Students as Change Agents in Learning and Teaching

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Case study 2 – Classics: Peer Tutoring in Ancient Languages

Introduction

Students starting their Classics programmes come into the University with differing levels of ancient language experience. Many students may have studied Latin or Greek at school, but some will have had no experience of ancient languages before the start of their course. Within their programme, students can study both Latin and Greek at six levels. Language in Action is the lowest level, designed to introduce basic principles and use of classical languages to those with no previous knowledge of Greek or Latin. The levels then increase in difficulty from I to V. Starting an ancient language at level I with no prior experience is challenging and many decide to enrol for Language in Action after the first term. It had been considered that a peer tutor might be able to support students through this challenging period in the first year.

This project was designed to investigate the following questions:

- What are the kinds of difficulty that students have in ancient language learning?
- Would students be interested in a peer-tutoring scheme for language learning?
- What would the cost and benefits be of such a scheme?
- How might such a scheme be implemented and would there be a need for training?

Methods of data collection

Data was collected through use of a paper-based questionnaire that was sent out to all students. This was completed by 60 students; twenty-nine were Year 1, nineteen Year 2, eight Year 3, two Postgraduate, and two who did not mark their year of study. A focus group of seven students - two Year 1, three Year 2, one Year 3 and one Postgraduate - was also conducted.

Analysis of data

Questionnaire

In general, students were keen for additional language support and had ideas for how this might be provided.
- *'I really found the extra Greek class laid on this year helpful. I would appreciate the same facility in Latin'.*
- *'Mentor program'.*
- *'Peer tutoring'.*
- *'More regular grammar and vocab review sessions and more practice in translating from the language'.*
- *'Often struggle as teacher assumes that after going over it once we understand. Goes too fast sometimes'.*
- *'Creating compulsory sessions for* checking *over grammar and if you don't need it you can go and say that, but you must go.'*

Nearly half of students thought that the support they received could be improved in some way. Specifically in relation to peer-tutoring, the majority of students (71%) reported they would find language-learning support from a trained peer tutor useful. Students were asked how often they would want to be supported by a peer tutor. Most considered this would be best only when they were struggling (see Table 1).

%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Overall
Only see when struggling	48	42	50	47
One hour a week	28	26	13	24
Once every two weeks	14	32	25	21
Once a term	3	5	13	5

Table 1: The number of times students want to see a peer tutor

Most students want the peer tutor to be available regularly throughout the year (66%).

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Overall
Available regularly throughout the term	69	53	88	66
Available at beginning of term	0	16	0	5
Around exam times	24	32	38	28

Table 2: Times when students want to see their peer tutor

Just under half of students reported (48%) that they had at some time supported others in their ancient language learning. Two thirds of these thought that supporting others with their language learning helped them with their own language development. Over the whole sample, a third would consider becoming a peer language tutor, with over half of second year students stating they would like to do this.

The questionnaire was devised to capture students' experiences of Latin and Greek language learning separately, in case there were differences between them.

Greek

Over half of the students in this sample had no previous experience of Greek language learning prior to coming to university, and over two thirds stated that they had struggled with this in the first year. Students had difficulties with a variety of aspects of Greek language learning, including vocabulary, grammar and translation.

%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Overall
Vocabulary	44	57	100	57
Grammar	50	57	60	54
Translation from English to Greek	50	36	80	49
Translation from Greek to English	31	50	80	46
Do not struggle with Greek	13	0	0	6

Table 3: Aspects of Greek language that cause difficulty in learning

If struggling with Greek, the majority of students spoke to their teacher (63%) or other students in their group (49%), as highlighted in Table 4.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Overall
Speak to your teacher	75	43	80	63
Speak to your personal tutor	6	0	0	3
Speak to another teacher	0	0	20	3
Other students in your group	50	43	60	49
Other student from a higher level group	13	0	40	11

Table 4: Who spoken to when struggling with Greek

The students were asked what level of Greek they had studied at in their first year. The table below shows that the proportion of second and third year students who studied Greek at Level 1 is higher. The majority studied Greek at Level 2 in their first years.

%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
Level 1	14	43	40
Level 2	71	43	60
Level 3	14	7	0
Level 4	0	7	0

Table 5: Level of Greek studied in Year 1

Students generally thought they had received adequate support when learning Greek (59% agreed), even when they were struggling, and (80%) indicated that they feel confident about approaching their teachers. However just over a third said that they feel more comfortable speaking to their peers than to staff when they are having language difficulties. Over half of students (56%) state they would take up extra support if it were available.

Latin

Students studying Latin generally had more experience of the language before coming to university. Only a fifth of students had not learnt any Latin before starting the programme and over half had studied Latin to A-level. Despite this, over two thirds of them indicated that they struggled to keep up at some point in their Latin language modules, either with translation, grammar or vocabulary.

%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Postgraduate	Overall
Vocabulary	27	44	33	0	32
Grammar	58	44	50	100	54
Translation from English to Latin	73	56	100	50	70
Translation from Latin to English	42	56	50	0	46
Do not struggle with Latin	12	32	0	0	16

Table 6: Aspects of Latin language that cause difficulty in learning

Similarly to students who studied Greek, most of those studying Latin spoke to the teacher (72%) or other students within their group when struggling (46%).

%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Postgraduate	Overall
Speak to your teacher	65	81	83	50	72
Speak to your personal tutor	19	0	16.7%	0	12
Speak to another teacher	8	6	0	0	6
Other students in your group	50	44	50	0	46
Other student from a higher level group	12	25	17	0	16

Table 7: Who spoken to when struggling with Latin

Most students study Latin at Level 3 in their first year, although there are still over a third of students who study Latin at Level 1 on entry.

%	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Postgraduate
Level 1	36	38	33.	100
Level 2	4	6	0	0
Level 3	60	50	67	0
Level 4	0	6	0	0

Table 8: Level of Latin studied in Year 1

Most students (65%) felt they received adequate support from staff. Three quarters of students felt confident approaching members of staff, but just under half of students felt more comfortable speaking to their peers when having difficulties than with staff. Two third of students would have taken extra support if it were available.

Focus Group

The seven students in the focus group reported mix of experiences of ancient language learning before coming to Exeter; a student with 7 years of Latin and no experience of Greek, three students who had not had any experience of ancient languages but one had studied several modern languages at school, one third year student who had very little Latin but had studied French, a further student who did a short course in Latin before coming to University and had studied two modern languages to A-level and finally a student who had done French and Latin to A-level.

Experiences of ancient language learning at Exeter   Students thought that overall the teaching on their ancient language modules had been very good. Some of the students struggled to begin with, especially those who had not studied ancient languages before. The students who stuck with Level 1 had been glad that they had, although some had not. One student had wanted to do both Greek and Latin in the first year but was unable to do so and had therefore done Latin II outside his course. Latin II students said that they were well supported and that their teacher was happy to go through things again. One student studying Greek fast track felt that they have to learn an enormous amount in a short period of time and further support would have been useful. Students generally felt confident about their ancient language learning. However, they indicated that they had to put in more effort to do well in their language modules than in any other. Students who had studied modern languages before coming to University did not necessarily find this had made learning an ancient language easier. One student who had done Greek II fast track was finding Greek III quite difficult, but he had expected this.

Assessment   Students found the half-termly assessments useful because they helped them to know where their weaknesses lay. They thought that it would be good to have perhaps two additional assessments and then for only the best 5 to count towards formal assessment. In Latin 1, they had weekly vocabulary tests that they found very beneficial. One Latin I student said that his teacher had given him tests nearly every day and he had found this helpful because they had covered almost every bit of Latin grammar. Greek 1 students were not tested in this way, but would find it useful.

Additional support   Only one of the students had received support from those in a higher-level group. They found this very beneficial. All other students had had support from their teachers. Students felt that classes were sometimes paced at the level of the most able and this meant that some people struggled. However overall teachers had been very supportive, for example seeing students outside of class or giving students opportunities to retake parts of tests outside of class to ensure they did not fall behind. Students stated there was no significant difference in support for Greek or Latin. Students thought office hours were sufficient, but felt that sometimes they did not want to bother the teacher about small problems. Students felt that if provision was to be increased more lesson time would be most beneficial. They felt that in the third term there had been more time to go over things and hoped that this would be maintained next year.

Supporting others   The focus group reinforced that all students thought that supporting others in their language learning can help with their own language learning, perhaps forcing them to work through the methodology. One student said *'teaching is a wonderful way to learn your language'*. One student had had experience of teaching primary school children Latin and felt that he really needed to make sure he knew the material very well. Students mentioned that they had both received help from peers and had helped peers in their classes and thought that this benefited both parties involved.

Peer-tutoring   Focus group students felt that the scheme would work best if it were one to one and informal. This would ensure that it was different to classes and would not undermine the class teacher. They felt that peer tutors would be under a lot of pressure if they were expected to teach more than one student. They were worried that people would only do it if they were to get something out of it. They felt students should be told it would enhance their CVs and count as experience towards the Exeter Award. They also felt it would be best if it was not paid because this might affect the tutor tutee relationship and mean that students might get involved for the wrong reasons. They thought that it would have been helpful for the Latin and Greek I students struggling in the first term who had eventually decided to do Language in Action. They also thought that peer tutors would need to communicate closely with class teachers to ensure effective support was given to those involved. It was thought all students could benefit, especially those students on fast track courses and that Level 1 students who were most at risk of ending up doing Language in Action would benefit most. Students thought tutors should be at least Level 3 and in general should be two levels above the person they were tutoring. Students did not think it mattered what year the student was in but raised the concern that third year students might have quite heavy workloads and might find it difficult to keep up with the commitment.

How the peer tutoring scheme could work   Students felt that if people signed up to become a tutor they would have to acknowledge that they had made a commitment and would have to do it for at least a term. Students thought tutors would have to meet their tutee formally through a meeting initially organised by the department. This could also be used as an opportunity to clarify the roles of tutor and tutee. All students thought that, within reason, tutors should be available on a regular basis. Students thought that in some instances it would be beneficial to have a peer tutor to speak to just so that they did not need to bother class teachers. Some students thought they would like to be both peer tutors and be tutored. Only one student, in his fourth year, stated he would not want to be a peer tutor; the others wanted to be involved and thought it

would be very worthwhile. One student was planning to do a PGCE and thought it would be great experience.

Summary of Findings

Many students stated they would find a peer tutor useful. The majority would like to see this person when they were struggling. They would want them to be available regularly throughout the term. Over half the students questioned said they had supported other students with their learning and more than a third would be happy to become a peer tutor. On entry, more than half of students studying Greek had no experience of studying Greek prior to coming to university and most struggled with Greek at some point in their first years. The majority of students thought they had enough support from the department and went to their teacher or someone in their group if they were struggling. Students studying Latin had had more experience of the language before coming to university. Over half had studied Latin at A-level. The majority studied Latin at Level 3 in their first year, though a third studied Latin at Level 1 on entry. However, despite students having more experience of Latin prior to entry, 67% of students said that they struggled with their Latin learning at some point in the first year. Students studying Latin were also overall satisfied with support from staff although 66% of students would take up extra support if it were available.

The students in the focus group had varying experiences of supporting other students with their learning, including a student who had tutored someone in his first year and one who had taught Latin to primary school children. The group agreed that teaching others was a good way to develop their own learning, that students would not need to be paid to be peer tutors, and that other incentives including Exeter Award experience could be offered. Peer tutors would need to be two levels above the tutee but it would not matter which year they belonged to. Students agreed that a formal system for the scheme would be useful, including acknowledgement by tutors of commitment and a minimum commitment period with expectations that were set from the start by the department.

Recommendations/Solutions

Following the findings from the questionnaires and focus groups, it is recommended that a pilot of the peer-tutoring scheme should be run from October 2009. This would include the recruitment of 5-7 students to act as peer tutors. It is thought that initially Level 1 first year students starting in October 2009 should be the group to be tutored, as it was found that these students are most vulnerable to attrition.

The scheme could be developed with the support of students but an academic member of staff may need to take a lead. The involvement of the department would mean that the tutoring scheme could set clear expectations of what tutors could be asked to do and what support tutees could expect to get from being involved. This is seen as beneficial to the sustainability of the scheme and would ensure tutors were supportive of class teachers. It is thought that tutors would need to be studying at at least two levels above the student they were tutoring and would need permission from their personal tutor to become involved. This would ensure that those participating would be the best placed to be tutors.

The scheme, in whatever form it takes, should be reviewed at the end of the first term and both tutors and tutees could be asked to evaluate their experiences. This would help the department assess whether the scheme had proved to be beneficial, sustainable and popular. If this were the case, the department could consider applying for Annual Fund money to provide support materials for the scheme, and also think about expanding the scheme, as it is thought that higher-level students could also benefit from peer-tutoring.

Study undertaken with Tessa Waite
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