3 Enhancing employability skills and supporting transition to the year abroad: a case study

Aziza Zaher[1] and Niveen Kassem[2]

Abstract

The year abroad is one of the most exciting yet challenging aspects of studying modern languages. In addition to the difficulties that all students face in transitioning to the year abroad, students of Arabic face the challenge of Arabic diglossia, given the existence of different written and spoken language varieties. To help with the transition to the Arabic year abroad, Durham University provided funding to recruit a team of staff and final-year students who had completed their year abroad to produce videos to help prepare students for their year abroad in Jordan, Lebanon, and Morocco. This project provided students with a unique experience that equipped them with crucial employability-related skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork, among others. This paper presents a case study of the project, its outcomes, and some feedback received from students who worked on the project and those who have used the videos.

Keywords: Arabic, diglossia, transition, year abroad, employability.

1. Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom; aziza.zaher@durham.ac.uk

2. Birmingham University, Birmingham / Durham University, Durham, United Kingdom; n.kassem@bham.ac.uk

35

1.   Introduction

Students of Arabic at Durham University spend the third year of their study abroad. Before the year abroad, they study Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is mainly a written variety. Since it has many 'mutually unintelligible codes' (Hymes, 1964), Arabic is characterised by diglossia, and in fact MSA is nobody's mother tongue (Maamouri, 1998), since Arabic speakers use local dialects. This causes communication problems for students at the beginning of the year abroad, as they do not learn colloquial dialects before they travel. Studies conducted in the USA reveal that 86% of Arabic students believe that they should learn spoken dialects before travelling abroad (Palmer, 2008). However, many students start their year abroad without having learned any colloquial dialects. To help improve this situation, a team of Arabic staff and final-year students created videos to support Arabic students' transitions to the year abroad by teaching them the basics of the colloquial dialects present in the country of their study abroad. The project provided an opportunity to boost employability skills such as creativity, problem-solving, and teamwork among students who contributed to the project.

1.1.   Presentation of the project

The situation of Teaching Arabic as a Foreign Language (TAFL) has been a topic of heated discussion among professionals for a long time. Al-Batal (2017) published an edited volume calling for the integration of the teaching of MSA and colloquial dialects from the beginning of language courses. However, in practice, many TAFL institutions, including Durham University, focus on teaching MSA in the first instance. This creates problems for students embarking on their year abroad. Arabic students at Durham University spend four to seven months in Jordan, Lebanon, or Morocco to further their understanding of the Arabic language and culture. However, they start their year abroad without having learned colloquial dialects at university. As a result, many suffer shock, have poor oral communication skills, experience frustration, and are sometimes ridiculed once abroad. Ad hoc support has been given to students in preparation for their year abroad by providing them with lists of useful expressions and

advice sessions with final-year students. However, a more sustainable and innovative solution to this problem was deemed necessary.

To support transition to the year abroad, a team of three staff members at Durham University requested funding via the University's Enhancing Students' Learning Experience awards. The funding would be used to produce videos that introduce Arabic students to the basics of the dialect and culture of the country in which they intend to study and to provide them with the basic expressions they would need to communicate once abroad. The funding, awarded in June 2018, was used to recruit teams of Arabic final-year students who had already spent a year abroad. They would work collaboratively to produce material that could prepare students for their experience abroad to help minimise the chances of potential culture shock, embarrassment, and time wasted trying to learn the basics of communication with locals.

1.2.   Recruitment and implementation

The project aimed to recruit three teams to work on videos for Jordanian, Lebanese, and Moroccan Arabic. The Jordanian team had three students and the Lebanese team four. However, no students were interested in working on the Moroccan dialect. Based on their actual experience abroad, the teams were asked to identify the communicative needs of students embarking on the experience, and to imagine scenarios, write scripts for videos, and act in, film, and edit them in order to provide junior colleagues with the basics they would need at the beginning of their stay.

Students were enabled to take ownership of the project and use their creative skills to produce the materials they thought would be most useful to their colleagues. Initially, both teams collaborated to decide on relevant topics for the videos and potential content. They agreed on certain scenarios, such as greetings, cultural expressions, and taking a taxi. However, the videos produced by each team were unique and reflected the needs and experiences of each group, as well as the characteristics of each destination country and culture. The students had all the freedom required to work creatively, and they were supported by

staff who helped them in revising scripts, filming, etc. The project had a tight timeframe for the videos to be available to second year students before starting their year abroad.

1.3.   Challenges

Students faced various challenges in producing the videos. One of the main issues was working under pressure to complete all the stages of such a complex project within a very short timescale, especially since all students were in their final year and had very busy schedules and academic commitments. Another major issue was the allocation of duties, and some students worked more hours than they had envisaged. These issues helped students to develop resilience and other competencies, including the creativity required to find new and alternative solutions, and time management skills, along with a sense of responsibility that enabled them to complete the tasks assigned to them successfully and punctually. A third issue was the logistics of completing the project with very limited resources; however, students overcame this problem by being resourceful and creative. One additional obstacle facing the organisers was the lack of interest among students in working on the Moroccan dialect. This was resolved at a later stage by recruiting two part-time teachers at Durham University who worked on the production of videos for the Moroccan context.

1.4.   Outcome and dissemination

By the end of the project, the three teams had produced 27 videos: ten for Lebanese Arabic, seven for Jordanian Arabic, and ten for Moroccan Arabic. These were made available to Durham University students via Blackboard and YouTube, and they were shared with staff from Leeds University and other institutions. They were also available in the University Council of Modern Languages Supporting Virtual Mobility Year Abroad Resource Pack[3]. Moreover, they have been shared with the Learning and Engagement Team at the Oriental

---

3. https://university-council-modern-languages.org/year-abroad/ucml-virtual-mobility-resource-pack/

Museum, to be available for students and community users working with Islamic collections.

2.   Discussion of outcomes

After completing the project, a focus group was conducted with students who worked on it to gather feedback on their experience. Questions were asked about their motivation to take part, how they found working on the project, and what skills they thought they had developed (see below).

- What inspired you to participate in this project?

- How did you find the experience of working on this project?

- What did you enjoy about this project, and what did you not enjoy?

- Do you think that the skills you have developed in this project will be good for you in terms of finding employment in the future?

- If you could do this project again, what would you do differently and what else would you like to do?

In terms of motivation, it was clear from the feedback that the students understood the need for the project and how it would benefit their junior colleagues: "I think it would be really helpful for other people to have this resource to be able to have some knowledge or at least understand the basics of the dialect before they move to the Middle East". It was also clear that they had very positive perceptions of their experience of the project. For example, one commented that they "thought it was very useful to keep up with colloquial" and that "it was an unusual opportunity".

Working on this project helped students to develop and expand a range of employability-related skills, including collaborative work, problem-solving, and

innovative thinking, as well as fostering a heightened sense of responsibility. These skills are not explicitly covered or included in class activities; however, they are beneficial and important for employability (Lowden, Hall, Elliot, & Lewin, 2011). For example, students commented that working on the project was an opportunity to improve both their creative and 'soft' skills: "I think it was a good opportunity to use creative skills that we don't usually use in class at all like editing or filming and acting, things like that; things we don't usually get the chance to do". One student said "it was nice to have artistic licence and it was exciting to be part of something that is so innovative. Doing something that hasn't been done before".

Problem-solving skills and creativity are some of the key skills students thought they developed. One presented the common issues they faced:

> "in terms of planning, having to know how many hours we needed and to organise our time effectively and have that plan over the course of the project, and then things like filming. Where we are going to film, and how are we going to do this? How do we overcome the problems?".

Moreover, students did not need to consult Arabic textbooks or rely on the literature to produce the material; rather, they combined their experiences with their existing knowledge acquired while studying at Durham to create an engaging and innovative resource. This generated high levels of motivation for students to show competency and complete the tasks. As one student noted,

> "it was an unusual opportunity in that in the beginning we had very free licence to do something that has not been done before! […] That really enabled us to take our experiences that we've had in the year and go, okay, what would be the most useful, what do we need to prioritise, what is the knowledge that we would have loved to have had at the beginning of our time".

Students also mentioned the experience of team development and collaborative work during this project, which are key employability skills. Several of them

highlighted the fact that working in teams gave them the opportunity to develop and improve their decision-making abilities and enhance their collaborative potential. One noted that "teamwork will be relevant to any situation that we come across in life, but it was new territory working with our friends. So, I think that teamwork has definitely improved".

This project represented an empowering experience for the students, not only because they were motivated and felt competent to carry out the tasks, but also because they found the tasks 'meaningful' and had the potential to generate a meaningful 'impact' (Frymier, Shulman, & Houser, 1996; Houser & Frymier, 2009). Students also found the tasks in this project valuable because they gave them the opportunity to practise Arabic dialects that they would not usually use in class. One student claimed:

> "I wanted to take part in the project because we had dialect classes as part of our curriculum at IFPO (the French Institute for the Near East), and I found these classes the most practical and applicable to life in Beirut. I wanted to have a way to keep going with the dialect while in Durham, but also, had it been one of those skills that students learnt a bit earlier in the second year, when they arrived they would not feel so shocked".

Working on this project enabled students to engage in activities relevant to real-life situations, which motivated them to show creativity, and apply existing and transferable skills which they developed in their year abroad, including problem-solving and how to overcome challenges. These are key and essential skills and qualifications needed to increase employability (Lowden et al., 2011; Pardo-Garcia & Barac, 2020). Moreover, students were motivated to take part in this project because they felt that their work would have an impact on students before they start their year abroad:

> "I was lost in the first few weeks in Beirut, so it would be really helpful for other people to have this resource to be able to have some knowledge, or at least be able to understand some dialect before they move to the Middle East".

Furthermore, the project prepared students for life after graduation, as one pointed out:

> "You get slightly out of practice being a student, because you have quite a lot of free time you can structure your life exactly how you wish to, but this was a reminder that we cannot be selfish in our use of time in the future".

The first group to use the videos in Durham included 21 students preparing for the year abroad. They welcomed the opportunity to use the videos and provided encouraging feedback about them, for example:

> "I found the videos very useful, and I felt they really prepared me for the basics upon arriving in Jordan (which is very important!)".

> "I liked how practical the videos were too. The topics like arriving at the airport and taking a taxi to well-known areas in Beirut were so relevant and I don't know what more I could have asked for from a transitional video".

> "Having pre-year-abroad students knowing the absolute basics, just really helps integration during small conversations and really boosts confidence to pave the way to better fluency".

3.   Conclusion

To facilitate the transition of Arabic students to their year abroad, teams of final-year students were recruited to produce videos to teach second year students the basics of colloquial dialects and give some cultural insights to support this transition. The project provided an opportunity for the students to improve their employability skills and to prepare for life after graduation. A focus group was conducted to elicit students' views on the project, and they confirmed that it helped improve skills such as creativity, teamwork, organisation skills, and time

management, among others. Moreover, it provided students preparing for their year abroad with a useful resource to make their transition to a different culture and a new variety of language smoother. The project also enlightened staff, showing that more creative and practical elements can be integrated into the syllabus to give students more of such experiences.

References

Al-Batal M. (2017). *Arabic as one language: integrating dialect in the Arabic language curriculum*. Georgetown University Press.

Frymier, A. B., Shulman, G., & Houser, M. (1996). The development of a learner empowerment measure. *Communication Education, 45*(3), 181-199. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634529609379048

Houser, M. L., & Frymier, A. B. (2009). The role of student characteristics and teacher behaviors in students' learner empowerment. *Communication Education, 58*(1), 35-53. https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520802237383

Hymes, D. (1964). *Language in culture and society*. Harper and Row Publishers.

Lowden, K., Hall, S., Elliot, D., & Lewin, J. (2011). *Employers'perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates. Project Report*. Edge Foundation.

Maamouri, M. (1998). Language education and human development: Arabic diglossia and its impact on the quality of education in the Arab Region. In *Mediterranean Development Forum*. World Bank.

Palmer, J. (2008). *Arabic diglossia: student perceptions of spoken Arabic after living in the Arabic-speaking world. Arizona Working Papers in SLA & Teaching, 15*, 81-95.

Pardo-Garcia, C., & Barac, M. (2020). Promoting employability in higher education: a case study on boosting entrepreneurship skills. *Sustainability, 12*(10), 1-23. https://doi.org/10.3390/su12104004

Innovative language teaching and learning at university: facilitating transition from and to higher education
Edited by Cathy Hampton and Sandra Salin