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University Student Ambassadors Bring Languages Back to Their High School Peers

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ABSTRACT

There is a general recognition that learning of foreign languages is in decline in Australia. This paper uses the social constructivist theory as a conceptual framework to report on a project where university language students supported their high school peers in the learning of their specialist language in New South Wales, Australia. The project involved 15 university students from the University of Wollongong and over 100 high school students engaged in the study of five foreign languages (French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Mandarin) in four local schools. The first section gives the aims and rationale of the study; the second describes the methodology and data collection; and the third section discusses the results and evaluation of the project by the students involved in the study. Preliminary results show that both cohorts of students benefitted from the study in different ways. It was the direct interaction between both groups that allowed more advanced students to assist their younger peers and to reflect on their own language learning in the process. The conclusion discusses implications for widening access to foreign language education in Australia and bridging the gap between tertiary and secondary sectors.

INTRODUCTION

There is a general recognition that learning of languages other than English is in decline and needs to be improved in Australian schools (Liddicoat et al., 2007). In his 2014 Adelaide Languages Festival speech, the former Education minister, Mr Christopher Pyne, acknowledged this gap by highlighting the target set by the current government to have 40% of Year 12 pupils studying a foreign or classical language within a decade (Pyne, 2014)).

The language ambassadors project at the University of Wollongong was designed as a community engagement initiative to help achieve this goal at a regional level. As such, it has two related goals. Firstly, it aimed at engaging and motivating younger generations of Australians in high schools to study and learn languages by interacting with their older peers enrolled in language studies at university. Secondly, it aimed to increase student enrolment in foreign languages by building a bridge between secondary and tertiary education. In this project, we are using the term "peer learning" to mean learning by direct contact with successful senior students who have experience of language learning, as will be explained in the project's rationale.

The language ambassadors program was a volunteer project, advertised by staff collectively having expertise in the five languages and cultures taught at the university: French, Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, and Spanish. Students with the highest marks in languages were given priority as they would have demonstrated excellence in language learning and would act as successful role models.

The need for the present project was identified at the 2012 Year 10 Languages Day organised as one of the outreach activities by the newly created University Language Centre in collaboration with the New South Wales Department of Education and high schools in the Illawarra region. During discussions with teachers, it became apparent that foreign language enrolments in the state schools in the Illawarra region were in decline and that there was a shortage of specialist teachers.

The language enrolment numbers in government schools over the last five years show a steady decrease in the uptake of foreign languages at the Higher School Certificate (HSC) level for all three levels: Beginners, Continuers, and Extension. The greatest decline appears to be in French and Japanese Continuers, as can be noted from enrolment numbers compiled by the New South Wales Board of Studies Teaching and Educational Standards (BOSTES, 2016) (see figures 1 and 2).
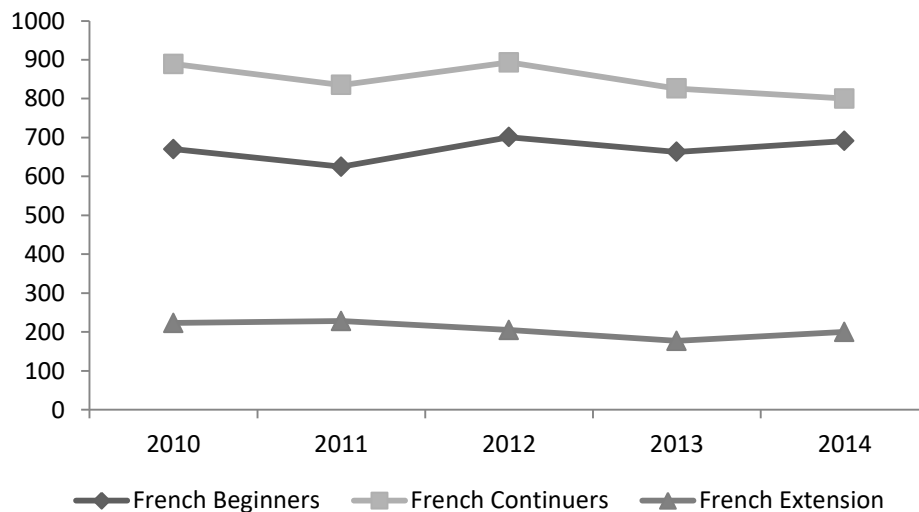

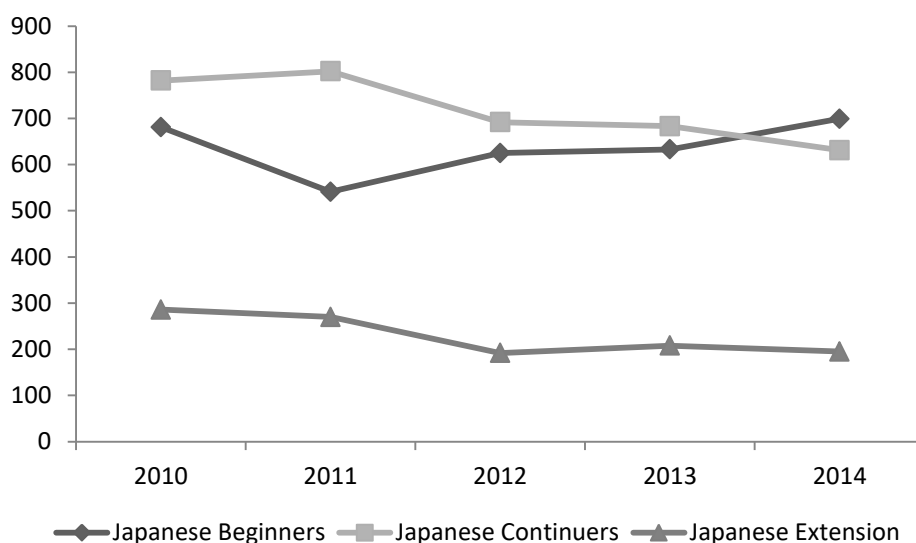*Figure 1*. HSC French enrolments compiled from BOSTES statistics.

Figure 2. HSC Japanese enrolments compiled from BOSTES statistics.

In Spring Session 2012, we took the initiative, with the agreement of the Language Centre Director, to run a pilot language ambassadors project in French by sending some of our students to assist in three local high schools that represented the three types of schools in the state (one government school, one independent school, and one Catholic school). After having secured an official authorisation from the Department of Education in New South Wales, six students were placed in the three local schools. The university students were all volunteers from second and third years and were of intermediate and advanced level proficiency. Two students were placed in each school where they spent half a day per week on average working alongside the French language teachers to assist their younger peers.

After a successful pilot in French, we applied for a community engagement grant at the university with the aims to extend the project to the other four languages in the faculty (Italian, Japanese, Mandarin, and Spanish) and build a platform of free online resources that could then be rolled out to inspire and mentor the next generation of language students at secondary and tertiary levels. Among the four local high schools (three state and one independent) that endorsed the grant application, one of the state schools and the independent school had participated in the earlier French pilot and their feedback had been extremely valuable in enhancing the scheme. Moreover, the four local schools represent feeder schools for the university.

LITERATURE REVIEW
The research paradigm used in the present study draws from Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) concept of learning as a social process, which includes collaborative learning. From this perspective, learning from interaction with more experienced others allows less advanced learners to achieve what they would not able to do by themselves and thus fill in the gaps in their "zone of proximal development." This approach to learning, referred to as "social constructivism" (Laurillard, 2009, p. 10), was applied to the present study as high school students had opportunities to learn from an older peer enrolled

at university through regular face-to-face contact. The term "scaffolding" learning is also used to describe this form of assistance.

Drawing from Vygotsky's (1978) principle of the Zone of Proximal Development, Gibbons and Hammond (2002) argued that scaffolded learning in the form of social interaction and guidance by successful models is key to cognitive development and successful learning since it allows learners to accomplish tasks and develop understandings that they would not be able to accomplish on their own.

Collaborative learning involving working in groups was used by Bissoonauth-Bedford and Stace (2012, 2015) to effectively scaffold online group discussions where university students with a more advanced knowledge of French language and grammar supported less advanced peers in the class. They found that although students were technologically savvy they often needed guidance on how to use online devices and tools for these to be conducive to effective learning. More importantly, scaffolding had to be progressively built into the curriculum to encourage reflection and independent learning in students outside the classes (Bissoonauth-Bedford & Stace, 2015, p. 13).

Collaborative learning based on senior students teaching and mentoring younger peers has been used in many universities around the world and is often referred to as Supplemental Instruction. Supplementary Instruction, henceforth SI, defined as "a type of academic mentoring program providing regularly-scheduled sessions attached to subjects with historically high failure rates or high perception of difficulty," was developed by the Centre for Academic Development at the University of Missouri Kansas City in the 1970s (Dawson, Lockyer, & Ferry, 2007, p. 1).

The principles of SI were adapted by various higher education institutions throughout the world and are used as Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) in Australia and New Zealand (Dawson et al., 2007, Van der Meer & Scott, 2009) and as Peer Assisted Learning Sessions (PALS) both in synchronous and asynchronous forms in the USA, Canada, UK, and Australia to improve student retention, particularly in subjects perceived as difficult or which have high failure rates or drop outs (Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky, & Cowley, 2014; Kodabux & Hoolash, 2015; Smith, May, & Burke, 2007; Watts, Malliris, & Billingham, 2015).

The PASS program used in Australian universities originated at the University of Wollongong (Townsend, Delves, Kidd, & Figg, 2011, p. 39). This type of SI is an "academic-only peer-learning program" that uses collaborative learning and peer support around formal learning and assessment processes (Townsend et al., 2011, p. 40). In this model, student leaders who recently completed the course with good grades facilitate small group interactions to assist a group of students enrolled in the target course to acquire study skills and content knowledge in order to increase grades and lower failure rates and drop-outs (Arendale, 2014; Dawson et al., 2014; Geerlings, Cole, Batt, & Martin-Lynch, 2016; Malm, Mörner, Bryngfors, Edman, & Gustafsson, 2012).

There have been very few studies where university students have acted as aides and facilitators to their high school peers. One such study was conducted in Sweden by Malm et al. (2012) where university students from

Engineering facilitated the learning in sciences (mathematics, physics and chemistry) of their high school peers in the local region. Results showed several related benefits. First, the school pupils who had attended the classes claimed a better understanding in sciences. Second, the university capitalised on this opportunity to send students who could be perceived as role models by their younger peers, and third, it provided the university with an excellent platform to boost student recruitment.

In the UK, university students were employed as ambassadors in projects funded by the Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) to mentor school students from backgrounds with no higher education to study at university (Austin & Hatt, 2005). Results showed that sending student ambassadors to rural and coastal areas had indeed increased school students' intention of going to university by almost threefold (Austin & Hatt, 2005, p. 4). Equally, university students claimed they found the experience of "going back" to school valuable. Their confidence and self-esteem had increased and they felt they could transfer and use employable skills more effectively in the workplace.

RATIONALE FOR THE PRESENT STUDY
Literature highlighted a lack of studies on evaluation by high school on programs where university students have acted as aides and facilitators to their high school peers (Malm et al., 2012, p. 35). It is to bridge this gap that the present study was undertaken in an Australian university setting with the particular aim to investigate how the support provided by university language students would be received and evaluated by their high school peers.

The design of the present study was adapted from Malm et al. (2012) and Austin and Hatt (2005) in that it was a community engagement initiative whereby university students spent half a day during term time in high schools as language ambassadors. It builds on principles of collaborative learning and scaffolding learning by having an advanced peer — in this case a university student — who worked in collaboration with school teachers to assist and tutor their younger peers in the learning of their specialist language. Here again, the term "peer tutoring" should be taken in a very general sense, which is "students teaching other students" (Colvin, 2007, as cited by Townsend et al., 2011, p. 38).

Our approach focussed on elements of constructivism, such as cooperation, multiple perspectives, scaffolding, and reflection. Moreover, this was an innovative initiative at our institution, which aims to build stronger relationships between the tertiary and secondary sectors at a local level.

In addition, it was hoped that such a scheme would stimulate interest for language learning both at secondary and tertiary levels and boost foreign language enrolments at the university.

METHODOLOGY

1. Training of university student ambassadors
At the start of the program, we ran two workshops, one at university and one in schools to train the student ambassadors. The workshop at the university was led by the university's IN2UNI team, which organises placements of

students into schools. The content of the workshop dealt with university guidelines for working with high school pupils, schools' expectations, and advice and recommendations about "do's and don'ts" in schools.

The second workshop took place in each of the four schools and involved a training session with the head of languages, language teachers involved in the project and the university students placed in the schools. The session covered introduction to the school, timetabling of sessions, and the best methods of communication between schools and their ambassadors.

2. Sample and data collection

A total of 15 University students enrolled in language courses (French, Italian, Japanese, and Mandarin), 104 high school students, and 12 teachers from four local schools participated in the project. It should be noted that although Spanish is offered at the university, it was not a language taught in the schools that participated in the study. In fact, at the time of the survey there was only one private school offering Spanish as part of its foreign languages program.

Quantitative data were collected through a mix of digital questionnaire surveys on the Survey Monkey platform as well as hard copy surveys since the survey monkey platform allowed only 100 questionnaires to be completed online. In total, 104 surveys were collected across these media.

Questions comprised a mix of open and closed questions, and students were able to opt out of any questions they did not wish to answer. Many of the open questions enabled students to give multiple answers. Additionally, a small number of surveys were completed improperly, wholly or in part, and these responses were removed accordingly from the data prior to analysis. For these reasons, the figures displayed in the graphs may not always total 104.

Qualitative data were collected via face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interviews in the high schools were carried out with the teacher present in the vicinity and were audio-taped. The semi-structured interviews with the university students were filmed since video testimonials from the project were required as part of the project's outcomes for the University Grants team.

3. Data analysis

Data analysis adopted a mixed approach as we collected both quantitative and qualitative data. The two online questionnaires collected quantitative data from university students (Appendix A) and high school students (Appendix B) and dealt with classroom activities, perceived benefits from the language ambassador scheme, and whether the program should continue.

The semi-structured interviews with high school students were conducted in schools with teachers present in the vicinity and they were audiotaped. Twenty-four high school students were interviewed by the researchers in a face-to-face interview and were asked to elaborate on their answers to questions 10, 11, and 12. Question 10 asked students how useful they found the sessions with the language ambassadors. For Question 11, students had to name three things that they had learnt from their interactions with the

ambassadors, and Question 12 asked whether the language ambassador project should continue in the future.

The semi-structured interviews with the university students were also conducted by the researchers in the form of short video testimonials. Nine students were filmed on university location while taking part in the interviews. In the questions, university students had to reflect on questions 10, 11, and 12, which dealt with their experiences of going back to school as a language ambassador and on what they had learnt in the process.

In addition to the high school students, the 12 teachers involved in the project were also interviewed informally by the researchers. Since the teachers were busy with work and other duties, the interviews were kept brief and focussed on feedback on the language ambassador program and views on how it could be improved in the future.

CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGES

Although the language ambassador scheme was enhanced over the last three years, it was not without challenges and limitations. It was important that university students were free to spend half a day in school on those days when their specialist language was being taught. This was not always an easy task since the majority of the university students were working outside their university hours to finance their studies—they were not paid for their ambassador efforts—and thus had to juggle university studies with work and volunteering for the program.

In addition, as the project ran over two semesters, not all 15 students who had started the project in semester one were free to continue in semester two due to timetable constraints. This was the main reason for the drop from 15 in semester one (April to June 2015) to 10 students in semester two (July – October, 2015).

As pointed out earlier, sustainability had to be built into the grant application since the project was only sponsored for one year by the university's community engagement division. Approximately half of the grant monies were used as travel allowance for university students travelling to get to schools on a weekly basis. The other half of the monies was used to create the students' videos and to employ a research assistant to set up a free online learning platform with resources developed by the ambassadors in each language to be made available to local schools in the region.

Sustainability beyond the sponsorship was guaranteed with the successful application for the language ambassador scheme to be included as one of the awards in the UOWx programs that formally recognise co-curricular activities carried out by undergraduates to build their employability skills.

Last but not least, this initiative imposes a considerable administrative burden on the coordinator, which is not officially recognised in the workload model. Given the success of the program and its potential growth as part of the UOWx program and the increasing student numbers who may wish to join the program in the future, there are resource implications that will need to be discussed at departmental level.

RESULTS

The data were collected in three stages. Firstly, from the university student ambassadors, then from the high school students, and finally from the teachers involved with the program. Questions, as they are numbered in the questionnaires, correspond to the questions as they were asked in the semi-structured interviews. Question 1 has been omitted as it related to the respondent's names, gender, and suburb of residence.

## 1. University student perspectives

In the university students' questionnaire (Appendix A), the questions were kept quite open to allow the ambassadors to report on their experiences and comment on where they thought the benefits of the program were the greatest and to comment on how the program might be improved in the future.

Quantitative data

The results show that French had the largest representation with four ambassadors, followed by Italian and Japanese with two each, and finally Mandarin and German had one ambassador each. The main reason for the high representation of French is because one of the researchers is involved with French and has the ability to check-up with students learning French more so than those studying other languages. In addition, as French has the second highest language enrolments at the University of Wollongong, it was easier to find more volunteers for the project.

Figure 3 highlights results from Question 6, which related to the high school year groups that the language ambassadors supported while they were at their schools. The schools chose to focus the ambassadors on Year 8 and Year 12, with Year 11 also quite well represented. The university students found that schools preferred to give Year 12 students one-on-one speaking practice with an ambassador (the kind of attention they couldn't get in a class setting) to prepare them for the Higher School Certificate (HSC) speaking examinations, and it would seem that preparation for preliminary exams was also the rationale for Year 11 involvement.

Although the high number of ambassadors for Year 8 might seem like a surprise, the ambassadors found that schools liked having an ambassador in Year 8 classes as a way of making the lessons more dynamic and having additional support with a view to encouraging students to choose a language as their Year 9 elective. Year 8 is the last year that foreign language learning is mandatory in most of the schools the ambassadors worked at.
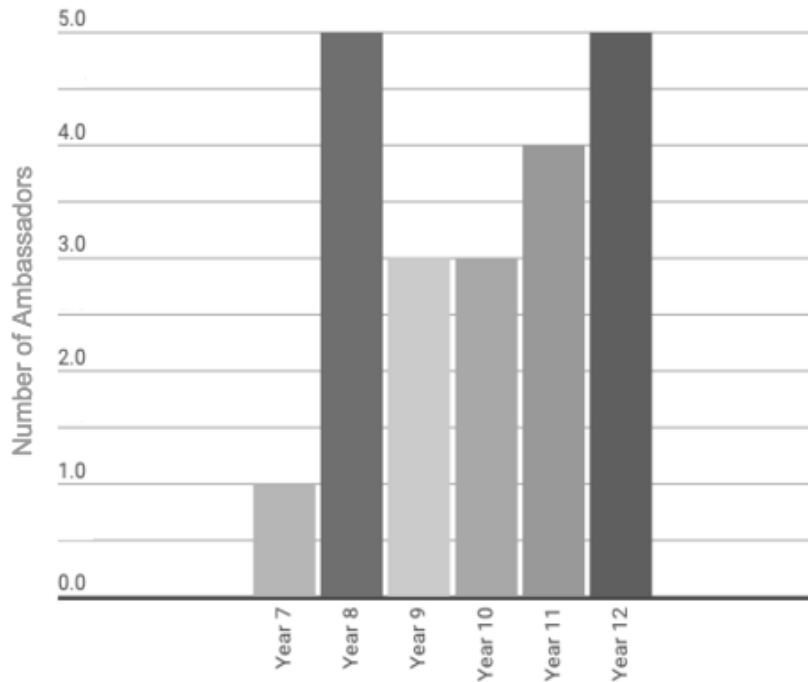
Figure 3. University student ambassadors in school year groups.

In Question 9 the ambassadors had to report on activities they were engaging in with their high school peers. As can be seen in Figure 4, ambassadors were predominantly used for speaking practice, which took place in small groups or individually. Ambassadors found that teachers often did not have the time to focus on developing conversation skills in a large class setting and that some students were intimidated by the idea of speaking in front of a whole class of approximately 25 students. Having an ambassador in the class allowed students to focus on developing their skills in a more personal context and speaking on topics that were of greater personal interest to them. Additionally, ambassadors working with younger year groups reported providing "general assistance" within the classroom, moving around the room to answer questions or help the teacher model dialogue and pronunciation in the target language.
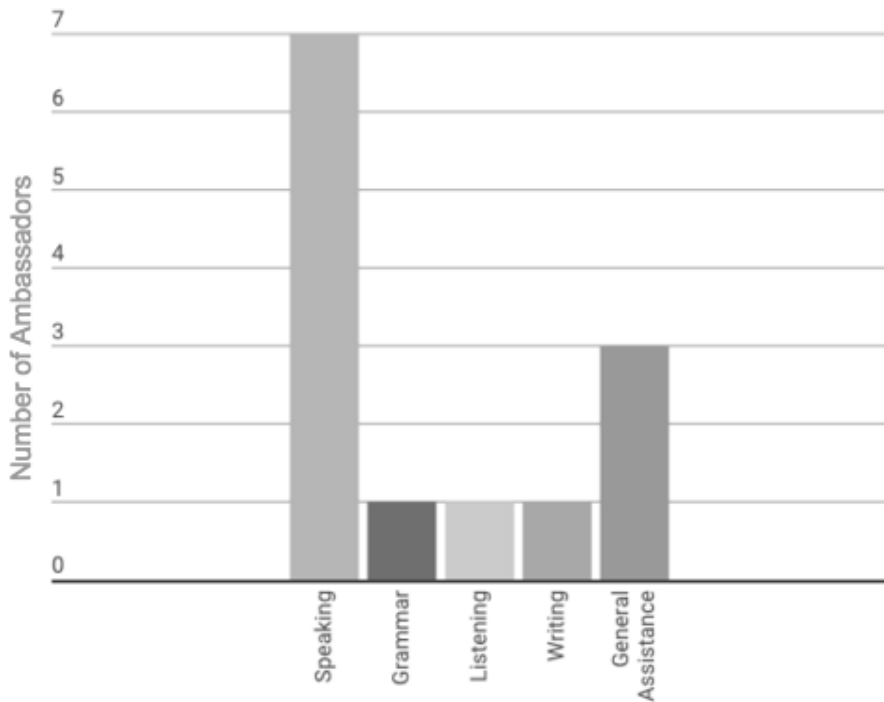
Figure 4. Number of language ambassadors by class activities.

In Question 10 we asked the ambassadors what they felt they were learning by supporting the learning of the language that they were studying at university. Their responses showed two key skill areas: language skills and professional skills (Figure 5). Five of the ambassadors believed that their language skills were improving through teaching that language to others, with most of these noting that their understanding of basic grammar and vocabulary was what improved most. Six of the ambassadors said that they developed teaching skills that they believed to be valuable, particularly those who expressed an interest in pursuing language education as a career. Additionally, two ambassadors said that their interpersonal skills had improved as a result of interacting with different types of people: high school students, teachers, and other ambassadors.
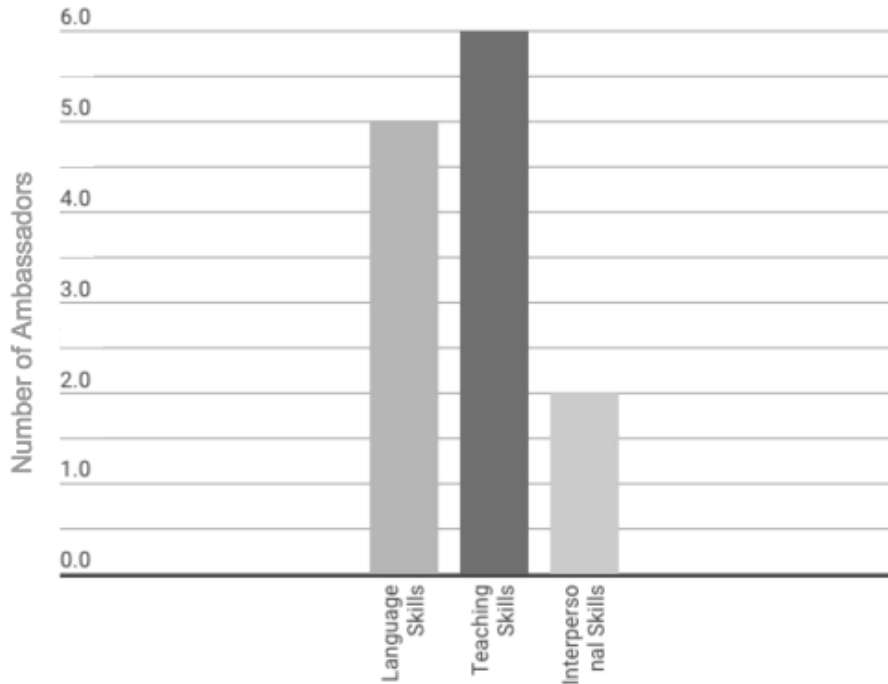
Figure 5. Language ambassadors' reflections on skills learnt.

When asked about the personal benefits they were getting from the experience of being a language ambassador (Question 11), seven replied that it was beneficial to be revising and consolidating knowledge of their target language, particularly the basics of that language (Figure 6). They also expressed a belief that teaching the language to others helped them to better understand certain aspects of that language. Six responded that gaining professional experience in an educational context was a benefit of the program, particularly among those wishing to become language teachers, while four said that the greatest benefit for them was a sense of personal enjoyment that came from being an ambassador.
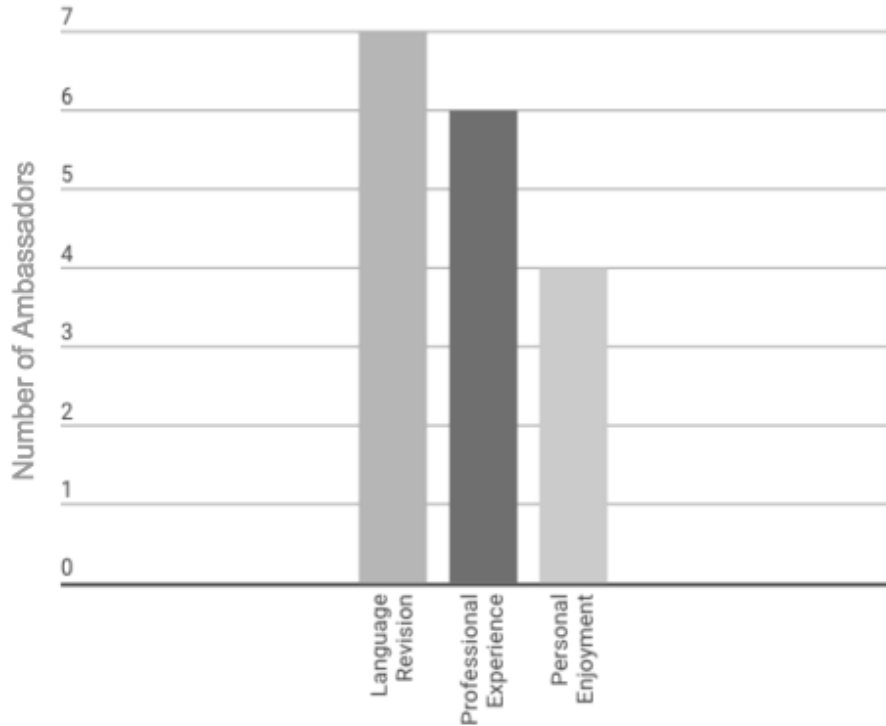
Figure 6. Language ambassadors' reflections on benefits.

Question 12 asked ambassadors if they thought the program should continue, with all 10 respondents saying that they believed it should. When asked why they held this view, a wide number of opinions were given (Figure 7). Five responses said that language ambassadors were a new and valuable resource for high school students learning languages and two specified that it was the informal nature of the relationship between the ambassador and the school students that was most valuable in keeping language current and targeting the specific interests of students.

Professional experience and language revision opportunities for university students were given as reasons for continuing the program by six respondents and three ambassadors also said that they thought that it gave high school students a chance to learn about university life as well as their options for continuing language learning at a tertiary level. Two respondents said that the classroom support for school teachers was an important reason to continue the program.
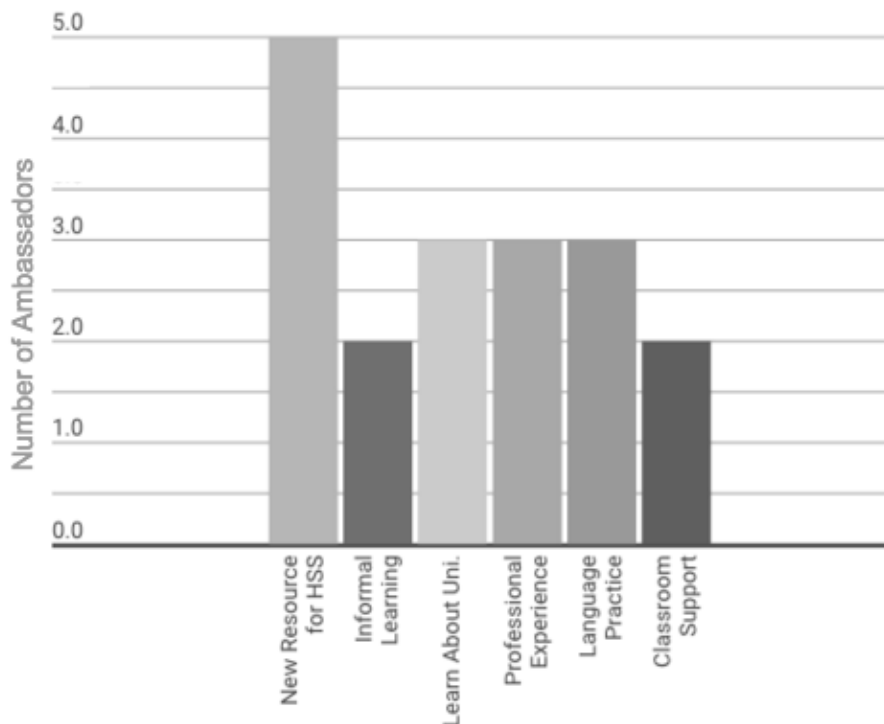
Figure 7. Ambassadors' reasons for continuing program

Qualitative data

In the semi-structured interviews in the video testimonials, student ambassadors claimed they felt that the project had allowed them to go back to school, but this time they were on the same side of the teacher. One of the language ambassadors thought that "it was really fun to teach Japanese with my old Japanese teacher." Another compared his experience of learning a language in high school with going back as an Italian language ambassador, which he thought was "quite an experience," although things "hadn't really changed" since his time at school.

University students also felt that this opportunity allowed them to experience the workplace first-hand and "test the waters" by spending half a day weekly teaching and assisting language teachers in schools. For those aiming to teach in the future, the program was "an eye-opening experience to what it's like in the classroom." As one language ambassador stated, the experience "prepares me for what I ultimately want to become, a teacher, and what is expected of me."

2. High school student perspectives

Quantitative results

In the high school students' evaluation questionnaire (Appendix B), the questions were also kept quite open to allow the pupils to report their experiences and comment on where they thought the benefits of having a language ambassador in school were the greatest (Question 11). They also commented on whether they thought the university should continue with the program in the future (Question 12).

Question 2 of the survey asked high school students which school they attended. The government school was the largest cohort, with 58 students returning the survey. The selective independent high school was next, with 30 responses. The third rural government high school returned 16 surveys.

Question 3 of the survey asked which year group high school students were in (Figure 8). The Year 8 cohort was the largest with 77 students surveyed, followed by Year 9 with 10 students, Year 10 with 9 students, Year 11 with 5 students, and Year 12 with 3 students.
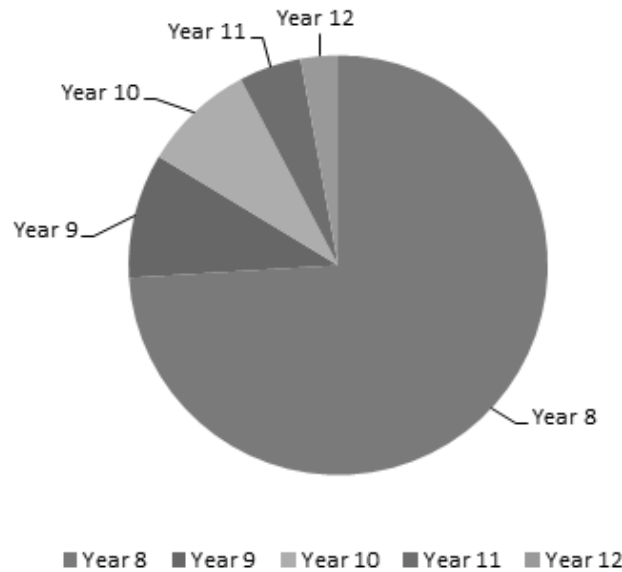

Figure 8. Participating school years.

Question 4 asked high school students which languages they were studying. French was the most widely reported with 37 responses (Figure 9). This was followed by Mandarin with 21 responses, Japanese with 20 responses, Italian with 16 responses, and German with 10 responses. Students were asked if they know anyone who speaks the language they were learning. Forty-three students responded "yes," 39 responded "no," and 22 specified that the only person that they knew who speaks the language was the class teacher or the language ambassador. These latter responses could potentially be incorporated into the "no" category since the students did not seem to know anyone else who speaks their target apart from their teachers and the language ambassador(s). In this case, the "no" response category would be higher (61) than the "yes" response category (43).
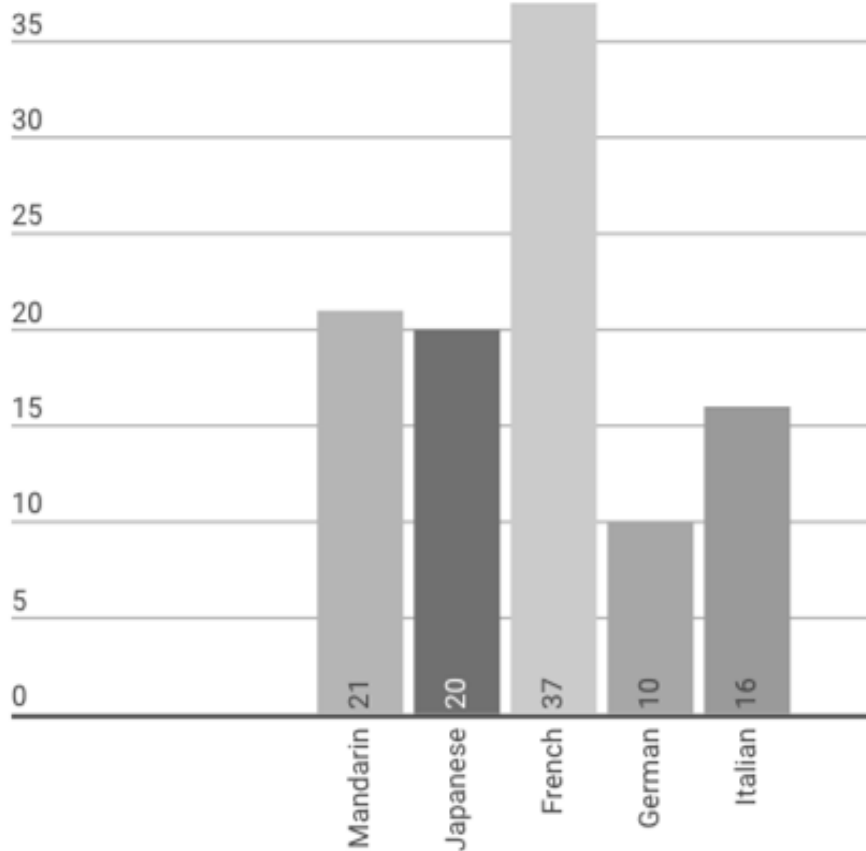
Figure 9. Languages studied in schools by number of students.

Question 8 asked students if their parents or guardians spoke a language other than English. Forty-six responded that they do, while 58 responded that they do not. Many students specified the languages that were spoken, which included primarily European languages (Croatian, Dutch, Spanish, French, Norwegian, Serbian, Italian, Greek, Turkish), Asian languages (Burmese, Filipino, Mandarin, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Nepalese, Hindi, Cantonese, Korean, Indonesian) and Middle Eastern languages (Farsi, Arabic).

In Question 9, students were asked what kinds of activities they do with the ambassadors (Figure 10). The most common response (64 responses) was "general classroom assistance and culture," which comprised help with worksheets, group activities led by the teacher, and learning about the target culture. Speaking and pronunciation were also commonly reported (35 responses). Less frequent were grammar and vocabulary (9 responses) and help with writing and spelling (7 responses).
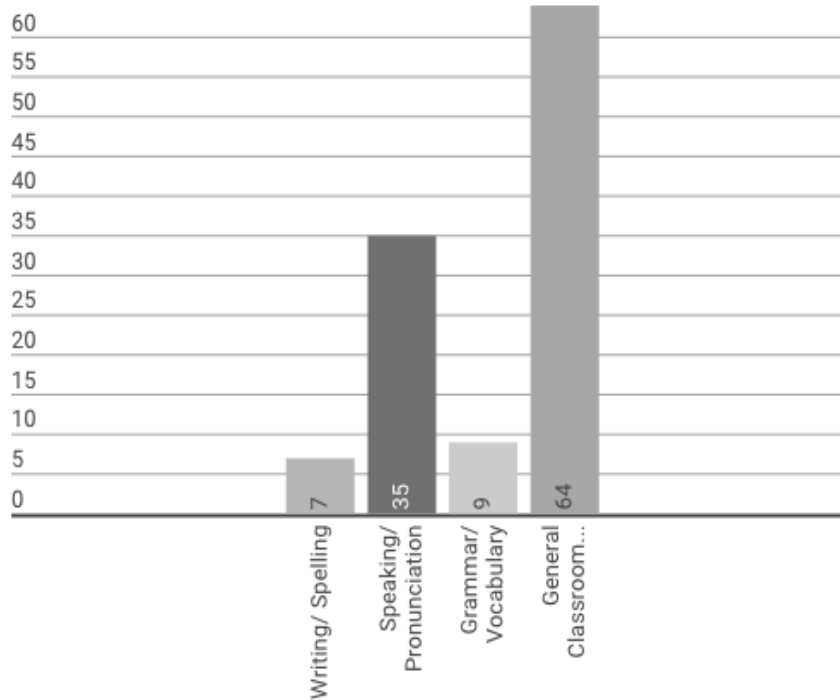
Figure 10. Activities with language ambassadors.

Question 10 asked the high school students whether they found the sessions with language ambassadors helpful. Eighty-six students (83%) said that they did find them helpful, citing reasons such as exposure to different accents, learning about university, boosting confidence for communicating in the target language, and creating a more relaxed atmosphere for language learning in the class. Eighteen students (17%) said that they did not find the sessions helpful; however, none gave reasons as to why they felt this way.

In Question 11, students were asked to state the three things they had learned with the language ambassadors that they felt were most important (Figure 11). The data were analysed according to five learning areas that appeared most frequently in the responses and then grouped according to those categories. Due to the nature of the data collection, some responses covered multiple learning areas.

The most common response was that language ambassadors helped with speaking/pronunciation, as this was mentioned in 73 responses. High school students often felt that hearing a different accent to their teacher's was valuable in this area. Seventy-two responses mentioned grammar/vocabulary as a valuable skill in which language ambassadors were able to assist.

Another 47 responses said that language ambassadors were able to help them learn about their language's target culture or aspects of the target culture that the class teacher was less familiar with. These responses were common from students of languages where a new alphabet was being

learned, such as Mandarin and Japanese. Students said that the extra help with learning new characters was beneficial.

Finally, one student responded that learning about language study at university was among the most helpful aspects of having a language ambassador in the class.
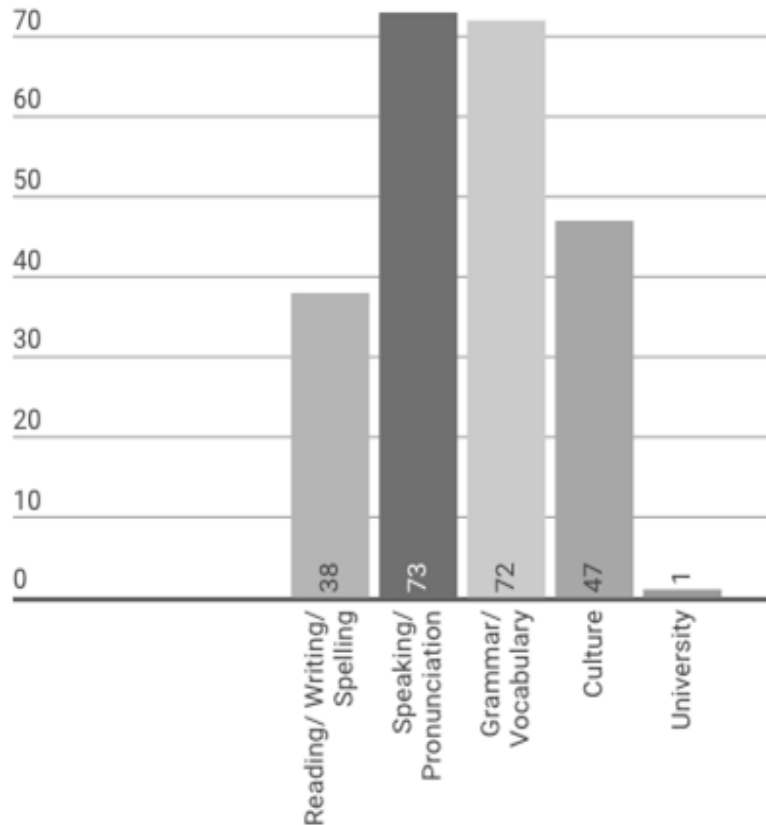
Figure 11. Most important support provided by language ambassadors by responses.

The final question (Question 12) asked students if they believed the university should continue to send language students as ambassadors to schools. Ninety-three students (89%) said that they believed the program should continue, while 11 students (11%) said that they did not believe the program should continue.

Qualitative data
In the interviews, high school students elaborated on how their older peers' explanations had helped them improve their written and spoken proficiencies, enhance their knowledge of grammar, and thus develop as learners. The benefits highlighted were perceived more from an academic perspective. For some, it was almost as if they had "two teachers in the class," especially with "spelling, that's definitely they make sure that we know how to spell things so we do a lot of quizzes and spelling and stuff like that and

we do plenty of speaking as well so we don't just know how to write but speak as well."

Having an "expert other" to aid and support was perceived as having made a difference in improving understanding and speaking progress since "she was really good helping with vocab and how we pronounced and that helped the majority of the class." Others found that the speaking and pronunciation practice was very useful because language ambassadors were able to dedicate individual time to the students and work on specific aspects of language learning as "you pick up all these different accents and pronunciation rules are different, so it's really helpful that we can go over them again with somebody who is like good in French."

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS
The results of the study show that student language ambassadors as well as their high school peers involved in the project viewed the experience positively. In a similar way to Austin and Hatt (2005) who sent university ambassadors to high schools to raise awareness about foreign languages and encourage young people to study at university, the university student ambassadors in the present study claimed their confidence in speaking and grammar skills had increased as a result of participating in the scheme. All the students who participated in the video testimonials said that "teaching other students allowed them to consolidate their own knowledge of the [specialist] language and particularly in the grammar area."

As can be noted from the results, student language ambassadors were perceived as the "expert other" who could provide extra and more individual support tailored to the high school students' needs (grammar revision, speaking practice, pronunciation, first-hand experience of host culture), thus corroborating Gibbons and Hammond's (2002) point that scaffolded learning in the form of social interaction and guidance by a more experienced learner is key to cognitive development and successful learning.

Results also confirmed claims made by Biggs (1999) that interactions and support had stimulated university students' cognitive development and self-evaluation or reflection skills since being a language ambassador had "consolidated my own understanding of the language especially grammar just through teaching it to other people." Some felt that that going back to school was an eye-opening experience and showed them how far they had progressed and developed since "going back to school made me look at students who make the same mistakes that I used to make."

Warschauer's (1997, p. 471) suggestion that social interaction between learners can promote 'an environment to learn language, learn about language, and learn "through" language is thus corroborated by both university and the high school students' in their evaluation of the present project.

CONCLUSION
This study explored the impact of the language ambassadors program on language learning at university and in high school by using Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as a conceptual framework. The student ambassadors in this study were all volunteers in four local schools (three government high

schools and one non-government school) in the Illawarra region. Fifteen students studying French, Italian, Japanese, and Mandarin at an intermediate level participated in the project in the first semester while only 10 continued with the project throughout the academic year.

The results drew on data collected through survey methodology to evaluate ways in which university and high school students perceived and evaluated the language ambassador program. The results corroborated findings of other researchers that guidance by more advanced learners in the form of social interaction and personal reflection are key to successful learning.

The language ambassador initiative has resulted in the scheme being included into the program of co-curricular activities available at the university. Students who successfully complete the requirements of the co-curricular program will have their contributions officially recognised on their degree record when they graduate.

In the longer term, motivating high school students to continue with the study of a foreign language beyond Year 8 and at HSC and tertiary levels may help to overturn the declining numbers in recent years. However, this may prove challenging in the current system since Year 8 is the last year that foreign language learning is mandatory in most of the schools in New South Wales. As the semi-structured interviews with Year 8 students revealed, preference for electives in Year 9 was given to subjects deemed more relevant to future studies, such as engineering, marine biology, information technology, and domestic sciences.

If language education were to increase across Australia, there should be a priority consensus from the federal government to widen Australia's language base across all the states and to eliminate disparities between language policies and jurisdictions across the states as suggested by Howard (2015, p. 178) and Slaughter and Hajek (2015, pp. 184–185). Our recommendation would be make a second language experience mandatory from years 8 to 10 in all states. This would provide every young Australian with the opportunity to develop their language skills other than English and thus help towards developing Australia's multilingual and multicultural resources that were strongly advocated by the late Michael Clyne (2005). Those high school students who would want to continue with their language studies could carry on in years 11 and 12 and further advance their learning at university level.

In conclusion, although the sample may seem small with 15 university students, it may be reminded that all students were volunteers and non-salaried. Nonetheless, this model is flexible enough to be adapted to other Australian universities aiming to bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary institutions and thus encourage more students to study foreign languages at university.

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APPENDIX A (UNIVERSITY STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE)

University of Wollongong

1. Name :

2. Year and Course enrolled in:

3. Major:

4. Female : ☐   Male: ☐

5. ………………(language) Language ambassador   at…………………(school)

6. Which classes are you mentoring in school?

7. How many students are involved in each class?

8. How long do you spend with each class on a weekly basis?

9. What type of activities do you do with the students?

10. What are you learning by teaching the language that you are studying?

11. What benefits are you getting from the experience from a personal and linguistic perspective?

12. Should the University continue the language ambassadors into schools program? If so, why?

13. Where did you go to school?

14. Did you learn languages at school? If so, what was it like?

Thank you! Merci! Grazie! Arrigato! Xiexie!

APPENDIX B: HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT QUESTIONNAIRE

University of Wollongong

1. Name (optional):

   2. High School: ....

   3. Female : ☐   Male: ☐

   4. Year   ☐

   5. Which suburb do you live in?...........................

   6. Which language(s) are you studying?

   7. Do you know anyone who speaks this language?

   8. Do your parents speak other languages than English? If so, which one(s)?

   9. What type of activities do you do with the language ambassador?

   10. Are you finding these sessions helpful? If so, in what way(s) do they help you?

   11. What 3 most important things have you learnt with the language ambassadors?
       1.

       2.

       3.

   12. Should the University continue to send language ambassadors into schools in the future? Can you please explain why?

Thank you! Merci! Grazie! Arrigato! Xiexie!