15 Communicating and teaching languages: a module for life

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Abstract

This case study introduces a final year undergraduate module in the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle University. The module offers a model for embedding careers in modern languages teaching into the curriculum, and thereby enhancing student employability. The case study gives an insight into the various strands of activity undertaken by the students/ Language Ambassadors on the module. These include university-led input that focuses on the areas of language policy, pedagogy, professionalism and reflection, and a 60-hour in-school placement which allows the Language Ambassadors to gain first-hand experience of what the teaching profession is like. Through the academic assessments (a reflective report in the target language, a portfolio and a reflective essay) the academic and school experience are brought together. The authors make the argument that the module addresses the development of transferable skills that employers are looking for in employees.

Keywords: language ambassador, role model, in-school experience, reflective practitioner, professionalism, transferable skills.

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1.   Context and rationale

"Communicating and Teaching Languages for Undergraduate Language Ambassadors" is an undergraduate module for final year students in the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle University. This 20 credit module, running over two semesters, was established between 2010 and 2012.

The module is aligned with the university's Career Development Module[4], where placement requirements are concerned. However, during the development phase, the decision was made that students taking this module should additionally explore various concepts of language pedagogy, language learning and teaching. From the outset it was agreed that a minimum of 30% of the final assessment should be undertaken in French, German or Spanish. The choice of languages is directly linked to the curriculum offer in placement schools in the North East. The module has been developed and delivered by linguists from the School of Modern Languages and educationalists with experience in (initial) teacher training from the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, emphasising not only the pedagogical aspect of this module but also the importance of being trained to reflect appropriately on the experience both in school and at university.

2.   Aims and objectives

The module gives the students a grounding in the factors that have shaped language policy nationally during the last two decades. It provides an opportunity for students to observe and gain experience of teaching languages in a real classroom environment at one of the local placement schools. The partnership between the two university departments and local schools aims to foster and stimulate pupil uptake of languages beyond Key Stage. An additional aim is for final year students to be able to make an informed decision when considering teaching languages as a future career.

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4. http://www.ncl.ac.uk/careers/develop/cdm/index.php

3.   What we did

The two-semester module has three equally important elements; university-based lectures and seminars, the in-school experience through a 60-hour placement, as well as the language development in at least one Modern Foreign Language (MFL). The last component was of particular importance at the development and approval stage of this module. The 30% component of assessing the students' language skills together with the active use of their target language during the school placement and in practical seminars contributed to the successful approval of this module by the School of Modern Languages for the final year curriculum offer.

The academic year commences with a joint twilight session attended by students and their mentors (MFL teachers in the placement schools). During this meeting the foci of the module are shared and students and mentors are given the opportunity to get to know each other, exchange important pieces of information both in terms of the students' ability and availability for placement visits as well as the school's/language department's priorities. As most of the mentors have been part of the module from its beginnings, students gain an initial insight into what activities they will be expected to undertake during the course of their placement.

The academic provision is delivered front-loaded, i.e. most of the university seminars take place in the first three months of the module. This is to ensure that the students have an increasing understanding in the following four overarching themes: language policy and language study in the UK, exploring the importance of reflection for the role of Language Ambassadors by developing into a reflective practitioner, language pedagogy, and professionalism in the workplace. The academic sessions are a combination of academic/research-informed input and discussions coupled with practical activities that are often student-led. Early on in the academic curriculum, the students are trained in the power of impartial observation and reflection, in particular through the Gibbs' (1988) Reflective Cycle, a tool which helps the students to articulate and structure reflections on their practical experience, both verbally and in writing.

As part of the student-led activities, students have to engage in micro-teaching episodes, preparing in pairs a ten-minute teaching sequence that they then deliver to the class. The students are asked to reflect on their experience immediately after they have delivered their sequence and receive peer-feedback from their fellow students who have acted as participant observers. Each micro-teaching pair is then given an opportunity to engage in a reflective dialogue about their performance with one of the module tutors. It is not the actual quality of the teaching episode but rather the quality of the reflection on the experience and the feedback received that counts towards the final assessment.

The final grade is an amalgamation of three assessed components: a reflective report on the use of the target language in the classroom (30%, written in the target language, submitted in semester 1), a portfolio (increased to 20% in academic year 2015-16, submitted after Easter) and an essay (reduced to 50% in 2015-16, written in English, submitted during the assessment weeks of semester 2). For the reflective report in the target language and the final essay, students use the Gibbs' (1988) cycle to structure their work.

The reflective report has as its focus the use of target language in the classroom. Students select an observed lesson and reflect on the use of target language by referring to discussions with school mentors, school policies on target language, and peer-reviewed literature. In the final essay, students are allowed to choose an aspect of language methodology and reflect upon this using an observed or self-taught session; they also have the opportunity to write a more discursive essay on the topic of language policy. Regardless of which focus they choose, students have to embed peer-reviewed literature, experience and evidence from interviews, conversations, and students' questionnaires into their writing.

The portfolio, to which a number of amendments have been made in light of students' and school mentors' feedback, consists of five tasks: an observation task, a reflection on micro-teaching, a reflection on a presentation about the importance of languages for a particular target audience (specified year groups, parents) delivered by the students themselves, a report of an interview with the headteacher/deputy head in charge of curriculum about the position of languages

in the placement school, and a reflective commentary on a videoed sequence taught in the placement school.

The portfolio is the academic link between the university seminars and the school placement. Apart from the required portfolio tasks, the students and school mentors are given the freedom to design the timetable and the activities according to learners' and schools' needs and match those with the Language Ambassadors' skillset and identified areas for development. Some students will work across all year groups, some will predominantly work with exam classes; in a few instances, students work with 6th formers on developing their exam oral topics. Students have set up their own language clubs (sometimes even in their second or third language that is not a curriculum subject in the school) or contributed to open evening events for parents and prospective students, utilising the facts and presentation skills developed and enhanced through one of the portfolio tasks.

Students' feedback indicates that their performance in school should be counted towards their final academic grade. The module leaders took the conscious decision to not assess the in-school experience through formal observations as this would mean additional pressure for all parties involved (students, school mentors and their teams, and academic staff) and a less developmental approach to the experiences collated during the placement. The importance of the in-school experience and the enthusiasm, quality of reflection and active engagement in the placement school are celebrated in the portfolio submission. At the end of the academic year, each school mentor writes a brief report on each of their Language Ambassadors.

The official end of the module is marked by a twilight celebration seminar to which school mentors and Language Ambassadors are invited. During this session, the students, module tutors and school mentors reflect on the various aspects of the programme and constructive feedback is exchanged. The latter is essential to inform future developments of the academic programme but also gives school mentors an opportunity to share good practice on how to deploy Language Ambassadors.

The module requires a high level of support by an administrator (this could be additional allocation of time for one of the module tutors). The administrator is the first port of contact for school mentors and students regarding all administrative aspects: finding suitable placement schools, allocating the Language Ambassadors to their placement schools, timetable clashes, monitoring attendance of school placements, arranging school mentors' meetings, administering the expenses claims for Language Ambassadors' travel to placement schools and most importantly, ensuring that all Language Ambassadors have successfully undergone a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

In November 2015, the Minister of State for Universities and Science stated in his foreword to the Green Paper on Higher Education, entitled *Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, that the government will "provide greater focus on employability" (BIS, 2015, p. 8). Employability and skills development are two overarching aims of the Language Ambassador module. In the Green Paper, no reference is made to the employability of graduates from disciplines in social sciences and humanities. This might not come as a surprise, considering that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) highlighted in their 2015 report that 40% of the surveyed employers were looking for STEM graduates, 19% for Business graduates, 5% for graduates from Social Sciences disciplines and 1% for Languages and Arts graduates (CBI, 2015, pp. 57-58). However, the CBI report states clearly the importance of language skills; 45% of employers "see foreign language ability as beneficial to the businesses" (CBI, 2015, p. 41). Over a quarter of the responding businesses reported that language skills contribute to staff mobility.

As linguists and educationalists, we have argued for decades that studying a language does not end with being fluent in a foreign language. Being able to communicate in a foreign language opens one's horizon, allows the speaker to see the world in a different light – through different cultural lenses. Studying a

language requires one to be resilient and a certain degree of self-management is needed too in order to succeed. It is therefore worth analysing the CBI report further, as it reports on employers' satisfaction rates with graduates' work-relevant skills (CBI, 2015, p. 58). Figure 1 summarises some of the findings relevant for our discussion here.

Figure 1.   Percentage of employers not satisfied with stated skills (information taken from CBI, 2015, p. 58, Exhibit 80)
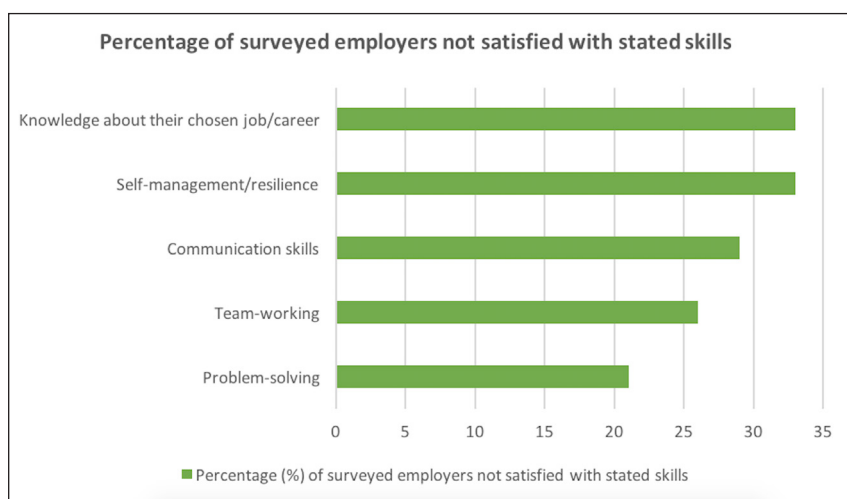
As previously stated, one of the aims of the module is to give Language Ambassadors an insight into what teaching as a profession is like; although a number of Language Ambassadors entered the teaching profession, the module is not intended to 'sell' language teaching as a profession. Module leaders and school mentors agreed from the outset that it is important for the Language Ambassadors to gain a realistic picture of teaching as a career with its many highlights, challenges, stressful moments and downs. One of our former students (academic year 2012-13) highlighted in her module feedback that "doing the module truly gave me food for thought in choosing my professional career". A fellow student (academic year 2012-13, currently enrolled in a teacher training programme) summarised his experience as follows: "The module gave me a

good idea what it would be like to go into teaching". The in-school experience, the relationship that the Language Ambassadors build over the academic year with their school mentors, as well as the pupils contributes to the success story; another student (academic year 2013-14) enjoyed her placement so much that she decided to follow the School Direct route and successfully applied to her placement school; her latest message to the tutor team said "I am absolutely loving it".

Passion, resilience and self-management are key features of the module. The more passion a Language Ambassador brings to the module, and most importantly to the in-school experience and the work with the pupils, the more they will benefit and learn from it. The students experience this module as challenging and definitely more time consuming than any other 20-credit module they enrol in. Students are required to be extremely independent throughout the module; independence and self-management are necessary for the successful completion of their academic work, for the construction of their timetable, for the preparation of teaching sequences, or the organisation of the interview with the headteacher for their portfolio task. These skills, together with good communication skills, are essential for building a professional relationship with their mentors and the tutors. The academic programme is designed so that all relevant skills are discussed and explored as part of the initial university-based input. During seminar activities and portfolio tasks and through peer/tutor feedback, students will have reflected on their skill set critically, and the reflection tools with which they have been equipped will help them to identify their strengths and areas for development during the placement.

The remaining two skills which were identified as important by employers, team-working and problem-solving, are fully embedded throughout the module and are essential on the Language Ambassadors' journey to becoming a reflective participant, observer, and practitioner.

Those students who have not chosen to go into teaching after their experience have reported back that many of the acquired skills, in particular the ability to reflect on their in-school experience in response to competency questions during

job interviews, has significantly helped them to secure good employment. Some Language Ambassadors do find their real passion; as one ambassador (academic year 2013-14) describes, "I never wanted to be a teacher until fourth year and I would have to say that the Language Ambassador module definitely contributed to my decision to apply to teacher training. I absolutely love my job and couldn't imagine doing anything else".

References and links

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