

14 Enhancing online language learning as a tool to boost employability

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Abstract

Online learning is a very flexible way to build and improve language knowledge alongside other work and/or study commitments whilst at the same time encouraging autonomous learning, time management, self-motivation and other skills relevant to employability. Learning on your own, however, can also be daunting. Therefore, the Languages for All (LfA) team at the University of Essex have incorporated an innovative blend of tutor support with flexible tailored lessons and bespoke assessments in addition to the Rosetta Stone® Advantage (RSA) programme which is used as the main platform. This combination has contributed to a steep increase in retention and pass rates, placing our modules in an advantageous position. The article presents an innovative (and easily replicable) module structure and – supported by students’ voices – shows how learning a language can contribute to enhancing employability.

Keywords: online language learning, employability, eLearning, language learning software, technology enhanced learning, IWLP, independent learning.

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1. Introduction

The number of students learning a language in Institution Wide Language Programmes (IWLP) at UK Universities has seen a steady increase in recent years (UCML-AULC, 2015). LfA, the IWLP available at the University of Essex, allows every student in any degree programme to learn languages at no extra cost on an extracurricular basis during their time at the institution. In addition to traditional face-to-face evening classes, we also offer innovative free online courses in French, German and Spanish. This diverse and inclusive mode of learning has many advantages, such as the flexibility it offers students, the opportunity to balance their language learning with other study commitments, easy access when students are based off-campus and convenience in time and pace of learning. This correlates with student motivations for having chosen the online mode of study³ as revealed in a survey conducted in 2016⁴.

Online learning, therefore, proves to be a flexible way to build and improve language knowledge alongside other work and/or study commitments whilst at the same time encouraging autonomous learning, time management, self-motivation and other skills important in boosting employability.

However, students new to online language learning can find it daunting at first. When we looked into students' previous experiences with online language learning we found that almost 60% of our survey respondents had not learned languages online before, and of the 40% that had, the great majority quoted Duolingo (www.duolingo.com) as their learning tool. Given Duolingo's popularity, this isn't surprising, but it shows that students tend to understand online learning as stand-alone activities rather than structured courses. However, our experience with the Online Portfolio, from its stand-alone beginnings to its current structured design, has shown us that the latter results

3. Traditional face-to-face courses in LfA are available only at beginner levels, whereas the Online Portfolio caters for levels up to C1 in the CEFR. Nevertheless, 81% of all students stated the online course was their first choice.

4. 38 Portfolio students participated in the survey conducted and analysed via Qualtrics software https://eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_3Dm2f55o517Bo2x

in better retention, pass rates, and overall successful learning experiences. This article will outline how foreign language learning can help boost employability and how online modules can maximise that potential. We will also describe the module's structure, which could be easily replicated across languages and institutions.

2. Employability and language learning

The Higher Education Academy defines employability as “a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy” (Yorke & Knight, 2006, p. 3). However, detailed information on what these skills, attributes and attitudes entail is much harder to establish. Various surveys and publications⁵ on employability make reference to the following:

- Positive ‘can do’ attitude.
- Aptitude to work.
- Communication skills.
- Problem solving.
- Innovative approach, creativity, risk taking, collaboration.
- Numeracy & IT.

Amongst these, learning a foreign language sometimes features as a separate skill:

5. Higher Education Academy (2016); CBI and Pearson Education (2015); Quality Assurance Agency (2012).

“The ability to communicate with other people in their own language can play a valuable part in forming relationships, building mutual understanding and trust, and developing the networks on which business opportunities depend. Language study can also indicate that an individual may have an international outlook and [...] evidence of the ability to work in diverse teams and with other cultures” (CBI & Pearson Education, 2015, p. 41).

Foreign language knowledge and its practical value are increasingly recognised by British businesses: 45% see this as beneficial to their businesses (CBI & Pearson Education, 2015, p. 42).

Knowing a foreign language is not, however, restricted to merely being able to communicate in a foreign tongue. In fact, many of the employability competencies that businesses require are an implicit and integral part of the language learning process, such as cultural awareness, communication skills including learning about English or a mother tongue through the foreign language, teamwork, regulation of self-efficacy and self-management, perseverance, motivation, etc.

But how does this translate into what our students think they gain from such courses? We set out to examine whether students’ beliefs about the skills gained through online language learning mirrored those mentioned above, which later informed the changes made to the programme.

2.1. Students’ perspectives on online language learning and employability

Our 2016 survey revealed that student perceptions of the skills gained through online language learning mirror very closely those described by Yorke and Knight (2006) in their definition of employability. This shows us that students are indeed aware that their employability skills, such as autonomy, time management and presentation skills (among others), are being developed alongside their language abilities. In the students’ own words:

“I think that especially **autonomy** and **time management** are striking because Languages for All shows my future employer that I am a person who **goes beyond the mere minimum** required and voluntarily engages in extra-curricular activities” (Spanish Portfolio student).

“Being able to give a presentation in a foreign language has **improved my confidence to present in English**” (German Portfolio student).

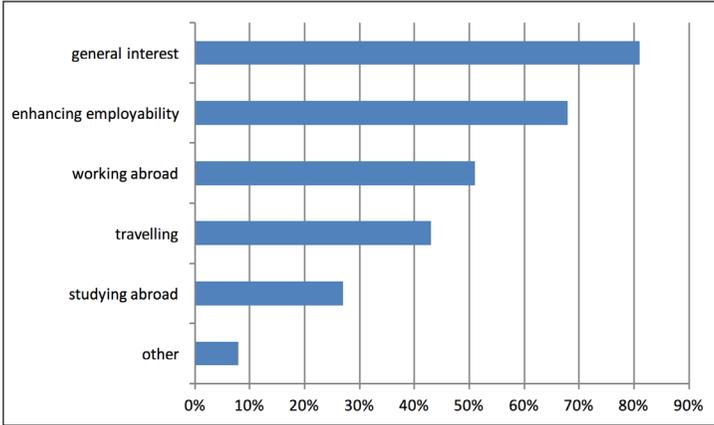
“[The online course] helped me to **develop an understanding of professionalism** in France [...]. Thus, my professional development has been improved by **expanding my cultural awareness**” (French Portfolio student).

Key areas of impact identified:

- Professional awareness.
- Improved self-confidence.
- Presentation skills.
- Improved language/communication skills in L1.
- More autonomy.
- Time management skills.
- Taking positive actions/extra-curricular engagement.

However, when asked to state the main reason for learning a language, employability ranked very high, but only after ‘general linguistic/academic interest’ as the top motivator (see [Figure 1](#) below). These results are also mirrored in previous studies from [Gallagher-Brett \(2004, p. 6\)](#).

Figure 1. Reasons for learning a language⁶



3. The Online Language Portfolio at the University of Essex: a case study

3.1. Course structure, content and support

The LfA’s Online Portfolio are free extra-curricular courses offered in French, German and Spanish at levels A1 to C1 in the CEFR, and use the RSA⁷ software as their content backbone. This technology-mediated method of delivery is then paired with robust tutor support, which we have found to be the most effective combination. Portfolio modules run over two terms with an average of 30-40 hours of tuition and include a face-to-face introduction to the course and software. The tutor then assigns a lesson each week, monitors student progress, keeps them engaged and provides help when needed. The content includes a variety of activities such as short videos, automated speech recognition and automatically graded exercises. The topics focus on ‘everyday situations’ in the first term, and ‘professional situations’ in term two, which respond to student’s

6. Source: Survey of Languages for All Portfolio Students, 2016, https://eu.qualtrics.com/jfe/preview/SV_3Dm2f55o517Bo2x

7. The Rosetta Stone® Advantage software is specifically designed for higher education. For more information, please visit <http://www.rosettastone.co.uk/he-fe/advantage>

top two reasons for choosing the course, namely a general interest in the language and employability.

Furthermore, the module is assessed via the progress achieved in RSA as well as one online written and one face-to-face oral assessment. The addition of the speaking test has proven very successful as it adds an element of continuous tutor-student engagement, with learners reporting that an in-person demonstration of their progress at the end of course is a motivator to complete it. Furthermore, upon successful completion of the course, students can apply for the University's employability award, into which LfA has been embedded.

Students are able to maintain contact with tutors via email, Skype or during office hours. The RSA software also offers a customised messaging system, which – through the use of screenshots – enables the tutor to better understand the problem the student might be experiencing and to provide more tailored support. However, while student support is key, it is equally important to provide it in a measured manner. This allows for independent learning to take place and gives students the space to develop skills such as time management and self-reliance.

Additionally, the RSA portal is accessed via the University's learning management system Moodle, which is used extensively across other modules and programmes. This has been purposely implemented to provide a cohesive and uniform academic space, where students can access their extracurricular language course in the same manner they would their other modules. This structure is replicated and consistent across all three language modules, and could be easily applied to online language modules at other institutions by following a similar module organisation.

3.2. Student feedback and stats

The results of our latest student survey carried out in 2015/16⁸ showed that our students were very satisfied with all aspects of interaction with tutors, support,

8. 38 students who finished the online modules.

content, skills balance and the variety of activities as well as overall user-friendliness of the RSA software.

As outlined in the [Table 1](#) below, completion and pass rates improved steadily over the past year. This, we believe, is due to the exploration of student needs and the measures we have taken to meet them. These rates are particularly encouraging when we take into account that these are free extra-curricular non-credit bearing academic online courses and that, in comparison, average retention rates for MOOC-like courses are in the region of 15%⁹.

Table 1. LfA completion rates (Essex University)

Completion rates based on overall number of registered students*		
2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
37%	42%	47%
Completion rates based on the number of students active after the first 4 weeks** of the course		
2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
N/A	58%	70%
Pass rates for total active students***		
2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
N/A	79%	90%

*initial number of registrations

**students still registered and attending classes

***those who completed the course

4. Lessons learned

Online language modules are a useful tool for students to gain language skills alongside other work and/or study commitments while at the same time promoting autonomous learning, time management, self-motivation and other skills relevant to employability. By enhancing these extracurricular language modules we have learned, helped by student feedback, that a combination of independent computer-mediated learning and strong tutor support can be successful in maximising student engagement and improving both retention and pass rates.

9. MOOC completion rates: the data; <http://www.katyjordan.com/MOOCproject.html>

Through the research described in this paper, we found that paced tutor-student interaction plays a key role, as does monitoring student progress and maintaining flexibility (content, deadlines, etc.) to allow for a more personalised learning experience. The individual format of student-teacher contact helps to maintain levels of motivation high and can also be used to guide students in developing skills, such as time management, which are an asset in the job market. Equally, embedding language courses in university-led employability initiatives, such as award schemes, has proven to positively affect student motivation to take up a language and further enhance self-reflection on its benefits. Finally, we hope that the steps we have taken in the development of these online language modules in order to address diverse and evolving student needs can serve as a model to other educators in the field who might wish to create similar courses.

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