

1 Learning through teaching languages: the role of the teaching placement for undergraduate students

Tara Webster-Deakin¹

Abstract

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) Embedding Employability framework lists a broad range of employability skills they have identified as being imperative to graduate success in the workplace, including “knowledge and application, self, social and cultural awareness and reflection and articulation” (HEA, 2015, diagram, n.p.). The final year Undergraduate Ambassador Scheme (UAS) module in the School of Cultures, Languages, and Area Studies, ‘Communicating and Teaching Languages’, delivers the majority of these skills identified as necessary for graduate employability while combining the acquisition of these with rigorous academic student outputs. While teaching as a career is not for everyone, the module provides an opportunity for final year linguists to apply their knowledge in a real-world context and offers them a testing ground for their own language skills and competencies as well as the chance to position themselves as adults in a work environment. In local inner city and county schools, they learn about the complexities of professional relationships, curriculum constraints, political agendas, and home-school relationships while constructing and evaluating lesson plans for a range of learning needs. Supported by seminars delivered by an educationalist, the experience of the students-as-teachers can be seen to follow the same plan-act-observe-reflect cycle as is commonly used in teacher action research (Elliott, 1985; Schön, 1987). As

1. University of Nottingham, Nottingham, England; afztw@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

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with professional teacher action research, students are required to demonstrate “a willingness to learn about their own classrooms and a desire to develop themselves professionally” (Nixon, 1981, p. 9). This article outlines the composition of the UAS programme, its challenges, and the opportunity it provides for final year linguists to develop a range of professional competencies for their future careers.

Keywords: action research, teaching, undergraduates, languages, reflective learning.

1. Introduction

One of the challenges that universities in the UK face is how to successfully provide meaningful opportunities for developing employability skills while ensuring academic study retains its rigour and its criticality. The HEA Embedding Employability framework (HEA, 2015, n.p.) offers a structure for developing ways in which to deliver these skills in higher education. The framework lists those employability skills they believe to be significant assets to graduate success in the workplace such as knowledge, cultural awareness, and self-reflection (HEA, 2015). Typically, universities offer a range of extra-curricular, or, in some cases, credit-bearing career-focussed modules including internships, work experiences, and industry placements. These can be helpful in developing students’ skills and attributes alongside their knowledge and, in some cases, their evolving identity as a citizen (Artess, Mellors-Bourne, & Hooley, 2017).

As a teaching associate who teaches cohorts of final year undergraduate students of languages, I have had the opportunity to develop and refine a module which can be said to go some way towards addressing the complex issue of developing the professional competencies the HEA suggests universities might consider when designing and delivering the curriculum. Originally conceived for Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects in higher education institutions in order to respond to the growing deficit in science and mathematics teachers, the UAS offers a threefold opportunity to undergraduate students,

subject teachers in local schools, and the pupils attending those schools. More recently, this scheme or academic module has been re-imagined for languages undergraduates, many of whom are considering entering the teaching profession following their positive experience of teaching English during their study year abroad.

UAS is a model which has run successfully in nearly 60 UK universities since 2003, although the languages model is less common and responds to a more recent, concerning deficit of language teachers entering the profession with the resulting negative impact on the take-up of languages at General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) and above. In 2016/2017, only 50% of GCSE candidates sat a language examination, and only 33% of these achieved a C grade or above. The data for A level uptake and success also show a deficit, and this has resulted in a lack of suitably qualified teachers in secondary and a negligible number of primary teachers having the requisite level and confidence in languages to teach the required basic skills to their junior pupils (Tinsley & Board, 2016).

2. The UAS programme – application, allocation, and curriculum

Participation in the module involves engaging in a varied and, at times, demanding set of activities and endeavours, collectively and individually. Students sometimes feel overwhelmed in the first few weeks when they are required to balance obtaining an enhanced disclosure and barring service check while summarising their teaching philosophy and completing their ‘availability to teach’ form alongside attending the seminar. While support is provided, I am careful to accentuate the necessity for multi-tasking in anticipation of their teaching practice. Access to the module is by application as the places are limited due to the availability of teaching placements. The application, although not particularly onerous, is the first in several hurdles which aim to situate the learning in a real-world context. The module is regularly over-subscribed, with 40+ languages students applying for the 25-30 available places.

Once the students are enrolled, the module runs for the full academic year, providing the participants with 20 academic credits and a total mark which contributes to their final degree classification. A weekly seminar runs throughout the year, including topics such as classroom management, learning theory, the pastoral role, assessment, and technology in language learning (see [supplementary material](#)). The curriculum was constructed in consultation with the university's Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) team, and annual feedback from local teachers provides appropriate updates to this. In addition, an MFL secondary school teacher delivers one of the seminars on language learning theory each year, to bring current practice directly from her classroom to the students. Assessment is in two parts; a 1,000 word lesson plan (25% of the final mark) and a 3,000 word critically reflective essay (75% of the final mark). These are submitted at the end of the first semester (lesson plan) and the second semester (essay).

The style of the seminar aims to demonstrate effective classroom practice; varied learning activities and groupings, a platform for student to voice their opinions, and ongoing opportunities to reflect on and share their teaching experiences. Module teaching is underpinned by relevant and current educational theory and practice, and encourages the students to pursue their own academic reading in an area that becomes of significant interest to them during their placement. This occurs in the second semester, is hosted by local school languages departments, and offers each student the individual opportunity to teach six lessons to a group or class of pupils.

Sourcing and maintaining the teaching placements requires a large amount of time and effort, both to recruit schools to the programme and to ensure the introduction of the students is a smooth and positive process. In the case of the former, there can be a last minute plea via email to schools who have offered a single placement to provide multiple placements where there is a dearth of teaching opportunities for German, for instance. Invariably, these pleas produce the requisite placements, mainly due to well-established relationships with placement schools nurtured over several years. In the case of the latter, expectations of both the placement school and the student are articulated

in class at an introductory placement teacher and student meeting and via email. As module convenor, I have to offer support to dissatisfied teachers and forgetful students in the form of reminders, follow-up telephone calls, thank you cards, and emails. The cohort of primary and secondary schools has steadily increased, and schools tend to return to offer placements year on year. Teachers cite as advantages the positive language learning role models the students present to their pupils, as well as the extra support for oral, grammar, and beginners' language learning.

3. Development of professional competencies

Much of what is expected of the students participating on the module and what they instinctively start to develop can be aligned to many elements in the HEA Embedding Employability framework: knowledge and application; reflection and articulation; self, social, and cultural awareness; and confidence, resilience, and adaptability. Evidence for this can be found in their teaching journals which they maintain throughout the module and in which they write up their reflections on meeting their placement contact teacher or class for the first time, as well as evaluating each lesson and planning for the subsequent one. This journal not only provides the qualitative evidence for their final assessed essay, it also charts their experience as novice language teachers and documents their challenges and successes.

While the practical classroom experience is useful for the aspiring language teachers in each cohort, it is the critical reflection on this which provides the self-knowledge needed for success in the future workplace and as a global citizen. [Knight and Yorke \(2003\)](#) determine employability in higher education to mean knowledge, attributes, and skills *plus*. The *plus* is comprised of

“self-theories (how we explain what we experience), locus of control (whether we think we are generally able to affect our experiences) and their motivational concomitants (whether we therefore strive, comply or resist)” ([Knight & Yorke, 2003](#), p. 7).

The definition of *plus* can be seen to provide a narrative of the UAS student experience as they navigate their path through teaching grammar or vocabulary in unfamiliar and sometimes confrontational learning settings. Conceptually, they learn what they can and cannot control about their teaching context, and how they can influence this. Practically, the students learn how to survive a less than successful lesson, regroup, and return with new and reflective strategies for classroom success. Academically, they find the synergy between their experience and the critical evaluation they need to employ to write their assignment. The module as a whole requires them to be responsive, resilient, and reflective, three of the qualities that help the students in the classroom, and in their final assignment. Reflecting on the three elements of the *plus*, I created a model (Figure 1 below) which encapsulates the requirements of the final year students in their teaching placement and the challenges therein.

Figure 1. Reflective, Reflexive and responsive, Agile, Adaptable, and Prepared (RRAAP) model



The module requires the students to be reflective learners in order to evaluate and adjust their teaching plan, style, or approach for the following week. They are required to prepare for every conceivable classroom eventuality of pupil behaviour and range of pupil ability. It asks them to be reflexive and responsive so that they are aware of themselves and their actions in relation to the pupils and able to respond to the needs of the classroom in the teaching moment. It also requires them to be agile in their ability to move fluidly between the roles of student (learner) and teacher; something which is neither intuitive nor easy to achieve. Students are also expected to be adaptable to the demands, boundaries, and customs of an unfamiliar school environment and prepared to foster collegiate relationships with the teachers and yet, at the same time, authoritative ones with the pupils in the school.

4. Links to educational action research

The competencies as outlined in the model above are in line with the principles of educational action research (Elliott, 1985; Schön, 1987). This positions the teacher as a researcher of their classroom in which they teach, reflect on, and improve their practice, thus ensuring that classroom pedagogy has a critical evidence base. The research process is an iterative one, providing ongoing opportunities for reflection and re-positioning of the teacher and her planning and delivery. In action research, the notion of ‘mess’ is a common one as researchers change direction and move backwards as well as forwards as they make sense of the actions they have taken (Cook, 2009). This mess and the resolution thereof reflect the complexities of a working environment.

The undertakings of the language undergraduates can be seen to emulate the action research cycle of plan-act-observe-reflect (Carr & Kemmis, 1986), following a recognisable pedagogical process using lesson evaluation and reflection to alter or re-think the subsequent lesson in the light of the lesson outcomes, responses, and levels of engagement. The students’ abilities to assess, make a judgement, and implement a change are high level competencies relevant to all places of work and crucial to strategic change processes and operational management

as well as outstanding lessons. While only a proportion of the students each year continue on to become teachers, the experience of applying their linguistic knowledge to a real-life and sometimes challenging context is advantageous to all in preparing for and securing their future roles.

5. Conclusion

It would be neither fair nor accurate to imply that the teaching placements and the intersection of student schedules and priorities with the pressures and challenges of schools is without its difficulties. For the school staff, they are required to support a novice and often-nervous undergraduate while continuing to deliver the curriculum and manage their own teaching load. For the students, there are many challenges. Different teaching groups week on week, last minute changes, a lack of clear guidance, and sparse communication from their contact teacher are a few of the regular barriers faced by the students as they prepare themselves to teach. Yet it is the ability of the students to navigate their way through which provides a visible arc of their development as professionals and as adults, not simply as academic products. Nixon (1981), in his work on educational action research, described what was required of the teacher-researcher as “a willingness on the part of the teachers to learn about their classrooms and a desire to develop themselves professionally” (p. 9).

The agility required to balance the dual role of teacher and learner together with the humility required to evaluate their teaching practice places high demands on the participating students but also yields very positive results. The complexities with which the students grapple and the sophistication of their responses demonstrate their ‘willingness’ to self-develop as future teachers and professionals. Their experiences on this module can be understood through their voices via excerpts from their reflective final assignments and comments in their module evaluation forms:

“Understanding language anxiety became a crucial element of my teaching experience as it affected most of my students”.

“I have deduced through my experiences that it is important for a teacher to view a class not as a homogeneous unit, but rather a group of individuals with varying abilities caused by different needs, learning preferences, and circumstances”.

“This module was extremely relevant to the career path I plan to take after university. I feel very well equipped with both theoretical knowledge and practical experience from this module”.

“The module ran very smoothly across the year and also in a logical way. The methods of assessment are particularly useful for students who want to go on and become teachers”.

The undergraduate students have a key role to play in learning from their teaching experience, acting as change agents throughout the process and benefiting their own praxis development and the development of the pupils they teach. The benefits of the additional workload such a module entails are in the marriage between academic study and real-world teaching experience. This does not dilute the academic requirements but rather adds to them through careful and thoughtful observation and reflection. It enables deep engagement with the literatures to draw informed, evidence-based conclusions based on each student’s direct experience.

Supplementary materials

<https://research-publishing.box.com/s/i15q67693vval1dslectp8h937vs2k8r>

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