts. This gave the students valuable experience of interacting in small groups with business people who value language skills and with alumni from their degree programme. Indeed, this networking event had, at times, a direct effect on the initial career decisions which students made upon graduation. For example:

> "[…] guest speakers […] held interactive sessions detailing their own experiences and how they had achieved success […]. The most useful of these sessions was the 'Employer Day' […] to broaden our connections amongst several different industries, but also to give us confidence in our employability after university" (Laura Biswas, Regional Sales Executive, LinkedIn recommendation, 2015[4]).

At the end of the module, the students presented their findings to the company in the form of a professional presentation and written business report. They were also required to write an assessed individual reflection in order to make more explicit the relevance of this experience for their forthcoming job search (Kolb, 1984; Rich, 2015). The students' reflections and the annual feedback from the employers showed that this was a win-win situation for both the employers and the vast majority of the students. The employers got to know a pool of soon-to-be graduates with language skills and, crucially, an international mind-set, who could help their company meet its export and other international goals (Leslie Silver International Faculty, 2010). Almost all of the employers worked with different cohorts of students on the module over successive years, providing project briefs for different export markets. The students commented in their individual reflections, through direct, informal communication with the module

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leader and in the individual written feedback on the Employer Day that they had expanded their international business communication skills, commercial awareness, confidence, connections and ultimately their career horizons. For example:

> "I will be starting a new job as an International Sales Coordinator […]. I wouldn't have got the job without the way your module helped me to sell myself and showcase how transferable my skills are in different job roles" (Sarah Cottingham, LinkedIn message, May 2016).

Employer engagement should not, however, only be incorporated into the curriculum in the language students' final year of study. In today's competitive graduate employment market, making the transition from a student to a professional mind-set and gaining relevant experience to make themselves work-ready cannot start just in Level 6 (their final year of study). It is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail ways in which employer engagement can be incorporated into the curriculum from the students' first year of study and it will depend upon each university's context, but some examples can be found in Corradini, Borthwick, and Gallagher-Brett (2016).

3.2.   Employer engagement beyond the curriculum

The embedding of employer engagement into the language degree curriculum may not be feasible in all university contexts. The following extra-curricular opportunities can be tailored specifically to the context of students on language degrees:

- *Mentoring* – local employers working in international business or language degree alumni act as face-to-face or email mentors for final year students.

- *Work Shadowing* – one-day work shadowing of language degree alumni or local export employers to gain experience of professional contexts where the students' skill sets can add value.

- *Work Experience* – a short (one or two week) unpaid placement or a longer paid internship organised, for example, through the University Placement Office or Careers Service. Students can often gain more varied work experience in an SME than on a large company's internship scheme, as they often work in roles across the whole company and the tasks can be tailored to fit the strengths and interests of each individual.

- *Assessment and Selection workshops* – these interactive experiences, such as those run by Smart Resourcing Solutions (2016), allow students to practise the typical processes used by graduate recruiters.

- *Graduate workshops and resources* – the GradStart programme (Akonia, 2016) is designed for recent graduates who are either still unsure about their career preferences after graduation or have started a graduate job in an SME which is too small to run a graduate scheme. Students and recent graduates can also benefit from the extensive online resources and workshops on the Learning to Leap website (Shindler, n.d.).

- *Language degree alumni* – alumni are invaluable members of a university's employer forum, mentors to current students, guest speakers and providers of work opportunities. Social media, particularly LinkedIn, can be an effective way of keeping in touch with alumni, and current students can use LinkedIn to see what jobs alumni from their degree have done and especially their career trajectory, rather than just their first job upon graduation. Social media can also be used to connect students, alumni and employers who value language skills, and to share relevant job opportunities.

- Most of the above extra-curricular, non-assessed activities can be incorporated into a *University Employability Award* so that they are officially recorded and recognised.

4.   Conclusion

In order to make a successful transition from university life to professional life, undergraduates need to be aware of employers' requirements and needs, and how the skills they have developed through their language learning add value to businesses (Leggott & Stapleford, 2007). Getting students out to businesses and businesses into universities can help to ensure that graduates with language skills consider all the options open to them, so that if they do ultimately choose to work in teaching or translating, this is due to career choice and not to a lack of imagination. In this way, no language student by the end of their course should feel that, "I'm just a linguist. All I can do is teach or translate".

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