24 Opening doors to teaching: understanding the profession

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1.   Introduction

Over the past five years, final year students in the School of Modern Languages at the University of Bristol (UoB) have had the opportunity to take our unit 'Teaching Modern Languages as a Foreign Language' for credits. The unit is currently offered for students of French, German, Italian and Spanish and taught by language teaching experts from all four languages. It was initially set up for students of German only, but due to popular demand, it was opened up to other students within the School in 2011. The unit attracts around 40 students each year and combines lectures and seminars on theoretical aspects of language teaching pedagogy with tutorials and teaching experience in local schools. This enables students to gain various transferable skills and invaluable insight into teaching as a possible future career.

Keywords: experiential learning, practical experience, MFL pedagogy, becoming a teacher.

2.   What we did

For many students taking our course there is a strong element of continuity in their encounter with teaching. A significant number will have spent their year abroad (Y3) working as foreign language assistants.

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Students with prior teaching experience take our course because they intend to gain a more structured and professional understanding of language pedagogy.

For others, however, this is the first opportunity to establish if teaching is something they feel comfortable with, and our unit aims to equip them with all the necessary knowledge and understanding – including considerations about teaching English as a foreign language – to allow them to decide whether it is a worthwhile professional option for them.

The course, spanning twelve weeks, aims to provide a thorough overview of current language pedagogy. Assessment consists of a 3,000-word essay on a theoretical issue and a reflective lesson plan detailing a 50-minute language lesson in a teaching and learning context of choice.

The presence of an in-built mandatory practical element is of special consequence in terms of making students reflect on the actual job of teaching in an Experiential Learning (EL) approach. In line with Kolb's (1984) notion of EL as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38), our unit encourages students to go through the cycle of the four EL stages, which Kolb (1984) identifies as Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation.

In week eight, tutors arrange for students to observe a language class either at a secondary school or a class offered at the UoB as part of the Applied Foreign Language programme. Students are asked to engage thoroughly with this task with the aid of a dedicated observation sheet so that all the relevant aspects of a lesson can be identified and appreciated. Students then meet their tutors and discuss what they have observed. In week nine, students need to liaise with the school-teachers, negotiate a suitable topic and seek their tutors' approval for their lesson plan. In week ten, they are required to co-teach with a fellow student part of a lesson with the class they have observed. Finally, after their teaching, they receive in-depth and specific feedback from their tutor, who will have observed them teaching.

There is a lot of feedback for students to absorb. The opportunity to observe, then plan and deliver their own lesson is extremely valuable as it forms the basis for tutors to identify concrete examples of what worked and what did not, and refers students back to issues previously dealt with in the course of the unit which now become real and personal to the students who experience them in practice. Moreover, all this forms the material for the assessed Lesson Plan (LP), where students look critically at what has happened and learn from their respective successes and mistakes. Here students have to bring together all the theoretical knowledge of language teaching pedagogy they have acquired over the course of the unit and apply it to a chosen teaching scenario. This allows the tutors to see whether students can put the theory into practice and if they have learned from their own teaching experience as well as the feedback they received for it.

This piece of assessment is very different from what students are used to, but a bespoke set of marking criteria and guidance in lectures and tutorials inform students of our expectations. The LP needs to illustrate an innovative and stimulating lesson for the chosen group of learners, using suitable aims and objectives and appropriate methods. Students also need to justify and analyse the content and material used, as well as suggest how the success of the lesson could be assessed or evaluated.

The 3,000-word essay, on the other hand, analyses one aspect of language teaching in more depth and can focus on topics such as the use of social media for language teaching and the use of L1 in the classroom.

3.   Discussion of outcomes

Anecdotal evidence shows that students who took the course found it useful in preparing them for the challenges of Initial Teacher Training (ITT). The opportunity to work in schools often gives our students a vital link with the profession and with practitioners who can informally act as mentors. Some students maintain the connection with their school after they have completed

the unit. This gives them a chance to do voluntary work, which often is very valuable to them to strengthen their CVs and their chances to be accepted on their ITT programme of choice. The recent Green Paper "Fulfilling our Potential" (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2015) on English Higher Education stresses the need to "provide greater focus on [graduate] employability" (p. 8), and this unit has proven to be an extremely useful experience for students going into teaching after graduation.

In broader terms, the unit also entails a range of transferable – hard as well as soft – skills, such as planning, negotiating (with peers, tutors and professionals), managing time, prioritising, presenting, working as part of a team, adapting quickly to new circumstances, etc. Students need to receive and process information quickly from their university tutors and also to mediate with the schools in order to make their lesson appropriate and effective. According to the latest Higher Education Academy UK Engagement Survey, students have reported that these employability skills are underdeveloped compared to "thinking critically and analytically" as part of their degree (Buckley, 2015, p. 4).

For the future, we plan to gather more quantitative data on establishing actual links with employment and/or further study after graduation. Qualitative data collected through questionnaires and focus groups would allow us to get a clearer understanding of the transferable skills students have acquired by attending this unit and engaging with the practical element of it.

4.   Conclusion

Teaching, together with translating, is probably one of the employment options most closely associated with a Modern Foreign Languages degree, or at least one where the language skills acquired are an intrinsic part of the profession in question. Yet, British undergraduate language degree programmes do not systematically offer students opportunities to facilitate the transition to postgraduate study and a teaching career.

With our unit, we have set out to attempt to bridge this gap by providing a balance of theoretical and practical knowledge aimed at those students wanting to pursue a teaching profession, so that they can make informed decisions about their future in the employment market.

References and links

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