

16 Stumble or fall? Responses to moving language learning online at Durham University during the 2020 pandemic

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Abstract

This chapter offers a chronological narrative of the steps taken by the Centre for Foreign Language Study (CFLS) at Durham University to move language teaching, learning, and assessment online following the announcement of the global COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. This includes immediate steps to suspend classroom teaching, a move to online assessments, preparations for teaching of summer language courses, and steps to convert existing curricula and teaching materials for online delivery in 2020-2021. The chapter concludes with some lessons learned, and plans for the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, online, language teaching, assessment, training, university-wide programme, UK.

1. Introduction

The CFLS provides access to language learning to anyone in the university, and the local community who is not otherwise registered for a specialist degree in Modern Languages and Cultures. We offer language courses in a variety of formats in 18 languages, not including English. In March 2020, we were supporting 2,100 language learners, 1,150 studying elective language modules

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that count towards their respective degree, and a further 950 on evening courses. We were supporting a core team of 22 language teachers, a further 37 teachers delivering evening courses on a freelance or part-time basis, and an administration team of five individuals. CFLS is a sub-department in the School of Modern Languages and Cultures (MLAC). In turn, MLAC offers four specialist undergraduate degree programmes, and a range of postgraduate and undergraduate joint honours programmes. CFLS operates autonomously from MLAC, although shares governance via a School Education Committee and Board of Examiners. We have had an unfulfilled plan to develop online delivery of language courses for a number of years.

At Durham University, the pandemic has evolved in four phases:

- the initial suspension of face-to-face teaching and immediate response to deliver the final week of teaching and assessment;
- the conclusion of formal examinations in April and May, including Boards of Examiners;
- the planning and preparation of summer language courses to start in June 2020; and
- the planning and preparation for the resumption of teaching in the new academic year.

This chapter offers a chronological narrative behind the decisions and actions undertaken from a management and coordination perspective.

2. Staying safe

The decision to suspend face-to-face teaching was announced to the departments by the senior management team at Durham University on the afternoon of the 10th of March 2020. This was a timely, unilateral decision made early by

the university's senior management team to mitigate risk of exposure to the coronavirus within the university community. At that point, we were in the penultimate week of teaching. Students were encouraged to complete classes in that week, and then seek ways to return home, with the final week of timetabled teaching to be delivered by alternative means. For CFLS, the announcement presented three immediate problems: first, we had scheduled summative assessments due to take place the following afternoon. In one case, this involved one exam venue for 150 students. We decided to progress with this exam, not to re-schedule, but to divide the students into four smaller groups distributed across separate rooms. We also had other assessments scheduled the following week, by which time many students would have left Durham. In each case, it was decided to proceed with the assessment, but to provide the students with an assessment task remotely via the university Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), then submitted to the relevant module teacher by email. This fortunately only involved around six separate courses and 100 students, with the assessments themselves comprising typically 25% of the course mark. The risk was mitigated by keeping the assessment as a real-time task, undertaken live and supervised by the course teacher.

Secondly, CFLS had 60 evening courses ongoing, with ten days left until course completion. An immediate decision was made to suspend face-to-face teaching for the final week, with teaching materials for those and previous sessions made available to learners via the VLE. Teachers, who in this case are all part-time, were advised not to come onto campus, and were encouraged to offer a virtual Skype session where this was considered feasible and viable. Approximately half continued with a final session online, usually using Skype. Fortunately, our evening courses are not assessed, the courses were almost at an end, and the circumstances were such that learners in any event were not necessarily immediately focussed on their learning.

Finally, we still had one week of teaching remaining for our elective modules. These are assessed modules, with marks counting towards students' degree outcomes. The final week of teaching usually helps wrap up the course, and helps to prepare the students for the final speaking assessments that take place

after the Easter break. It was decided to proceed with delivery of teaching sessions in the final week online. To this end, the central university Information Technology (IT) service had stepped in promptly as soon as the suspension of classroom teaching was announced. Durham University uses Blackboard as the platform behind our VLE, and already had a licence for limited use of Collaborate, Blackboard's online teaching platform. This licence was extended almost immediately, and made available to all courses and all teachers across the university. The university also rapidly acquired institution-wide licences for Microsoft Teams and the Zoom video-conferencing software, and established centrally-coordinated training in the use of Collaborate and Microsoft Teams through our Durham Centre for Academic Development (DCAD), accessible at scale to staff across the university.

With this support, we therefore took the decision to proceed with some real-time remote teaching in the final week, supported with asynchronous teaching materials, and using office hours as a means for individual students to raise concerns and get more focussed support. This interim solution worked well, allowing teachers themselves to decide what they considered to be the best and easiest solution for their individual circumstances, and allowed teaching to conclude without significant impact on the learning of the students. Furthermore, teachers were encouraged to start working from home immediately. With progress of the pandemic at a national level, on Monday March 16th we took the decision in CFLS that all staff would move to remote working from home. Ultimately, at this point, the priority was to reassure students about their progression, to provide a stopgap emergency solution to continue to provide teaching to the end of term, and to remove as many individuals as possible from the university campus to minimise risk of the virus spreading into the university community.

3. Catching breath

Having managed to reach the end of the academic term, we then had time to take stock, and the university focus moved towards end of year exams. For elective

language modules we only had to concern ourselves with speaking assessments, usually undertaken individually or in pairs with an examiner in a small teaching room. For students studying a specialist languages degree, they would have to take a speaking assessment and a written examination.

For speaking assessments, the main decision to make was one of submission format. How might we replicate a conventional speaking assessment when we cannot meet the students? Would we attempt to keep the usual exam format, with students meeting examiners via video in real time, or would we ask students to submit a recording of themselves in response to instructions and submit this for marking by the examiner? For degree students, MLAC took the decision to change the format of the speaking assessments, requiring all students to submit a recording of themselves. The assessment format itself was modified to a more reflective submission that allowed students to demonstrate their full range of speaking ability in the target language. The assessment task would be released to students at a set time, with a recording to be submitted within a 48 hour time window.

For CFLS, we retain more flexibility. When consulting with teachers, some preferred the idea of allowing students to pre-record a submission, thereby avoiding issues with internet connectivity, and to hopefully allow the students to be more relaxed. Others preferred to keep the format of a real-time assessment, undertaken by video link. CFLS allowed module convenors to make their own decisions on their preferred format, albeit having a consistent approach in each format and across all courses. For all courses, approximately half of students had a live video assessment and half submitted a pre-recording.

Teachers briefed students as to the modifications to assessment methodology, and spent time over the Easter break modifying assessment tasks and preparing to undertake assessments virtually. To this end, we were able to take advantage of a consultation forum set up with other language teachers in other university language programmes across the UK. Durham University is a member of the Association of University Language Communities in the UK and Ireland (AULC), and the Director of CFLS also happens to be the current Chair of

AULC. It was recognised early in the process that all university language teaching, learning, and assessment would need to adapt, and common approaches shared across the wider language teaching community would work well. As a result, an online community of language teachers across the UK was established in mid-March on Microsoft Teams, with 127 individual participants, and a variety of discussion fora, related to asynchronous teaching, online summative language assessments, online support for languages using non-Roman scripts, and mitigation strategies for students. This network did not in and of itself provide any significant breakthrough. However, it did allow language teachers across the country to gain some reassurance that the issues they were facing were being similarly addressed in other institutions. This did a great deal to ease anxiety amongst the language teaching community, and to allow teachers to then focus their efforts in areas of greatest concern, locally, in their own contexts.

When it came to the assessments themselves, we encountered a number of issues:

- for pre-recorded oral assessments, it proved not possible to submit video due to large file sizes. As a result all pre-recordings were audio only;
- several students, but not as many as first feared, had connectivity problems. For those who were unable to upload, we managed to organise an alternative live assessment, usually via mobile video;
- a number of students clearly over-prepared, and on occasions read from scripts, contrary to the usual spontaneity desired from a speaking exam. In isolated cases, we also suspected instances of self-plagiarism or impersonation, which proved difficult to confirm in every case; and
- we had a number of students who had fallen ill themselves with coronavirus, or had complex domestic circumstances, including caring for other family members who were unwell, and we had to re-schedule a higher than usual number of assessments.

4. Interim solutions

CFLS runs three sets of extra-curricular language courses, usually evening courses, with start dates in October, January, and June each year. These lie outside the main academic programme of the university, and those registering pay a course fee. By the end of March, the UK was in full lockdown, a situation that would not really be lifted for a further three months. These circumstances presented two main challenges:

- the pandemic created uncertainty in the prospects for recruitment of international students, and the potential deferral by UK students. There was a resulting anticipation of significant financial income shortfalls for Universities across the UK, and an immediate call for restraint on all expenditure, and a reduction in non-essential activities; and
- uncertainty across higher education meant that casualised teaching staff, including many language teachers on fixed term or temporary contracts, faced the prospect of a loss of work if language courses were withdrawn, or if solutions to be able to deliver language courses online were not found.

Durham University made clear that we wanted to continue to offer language learning opportunities during the lockdown, both to our students and the local community, and we wanted to make sure we could continue to offer employment to our language teachers. As a result, a business case was submitted and approved through the emergency budgeting procedures in place at the time, to proceed with delivery of language courses online in June, these also presenting an excellent opportunity to test new online delivery methods.

Our evening courses are taught by freelance language teachers. At this point in time (April 2020), CFLS had only three teachers who had anything more than a couple of weeks experience with online teaching, with a handful of others familiar with digital language teaching tools. The majority of our part-time teachers had no experience at all and, as a result, we had to quickly adapt,

and put together a training programme to prepare teachers for remote course delivery. The Durham Centre for Academic Development had by this time put together a thorough training programme to help all teaching staff transition towards online teaching. This included bespoke training on individual learning platforms (Teams, Collaborate), and generic online teaching skills. However, this was not discipline-specific and, as a result, lingering questions remained about teaching language specifically. From our past experience in delivering pilot academic reading skills courses online, we knew that progress was 25% slower when teaching online. As such, we recognised early on that the main effort would need to focus on effecting a culture shift, especially through re-balancing the use of contact time and student self-study accordingly.

The process of training our part-time teachers was undertaken through a four-part training programme, focussing on:

- programme and course objectives, adapting teacher and learner behaviours, and maintaining a consistent approach;
- different approaches to online teaching and use of contact time;
- different approaches to student self-study and the link to contact time; and
- use of online tools and software to aid remote teaching and learning.

The training was delivered by a team of six, comprising the Director, four of the core teaching team who had more experience of remote teaching and learning, and an external consultant, who has been offering technical and online support to language teachers in the UK for more than ten years. The programme offered four hours of direct training time, supplemented by the generic online teaching training offered by the university centrally, and peer-to-peer sharing, where small groups of teachers would get together online to test out exercises and activities, and become individually and collectively more comfortable with the technology.

Twenty-six part-time teachers were trained over the course of four weeks in May 2020. Upon completion of the programme, all of the teachers were issued with a Teacher Pack, effectively a guide to the Centre's expectations of online teaching. We also prepared a Student Pack, so that learners subscribing to our courses knew what to expect, were briefed to expect problems from time to time, and what they needed to do to support their own learning.

We have subsequently run the training programme twice more; once internally for core teaching staff in CFLS and some in MLAC, and again for remaining part-time teachers who are involved in delivery of a larger online programme in October 2020. All-in-all 67 language teachers have been through a short, bespoke training programme focussed towards language teaching between May and September 2020.

5. Reality dawns

The one constant throughout the summer of 2020 was the uncertainty: would the pandemic die down or come back even stronger, how many students would arrive and what would be their expectations, was face-to-face teaching possible, were there enough teaching rooms? From the outset of lockdown in late March, Durham University was giving clear signals that all staff should prepare for the possibility of teaching being online for the academic year 2020-2021. An early decision was made to deliver all large group teaching online in all academic disciplines. All small group teaching would be undertaken face-to-face in a classroom where possible, applying risk assessments and social distancing in line with UK Government guidelines. The university went to enormous efforts to re-configure teaching spaces and a timetable to match. However, it was obvious that it would be impossible to undertake all small group teaching within the conventional university weekly timetable. Considering the pitfalls of trying to teach language classes whilst either the teacher or the students were wearing face masks, it was decided in late June that all language teaching would be delivered online only, at least for the first term before Christmas, and most likely for the full academic year. This meant that staff could continue to prepare teaching

materials for online delivery safe in the knowledge that this would not be time wasted. This helped ease anxiety and, even if teaching staff realised they had a lot more work to do, at least they were reassured a clear decision had been made, and one that they generally supported.

The university also acknowledged the additional work that would be required to prepare to teach online. The objective is to ensure all departments across the university offer a high quality, online product. This recognises the innate quality that already exists in all teaching, but that the move online must not attempt to simply replicate the classroom in the virtual sphere. At the same time, to design a high quality, purpose built online course takes many months. A nominal workload allocation was assigned for all language modules, 75 hours per module to review and re-design curricula and teaching materials to be suitable for online delivery and online learning – both synchronous and asynchronous. As a result, language teaching staff were given the clear message that ‘good enough’ should be the aspiration. We needed to work to optimise our course curricular and materials for online delivery, but not try to re-create a perfect online language module in the course of a few weeks.

The fact that we made an early decision to move everything online did much to reduce anxiety. We then set up a weekly drop-in session for CFLS staff, so that we could check in with each other, check on mutual well-being, and respond to the many questions that colleagues would inevitably have. As an extension of the AULC Team, we also set up a weekly drop-in session nationally from the end of June, whereby colleagues from across AULC could meet informally on Teams. We never had more than 16 people attend any one session (out of the 127 signed up on Teams), but over the course of the summer we met up with around 100 colleagues from 21 different UK universities. Participants were generally at the management end of the spectrum, rather than teacher-practitioners. In this way, we were able to informally share ideas, thoughts, and challenges with each other, and compare notes. This very quickly demonstrated a very similar approach at all universities in the UK. Without exception, at the universities who engaged, all language teaching is taking place online only in 2020-2021. The only differences relate to use of class contact time, group

sizes, and overall teaching hours. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of approach are very similar.

Armed with the reassurance that our approach was sector-standard, the problems that were regularly raised in Durham were ones of a practical nature. The actual tasks of modifying curricula and producing teaching materials for online delivery almost passed by without comment. The recurring themes were, and to an extent still are as follows.

- What do we do with student attendance and engagement?
- Should all teaching sessions be recorded?
- Do all recordings need to be captioned to comply with UK legislation?
- How do we stop plagiarism for remote assessment of language tasks?

None of these issues has yet been entirely resolved, and they remain under review both in CFLS and at university level.

6. Lessons learned and planning for a post-pandemic future

October 5th 2020 saw the first day of teaching in the new academic year at Durham University. Staff have been trained. Teaching materials have been prepared. Students have registered. International student numbers are down, but not as much as originally feared, whereas domestic student numbers are up, in part due to issues with the marking of post-16 school qualifications during the pandemic, which became subject of a government review and u-turn. Registrations to elective language courses are similar to 2019-2020, but demand has soared, 30% higher than 2019-2020. Meanwhile, registrations to evening courses are down, largely, we believe, to problems in marketing, and possibly due to student anxiety about excessive online learning.

We have the usual problems about students wishing to change courses, some students not attending, and some students with positive tests for COVID-19, or self-isolating. However, so far, the hard work over the summer is largely paying off. The issues will come when assessments begin in early December, and we can then properly evaluate how effective the online delivery model has been in comparison with past years.

The most useful lesson we have learned is to cooperate and collaborate with peers. Taking advantage of available networks with colleagues in other Universities has proved a lifeline, providing us all with reassurance and confidence knowing that our plans were in line with our peers. We have also learned that the transition to online teaching, long anticipated as a major step with significant barriers, has been less problematic than any of us could have envisaged. Certainly, the additional work imposed has been significant, and the pressures of this workload and the impact it has on family life and personal well-being cannot and should not be underestimated. Nevertheless, we are well set up for a more flexible future.

CFLS will continue with online delivery of language courses, fulfilling a long-term plan to deliver language courses outside the university. This will become a key element of our portfolio, with face-to-face teaching at its heart, and always teacher-led, that will offer flexibility and choice to learners. The principle advantages for online delivery are perceived to be:

- the ability to maximise the viability of less widely taught languages through wider reach online;
- the ability to deliver courses to defined groups across institutional boundaries, unconstrained by location (e.g. multi-institution PhD partnerships); and
- access to a wider pool of professional language teachers in a peripheral geographic region.

To support this, we will review and develop the online training programme and replicate this on an annual basis. We also need to continue to critically reflect on different approaches to blended learning, maximising the benefits of online or digital teaching and learning resources in a genuinely blended learning environment for students.

7. Acknowledgements

This chapter is dedicated to colleagues in the CFLS at Durham University, who have actually put in the hard work to be ready to deliver language courses online.



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