

Enhancing the employability of language graduates

Graham Webb

Principal Lecturer in Spanish,
Leeds Metropolitan University

This article outlines how the Languages Subject Group at Leeds Metropolitan University tries to ensure that graduates of our language degrees are able to find valuable employment. It describes the key employability issues for language graduates, and provides some analysis of my research into employers' expectations of language graduates and how the Languages Subject Group responded to those employers' needs. Finally, it briefly describes what some recent graduates felt about the experience they received at Leeds Met and how they use their foreign language skills in their employment.

The degree courses we offer all combine French, German, Spanish or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) with one or more other professional disciplines such as Business, Marketing or Tourism Management. In them we focus on teaching applied language so that, on graduating, students will have the appropriate language skills to enable them to work in their chosen profession in either English or their foreign language, thus enhancing their attractiveness to employers and their flexibility to work in the UK or abroad. This approach seems to have been effective in the past, as anecdotal evidence suggests that our graduates, in the main, have not struggled to find employment and that many have entered careers with companies where their cross-cultural and language skills are used and valued. In the past five years graduates have found employment with a huge range of small and medium-sized enterprises as well as large, high-profile companies such as Thompson Holidays, Thomas Cook, Morphy Richards and British Airports Authority. This positive experience concurs with data from 1996–2002 indicating

that language graduates do well in terms of employability and have lower unemployment rates than graduates of many other disciplines (Marshall, 2003). The reasons for this are generally acknowledged as resulting from the wide range of generic or transferable skills developed automatically through language learning, which are highly valued by employers (Marshall, 2003). The nature of the discipline means that communication and presentation skills, cross-cultural and interpersonal skills have always been integral to the assessment, learning and teaching strategies on language degrees. Linguists are communicators and the four key skills (active: speaking and writing; passive: listening and reading) must be developed within an interactive environment, through pair, group and cross-cultural interaction, plus formal or informal discourse and presentations, all of which develop core employability skills. In addition, language graduates have typically spent a full academic year abroad during their undergraduate course and gained life experiences that add to their problem-solving skills and general confidence and maturity.

While the employability of our language graduates has not seemed a major issue, I nevertheless wanted, with the support of the course team, to identify what employers actually wanted from our graduates. In this way we could ensure that we developed our course objectives, content and learning outcomes to enable our graduates to demonstrate the required skills to prospective employers. In 2007 I distributed a questionnaire to 220 businesses in West Yorkshire involved in international trade and had 91 responses (41.3% response). The underlying research question was "What do employers want and

expect from language graduates?" and I will analyse some key responses here.

53% of respondent companies employed fewer than 50 employees, 43% employed 51–500 employees and 4% employed over 500 people, giving a representative sample of potential employers. Of the total, 38% said that they employed people specifically for their language skills, whereas 62% said they were likely to in future, suggesting that language skills are becoming increasingly valued. Further supporting this, while 58% of respondents confirmed they currently found foreign languages vital or useful to their business, 41% responded to a separate question saying they were likely to be more valued in the future, which is particularly encouraging for the employment prospects of future language graduates. Further key questions are analysed below.

Q. Does your company ever need or use any of the following?

	Yes	No
Written translations from English to a foreign language	68%	32%
Written translations from a foreign language to English	66%	34%
Interpreting between English and a foreign language	93%	7%
Use of foreign languages on the telephone	66%	34%
Use of foreign languages on overseas trips	69%	31%
Reading documents/brochures/websites in a foreign language	61%	39%
Reading business letters/emails in a foreign language	59%	41%
Professional translation agencies	39%	61%
Professional interpreters	25%	75%

These responses regarding employers' existing need for language skills clearly demonstrate demand for translating skills (66%) and that interpreting (translation between two languages when spoken, not written) was frequently required (93%). The data also suggest that companies were less willing to hire professional translators (39%) or interpreters (25%),

preferring, presumably, to use their existing staff with language skills. The following question addressed their expectations of language graduates.

Q. If you employed a language graduate would you expect them to be able to ...?

	Yes	No
Undertake translations from English into the foreign language	92%	8%
Undertake translations from the foreign language into English	92%	8%
Interpret between English and the foreign language	92%	8%
Undertake general correspondence in the foreign language	92%	8%
Write formal documents or reports in the foreign language	73%	27%
Use the foreign language on the telephone	96%	4%
Learn new foreign languages as required	42%	58%

These responses mostly confirmed what I had anticipated but also produced one rather disturbing result. They show that translating, interpreting, business correspondence and use of the telephone in the foreign language were all clearly core expectations of language graduates (92% or greater agreement). This was expected and they are all skills normally developed on applied language degrees. However, they also indicate, although to a slightly lesser degree (73%), that employers felt graduates should be able to write formal documents in the foreign language. While applied language degrees can give students the robust language skills to translate and produce general commercial correspondence they cannot prepare students for the production of formal, perhaps even legal, documents in the foreign language. Furthermore, the language industry does not expect or generally allow people to translate formal documents into their non-native language. Industry standards mean it is particularly the case for documents with legal, contractual or marketing purposes that translators must only translate from a foreign language into their native tongue. The employers' expectation that language graduates

could undertake formal translations into the foreign language indicated insufficient appreciation of the true complexity of the skill required as well as of industry norms.

Having analysed the data from my research and from national data and sought the opinions and expertise of colleagues within the Subject Group, we reacted by matching the employers' needs with the content and learning outcomes of the language modules in our degree courses. While we felt that issues such as general commercial correspondence and communication were well covered already within core modules, we decided to strengthen our emphasis on both translating and interpreting skills. Not only would this give graduates greater competence in these areas in employment but we had also noticed that an increasing number of our graduates were progressing onto Masters courses in translation and interpreting. We decided to increase the proportion of time we devoted to these skills in order to enhance our graduates' employability and improve their performance in postgraduate study in these areas. We therefore revised our approach to both skills and introduced formal translations into Level 4 modules, to be further developed in Level 5 and then featured in Level 6 as a major component of both content and assessment. As interpreting is a particularly demanding skill requiring rapid language production and recourse to a wide vocabulary and robust knowledge of grammar and structures, we introduce it at Level 6 after students have completed their residence abroad. To introduce interpreting before students have sufficient confidence and fluency to perform well was felt to be counter-productive. The final element we decided to strengthen was our students' knowledge of translation theory, which would help them both as postgraduate students in this area and as practitioners in industry. While students have, in the past, developed good translation skills through the very practical approach previously adopted, we felt that a greater theoretical underpinning would enable them to perform better for their employers and provide a platform for them to develop into professional translation specialists.

I will now refer briefly to responses from 30 of our language graduates from 1998–2006 about their experience at Leeds Met and in employment, through a questionnaire distributed to 45 alumni in 2007. As all of these respondents graduated before we gave the additional focus to translation and interpreting on the courses, I was unable to draw any conclusions as to the effectiveness of the changes we had implemented. However, based on the responses from employers as

analysed earlier, colleagues in the Language Subject Group anticipate that future graduates will be even more valued by employers.

First, it was gratifying to see that 96% of the alumni who responded were using their languages in their employment and 54% had jobs where foreign languages were essential. 46% even acknowledged they had been paid more because of their language skills and 64% that they had travelled abroad on business.

In terms of their use of languages in their employment, 82% said they had used their foreign language to send emails and 79% to speak on the phone. Furthermore 68% had translated material from the foreign language into English and 61% had produced business correspondence in the foreign language. This is in line with what employers said they would require and with the general expectations of university language tutors. More worrying, though, was that two-thirds of respondents said they had been asked to translate business material from English into the foreign language. As mentioned above, linguists have considerable reservations over the quality of translations made by anyone into a non-native language.

Interpreting was undertaken by 57% of the respondents. This figure, though on a relatively small sample size, taken in conjunction with the responses from employers fully supports our decision to include interpreting as a skill to develop through our language courses. However, the most satisfying responses for me and Subject Group colleagues were that 100% confirmed that languages had been useful to them since they graduated and that they were glad they had studied languages at Leeds Met.

References

Marshall, K. (2003) *Motivation in Language Learning. What do language graduates do then?* CILT Research Forum. Available at: www.cilt.org.uk/research/papers/resfor3/marshall.htm.