

Organ, Alison (2017) "Languages in the workplace": embedding employability in the foreign language undergraduate curriculum. In: EditorsEmailORCIDÁlvarez-Mayo, CarmenUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDGallagher-Brett, AngelaUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDMichel, FranckUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIEDUNSPECIFIED, (eds.) Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability. Dublin, Research-publishing.net, pp. 37-45

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5 “Languages in the workplace”: embedding employability in the foreign language undergraduate curriculum

Alison Organ¹

Abstract

This case study examines student perceptions of the experiential value of a work placement carried out as part of a languages degree programme. The data for the case study consists of a corpus of 67 reports submitted from 2011 to 2015, reflecting on placements carried out in Europe, Japan, the UK and the US. The data offers a student view of the impact of the placement on their linguistic prowess, character development, employability and career plans. The case study compares these with the soft skills increasingly required in employment, and concludes that the reflective nature of the work placement report is beneficial to students in preparation for marketing themselves to potential employers.

Keywords: languages, work placement, employability, key skills, study abroad.

1. Background

Students at York St John University are required to carry out a 15-day work placement at some point during their second year. As students on our languages degree programmes spend their second year studying abroad at partner

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How to cite this chapter: Organ, A. (2017). “Languages in the workplace”: embedding employability in the foreign language undergraduate curriculum. In C. Álvarez-Mayo, A. Gallagher-Brett, & F. Michel (Eds), *Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability* (pp. 37-45). Research-publishing.net. <https://doi.org/10.14705/rpnet.2017.innoconf2016.653>

universities, a distance module was created. The students are required to find and negotiate their placement themselves, although guidance is given by the module director. The student completes an agreement form in discussion with the supervisor in the host organisation, who, crucially, also signs a completion form to confirm that the placement was carried out.

The module is assessed by a 5000-word reflective report detailing the steps taken to arrange the placement, the nature of the host organisation, a discussion of language and communication issues encountered, and evaluations of the student's performance and the impact of the placement on his or her career plans (Organ, 2016).

Students are given complete freedom in their choice of placement. They are encouraged to carry it out abroad, because of the benefits in terms of linguistic progress and personal achievement, although some choose to find placements at home for practical or personal reasons. Students abroad are often employed by their host university to provide English conversation classes, or find placements in the international office. Others are assigned to local schools, or apply to commercial language schools. Those who do not want to teach often find placements in retail, hospitality, or voluntary work.

In the UK, some students look for placements in schools, particularly if they are planning to go into teaching. Others apply to museums or tourist offices. Students of British Sign Language (BSL) approach special schools, local council services, or centres and charities for the Deaf.

2. Literature review

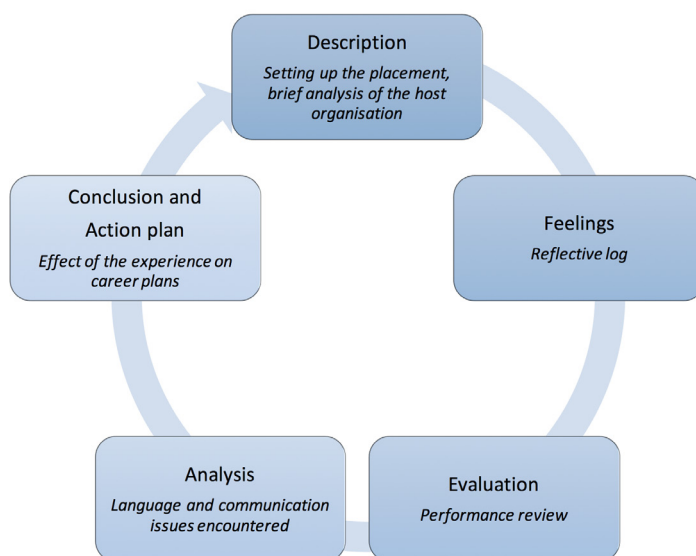
Work placement modules can be good examples of experiential learning as advocated by Kolb (1984), who drew on earlier work to establish his experiential learning cycle. More recently, authors such as Kohonen (2001), and Phipps and Gonzalez (2004), have researched this practice within the specific field of foreign language learning.

2.1. Experiential learning

Work placement modules align closely with Kolb's (1984) notion that "Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Moreover, Kolb's (2014) revised edition of his seminal work "pictures the workplace as a learning environment that can enhance and supplement formal education and can foster personal development through meaningful work and career-development opportunities" (p. 4).

Although Kolb (1984) proposes an experiential learning cycle, the structure of the report submitted by the students in this case study more closely follows Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle (Figure 1).

Figure 1. The elements of the placement report, in alignment with Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle



Kohonen (2001) approaches experiential learning from the point of view of language education, arguing that language teaching "has a broader goal than

promoting linguistic and communicative skills only” (p. 2). His claim that it “contributes to the wider task of fostering the students’ personal growth” (Kohonen, 2001, p. 2) strikes a chord in the light of the reports which make up this case study.

2.2. Intercultural learning

Phipps and Gonzalez (2004) argue that for language teaching to survive in the current climate, we need to empower students to ‘live’ the language rather than to just ‘have’ it.

They offer a concept of ‘linguaging’ as opposed to ‘language learning’, as shown in Table 1. In their words, this is the process of becoming “active agents in creating their human environment” (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, p. 2). In short, “[l]inguaging is a life skill. It is inextricably interwoven with social experience – living in society – and it develops and changes constantly as that experience evolves and changes” (Phipps & Gonzalez, 2004, p. 2).

Table 1. Extracts from Phipps and Gonzalez (2004, p. 3) concept of ‘linguaging’, adapted from Barnett (1994)

	Language learning	Linguaging
Context	Classroom focus	Whole social world
Outcome	Assessed performance	Feel and fluency
Aim	Accuracy and measurable knowledge	Meaning-making and human connection
Disposition	Competition	Open, collective exploration and exchange
Cultures	Learning about	Living in and with
Position	Language at a distance	Language from within
Task	Complex	Supercomplex

Many of these ‘linguaging’ skills, such as ‘meaning-making and human connection’, and carrying out ‘supercomplex’ tasks, are developed by students on work placements in their target language context, be it a spoken foreign language or BSL.

3. The case study

The data for this case study consists of a corpus of 67 reports (anonymised and coded with the country and year of writing) submitted from 2011 to 2015, detailing placements carried out in France, Germany, Spain, Japan, the UK and the US. The qualitative data shows that the students value the opportunity to reflect on their experience, and recognise the development of many of the skills mentioned above.

3.1. Advantages of the model

Many students comment on the value of having to secure the placement themselves, and on the importance of the reflective process in helping them to evaluate their experience.

Setting up the placement:

“What I learnt about myself during my placement is I am proactive and I am able to show initiative by finding a work placement without the assistance of my host university” [SP12/2].

Reflection:

“The completion of a daily log improved my ability to reflect on the successes and issues of the day and how I reacted to different situations” [FR13/5].

3.2. What do the students learn from the placement?

Many students who carried out their placement in a target language context found that this benefitted their language learning and intercultural understanding, and in some cases their understanding of their other degree subject:

“I believe that this was an extremely valuable experience for me, equal in value to the entire semester spent abroad” [FR12/1].

Language improvement:

“It gave me the motivation to study and practice my Japanese language skills in my free time in order to become better at my job. I wrote in my journal after my fourth shift that ‘I am disappointed in myself that I can’t speak freely to these people” [JP15/4].

Self-confidence:

“My final shift [...] was a real eye opener. Despite me feeling that I had been the ‘awkward English girl’, my colleagues and my team leaders had all said to me that I was a pleasure to work with. I was delighted!” [FR13/1].

Application of theory to practice:

“I was able to acquire invaluable work experience which combined both aspects of my joint honours degree; [...] Intellectually, I was able to take the theoretical side of my academic studies and use the skills in real-life situations” [FR14/5].

3.3. Soft skills

According to the [National Careers Service \(n.d.\)](#), the ‘soft skills’ employers look for are: communicating, making decisions, showing commitment, flexibility, time management, leadership skills, creativity, problem-solving skills, being a team player, accepting responsibility, and being able to work under pressure.

Being aware of one’s own competencies in these areas is a skill in itself, as highlighted by [Wyburd \(2016\)](#), who noted that many languages graduates enter the job market unable to identify to employers the skills that their degree has developed in them. Many of these elements are mentioned in the reports, showing that the reflective process helps the students to recognise the skills they have developed:

“In terms of occupational skills I have acquired as a result of this placement, I think building my confidence in both languages and in the

workplace environment would be the biggest factors. I feel that this has had a knock-on effect with other skills, such as communication, team-working and leading, organisation, self-management and autonomy within the working environment, and a willingness to learn” [FR15/1].

Communication:

“This placement has honestly been one of the best experiences of my life, this may be because it was abroad but it has given me so much insight into myself and on how to communicate well with others and everyone around me” [JP15/4].

Time management:

“The most useful thing I learned was how to properly organise my time” [GE15/1].

Leadership skills:

“I observed carefully the techniques of the management as I may have to use similar techniques in my future career” [FR13/2].

Teamwork and intercultural understanding:

“This work placement has given me the confidence to consider the possibility of returning to Spain in the future to work as I have proved to myself that I am able to work in a team of people from a foreign country and still be able to complete the tasks required of me without any problems” [SP11/1].

Accepting responsibility:

“By the end of the placement I was given my own set of keys to open/close the bar while Michael was unavailable and was even given the job of paying the bills” [JP15/4].

Ability to work under pressure:

“Despite all of the language and communication problems which I encountered, I really enjoyed the challenges of working in a foreign

environment where each day was a considerably bigger challenge than working in an English supermarket” [FR13/5].

3.4. Impact on career plans

Many students comment that the experience had a significant effect on their plans for the future, even in cases where the placement itself had not lived up to their expectations:

“It has been an undeniably beneficial experience, even if it was just to clarify that working as a teacher in Japan was something not for me” [JP11/2].

“Overall my experience [...] has forced me to evaluate what I would like to gain from my future studies and, eventually, my career. It has made me more confident not only in communication and a workplace environment but also of my goals, which previously were unfocused and not particularly career driven” [FR13/4].

4. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that students who carry out work placements, particularly in a target language environment, find them valuable in ways which extend beyond their linguistic progress. Alongside the elements mentioned in this report, students comment on the improvement to their oral and aural competence, as well as their understanding of cultural differences. Most report an improvement in their autonomy and professionalism, some discovering reserves of confidence and competence that they were unaware of. While many comment on the fact that the placement clarified their career path, some find that it gave them a renewed appetite for further study.

Finally, the reflection on the experiential learning process gives them an opportunity to articulate the skills they have acquired, which may enable them to present themselves more favourably to potential employers.

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

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Innovative language teaching and learning at university: enhancing employability
Edited by Carmen Álvarez-Mayo, Angela Gallagher-Brett, and Franck Michel

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Cover design and cover photo by © Raphaël Savina (raphael@savina.net)

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-49-0 (Paperback - Print on demand, black and white)
Print on demand technology is a high-quality, innovative and ecological printing method; with which the book is never 'out of stock' or 'out of print'.

ISBN13: 978-1-908416-50-6 (Ebook, PDF, colour)
ISBN13: 978-1-908416-51-3 (Ebook, EPUB, colour)

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Legal deposit, United Kingdom: The British Library.
British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data.
A cataloguing record for this book is available from the British Library.

Legal deposit, France: Bibliothèque Nationale de France - Dépôt légal: mai 2017.
