

10 Challenging, supporting, and empowering students in IWLP beginners' classes: a teaching and learning response to internationalisation

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Abstract

Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) modules are a popular option for international students at the University of Reading. Student feedback and module results show that some of these students face particular challenges in relation to their peers. In this paper, we describe how a team teaching Beginners French – Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) level A1 – addressed this issue. More specifically, we focus on the development of a new module with integrated support and differentiated assessment as well as student feedback and suggestions for curriculum enhancement. We demonstrate how minor module and assessment modifications enabled the team to support students who might have dropped out or become discouraged and at the same time raise the level of challenge for all students whatever their background.

Keywords: internationalisation, diversity, assessment, student-led curriculum design.

1. Introduction

The increasing internationalisation of UK higher education poses opportunities and challenges for IWLPs. In 2016-2017, almost 33% of non-EU students in the

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How to cite this chapter: Nader, A. (2019). Challenging, supporting, and empowering students in IWLP beginners' classes: a teaching and learning response to internationalisation. In N. Becerra, R. Biasini, H. Magedera-Hofhansl & A. Reimão (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends* (pp. 83-93). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2019.32.905>

UK came from China (UKCISA, 2018). Teaching multicultural, multilingual groups of language learners together contributes to developing global graduates in addition to teaching language skills. As Dlaska (2013) argues, “[a] pedagogy which facilitates international encounters and collaboration [...] puts the IWLP in a unique position to trial and advance the internationalisation of learning and teaching in the university” (p. 261).

This project addresses the challenge of increasing diversity by recognising that some students have a cultural and linguistic advantage, especially at the beginning of the course. We wanted to keep our diverse cohort together but at the same time address the particular challenges faced by East Asian students. The students we worked with were studying a 20 credit Beginners French module at the International Study and Language Institute of the University of Reading. The course sets 60 contact hours and another 140 hours of self-study which is supported by reading and listening material, made available on the virtual learning environment, and speaking and writing e-submission tasks.

Based on the results of previous cohorts and given the interactive nature of the lessons in an IWLP classroom, we decided to focus on supporting speaking and listening skills. Furthermore, we took into account that student anxiety is high for all students in these two skills (Gu, 2010), especially for those whose first language and prior learning experiences make French challenging. For these reasons, we made small changes to the syllabus and introduced scaffolded assessment. Furthermore, after securing university funding, we organised student-led focus groups to test some of our underlying assumptions and receive student input on the syllabus.

2. Method: the phases of the project

2.1. Phase 1 (2016 to 2017)

We obtained project funding to develop focussed listening, speaking, and pronunciation material and ran extra workshops for selected students. Having

reviewed student feedback, the conclusion to this phase was that all students taking Beginners French could benefit from explicit skills teaching and that the materials and the timing of the sessions did not meet the needs of the weaker students.

The learning experience, early on, was leading to de-motivation and absenteeism among both Asian and European students. For the linguistic reasons highlighted above, the former often felt overwhelmed while the latter found the pace too slow. Even though all of our students were beginners, their prior experience, if not their formal learning, meant that they were not starting from the same baseline and therefore we needed to make some modifications in order to make the teaching equitable for all (Killick, 2017, p. 136).

One possibility was to create a separate module with different learning outcomes to cater for diversity, but this approach would have undermined our secondary aim of fostering multicultural awareness among our students.

2.2. Phase 2 (February to September 2017)

In this phase, we reviewed the syllabus and contact hours for the Beginners French module, LA1PF1, and designed a second module, Beginners French with Listening and Speaking Workshops, LA1PF9, referred to as F1 and F9 hereafter. We have run the two modules together since October 2017.

We continue to teach these rich, culturally mixed groups together, while recognising that some students need extra support, especially at the beginning of the course. For this reason, we have introduced a differentiated summative assessment task, which we describe below, and allocate students to either module following a placement test and not solely on the basis of their first language.

2.3. Implementing Phase 2 changes (October 2017 to May 2018)

All students taking IWLP F1 registered for the Beginners' module (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Students studying IWLP F1, 2017-2018, by nationality (66 students)

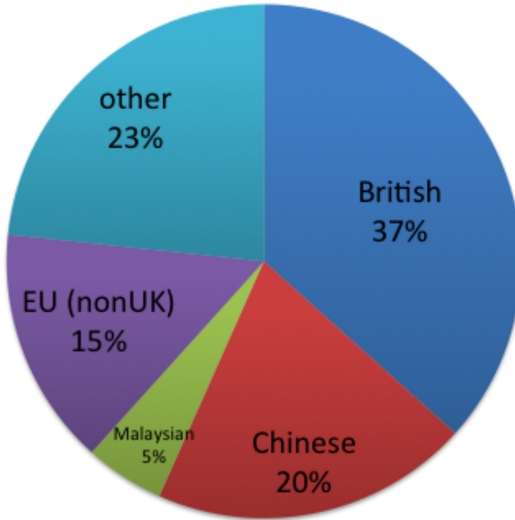
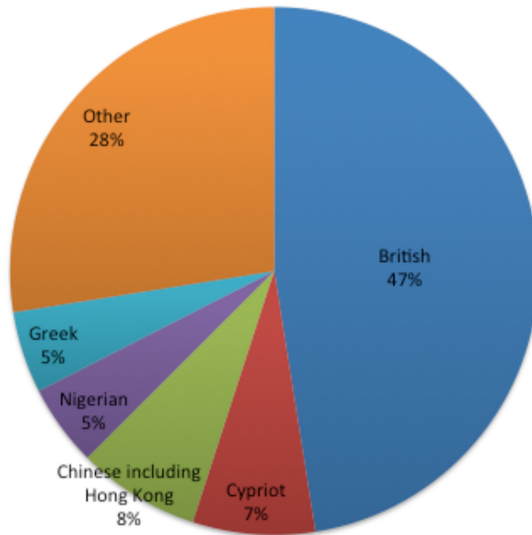
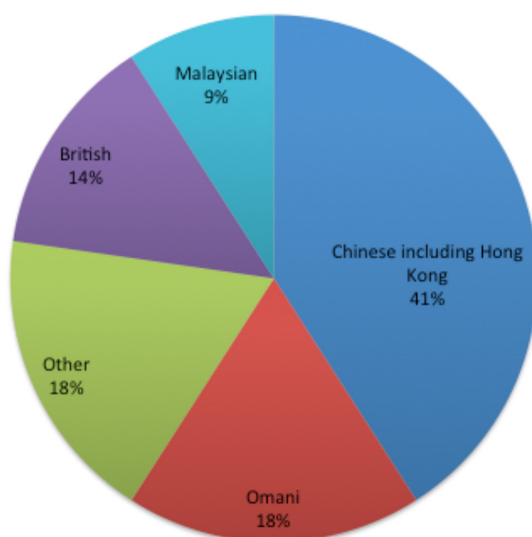


Figure 2. Standard IWLP F1, 2017-2018 (40 students)



After the initial four contact hours, students do an in-class listening and speaking placement activity and either remain in F1 or move to F9. Both modules are taught together for all but five contact hours. We see from [Figure 2](#) and [Figure 3](#) that the placement of students resulted in most but not all UK and European students being placed in F1 and most but not all Chinese students being placed in F9.

Figure 3. IWLP F9, 2017-2018 (22 students)



The contact hours for the F1 students were reduced to allow the F9 students to be taught on their own in small homogenous groups with focussed tutor support. During these workshop hours, the F9 students were able to practise and go back through set materials. Three of the five hours were timetabled early on in the course, Weeks 3, 4, and 8 of the autumn term. Knowing that extra support hours are available means tutors maintain the pace of the classes from the start.

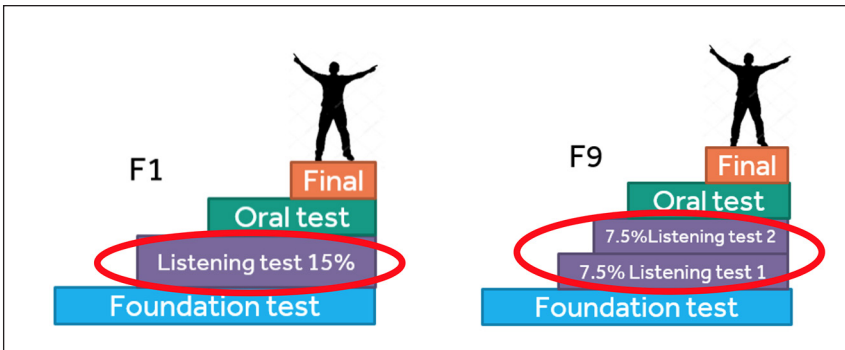
The most innovative aspect of the F9 module is the new differentiated ‘stepped’ listening assessment. F9 students take two summative listening tests rather

than just one. The final summative listening assessment is scaffolded for the F9 students (Figure 4).

IWLP learning outcomes are benchmarked against the CEFR but overlaid on these levels is the need to attribute a range of marks from distinction to fail. Students who reach the CEFR A1 may fail or achieve very low passes in listening because differentiating between the ranges of students means that the final listening has to include sections that exceed A1 level.

The students taking F1 sit only the final listening test worth 15% of the module mark. The learners taking F9 sit a first listening test in Week 4 of the spring term, worth 7.5%, which tests A1 material, and then they sit the final test with their F1 colleagues, worth only 7.5% for them. The final learning outcomes are achieved by both cohorts but the F9 students have more support along the way.

Figure 4. The scaffolded listening test for the F9 student



2.4. Phase 3 (January to April 2018)

Four students were funded to run a small project to collect student and tutor feedback on the new modules and to suggest further curriculum enhancement. They ran focus groups, analysed a questionnaire, and produced a written report on their findings. The outcomes are discussed below.

3. Outcomes and discussion

The feedback from the student mid- and end of module evaluations and focus groups shows that by offering the two new, co-taught modules, with targeted support, students were satisfied with the way we had addressed the issues of differentiation.

The support hours addressed the anxiety (Killick, 2017, p. 140) felt by the F9 students at the beginning of the course; a common comment from F9 students was that:

“the smaller group lessons gave me a chance to practise and go over what I did not understand”.

At the same time, we were successful in raising the pace of the lessons and ensuring an appropriate level of challenge and student engagement for the most able students. A typical learner’s comment in the F1 end of module questionnaire was:

“very engaging and interesting way of learning a language. Fast paced and effective”.

Previously, there had always been a number of students who fed back that the pace was too slow. One tutor commented that it was actually easier to cover all the material with the whole cohort, despite the reduced hours, because of the supplementary F9 support teaching.

Overwhelmingly, students agreed that being taught together gives them a positive experience in the language class. Learners unanimously agreed that they should be taught together:

“[k]eep the classes mixed as it is advantageous to both groups: a positive, interactive environment where students can help each other as well as develop themselves and [the mix] gives a culturally diverse class”.

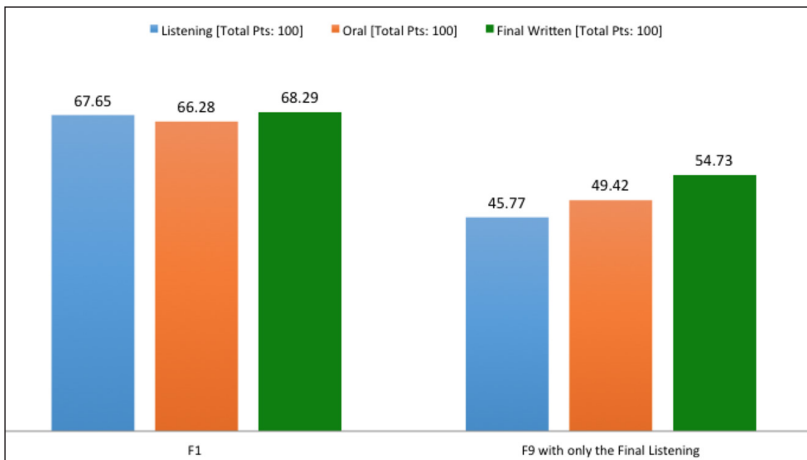
3.1. Feedback on assessment

We asked three questions:

- Did the extra support in listening skew the overall marks?
- Did the students feel that the differentiated assessment was unfair?
- How did the F9 students perceive the extra listening test?

The final listening test was the same for both cohorts, F1 and F9, so we were able to compare the marks. We made the final listening test more challenging, since for the F9 students it is now worth only 7.5% of their final mark. In the final listening test, the mean mark for the F1 students was 68% and for the F9 students it was 46%, a difference of more than 20% (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Comparison of F1 and F9 marks with only the final listening test



Combining the results of the two listening tests for F9 (each weighed as 7.5% of the module mark) raised the mean mark for the F9 students listening score to 57% (Figure 6).

The aim was to offer differentiated support to the two cohorts, but not to skew the overall results, and Figure 7 shows that the final mark distribution, for all skills, reflects the students’ relative achievement on the course. This evidence satisfied staff that introducing the extra listening test and having different weightings for the final listening test still retained the students’ ranking.

Figure 6. The impact of two listening tests on the F9 overall marks

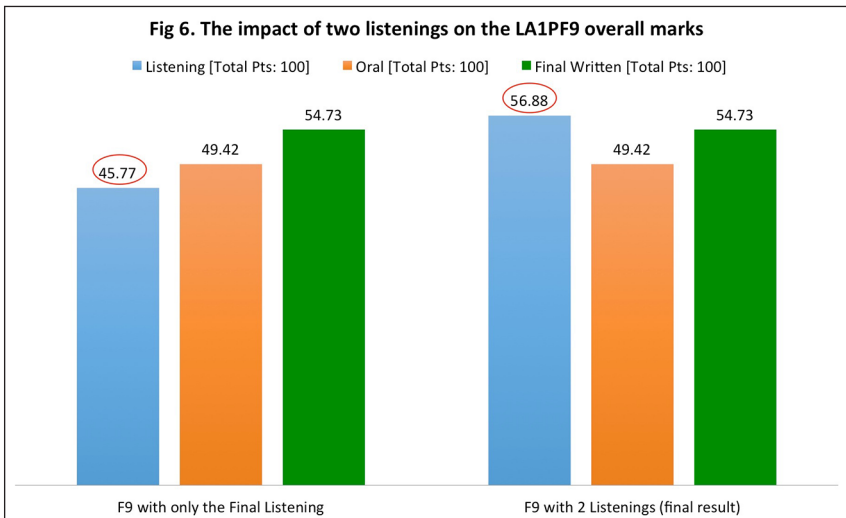
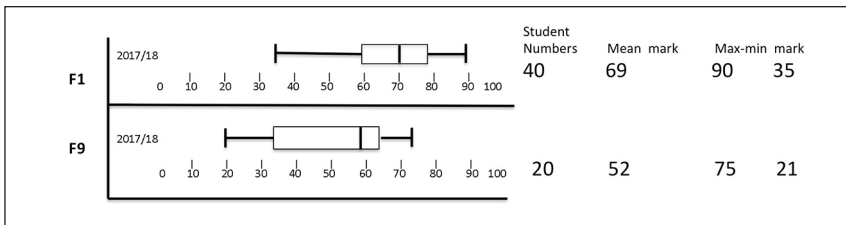


Figure 7. Comparative overall mark distribution for the two modules



No student suggested that the listening weightings were unfair. In the group discussions, students recognised that, though they were all beginners, they were

in reality starting from very different points, given their cultural and linguistic diversity.

The F9 students might have felt that having two listening tests rather than one put them under extra pressure but apart from one, who felt it made no difference, this was not the case:

“[b]ecause the modules are split into two and having another chance to experience the [listening] exam I felt less nervous about it”.

3.2. What next?

In their report, students suggested further improvements. One was developing more listening practice materials on the virtual learning environment as part of the scheme of work for the F1 students in the hours that only F9 students come to the class.

The project evolved from focussing on speaking skills to giving more support for listening skills, both F1 and F9 students would still like more personalised tutor feedback on speaking as opposed to peer feedback.

4. Conclusion

Reducing student anxiety, recognising different starting points, and providing extra structured support has benefited both the weak and the strong students in the cohort. The former was anticipated and the latter less so. Undertaking this project, the teaching team has appreciated the value of working with students on course design and in future we will engage students at an earlier stage.

These A1 level language learners were very positive about the intercultural classrooms, even in a context where one group might perceive themselves at a disadvantage.

Mixed classes will always need careful management, but this intervention proved worthwhile for both students and lecturers.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to my IWLP French colleagues Alison Nicholson, Jenny Birk, and Sabine Martinez; the International Study and Language Institute and the PLaNT project funds, which both supported the project; and IWLP students Alex Lane, Maria Mitrou, Jiani Shen, and Ruiqi Wang.

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

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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: a look at new trends
Edited by Nelson Becerra, Rosalba Biasini, Hanna Magedera-Hofhansl, and Ana Reimão

Publication date: 2019/05/06

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Typeset by Research-publishing.net
Cover design by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-36-8 (Ebook, PDF, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-37-5 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

ISBN13: 978-2-490057-35-1 (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'.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.

A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, UK: British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2019.
