

Routes into Languages Student Ambassadors Case Studies: England

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November 2012



Introduction

This report analyses the experience and work of a number of student language ambassadors (SLAs) in England in 2011-2012. The scheme supported by the Routes into Languages programme has been recruiting undergraduate language students at universities working in partnership within the project's framework. For the past five years, SLAs have been promoting the study of languages in secondary schools through giving presentations and language taster sessions in order to transmit their passion for languages to school pupils. Before SLAs started their role as ambassadors they were trained to work with pupils, at a training event which took place in London in 2011. These activities have in turn helped the SLAs to enhance their employability by acquiring skills that might be used in a wide variety of jobs.

In the past year, the scheme achievements have been monitored through a set of questionnaires completed by the student ambassadors. The aim of this survey was to find out more about their motivation for participating in the project, their expectations and final achievements and the training that they received in preparation for their role. The responses obtained are analysed below and will ultimately help to evaluate part of the activities the Routes into Languages programme and their impact on the student ambassadors themselves as well as on the uptake of languages at school and university.

Methodology

A qualitative case study approach was utilised in both England and Wales. This report focuses on the experiences of the SLAs recruited from English universities. The survey was organised in two consecutive phases with a form to be filled in by SLAs at the beginning of their role as student ambassadors and one follow-up form at the end of their time. This is, therefore, a small sample. In addition to this, a questionnaire on the preliminary training of the SLAs was completed prior to commencement of their role.

Thirty-six students in total filled in the questionnaire forms. All students completed either a Questionnaire 1 (Q1) form or completed an adapted version of Q1 (Q1Tr) on the training day and then Q2 after their role came to an end. Q1 was completed by nine students, Q1Tr by seven students totalling a number of 16 students completing the first phase of the survey. Q2 was then filled out by twenty-seven students. Two different sets of questions were asked in the two subsequent phases of the survey in order to monitor whether or not the expectations of the students had been met at the end of their role and whether their intentions had changed. One of the limitations of the approach, however, was that it proved difficult to obtain a complete set of data from the same students for both phases and so

caution is needed in interpreting the findings. Thirteen out of all thirty-six students received their education abroad and three did not indicate their nationality or their background. The remaining twenty students received their secondary education in the UK.

School provenance/geographical coverage

All the questionnaire recipients attend university in England. The following regions are represented in the questionnaire's responses: North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, West Midlands, East of England, London, and the South West. Students come from a variety of institutions covering a number of geographical areas, with the following institutions being mentioned: University of Birmingham, University of Bristol, University of Cambridge, University of Hull, Imperial College, University of Leeds, Leeds Metropolitan University, University of Plymouth, University of Salford, SOAS, UCL, UWE and the University of Westminster. Students were also asked for the name and location of the schools where they completed their GCSE exams. Geographical areas where the SLAs have completed their GCSEs include the North West, South East, South West, North East, East and London. The majority of students (twenty-nine) went to university in a region different from the one where they completed their GCSE; the remaining seven students went to school and university in the same region in the North of England, broadly speaking. Thirteen students indicated that they completed their studies abroad and came to study in the UK either as part of an exchange programme or for an undergraduate degree. The countries where these students come from are Italy, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Peru. Three students did not give any indication of the school where they were based prior to coming to study in the UK.

All students indicated that they attended state schools and are therefore familiar with that kind of environment. Eighteen of the twenty schools where the English SLAs obtained their GCSE are high achieving according to Department for Education performance tables. These schools show a score of above 59% (the National average for England) of pupils achieving 5 or more A*-C GCSEs (or equivalent) including English and Maths GCSEs in 2011.¹ Two schools show a percentage lower than the average. The table below shows how many SLAs the programme recruited for each year of study of their degree:

¹ Information on the achievement rate of English schools was obtained from the Department of Education website www.education.gov.uk/schools/performance/index.html (accessed 09 November 2012).

Figure 1: Year of study of SLAs	
Year 1	7
Year 2	13
Year 3	7
Year 4	8
Post-graduate	2
Erasmus	2

Two students indicated that they were on an exchange programme. This figure is however an indicative one, as the comments of some of the SLAs who completed the questionnaire, imply that they attend a foreign university without explicitly stating that they are exchange students. The languages studied by SLAs are mostly western European, however a small number of students (10) study either a minority (EU) language or non-EU languages, which are increasingly gaining popularity among students, such as Arabic or Chinese.

Figure 2: Languages studied by SLAs	
French	21
German	8
Spanish	20
Italian	8
English	6
Arabic	3
Russian	1
Japanese	1
Mandarin	2
Dutch	1
Galician	1
Catalan	1

Motivation

When asked what their motivation was for becoming language ambassadors, the students gave the reasons stated below. These are grouped thematically for purposes of clarity and readability and are listed below in no particular order. Students commented that they wanted to be a student ambassador to:

- to help with languages
- encourage communication
- encourage pupils to study a language
- to show pupils that studying languages can be fun

Foreign students commented that they had also wanted to become SLAs to:

- see how MFL are studied in England
- give pupils an opportunity to work with a mother tongue teacher (in one of the EU languages)

These comments indicate that the SLA programme has sparked some interest also with international students who might eventually use the skills that they have learnt through participating in this scheme when they go back to their own country.

Most students indicated that especially the desire to share their passion for languages had encouraged them to become language ambassadors. This enthusiasm shows in the words of students, examples of which are reported below:

'I believe that the role of Routes into Languages is important to make the children aware of the importance of languages and I wanted to get involved in it.'

'I wish I had someone to advise me better when I was at school, so I really wanted to pass on the message about how important studying languages is and how you can combine it with so many other subjects.'

Students responded that they chose to study languages at university because:

- They loved languages
- They thought it would give them good opportunities
- Languages would look good on their CV
- Studying languages opens the mind up
- Studying languages gives valuable skills, self-satisfaction and confidence
- They wanted to go on a year abroad

Broadly speaking, the questionnaire highlighted that students cherish a passion for learning languages as the following quotes show:

'I get a great sense of satisfaction out of being able to talk to people in their native language'

'I am very interested in learning about other cultures and so I was excited about the prospect of spending a year in another country during my time at university.'

Student main drivers for studying one or more languages, therefore, appear to be in the SLAs' feedback interest in and love of languages and their related cultures. In addition, languages are perceived as a good asset on the CV and a good subject for building confidence and developing self-esteem. This aligns closely with findings from a similar survey in Wales (Corradini, 2012) and with earlier research indicating that students study languages because they enjoy them and because they are perceived to be useful for enhancing employability (e.g. Coleman, 1996; Gallagher-Brett, 2004).

Benefits to pupils

All questionnaire recipients thought that their involvement with schools had not only a personal positive outcome but also had a number of benefits for both the pupils and the schools that they worked with. SLAs felt that through their involvement school pupils:

- Could appreciate the importance of languages
- Had inspiring role models
- Could understand that languages can be learnt
- Could get advice from university students
- Felt more confident with languages
- Changed their negative opinion of languages
- Gained confidence
- Gained language related skills
- Felt reassured when choosing languages
- Felt less intimidated talking to young people than to teachers
- Were inspired to take languages further to a higher level of study

A comparison with the Welsh report (Corradini, 2012) has highlighted that students taking part in the scheme felt their role was useful for inspiring and reassuring pupils on studying languages at university. SLAs also thought that they acted as role models for pupils and through this became more confident in their teaching role. Foreign students indicated that school pupils:

- Had an opportunity to have immediate contact with native speakers
- Could practice their skills with native speakers
- Could improve their pronunciation

The importance of the positive messages about languages coming from SLAs and their influence as role models were also reported in an earlier survey of teachers (Canning et al, 2010) and in the independent evaluation of the Routes programme (SQW, 2011). Findings from this survey indicate that as well as helping to promote languages, SLAs perceive that they are having a beneficial impact on learning.

Skills developed and reflections on employability

The survey highlighted that the programme benefited SLAs in a number of ways. The table below summarises the skills that students felt they had developed, improved or acquired during their time as ambassadors.

Figure 2: Skills learned by SLAs	
Time management	4
Presentation skills	7
Communication skills	8
Problem solving	4
Initiative	4
ICT	3
Self-management	7
Persuasion	2
Task management	5
Leadership skills	4
Other	see list below

In addition to those mentioned above, SLAs felt that through their role they had improved their abilities in:

- Online tutoring
- Language speaking (both foreign and English speakers commented on this)
- Relating to students and obtaining their attention
- Engaging pupils

- Helping pupils effectively in learning situations
- Being patient
- Team-working
- Classroom management

A few foreign students commented that it was beneficial to them to see their native language through the eyes of speakers of another language. These results reinforce findings from the Welsh scheme survey (Corradini, 2012) where SLAs indicated that they had developed or improved skills useful for the job market and especially for a teaching career.

Overall, SLAs felt that the programme helped them to gain insight into a career in education and that their experience was helpful for their future decisions. One student noted that the programme had made her happy.

Career plans

The questionnaire recipients indicated that they had plans to undertake one of the career paths reported in the table below.

Figure 3: Career plans of SLAs	
Teacher training	23
MA in Interpreting and translation	16
MA/PhD	16
Live and work abroad	3
Work in publishing	2
Diplomatic career	3
School management	2
Work at EU/EC	7

While it is not unexpected that most students are attracted to this scheme because they intend to become language teachers, there are however a few undecided students who changed their mind after their time as SLAs. This suggests the existence of a possible relationship between the Routes ambassador programme and subsequent teacher training courses and fits with findings from a survey of SLAs in the North East (Johnston, Andersen & Shuttleworth, 2012). Responses evinced that students became aware of their teaching skills through participation in the scheme and that, by completion of their role, they came to appreciate the possibility of a career in teaching.

A few respondents commented that they intended to undertake a teaching career eventually:

'[I would like to] work with Teach First for two years then stay in teaching'

'I know that I want to teach eventually'

*[I would like to spend] a year in Australia followed
by a postgraduate qualification in either interpreting or teaching'*

'I would like to pursue a language teaching career'

SLAs stated that their experience with Routes into Languages helped them gain confidence in the following situations:

- Teaching pupils
- Working with people with different cultural backgrounds
- Public speaking
- Presenting themselves
- Using different teaching practices
- Preparing for year abroad
- Facing interviews
- Adapting to different teaching and learning environments/audiences
- Academic career/training

SLAs felt that the experience would improve their CV regardless of their chosen career or future plans as the skills developed during their time as ambassadors could be transferred to many different careers. Students in general perceived that their experience as ambassadors was a very positive one. This trend is very much in keeping with the results of the survey carried out for Welsh universities (Corradini, 2012), in which SLAs reported that they felt their work as student ambassadors has enriched them both personally and professionally.

Conclusions

Both the Welsh and English surveys have provided evidence that the Routes SLA scheme is perceived to be very positive by students. Participants pointed out that the experience was very useful for them in that they acquired a number of skills which they thought would make them more employable in the future. Most students appreciated that participation in the

student ambassador scheme gave them an opportunity to think about their career in a clearer and better informed way. One of the main trends these surveys highlighted was that students felt more confident in classroom situations after they completed the scheme than they were before they started. This feeling was often associated to having confronted themselves with teaching activities such as speaking in front of an audience, managing a group of students and communicating ideas effectively. Through the language ambassadors' scheme, Routes into Languages has encouraged students to look at the range of skills one can acquire by studying languages and how these can be useful on the job market. The positive comments and feedback produced by the English and Welsh surveys encourage us to think that the scheme continues to produce consistent positive results in raising awareness of the importance of languages across the country.

Acknowledgments

Routes into Languages would like to thank the 36 student ambassadors who took time to complete the questionnaire forms and the project managers of the regional partners involved in the scheme for their support in gathering the set of data analysed in this report.

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