1 Treasuring languages: an introduction

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This volume collects selected papers from the 9th annual conference in the Innovative Language Teaching and Learning at University series (InnoConf), which was hosted by the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at the University of Southampton on the 28th of June 2019. The theme of the conference was ‘Treasuring languages: innovative and creative approaches in Higher Education (HE)’.

The conference aimed to address the consistent decline in recent years in applications to study languages at UK universities by igniting discussions and seeking innovative and creative approaches to raising awareness about the value of learning languages. Languages allow learners to gain an understanding of other countries and cultures. They matter for trade and business and are an asset to the economy and there is now a focus on seeing language learners as global citizens.

The contributions collected in this peer-reviewed volume aim to reflect on best practice in HE and showcase innovative approaches to supporting and encouraging language learning. They range from collaborative approaches to curriculum design, from critical thinking and creative skills, to intercultural awareness, the use of digital tools and Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL), to employability, independent learning, and innovative assessment.

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The volume opens with a selection of papers focusing on how educators are exploring teaching and learning languages at scale using massive open online courses (MOOCs) and smaller, closed online courses. It reflects on how both can enhance language learning.

MOOCs have been explored within a variety of educational contexts, but some of their intrinsic design features do not seem to follow the ‘one fits all’ rule. Especially when considering inclusivity, teaching and learning languages at a large scale poses quite a few challenges. Kate Borthwick considers how the inclusive design in MOOCs can encourage the treasuring and preserving of languages through global reach and low barriers to access. She presents an example from a MOOC created at the University of Southampton and indicates how its design, conceived for a broader audience, might be relevant in language learning contexts.

Neill Wylie, discusses the challenges of transposing face to face courses into an online modality and discusses the progress made in constructing an advanced online PhD academic writing course to cater for global students situated in diverse time zones and with diverse schedules.

The recent hype around Virtual Reality (VR) has seen an increased interest in language teaching applications. However, practical implications for teachers have slowed down its wider dissemination due to costs and workload issues in designing activities. Alessia Plutino, Tiziana Cervi-Wilson, and Billy Brick report on the rationale for repurposing VR assets from other disciplines for language learning, in order to increase sustainability and dissemination of VR in language learning. They argue in favour of the potential pedagogical uses of VR within the modern language curriculum, including emotional language, employability skills, and the year abroad.

Escape games have also been increasingly used in language classrooms, demonstrating an interesting educational potential within the frameworks of gamification, pervasive learning, and ‘serious games’. Sascha Stollhans
describes his creative project where he evaluates an escape game developed for a grammar class on the idiomatic uses of German modal verbs. He comments on the transferable skills which the game fosters.

A number of papers consider practical and innovative approaches to learning collaboratively or independently and provide feedback in order to help students gain confidence in their skills.

Laura Richards discusses collaborative writing practice using TEL. Her project aimed to create a collaborative and interactive classroom using open access file sharing services. Catherine Franc and Annie Morton examine the challenges of effective feedback for language assessment and propose an innovative and creative solution to support staff in producing clear and meaningful feedback in a sustainable way, as well as raising students’ awareness in becoming efficient language learners. Carmen Martín de León and Cristina García Hermoso discuss the role that teachers in HE have in facilitating Independent Learning (IL) for their students. They focus on the benefits of using scaffolding strategies for students’ IL materials to develop autonomy in learning, as well as developing the higher order skills expected at university level.

Intercultural competence and cultural awareness are two competencies that global graduates should acquire. However, the complexity behind the separation of language and content within modern languages degrees in HE does not always facilitate this. Elinor Parks’s paper supports the view that teachers should help modern language students to develop criticality and critical cultural awareness in order to fully grasp and combine both skills. Not only is it difficult to integrate intercultural competence and cultural awareness competencies within the curriculum, but students returning from their year abroad still seem to struggle with making sense of cultural differences. This has inspired Vera Castiglione and Stefania Placenti to create a speaking activity designed to help modern languages finalists to further develop their intercultural competence. The authors provide a concrete example of how a language curriculum can be adapted to meet the challenges of today’s culturally complex and ever-changing world.
Caroline Campbell concludes the volume with a paper that presents the findings around employer expectations of graduates and their perceptions of the value of language skills and cultural awareness. The project proposes an end-of-module reflective task for any language module to enable students to articulate their personal ‘brand’ based on their knowledge and social capital, thus evidencing the breadth of their employability.

This is the fifth volume in a series of books compiling papers from the InnoConf conferences. It follows from Enhancing participation and collaboration (Goria, Speicher, & Stollhans, 2016), Enhancing employability (Álvarez-Mayo, Gallagher-Brett, & Michel, 2017), Integrating informal learning into formal language education (Rosell-Aguilar, Beaven, & Fuertes Gutiérrez, 2018), and A look at new trends (Becerra, Biasini, Magedera-Hofhansl, & Reimão, 2019).

We do hope you enjoy this latest volume of short papers from InnoConf19 and that you find some of the innovative approaches showcased here useful for your own research and practice.

References


