

2 Well-rounded graduates – what languages can do

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Abstract

The School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the Open University (OU) radically re-designed its modern languages curriculum in 2014, launching its first suite of new modules in 2017. The institution as a whole has since also developed a new employability framework. Our paper describes the principles underpinning the design of the new curriculum, demonstrates how it is being implemented, and focuses on an initiative that involved our Associate Lecturers (ALs) in defining a ‘well-rounded graduate’ and reflecting on plurilingualism and their roles as language teachers in a distance-teaching institution. Presenting our Teaching Excellence project, its processes, and findings in this paper will allow colleagues who teach modern languages to replicate or adapt parts of our approach in their own settings, exemplifying to the wider world how language skills can become an inherent element of the well-rounded graduate in the 21st century.

Keywords: language graduates, employability, action research.

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1. Introduction

Globally and within Europe, the call for language competences as part of employability skills has become heard widely. Some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have already responded by integrating language and employability more closely. However, there is evidence that languages graduates are not necessarily aware of the range of employability skills they develop through their course, or are unable to articulate them. Moreover, practitioners on the ground might fear that the latter comes with a loss of language competence, and, hence, they might resist the change required in pedagogy to support it. Language teachers at tertiary level but also, consequently, at secondary and even primary level, will need to be encouraged to buy into the new curriculum and its associated methods and content.

The School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the OU has revised their modern languages syllabus and curriculum considerably, following university strategic new priorities and responding to a changing higher education environment.

As a distance university, the OU differs from other HEIs in which all teachers have immediate and direct contact with students. In our case, the bulk of the academic teaching is done through materials design and development, and mediated through ALs to teach and support students. New requirements for graduateness demand a shift towards general communication and employability skills, amongst others, and this is reflected increasingly in our materials. However, although these changes have taken place centrally, they have not necessarily been transmitted effectively to all our ALs.

The Teaching Excellence project presented in this paper is aimed at re-connecting language ALs to our updated strategy for language teaching and materials design, and at cascading its rationale to other ALs. In addition, it is intended to gain immediate feedback and evaluation of the impact on students and teachers during language tutorials.

2. The new curriculum and the principles underpinning its design

Research (e.g. Araújo et al., 2015) shows that knowledge of languages increases employability. For Kelly (2016), “[t]he value of languages for employment is not the only motivation for learning other languages, but language learning provides a lasting asset for a growing number of careers” (p. xix). In the UK, it has been recognised that languages are “strategically vital for the future of the UK” (The British Academy, 2020, p. 6). The positive impact of multilingualism on social cohesion has also been emphasised in a report from AHRC and UKRI (2019). The economic impact of the nation’s lack of language skills has been costed at 3.5% of GDP (The British Academy, 2019). At the same time, the current higher education environment has seen languages departments having to justify or fight for their existence (too many of them unsuccessfully), and needing to demonstrate to their own institutions the value of their programmes and their relevance in a context where, more often than not, the focus is on the vocational relevance or monetary value of degrees for graduates. Employers do recognise that graduates with language skills add value to businesses through the range of skills developed as languages students, e.g. their communication skills or ability to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds: “[f]or the government vision of ‘Global Britain’ to be delivered, businesses need people who can communicate with customers and suppliers around the world” (CBI/Pearson, 2019, p. 26). Languages specialists know that the development of such attributes is intrinsic to languages programmes, but they have, so far, frequently remained in the background, and been taught implicitly. As a consequence, awareness of these attributes has remained low in the general public and amongst non-specialists, and languages graduates themselves are often unable to articulate them, for example, in a job interview.

It has been shown that interventions can be successful in teaching students how to articulate their employability skills (Tomasson Goodwin, Goh, Verkoeyen, & Lithgow, 2019), and this is an integral part of the approach taken by the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics at the OU. Starting in 2013, we undertook

a thorough review of the content of our modern languages curriculum (described in [Baumann & Vialleton, 2017](#)) in order to:

- foreground the development of all the skills, knowledge and attributes taught through a modern languages degree programme;
- raise awareness of the development of skills and of their relevance in terms of employability and in terms of other learning gains, working gains, and personal gains relevant to part-time adult learners reflecting the “holistic fusion of skills, values, and attitudes in [their] employment journeys” ([Kellett & Clifton, 2017](#), n.p.); and
- help students to articulate this.

In the past, the development of OU modern languages modules hinged on three subject-specific areas, namely language skills, cultural knowledge, and language learning skills, which was reflected, for example, in the labelling of different content sections in our module materials. The new curriculum blueprint developed in our school follows a different design, which reflects a more holistic view of what language learning is about. It explicitly redefined the discipline as a clustering of knowledge, skills, competences, and attitudes spanning several different areas. Some of these are subject-specific, such as the development of grammatical competence or of intercultural communication skills, and others are not subject-specific, for example, digital skills and academic skills. In total, 12 core components were identified, around which the new curriculum blueprint was structured. This is illustrated in [Figure 1](#) below ([The Open University, 2017a](#)).

Through this work, we redefined our languages graduates as well-rounded graduates able to demonstrate a wide range of skills, knowledge, and attitudes relevant to a variety of jobs and life situations. The impact on the overall content of the new modules produced since we started implementing the new curriculum blueprint was not dramatic, although it has had to be adapted to suit the revised framework; greater emphasis has also been put on intercultural communication

competence. At the same time, a more substantial rethink of the way the course is framed, and of the narrative which introduces it to our students within the learning materials that we produce for them, had to be introduced.

Figure 1. The 12 components of the OU modern languages curriculum blueprint



The OU’s trademark model of the “teacher’s voice in print” (Coleman & Vialleton, 2011, p. 235; see also Rowntree, 1994) was adjusted to ensure that the teacher in print attracted the students’ attention to the various skills developed through each activity. Two examples are given below, both extracted from our

module entitled *French Studies 1*, the second module studied by *ab initio* French students.

Figure 2 provides an example of a reflective question asked to students at the end of a section on traditional festivals in France, including the teaching text provided to them as a follow-up discussion prompt (The Open University, 2017b).

Figure 2. Reflective learning activity mentioning skills developed by languages graduates

<p>Étape E</p> <p>Under what circumstances might it be important to be aware of festivals or traditions from another culture? Think of at least one example. Answer in English.</p> <p><i>Pourquoi c'est important de connaître les traditions d'autres cultures ? Répondez en anglais.</i></p>
<p>Intercultural awareness</p> <p>Knowing about festivals and traditions can be useful when interacting with someone from another country: it can, for example, help avoid making cultural assumptions about how people behave or about what they do on particular occasions. By studying this unit, you are furthering your knowledge of francophone cultures, and you will get to know more about a number of festivals and traditions in French-speaking countries in Europe. Furthermore, as a language learner, you are becoming aware of the importance of not making assumptions when you communicate with people from other cultures, even when you don't have any knowledge about their specific culture. Intercultural communication skills are key skills developed by languages graduates. They are relevant in all multicultural contexts, whether it be doing business abroad, working with colleagues from a variety of cultural backgrounds, or living in a multicultural town. Flexibility, curiosity and openness are some of the characteristics developed by languages graduates, who have learned to expect different behaviours from people from different cultures.</p>

The picture above illustrates how students are encouraged to reflect on the relevance of what they learn within the module, and the way the teaching text provides examples of how this can be articulated.

Such reflection is also embedded in the module materials through a careful selection of learning resources. For examples, in the *French Studies 1* module, we interviewed and filmed six French-speaking people, some of whom had studied languages at university. We asked them to explain to students how the skills they acquired at the time were relevant to their current careers, from

teaching to nursing or shop-keeping. We then asked students to reuse the same phrases and ideas in a simulated conversation. The interviews are then also used as resources to teach a range of subject-specific learning objectives.

Furthermore, at the end of each module unit, students are encouraged to reflect on their learning, both as part of their personal development plan and to help them organise their revision work ahead of assignments. An online self-evaluation tool has been designed for this.

Figure 3 below shows an example from the same unit as above, demonstrating how students are encouraged to realise that, by being language students, they are learning skills that are desirable to employers (The Open University, 2017c). This approach trains students to articulate those attributes for themselves in whichever professional or personal context is relevant to them.

Figure 3. Self-assessment checklist and employability and professional skills for L112 unit 2

▼	Lexical competence	+/-
▼	Grammatical competence	+/-
▼	Phonological competence	+/-
▼	Language skills	+/-
▼	Translation skills	+/-
▼	Cultural knowledge	+/-
▼	Intercultural communication competence	+/-
▼	Academic skills	+/-
▼	Digital and information literacy skills	+/-
▼	Employability and professional skills	+/-

▼	Employability and professional skills	1	2	3	4	5
	I can demonstrate my ability to motivate myself: working through module materials, attending tutorials, submitting iCMA51 and TMA01.					
	I can display the ability to be an effective and self-aware independent language learner: I can work with tutor feedback.					
	I can work with grammar books and dictionaries.					
	I can organize my vocabulary and grammar notes.					
	I can analyse and assess my own strengths and weaknesses: working with the Section 5 skills checklist.					
	I understand that through intercultural awareness, languages graduates develop characteristics such as flexibility, curiosity and openness which are key employability skills.					

The first modules following the new approach were launched in 2017. A year later, our project was developed to evaluate the impact of the change. Working with ALs teaching on the modules, the project team examined how the change was perceived by them, and what their and their students' views were on the new approach.

3. The project

A workshop with ALs who tutor on the school's languages modules was organised to share the principles behind the curriculum redesign, collect feedback from practitioners, and discuss how best to embed the development of employability skills in modules studied by students as diverse as those found at the OU.

Five ALs took part in the workshop and two were placed on a waiting list. In the end, four ALs could participate in the one-day workshop which was facilitated by three language lecturers of the School of Languages and Applied Linguistics.

In preparation of the workshop, the four participants were asked to collect statements from their students, answering two specific questions:

- Where do you think you will be using your L2 skills in the future?
- What other skills do you think you will be needing (for a job/work/volunteering) in the future?

The workshop was organised in seven parts:

- a brainstorm activity where participants reported on what their students said about what they are looking for in a language course and what they wish to do with their language degrees;
- a presentation on the benefits of language learning;

- a group session on skills development through module materials: participants familiarised themselves with materials based on the new curriculum and, in pairs, they identified the specific ‘hidden’ skills that were taught or included in the activities. Participants were also able to provide feedback to authors and editors about the accessibility and the clarity of the newly written materials;
- a presentation of the new curriculum framework for languages at the OU;
- a discussion on how to define a ‘well-rounded’ language graduate – based on different cultural views and perspectives, participants worked on defining educational ideals by describing the traits expected of a well-rounded language graduate;
- a focus group on cultural differences, where participants exchanged ideas and the discussion was recorded; and
- a round-up in a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis of the new curriculum framework for language modules, where participants were invited to comment on the new curriculum and how they envisaged teaching with the new materials.

Participants were asked to complete a feedback form after the workshop.

The one-day workshop was then repeated as part of a staff development programme for ALs. The second workshop took place online four months later, and was attended by 18 participants. Similar staff training takes place regularly when modules are re-designed and findings from our project can feed into these events.

The model of integrated practitioner feedback as a process, rather than collecting product-specific evaluation data at the end of the production, has proven successful in engaging ALs in reflections about language modules, and has influenced pedagogy in the early stages of writing new module materials.

Beyond influencing ALs' practice, relevant findings from the workshop were passed on to the module-writing teams of Level 2 languages courses to improve future course design. Specific changes made for the new courses include: the importance placed on language skills used for voluntary work (not just employment); the relevance of choice in language learning activities to make them relevant to each student's particular professional or personal context; and the value of explaining pedagogical reasoning to learners through introduction and activity instructions.

4. Discussion

The feedback and reflection model as described in our article can be seen as a complex action research cycle (Lewin, 1946). Action research for language teachers has been described as follows:

“the process begins with the identification of a concern. Then, the practitioner investigates issues related to the concern and plans and implements a change designed to address the concern. At the heart of action research is reflection: practitioners involved in action research are expected to explore what they are doing, why they are doing it and what the impact has been after doing it” (Cabaroğlu, 2014, p. 80).

Whereas in the classic action research model, teachers would first notice a need or desire for change by observing their own class, in our case, the central team of academics reacted to a shift in the external demands for language graduates, placing more emphasis on employability skills. This led to implementing a change in the curriculum by influencing syllabus design for individual language courses.

The next step, evaluating change and reflecting on change, was shared between central academics and the – in our case – more peripheral teachers who had to implement the change in their own teaching (the new language materials also meant that their teaching content had changed). However, to make this change successful in all areas of teaching, the ALs needed to understand and

integrate the new emphasis on skills in their own teaching. The following round of changes, implementing the findings from the evaluation process, was again conducted centrally.

5. Contributions to the field of modern languages

Our study can offer two distinct contributions to the field of modern language teaching: (1) a model for shared action research to fit the busy lives of part-time language teachers, and (2) a model for integrating employability skills into a modern languages curriculum. We will not go in too much detail about the principles of the first model, which has been outlined above, as this is not the focus of this article. We will focus instead on the second model for successful modern languages teaching, based on an integration of employability skills into the curriculum, and which mainly relies on actions and context-relevant initiatives foregrounding the development of knowledge, skills, and attributes which usually remain implicit in languages teaching. As specialist linguists, we need to remind ourselves that what we take for granted is not necessarily understood by non-specialists. As teachers, we need to explicitly make connections for students, and train them to articulate the detailed steps of their rich learning journeys. In our framework, this was achieved through redefining the discipline holistically as a clustering of knowledge, skills, competences, and attitudes spanning 12 distinct core areas. As course designers, our key efforts to implement this went into the careful choice of learning materials and resources to support the approach, the systematic and explicit development of intercultural communication competence and non-subject-specific skills alongside the development of language-specific skills, and a pedagogic approach which supports the development of self-reflection in our students.

6. Conclusion

It has become imperative for the languages sector to demonstrate the wide professional relevance of language learning to specialist students, and even more

so to non-specialist ones, and to educate them in articulating the nuances of what language learning brings to them.

The OU's new curriculum for modern languages has redefined the discipline as a holistic cluster of knowledge, skills, and attributes. It has achieved this by emphasising the intercultural communication competence dimension of language learning and developing a pedagogic approach which encourages self-reflection and explicit training in articulating one's skills. Our project suggests that there is a need for a collaborative approach between all the practitioners involved in educating our future languages graduates for this to be successful.

We need to ensure that our language learning programmes deliver the skillful, thoughtful, and culturally-aware linguists that society needs by raising our students' awareness of their wide range of language, communication, and professional skills, and by training them to articulate the benefits they can bring to employers. By doing this, we can ensure that those well-rounded graduates are able to secure the jobs that they aspire to and deserve to get.

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