

INTRODUCING AN ENTERPRISE ACTIVITY AS AN INNOVATIVE LEARNING METHOD IN A FINAL-YEAR CONTENT MODULE

Author: Chiara La Sala

Dr M. Chiara La Sala, School of Modern Languages, University of Leeds

1. Introduction

In January 2009, I secured funding for a project to enhance the delivery of a final-year module entitled 'Minority Languages and Dialects in Italy from Fascism to the Present'. This funding came from the White Rose Centre for Excellence in the Teaching and Learning of Enterprise. The project, undertaken during the 2009-10 session, aimed to give students the opportunity to undertake an enterprise activity as an assessed component of the existing module.

In this paper, I shall briefly describe the module, introduce the project and discuss how its aims were addressed. Some of the difficulties faced will be considered and outcomes in terms of analyses of exam results and student feedback on the experience will be discussed. Finally, I shall outline what lessons have been learnt and mention possible future developments in this direction.

2. Description of the module

The module 'Minority Languages and Dialects in Italy from Fascism to the Present' investigates attitudes towards the safeguarding of minority languages and dialects in Italy from the 1920s to the present day. The module focuses on the problematic nature of such terms as 'language', 'minority language' and 'dialect', and how these relate to the Italian linguistic situation. An overview of the status of dialects and minority languages during the Fascist years is followed by an exploration of contemporary attitudes towards dialects; the module shows that there is a perceived link between local or regional varieties and local or regional identities which becomes a key factor in determining a positive attitude towards these dialectal varieties (Agheyisi, *et al.* 1970).

The main objectives of the module are:

- To provide students with a sound knowledge of the Italian linguistic situation and of how the concepts of language, minority language and dialect apply to it;
- To enable students to understand the evolution of the status of local or regional varieties and to evaluate issues related their rise in status.

The assessment method is the following: two 2,500-word essays and one oral presentation.

3. Description of the project

The main objective of this project was to enable students to link their research skills with a practical enterprise (Cowan, 2006). Students were given the opportunity to carry out a survey which would form the basis of their second essay. They therefore had to locate informants, define the population of their survey, formulate questions, analyse responses and deliver data and results. They were encouraged to apply a problem-solving model to their individual case study. The objective was to give students the chance to enhance their research skills for their final year as well as help them acquire new skills in the areas of interview technique and the formulation of questionnaires. This was achieved by:

- Conducting an in-depth investigation which allowed students to establish contacts with native speakers and develop their linguistic skills;
- Creating networks;
- Refining students' questionnaires and interview technique.

The project started in January 2009 and was completed in June 2010. From January 2009 to March 2009, the scope of the project was evaluated; from April 2009 to August 2009, the teaching materials to run the project were developed (consisting of a model for conducting a sociolinguistic survey). From September 2009 to January 2010, the teaching materials were tested by conducting a sociolinguistic survey in Sardinia and Sicily, which was subsequently analyzed. From January to May 2010, the teaching materials (sociolinguistic survey with results) were incorporated into the module. During this time students used the

standard model which had been devised by tutors in order to help them create their own survey for conducting a sociolinguistic analysis.

The outcomes were:

- Teaching materials were made available within the VLE;
- Students' materials consisting of a socio-linguistic questionnaire and a 2,500-word essay were put online. The title of the essay was as follows:

'With the help of a questionnaire you have drawn up,* interview a small sample of young Italians (approximately 6 respondents aged 18-25), who may or may not live in the same part of Italy.

Examine their responses to questions designed to reveal their level of competence in their local variety, any links they might perceive between local language variety and local identity, and their reactions to measures to safeguard their local variety.

Draw conclusions about the use and role of local varieties among young people in contemporary Italian society.

*This should be attached as an appendix to your response'

4. What students have gained from the experience

At the end of the module, students have:

- Gathered, evaluated and used information from secondary sources (both written and online);
- Communicated effectively, both orally and in writing;
- Used IT effectively, both as a means of communication and as an aid to learning;
- Taken personal responsibility for their own learning;
- Gained creative, project-planning, problem-solving and research skills;
- Improved their networking skills by establishing contacts with members of the public.

Overall, the experience of conducting their own sociolinguistic survey helped the students to:

- Become competent investigators;
- Understand how to use their research findings in a more proficient manner;

- Develop skills in questionnaire design adequate for conducting their own investigation;
- Acquire a range of generic analytical and investigative skills;
- Link their research with a tangible enterprise.

5. Difficulties

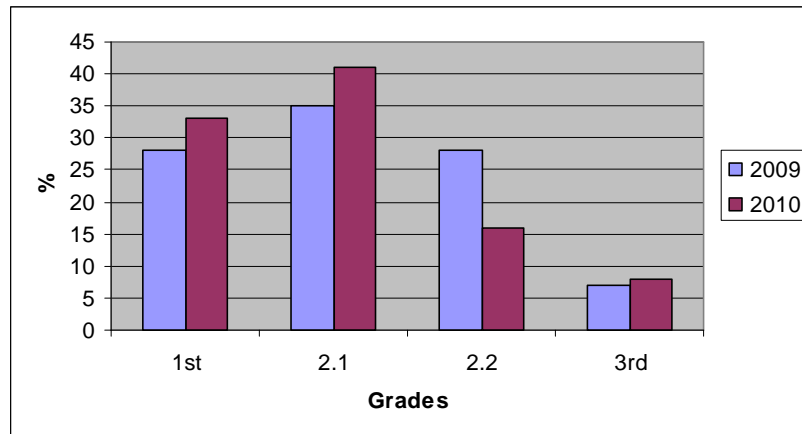
The main difficulty was in convincing students to take part in the survey. When they found out that they had the opportunity to write an essay based on their own socio-linguistic survey, they had mixed reactions. They were very interested and excited about the project but, at the same time, they were worried about not being able to cope with this new research task. Students needed to be reassured that they would receive constant support and guidance.

Assistance was given in the following areas:

- Defining the population of the sample;
- Finding informants (students were encouraged both to use their contacts in Italy and to use Skype as a tool to conduct their interviews as much as possible);
- Managing their frustration when potential respondents did not get back to them in time;
- Relating their own research and findings to larger-scale surveys available in the course bibliography.

6. Exam results

Four students out of the twelve on the course chose the essay title that asked them to draw up a questionnaire and interview a small sample of young Italians. There were more results in the first-class range than have been achieved in the past on this module: three of the students achieved marks in the first-class range and one in the 2.1 range. The following table shows students' performance in the academic years 2009 and 2010:



7. Students' feedback on the experience of writing an essay based on a sociolinguistic survey

Student feedback on the experience was very positive, as the comments below show:

Student 1

'I thoroughly enjoyed doing this questionnaire-based essay as it was unlike anything else I had done in the past. It was a new and interesting way of collecting information and one that I would definitely consider doing again in the future. It would be quite nice if similar modules were to take on this method in the future. The only negative I had with the questionnaire was some trouble in getting the responses back in time as this unfortunately gave me less time to analyse the results, but that is merely a logistic problem, it is not something that can be helped. I found all the handouts and also the model for the questionnaire extremely helpful, as I think it would have been rather difficult to compile a questionnaire from scratch. All in all, it was very positive'.

Student 2

'I found the opportunity to base an essay on my own research hugely exciting. It was a great experience talking to my respondents about what is, for them, clearly a very important subject; namely the use and role of local varieties in modern Italy. Despite the limited nature of my questionnaire, it was interesting to note how frequently my own results tallied with trends noted in academic studies of a more extensive scale. I would like to do something similar in the future, perhaps in Italy, as the only problem I encountered was gathering together an adequate number of informants. A regular Skype-based exchange between Leeds and Italian universities might prove beneficial in this respect, as well as on a general level'.

Student 3

'Conducting the survey itself was incredibly interesting and I very much enjoyed being able to apply the theories learnt in the classroom to a practical investigation.

- I divided my report into two halves: the first half focussed on a selection of the academic research that had already been conducted into the ties between language and identity. The second half was a collation of the results from my own socio-linguistic survey to examine how far the academic theories applied in practice.
- Compiling the results was relatively straightforward and it was interesting to find trends and patterns in responses even from my small sample of six respondents.
- The most interesting aspect of the investigation was being able to make a final comparison between the academic theories and the responses of real people whose everyday lives are affected by the relationship between their language (or languages) and their identity.'

Student 4

'The experience of writing an essay based on a sociolinguistic survey has been important to my linguistic studies, since as a student of linguistics in my home University (Università degli Studi di Padova) I consider a pragmatic and actual [*sic*] approach to the subject matter as fundamental. In my home University my approach to the subject has always been a rhetorical and theoretical one, whereas I believe that these kinds of studies require a more scientific and direct knowledge, which leads the students to a better understanding of the sociolinguistic dynamics. Moreover, I particularly appreciate how such research can give students the ability to identify broader issues studied in lectures starting from a direct analysis of the sources.' (Erasmus student)

8. Conclusion

As the comments above have shown, linking our research with a teaching module (Tamponi, 2005) can be a very rewarding experience for both tutors and students alike. The production of materials is time-consuming, but results have been very encouraging.

Moreover, exam results proved that students had benefitted from the experience. They were given clear guidance and guidelines that fostered learning autonomy, thus helping them to become more responsible for their own learning. Overall, student comments show that the support provided and the experience of conducting a survey helped them to understand the course materials and increased their ability to learn autonomously (Main, 1985).

9. Future developments

Linking an academic exercise with a practical enterprise is something which could be extended to other modules offered in the School of Modern Languages at Leeds and beyond, with a particular focus on practical language activities. Persuading students who graduate in a language-related discipline to pursue something 'practical' or something that they can 'sell' outside in the real world is difficult and demanding. However, this project has proved a very valuable experience for all those involved. Writing a questionnaire, conducting a survey, and analyzing results is indeed very valuable in terms of helping students develop transferable skills, which is what employers seek and value highly.

Bibliography

Agheysi, R. & Fishman Joshua A. 1970. Language Attitude Studies: A Brief Survey of Methodological Approaches. *Anthropological Linguistics*, 12(5): 137-157.

Biggs, J. & Tang C. 2007. *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Boud, D., Keogh R. & Walker D. 1985. *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. London: Kogan Page.

Butcher, C., Davies C. & Highton M. 2006. *Designing learning: from module outline to effective teaching*. London and New York: Routledge.

Cowan, J. 2006. *On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher: Reflection in Action*. Buckingham: Society for Research into HE & Open University Press.

Main, A. 1985. Reflection and the Development of Learning Skills. In: D. Boud., R. Keogh and D. Walker, eds. *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. London: Kogan.

Tamponi, A.R. 2005: Content and language integrated university course: A task-based approach [online]. LLAS website [accessed 30 August 2011]. Available at: <<http://www.llas.ac.uk/resources/paper/2295>>

Ursini, F. 1979. Funzionalità ed efficienza comunicativa del dialetto come risultante della combinazione delle variabili di status e di ruolo. In: A. Leoni, ed. *I dialetti e le lingue minoritarie di fronte all'italiano*. Rome: Bulzoni, pp. 247-254.