

19 Is developing employability skills relevant to adult language students?

Tita Beaven¹

1. Introduction

Open University (OU) students are typically mature students who combine studying part-time with work or caring responsibilities; the average age of OU language students has been dropping, and about 30% of our new students are now under 25.

The traditional view of adult learners who study languages is that they often study for pleasure or personal development, rather than for clear career goals. The current study investigated whether adult students found the development of employability skills as part of their language courses useful, and, if so, the development of which particularly key employability skills they valued most.

Keywords: adult learners, motivation, aspiration, survey.

2. What we did

This study aimed at understanding the views languages students at the Open University have on employability, and if and how they think their language modules should equip them to develop/practise/enhance employability skills (Pegg, Waldock, Hendy-Isaac, & Lawton, 2012).

1. The Open University, Milton Keynes, United Kingdom; tita.beaven@open.ac.uk

How to cite this chapter: Beaven, T. (2016). Is developing employability skills relevant to adult language students? In E. Corradini, K. Borthwick and A. Gallagher-Brett (Eds), *Employability for languages: a handbook* (pp. 133-138). Dublin: Research-publishing.net. <http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.cbg2016.474>

Along with two colleagues², I conducted two surveys in 2015 amongst two cohorts of students enrolled in language courses at the Open University. The first cohort (127 responses) involved students enrolled on the module *Exploring languages and cultures*, the compulsory Level 1 (L1) module for all students on the BA (Hons) Language Studies. This BA includes strands in French, German, Spanish, and English (Applied Linguistics), and students specialise in any two of those strands. The module *Exploring languages and cultures* is taught in English and introduces key concepts relating to languages, language learning, plurilingualism and intercultural communication. The second cohort (259 responses) was made up of students of French, German or Spanish studying at Level 2 (L2), i.e. those who had typically already completed at least 120 credits at Level 1.

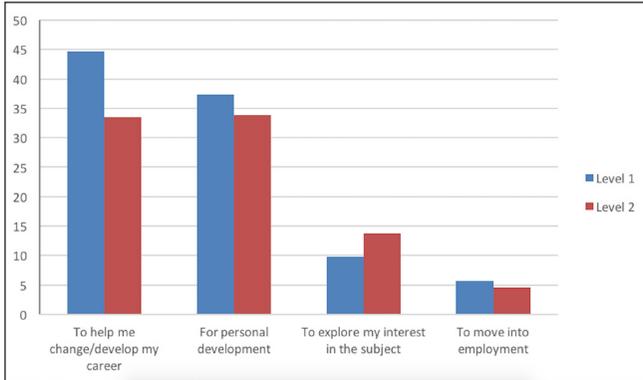
The survey was designed to find out the aspirations and motivations of adult language students with reference to the [NUS/CBI \(2011\)](#) definition of employability skills as encompassing: a positive attitude, self-management, teamworking, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of IT, application of numeracy, entrepreneurship and business, and customer awareness.

3. Discussion of outcomes

In terms of motivation for studying languages, the study showed that although around a third of students study for personal development (L1: 37.4%, L2: 33.9%), overall the main motivation is to help them change or develop their career (L1: 44.7%, L2:33.5%); see [Figure 1](#). Although the picture is not straightforward in the sense that students do not always study modules in a linear way, it also appears that students enrolled on the L1 module are more motivated by their career than those at level 2, and that the profile of students is changing. One has to remember that because students study part-time, and it typically takes students 6-8 years to complete a degree course, these changes between L1 and L2 might indicate a medium-term change rather than a more arbitrary difference in cohorts.

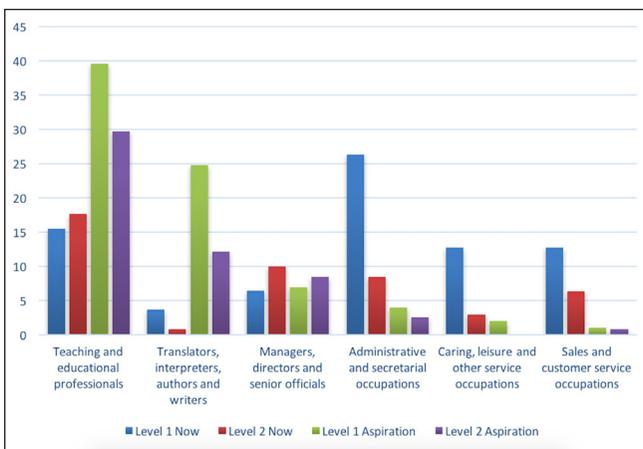
2. María Fernandez Toro and Concha Furnborough

Figure 1. Students' main motivation for studying languages



If students are partly motivated by changing or developing their career, how do their current occupations compare to their career aspirations? The results indicate that students are keen to move away from jobs in the areas of administrative and secretarial work, caring leisure and related services, and sales and customer service, and that they are aspiring to join the teaching profession or to become translators, interpreters, and communications specialists, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

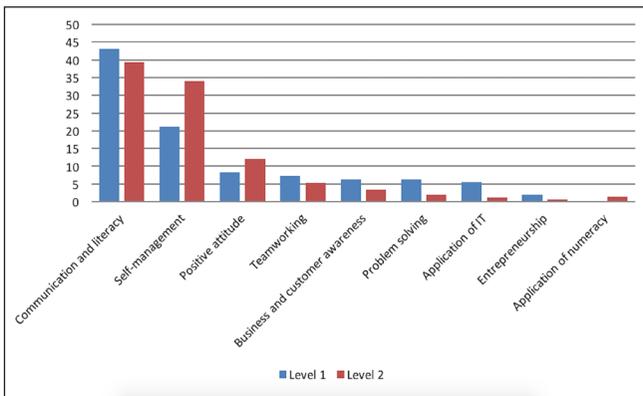
Figure 2. Students' main current occupation vs. aspirations after study



Most students felt that the qualification they were studying would be useful for their career, and thought that the most useful skills for their future profession would be communication and literacy (41.2%) and self-management (27.5%), followed by positive attitudes and team working (10.1 and 6.3% respectively).

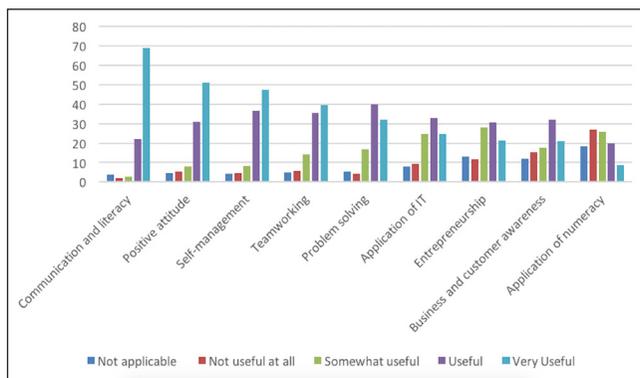
Whilst it is not surprising that communication and literacy are considered the most useful skills amongst language students (Figure 3), self-management is perhaps a more unexpected choice, in particular as there is a marked increase in the usefulness accorded to this skill from L1 to L2 (21.1% and 34% respectively). Self-management involves “readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, resilience, self-starting, appropriate assertiveness, time management, readiness to improve own performance based on feedback and reflective learning” (NUS/CBI, 2011, p. 13) – all key to successful study, particularly at a distance and part-time – so this perhaps explains how the more experienced L2 students value the skill more, and are more aware of it.

Figure 3. Most useful employability skill in your future profession



Students also thought it was important that some employability skills are included in future courses as we develop or update the curriculum, presumably even if not directly relevant to their career development. The most useful ones, again perhaps not surprisingly, being communication and literacy, followed by positive attitude, self-management, teamworking and problem solving (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Usefulness of including these skills in our future language courses



4. Conclusion

This study revealed that, far from being mostly interested in studying languages for personal development, adult, part-time language students at the OU are keen to use their qualification to help them develop or change their career, and consider the qualification they are studying useful in achieving these goals.

Students were able to identify the most useful employability skills in their future career development, highlighting communication and literacy and self-management. However, they were also keen to see other skills, such as a positive attitude, teamwork and problem solving explicitly addressed in language courses in the future.

Although it might seem obvious that communication and literacy are the most valued skills by language students, this might also indicate a blurring between employability skills and the actual subject knowledge that is developed through a degree in languages. Whilst responding to the professional aspirations of students in the way we develop our curriculum, as language educators we should also be clear about what constitutes generic employability skills versus content specific knowledge and skills that are developed by studying languages. Debates

about employability, especially in language education, should reflect the tensions between developing a knowledge curriculum and fostering the development of more generic skills.

References and links

- NUS/CBI. (2011). *Working towards your future: making the most of your time in higher education*. Retrieved from http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf
- Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S., & Lawton, R. (2012). *Pedagogy for employability*. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved from https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/sites/default/files/pedagogy_for_employability_update_2012.pdf



Published by Research-publishing.net, not-for-profit association
Dublin, Ireland; Voillans, France, info@research-publishing.net

© 2016 by Erika Corradini, Kate Borthwick, and Angela Gallagher-Brett (collective work)
© 2016 by Authors (individual work)

Employability for languages: a handbook
Edited by Erika Corradini, Kate Borthwick, and Angela Gallagher-Brett

Rights: All articles in this collection are published under the Attribution-NonCommercial -NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Under this licence, the contents are freely available online as PDF files (<http://dx.doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2016.cb2016.9781908416384>) for anybody to read, download, copy, and redistribute provided that the author(s), editorial team, and publisher are properly cited. Commercial use and derivative works are, however, not permitted.



Disclaimer: Research-publishing.net does not take any responsibility for the content of the pages written by the authors of this book. The authors have recognised that the work described was not published before, or that it was not under consideration for publication elsewhere. While the information in this book are believed to be true and accurate on the date of its going to press, neither the editorial team, nor the publisher can accept any legal responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be made. The publisher makes no warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein. While Research-publishing.net is committed to publishing works of integrity, the words are the authors' alone.

Trademark notice: product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Copyrighted material: every effort has been made by the editorial team to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyrighted material in this book. In the event of errors or omissions, please notify the publisher of any corrections that will need to be incorporated in future editions of this book.

Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design and frog picture by © 2016 Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)
Cover illustration by © 2016 Nicolas Fenix (www.nicolasfenix.com)

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-37-7 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-38-4 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-39-1 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

Legal deposit, Ireland: The National Library of Ireland, The Library of Trinity College, The Library of the University of Limerick, The Library of Dublin City University, The Library of NUI Cork, The Library of NUI Maynooth, The Library of University College Dublin, The Library of NUI Galway.

Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: juin 2016.