11 Studying languages in the times of COVID-19: reflections on the delivery of teaching and learning activities and the year abroad

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Abstract

This contribution reflects on some of the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic has introduced for languages in Higher Education (HE). In particular, two areas are discussed: the delivery of teaching and learning activities, including assessments, and the year abroad. These two areas, on which the enforced move to online provision has had a significant impact, are central to many UK languages degrees. The piece discusses challenges, responses, and unresolved issues. All in all, it aims to offer a positive view for the future of the sector by highlighting particularly the spirit of collegiality that has developed during the pandemic across different HE institutions and national organisations.

Keywords: languages, COVID-19, year abroad, assessments, digital teaching, collaboration.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about a number of challenges that directly impact the educational landscape across all subjects. The languages sector offers a unique perspective on how the pandemic is affecting the approach to teaching and learning for subjects in which close student-tutor interaction and immersive elements are often deemed essential for successful learning and the attainment of learning objectives. The sudden move to online teaching and learning, to

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supplant conventional student-tutor interaction, has left little time to plan for such a transition with any amount of foresight. The mandatory period of isolation and the subsequent surge in digital practices may continue to have an impact on, and potentially influence, pedagogy in the post-pandemic world. However, it is not just classroom pedagogy that has been affected and requires modification. From admissions and recruitment to research dissemination – all areas in which a languages department operates – have been affected in some form, and in all areas staff and students have had to develop new skills or repurpose existing skills.

In this piece, I reflect on two areas that form central parts of languages degrees at many UK universities: the delivery of teaching and learning activities (including assessments), and the year abroad/the organisation of international placements. As both a teacher of German and an international placement year (year abroad) tutor in the Department of Languages and Cultures at Lancaster University, I have had first-hand experience of the developments in these two areas. In my reflections, I focus on some key challenges the sector has experienced and consider how we have approached these in our department and as a sector. Taking stock, I also aim to highlight some potential positive opportunities that have arisen, particularly relating to the acquisition and enhancement of skills for staff and students. Lastly, I will identify questions that remain unanswered at this point and need further, potentially sector-wide, discussions.

The delivery of teaching and learning activities is arguably the area in which departments have seen the most drastic changes caused by the pandemic. Sudden campus closures meant that classes had to move online, facilitated via Zoom, Microsoft Teams, or similar platforms. This has understandably led to concerns among both staff and students: will online classes be just as effective as face-to-face classes? How do they need to be adapted for the new environment to avoid unsuccessfully replicating face-to-face classes online?

While many, if not all, HE institutions are well versed in using online platforms and digital tools to supplement their teaching, most are not usually equipped for, and experienced in, delivering their portfolios entirely online (The Open

University being a notable exception). For both staff and students, this has meant a period of having to familiarise themselves with new online platforms, experimenting with software and different approaches, and, no doubt, some degree of overload and frustration.

In preparation for the academic year 2020/2021, Lancaster University has, for the majority of its teaching and learning activities, moved to blended learning models; combining synchronous online sessions with asynchronous elements, such as recorded video tutorials, preparatory exercises, and tutor-facilitated online discussions.

Preparing for this blended learning model has also been an opportunity for staff to re-visit and draw on previous experiences with digital practice. For instance, I had been working on the use of audio-visual screencast tools for a number of years, exploring its impact on student engagement with feedback (Speicher & Stollhans, 2015) but also more recently looking at ways in which screencast feedback can improve linguistic accuracy and complexity of academic texts produced by students. While this is not an approach I discovered and started exploring due to the pandemic, and the subsequent enforced move to online teaching and assessments, my previous experience with it has helped me re-think assessments during this time. I worked closely with one of our digital learning facilitators to further explore and share how the work I had previously done in this area could be usefully applied to the new context (Hosseini & Stollhans, 2020).

These forms of collaboration are a highly important and positive development: there has been an emergence of online initiatives that enable practitioners to share experiences, good practice, materials, but also concerns and anxieties. For the first time ever, the annual Innovative Language Teaching and Learning at University Conference (InnoConf)[2], and the annual conference of the European Association for Computer-Assisted Language Learning (EuroCALL)[3], took

2. https://conferences.ncl.ac.uk/innoconf20/

3. http://www.eurocall-languages.org/

place online in 2020, along with many other conferences and seminars such as the Kent Modern Languages Teaching Forum[4]. The Association for German Studies (AGS)[5] in Great Britain and Ireland postponed their annual conference, but put on a series of timely online events, including a social gathering.

In the same spirit, the Association of University Language Communities (AULC)[6] in the UK and Ireland has been holding weekly informal drop-in sessions on Microsoft Teams to provide a platform where colleagues can share and discuss both concerns and examples of good practice. Organisations such as the University Council of Modern Languages (UCML)[7] and the Institute of Modern Languages Research (IMLR)[8] were quick to collate a varied range of online materials, and create rich open-access repositories with the intention of supporting languages research and teaching. All these initiatives provide not only useful resources and opportunities, but they are also testament to the immensely collaborative and collegial spirit within the sector.

Examinations and assessments are an area that has shown to pose particular challenges. If traditional 'physical' written and oral examinations and tests cannot be conducted, what are the alternatives? At Lancaster University, the majority of examinations were cancelled and replaced with coursework assessments in the form of online tests on Moodle and take-home papers. With the aim of putting together an overview of practices at different institutions, we have conducted an online survey and shared this within the sector (Polisca, Stollhans, Bardot, & Rollet, forthcoming). The results, based on responses from colleagues at 24 different institutions, indicate that there has been no unified approach to the modification of assessments; rather, a variety of different solutions has been found, which included cancelling or replacing certain elements of assessment packages. An area of particular concern (raised by practitioners

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4. https://research.kent.ac.uk/languages-teaching-forum/, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RM9bDB-5y_8 for a recording of this year's online event

5. http://www.ags.ac.uk/2020online

6. http://www.aulc.org/

7. https://university-council-modern-languages.org/languages-education/online-resource-sharing/

8. https://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/about-us/online-resources

from 19 institutions in the survey) is how the changed circumstances have been affecting practices and existing guidelines concerning academic integrity and plagiarism. In this respect, different ad-hoc solutions have been trialled, but a sophisticated consistent approach remains to be found and implemented.

The year abroad, which is mandatory for students taking a languages degree at many UK universities, is often seen as a pivotal part of the degree. It offers an opportunity for students to immerse themselves in the language(s) and culture(s) they are studying, and to develop a range of intercultural and transferable skills. It has therefore been argued to have a positive impact on employability, and students often consider it to be a simultaneously daunting and rewarding experience (c.f. Salin, Hall, & Hampton, 2018 for a collection of insightful papers on all these aspects).

For the year abroad, COVID-19 has not only introduced concerns related to students' health, safety, and wellbeing, but also tangible organisational and legal issues that surpass the remit and expertise of year abroad tutors: what happens if the Foreign and Commonwealth Office recommends against any but essential travel to the country a student is planning to complete a placement in? – and is the year abroad, as a compulsory component of a university degree, considered to be 'essential' in this respect? What are the implications for health and travel insurance? If a student cannot travel abroad, what are the alternatives? How do we ensure students still meet the defined learning outcomes to a sufficient degree and still develop the range of linguistic, intercultural, and professional skills a placement abroad would have offered them?

At this point in time, many of these questions remain unanswered. The uncertainty and fluidity of the situation, combined with student expectations and, quite understandably, anxieties, has put significant pressures on year abroad tutors and coordinators, international offices, and heads of departments. The UCML has set up a Special Interest Group *Year abroad: supporting virtual mobility* "with a view to mitigating the impact [the pandemic] will have on Modern Languages undergraduates due to undertake a Year Abroad in the academic year 2020-2021" (UCML, 2020, p. 1). The group, of which 47 universities are members, has set

out four principles: to send students abroad if and when this is possible, while applying flexibility with respect to required placement periods; to continue to welcome exchange students from partner universities ('physically' or online); to create and share a range of virtual activities; to encourage individual institutions to apply flexibility; and offer alternatives to their year abroad assessment formats and requirements.

While online placements are a valuable experience in themselves and offer the opportunity to develop linguistic, professional, digital, and transferable skills, they are unlikely to provide the same immersive and culturally rich experience as the year abroad. A combination of virtual and 'physical' placements (whenever these are possible and safe) may have to be the way forward for the academic year 2020/2021 and most immediate future. In any case, the year abroad will be an even more individual and personalised undertaking, and year abroad tutors will need to work closely with students to discuss individual circumstances and explore different options specific to each student.

As I finish writing these reflections, we are still in the middle of the pandemic. Whatever happens, one thing seems clear: staff and students have shown a considerable amount of flexibility, adaptability, and optimistic productivity. On many occasions digital skills have been enhanced, adapted, and newly developed, and creative new approaches have been found to make the best of a difficult situation.

There are problems that we have yet to find solutions for, such as in the area of teaching and learning delivery. Plagiarism and academic malpractice frameworks for digital assessments also need to be developed, trialled, and implemented. To make a success of the year abroad during the pandemic, we will need to find ways to offer opportunities for linguistic and cultural immersion in the absence of, or hopefully rather in addition to, in-situ placements. Virtual exchange programmes and virtual reality immersion may offer potential solutions.

One common thread that runs through all the observations I have shared in this piece concerns the way in which the sector has been working together more

closely than ever. It is inspiring how colleagues have been supporting each other across institutional and geographical borders, and how many initiatives have been informed by joined-up thinking and cross-institutional collaborations.

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