4 Intercultural language learning at work: a student-designed module

Marion Sadoux[1]

Abstract

During the academic year 2014-15, the Language Centre at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China (UNNC) worked in partnership with students on the design and validation of accredited work placement modules in the Language Centre. This initiative, endorsed by the UK campus within the Students As Change Agents (SACA) programme, aimed to address key concerns within the University with regards to employability and to the difficulty of combining a UK model of higher education and employability requirements within the Chinese context. This case study will look at the benefits of co-curricular design and at the importance of involving students in employability related projects. It will finally review performance and feedback from the first cohort of students and indicate areas for improvement.

1. Context and rationale

Employability is a driving concern for Chinese undergraduates – the job market they seek to enter upon graduation is exponentially more competitive than that which UK graduates may expect to face, as China produces over 6 million graduates every year, 25% of whom remain unemployed (Bagley, 2009).

---

1. University of Nottingham Ningbo, China; Marion.sadoux@nottingham.edu.cn

Graduate employability is also a key performance indicator for universities and of most direct concern for individual schools, as rankings are published at programme level. As the UNNC is keen to figure among the leading division of universities in China, it faces the complex challenge of understanding employability in its Chinese dimension and providing its students with compelling opportunities to develop skills akin to their peers in other Chinese universities. The most problematic area, as perceived by our Chinese students, is the lack of accredited work placement schemes on offer at the university. Whilst Chinese final year undergraduates typically spend most of their time undertaking work placements (which are seen as traditionally leading to future employment within the same firm), UNNC students see their opportunities severely limited by a heavy timetable and by the university's rigid recommendation that such work placements should be undertaken during the summer vacation only. Accredited work placement modules were not available to students at UNNC before this initiative. Not surprisingly, one of the main performance indicators that UNNC has not scored well on in the last few years in student satisfaction surveys has been employability.

Employability requires in-depth local job market knowledge – embedding it in the curriculum demands openness and flexibility. The tensions between global and local perspectives or between academic and vocational paradigms are often difficult to reconcile within institutions of higher education. Discussions across Schools and Faculties have been tenser here than perhaps elsewhere, as changing our pedagogy and curriculum in the face of the big unknown (the Chinese job market) can also threaten our sense of expertise.

The University of Nottingham has, however, a rich history in supporting and developing employability through its Nottingham Advantage Awards (NAA) scheme, which offers students in all 3 campuses the possibility of taking additional 'employability rich' modules and earn a maximum of 30 extra credits rewarded with a special award certificate. This scheme, for academics who are keen to explore novel ways of supporting employability and developing pedagogies, provides a uniquely safe ideas incubator and it is a scheme highly valued by students. It has also proven to be a precious vehicle to bring to the

fore specific issues relating to employability in the socio-cultural context of China (Speight, Lakovic, & Cooker, 2012).

For this reason, the SACA scheme launched by the University of Nottingham as part of its Teaching Transformation Plan seemed an ideal vehicle to explore, hear, voice and support student needs in terms of employability and bring them to the fore constructively through collaborative curriculum design.

2.   Aims and objectives

The Language Centre team in China seized this opportunity to improve another area of concern raised by students in multiple student satisfaction surveys, namely the perceived lack of cross cultural opportunities on campus. Whilst the university is keen to brandish its international dimension as preparing students for global citizenship, the reality that most students are keen to project is one of separation between international students (10%) and domestic students (90%), with too few mechanisms for integration. The idea of creating an accredited Work Placement module in the Language Centre therefore sought to not only give students the opportunity to develop their employability skills at work, but also to actively support cross cultural exchanges through language learning support.

3.   What we did

3.1.   Module design

Through the SACA-China scheme, a group of eight tutors and twelve students held meetings and worked together to design module specifications during November and December in 2014. The proposal focused on a suite of modules that would be available as part of degree programmes as 10 or 20 credit modules and as an extra-curricular NAA award (also worth 10 NAA credits). The students (and tutors) received training on how to design modules (learning

theories, intended learning outcomes and constructive alignment of assessment instruments) and the SACA NAA module running in the UK offered training opportunities in terms of project design and management to all participants via its Moodle platform. The students' collaboration was particularly important in terms of (1) defining the employability skills which they felt were going to be highly valued by Chinese employers and (2) seeking to develop assessment instruments which would highlight those. The students were very keen on the development of assessment instruments that would be transferable and which could be added to a skills portfolio.

We worked in three sub groups following rapid prototyping design techniques (one group per module type) and brought together proposals (sketches) which were then agreed on – the tutors involved in the project were then responsible for converting the sketches and ideas into technical module specification formats. We used a Moodle platform to share outputs and comments with the students. Our final proposals were then approved locally by the School of International Communications at UNNC and subsequently validated by the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies (CLAS) at the University of Nottingham in the UK.

3.2.   Features of the modules

In agreement with the student partners, the three Work Placement modules work seamlessly and all the different credit pathways are delivered together as one cohort. The modules all run for one semester – although the possibility of later adding a 20 credit year long module was agreed, it was not initially proposed – and are all structured along the same model:

Weeks 1-5: training phase

- Students attend a two hour long formal weekly workshop delivered by a language tutor, focusing on key aspects of language learning and on the requirements of the module (language learning skills, teaching approaches, language learning strategies, and digital strategies for language learning).

- Students observe learners in Language Centre classes and write reflective notes on these observations.

- Students offer 'language surgeries' to Language Centre students learning the language they are supporting and write a learner needs analysis based on classroom observations and individual surgeries.

At the end of the training phase, students write a draft work plan which is discussed and agreed on by a tutor. Students are free to choose what they will work on, this can be a continuation of surgeries, acting as a classroom assistant, developing resources, etc.

Weeks 6-12: work placement

- Students implement their work plan and have two more tutorials.

- Students are required to keep a reflective journal every week.

- They have a Moodle space available for their projects (not compulsory).

At the end of the work placement, students submit a portfolio and their reflective journal.

The portfolio includes a work plan, a needs analysis document, evidence of the work undertaken and feedback on this work. Students taking the module as part of their degree are also required to present their work orally and make recommendations to the Language Centre team (15 minute presentation).

3.3.   Syllabus and content design

This phase of development was beyond the scope of our SACA project and was exclusively undertaken by the module convenor (myself) working from the module specifications. The syllabus was designed within a co-constructivist distributive learning framework and all contents were designed and built in the

university learning management system, Moodle. Each weekly workshop is intended to be preceded by the view and study of a learning pathway designed as a book chapter in Moodle. Each learning pathway includes readings and short video tutorials (as much as possible taken from expert videos available online) followed by quizzes designed to inform workshop activities. One important section omitted in the module specification had to be added: the ethics of the work placement. The face to face workshops focus on sharing of knowledge and experience, on further developing students classroom observation and needs analysis skills and on discussing possible solutions and interventions to issues noted by the students.

3.4.   Work placement autumn semester 2015-16

The first delivery of the accredited Work Placement module recruited a total of 21 students: 5 elected to take this module as a 10 credit option within their degree programme and 16 students joined the course as an extra-curricular NAA option.

The optional in-degree module had purposely not been widely advertised by the Language Centre, in an effort to keep a relatively small cohort in the first instance. It had in fact only been actively promoted to students in the School of English, many of whom opt for Masters in teaching English to speakers of other languages after their undergraduate study.

In the autumn semester, we recruited 4 students from the School of English and one exchange student from the School of Contemporary Chinese Studies (who preferred to take this optional module rather than additional Mandarin credits and had found it herself on the online catalogue of modules). The NAA student cohort was extremely diverse both in terms of degree programmes provenance and in terms of linguistic background, so much so that all the languages offered by the Language Centre were represented (Mandarin, French, Spanish, German, Japanese and Italian). This created a uniquely vibrant multicultural class which had a very positive impact on establishing a community of learning as all students felt they had much to learn from one another.

3.5.   Students' work plans

Although students were given great freedom in choosing the area to focus on and the modalities of their work plan, the Language Centre offered some of them the opportunity to carry out a paid work placement teaching languages in local schools. Overall, the students opted for the following options:

- Language surgeries – one to one or two to one language learning support – the majority of Chinese students opted to work in groups (14, including 1 Spanish, 1 German).

- Additional classes focusing on 'real language', 'language through culture' or closer to students' personal interests (3, Japanese and Italian).

- Teaching an optional course in local middle and high schools (4, French, Spanish and German).

3.6.   Student performance and outcomes

The student performance and learning outcomes across the module were quite variable and certainly indicate the need for some modification ahead of next semester. Whilst the freedom given to students to intervene as they liked enabled some students to work responsively and creatively, alone or in groups, the quality and quantity of their input was quite variable due to their different abilities to respond quickly to the difficulties they encountered in reaching out to students. Some students organised outstanding support for the learners they helped and produced excellent reflections and learning materials to meet their needs. One group of students working on Mandarin surgeries created outstanding pronunciation resources for the students they helped and another student embedded her interventions into real life learning by organising topic relevant outings with the learner she was helping in order to boost motivation through genuine communicative achievements. Most students struggled to articulate the employability related outcomes in their reflection, and their journals remained

overall highly descriptive or focused on language learning analysis. It was also clear that reflective journal writing in English created difficulties for non-native English speakers used mostly to producing more traditional academic forms of writing, and that insufficient attention had been paid to this during the training period. Most students also struggled to understand the difference between the portfolio and the journal, and mixed both or omitted to include evidence of their work.

3.7.   Student feedback

Feedback on the module reaped very few responses. Only three students responded to the end of module evaluation questionnaire despite the fact that it was also made available to NAA students via Moodle. The feedback indicates overall satisfaction, one student believes though that the workload for an NAA is excessive. All students valued the freedom to set their own work plan and indicated that the independence given to them helped them develop time management and troubleshooting skills, particularly when they worked in groups.

4.   Discussion and conclusion

All 5 students taking the module in their degree completed the module and attended all workshops and tutorials. All the NAA students who were placed in schools also completed the assessments. However, the overall completion rate among NAA students was just over 50% with some students having carried out their placement but not submitted their assignments (portfolio and completed journal). This may suggest that for NAA students, having more guidance through a set work plan could improve completion. Module content delivery will be tweaked next semester to include a stronger focus on reflective writing and analytical skills related to employability. Better guidance needs to be given for students to distinguish the portfolio and the journal and it is proposed to create a template for the final journal entry which will be the only required assessed entry for this assignment. It is also proposed to run the workshops throughout

the semester to include 'staff meetings' beyond week 5 in order to monitor and support stronger outcomes.

At the end of this semester long journey, by far the clearest benefit of this module is to the Language Centre itself. Throughout their observations, reflections and interventions, the students have given us invaluable feedback on the weaknesses of our programmes and teaching methodology. With great sensitivity they have spoken of the frailty of our learners' confidence and motivation and their need for 2 core aspects of language learning that have fallen in between the cracks of the communicative approach: training on pronunciation and personally meaningful encounters with culture rich language.

References and links

Bagley, D. (2009). *Graduate employability in China*. University of Central Lancashire. Retrieved from http://www.cumbria.ac.uk/Public/Enterprise/Documents/TransnationalConference Presentations/GraduateEmployabilityinChinaDavidBagley.pdf

Introduction to the work placement modules. Retrieved from http://www.showme.com/sh/?h=uDOeOrg

NAA, Nottingham Advantage Awards: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/Careers/Students/AdvantageAward/Index.aspx

SACA, The University of Nottingham Teaching and Learning Directorate: http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/tld/ttp/studentengage/index.aspx

Speight, S., Lakovic, N., & Cooker, L. (2012). Stakeholder attitudes towards employability in a Sino-British university. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability, 3*(1), 26-40.

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