Peer-led Discussion Groups in Foreign Languages: Training International Students to Become Peer-Facilitators

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Abstract

While practice is paramount to achieve fluency and accuracy in a foreign language, Higher Education is understandably limited in the amount of language practice it can offer to its students.

The initiative discussed here aims to address this issue by providing peer-led discussion groups in languages in a systematic manner. For the past three years, a team of language practitioners at the University of Limerick, Ireland have developed a programme whereby groups of native speakers receive training before facilitating discussion groups and/or one-to-one sessions.

In this study, we will first present an overview of the initiative. We will then focus on the training offered to the peer-facilitators. The main principles of the training package will be explained: it seeks to prepare the facilitators to select relevant topics, to focus on language fluency and to provide constructive feedback to participating students. Finally, we will draw some conclusions from our experience, provide some recommendations and discuss the value of peer-supported activities to integrate International students in their host university.

Keywords: Peer-learning; facilitation training; intercultural education; internationalisation

Context for the Peer-Learning Training Programme

The training programme discussed in this paper takes place as part of an initiative, which aims to provide peer-facilitated discussion groups and one-to-one sessions in languages in a systematic manner. It is deployed at the University of Limerick, Ireland, which has a strong ethos of student support and prides itself on its "vital learning resources and learner support services" (University of Limerick Strategic Plan, 2011, p. 30).

The centre that fulfils this role for language learners is the Language Learning Hub (LLH). It was created over thirty years ago and was formerly known as the Language Resource Area (LRA). At its onset, the LRA solely provided access to varied language resources but over time, it became clear that the centre should also foster language learners' autonomy. The LRA instigated activities to support language learning and enhance student engagement, e.g.: tandem language exchanges (Batardière & Jeanneau, 2015). As a result of these changes, the LRA was renamed Language Learning Hub.

It is within this support-rich environment that the peer-facilitated discussion groups and one-to-one sessions were created in 2012, addressing language students' needs as well as the university goals "to provide an outstanding and distinctive experience for every […] student" (University of Limerick Strategic Plan 2011-2015, 2001, p.6) and "to provide students with experiences that instil the spirit of European and global citizenship" (p. 8).

Description of the Peer-Learning Initiative

The peer-facilitated discussion groups and one-to-one sessions are oral practice sessions offered to students in all the languages taught in the School of Modern Languages and Applied Linguistics (namely French, German, Japanese and Spanish). Attendance of the sessions is voluntary. The peer-facilitators are exclusively native speakers who are recruited amongst Erasmus (European Union student exchange programme) and international students on campus. This recruitment criterion ensures that the facilitators bring both linguistic and also cultural input to the exchanges.

Each discussion group session lasts one hour and students can join freely at any time during the semester. Each one-to-one session includes two individual slots of thirty minutes. These sessions have to be booked in advance by participants to avoid overcrowding. To accommodate as many participants as possible, several discussion groups and one-to-one sessions are offered in each language every week during the semester (see Figure 1).

Spring Semester (AY 14-15) Language speaking practice with peers – LC1008

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday
11-12		Discussion group FRENCH Thomas & Matthieu	One-to-one FRENCH Romane	
12-1pm		One-to-one JAPANESE Shoko	One-to-one FRENCH Olivier	One-to-one SPANISH Pedro
1-2	Discussion group FRENCH Pierre		Discussion group FRENCH Florence	One-to-one SPANISH Nuria
2-3	One-to-one SPANISH Rocío	One-to-one FRENCH Isabelle		One-to-one GERMAN Peter
3-4	Discussion group FRENCH Marie	Discussion group GERMAN Hannah	Discussion group SPANISH Camilia	4th YR Discussion group FRENCH Maud & Juliette
4-5	Discussion group SPANISH Maria	4th YR Discussion group JAPANESE Masahiro	Discussion group JAPANESE Nanami & Shiho	
5-6				4th YR Discussion group SPANISH Cecilia, Marta & Ana

Figure 1. Sample of Timetable of Activities - Spring 2015

(Names have been changed)

Since its inception, this initiative has been popular amongst language learners (see Table 1) and the overall feedback, gathered through end-of-semester surveys, is positive. Users report that the main reason for attending the sessions is to improve their language skills; they particularly enjoy the authenticity of the exchanges and learning new vocabulary in context.

Table 1: Number of Participants (Users), 2012-15

	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015
Number of visits (total number of participants)	304	362	465

Becoming Peer-Facilitators: A Training Programme

As the notion of peer-facilitation is central to the project, a clear definition of the term is necessary. In this specific context, the facilitator is a peer (i.e. a fellow student) who volunteers to guide and support a 'flowing' discussion amongst learners of their native language. Although the facilitator needs to apply some attributes associated to teaching (patience, positive attitude, inclusiveness), his/her role contrasts greatly with that of a teacher or lecturer. As the discussion sessions take place "outside class-time" and are informal in nature, a new learning environment is created for learners. The focus of the sessions is on promoting participation and fluency as opposed to gearing discussions towards specific content and form. For this to happen, the facilitator has to apply some core principles, hence the requirement for volunteers to participate in training sessions before becoming facilitators.

Structure of the training programme

When the project was first piloted (Academic Years 2012-13 and 2013-14), a four-hour training programme was developed. This initial training aimed at preparing the facilitators before their first sessions.

It was later decided to transform this short training sessions into a 12-hour contact-time module bearing three ECTS (European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) credits. The first two years of the project had shown a deep engagement from the volunteers in their role as facilitators and it was felt that their engagement needed to be further recognised. Following the advice of the pilot project team (LLH coordinator, facilitator trainer

and lecturers representative of each language), a number of volunteers had prepared portfolios reporting on their activities as facilitators in order to qualify for an award under the UL volunteering award scheme which formally recognises strong engagement in the community. As this exercise allowed the participating facilitators to reflect on their experience, it was subsequently decided to generalise this practice in the new module through the production of a portfolio. This had obvious implications for training needs and institutional support. For instance, support in the area of reflective practice was required. All this led the team to create a fully accredited module integrating six hours of in-depth class discussions on all topics developed in the original training (see description of the training content in the following section) with an added six hours of classroom discussion on reflective practice. The structure of the module can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Module Breakdown

Module LI4001 Weeks	Lecture Training session	Tutorial A (Discussion group or 1to1 sessions)	Tutorial B (observation)
1	RECRUITMENT – (information meeting)		
2	2h 1. Exploring the role of a discussion group facilitator		
3	2h 2. Preparing your first discussion session		
4	2h 3. Giving feedback & Understanding the students' background	1h	
5	2h 4. The reflective portfolio	1h	
6	2h 5. Self-reflection & peer observation	1h	1h
7		1h	1h
8		1h	1h
9	2h 6. Reflection on practice	1h	
10		1h	
11		1h	
12		1h	

As the change into a credit-bearing module could impact negatively on the attractiveness of becoming a discussion facilitator (some students preferring the "lighter" volunteer option), two options are offered to international students: becoming a discussion group facilitator (1) *as a student volunteer* after compulsory attendance of six hours of lecture-tutorials as initial training; (2) *as a student enrolled in a peer-tutoring for languages module* requiring attendance of all lecture-tutorials with the compulsory submission of a portfolio as part of a pass/fail assessment procedure. From September 2014 to December 2015, a total of 54 peer-facilitators were trained (see Table 3) with 22 of them opting to register for the module.

Table 3: Number of Participants (Facilitators), 2012-16

	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016 semester 1
Total number of student facilitators	19	40	35	19
Number of student facilitators registered for the module	n/a	n/a	16	6

Content of the training programme

The content of the training was devised in consultation with members of the Regional Peer-Supported Learning Centre at UL and was partially inspired by literature on language advising (Esch, 2001; Voller, 2004). It is delivered by language teaching academics in the format of highly interactive lectures/training sessions based on the principle of co-construction of knowledge. Attendance is limited to 20 participants in order to enhance interactivity. The following section aims to detail the six training sessions outlined in Table 2.

Exploring the role of a discussion group facilitator (Lecture 1). The overall aim of the training is to ensure that the peer volunteers understand the distinctions between facilitation and actual teaching in the context of discussion groups. To this end, the training programme starts by clearly defining what a discussion group is. The following working definition was adopted: A group of people meeting informally outside class-time to practise a

language they have learnt / are learning in order to become more fluent in that language or to maintain the level they have acquired.

Keeping a discussion flowing with participants who are mostly strangers is a difficult task. Facilitators need to ensure that all participants feel welcome and valued as members of the group regardless of their language level as any negative feeling could cause a participant to never return to a discussion group. Therefore, facilitators must be supportive at all times and suppress any attitude that could be perceived as negative or judgemental. Active listening (Voller, 2004) is an interesting model to draw from. Indeed, its core technique of paraphrasing enables the facilitator to support not only his/her own comprehension but also, and most importantly, that of participants in the group. As soon as a friendly atmosphere is in place, facilitators have to regulate participants' speaking time. During the training sessions, issues such as turn taking and silences are discussed. Facilitators are reminded that "wait time" is important to allow participants to formulate their thoughts for instance (Turnbull, 2006). It is imperative that every effort be made to avoid interrupting participants except, in specific cases, for example, when it is obvious that one participant is continuously speaking without including others in the discussion.

Preparing the first discussion session through intercultural competence (Lecture 2). The second training session focuses on intercultural competence and it provides opportunities for facilitators to familiarise themselves with "intercultural attitudes such as curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Byram, Nichols, & Stevens, 2001, p. 5). Trainee facilitators brainstorm and then discuss the pros and cons of selecting various discussion topics. The general consensus is that *student life* (shared reality) and *personal interests* are likely to be successful discussion starters, while it is generally agreed that topics which can be controversial or hurt sensibilities (e.g. religion, race, sexuality and body image) are to be avoided or handled with care if brought up by participants. It is important to stress that facilitators are advised to use their common sense regarding discussion topic selection. These guiding principles are never prescriptive in nature but act as a compass for facilitators who may need it.

Giving linguistic feedback and understanding students' background (Lecture 3). Being a native speaker does not necessarily mean that a facilitator is a language specialist. Facilitators are engineering, IT, maths or business students and their linguistic awareness may be minimal. Therefore, it is important to reassure them that they do not have to be experts on

the intricate workings of their own language. They are first and foremost ambassadors of their language and culture. However, when facilitating their sessions, they will notice recurring errors and can expect questions from participants about correct formulations. Consequently, facilitators need to be trained to deliver feedback in a way that will enhance language learning while maintaining the discussion flow. Trainee facilitators are given a list of common mistakes made by non-native speakers in each of the language**s** offered. This provides the opportunity to think of strategies to use during their sessions to help students correct their mistakes without simply giving them the solutions. Scaffolding techniques such as recasts, reformulations, clarification requests, prompting, and provision of examples are essential skills to develop (Lyster, Saito, & Sato, 2013). "What do you think of wind turbines?" is a question used to trigger a group discussion illustrating the need for such strategies to aid comprehension. This lecture concludes the set of compulsory lectures, which must be attended by volunteers who did not enrol in the module.

E-portfolio writing: Self reflection and peer-observation (Lectures 4 and 5). Facilitators enrolled in the credit-bearing module are assessed through the writing of a reflective e-portfolio, which documents their experience of being facilitators. Two lectures are dedicated to the set of skills required to perform this task. In the first lecture, the theoretical underpinnings of self-reflection are discussed (Dewey, 1938) followed by a practical session to create and structure an e-portfolio using Google as a platform. In the second lecture, students discuss higher order thinking using Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956) in order to promote depth of analysis within the reflective process. Peer-observation –i.e. observing and being observed by fellow-facilitators- brings a wider range of insights into students' e-portfolios (see Table 2). To this end, students use a peer-observation form devised by the UL Centre for Teaching and Learning, which helps them select observation foci and structure the comments given to their peers. Feedback on reflections is delivered individually to students throughout the semester by the main module teacher through the "comment" function of the e-portfolio.

Reflecting as a community of practice (Lecture 6). The last lecture of the programme takes place at a later stage of the semester (See Table 2) and volunteer facilitators are encouraged to join. It focuses on the notion of community of practice (Wenger, 1999) and aims to help facilitators develop – with their fellow-facilitators - a deeper sense of purpose within the university context. Students can avail of this opportunity to discuss their facilitating

experience as a group and share ideas on effective discussion topics or activities. With three discussion sessions left, students are asked to write a plan of action for the rest of the semester as well as to look – beyond the university setting – at the impact this experience will have in their development as future professionals. The notion of transferable skills features prominently in this lecture to help students articulate the specific skill set that each student has developed as a facilitator. This provides an ideal locus to recap the key concepts evoked within the module classes throughout the semester.

Practical Implementation and Logistical Issues

As the peer-facilitated programme relies on international students who are spending a short period on campus (six months to a year) and who have to give priorities to their own studies and classes, the implementation of the programme requires a good logistical organisation in order to draw up a new calendar of activities each semester. Some practical points, which are the key features of these logistical considerations, will be further discussed in this section.

Recruitment & training of peer-facilitators

The facilitators are the key actors of the discussion group and one-to-one session programme, so the first phase of the programme thus involves the recruitment of the team of facilitators. Collaboration with the University of Limerick International Education Division is essential to advertise the programme to incoming international students. A promotional email is sent to all international students attending the university and posters are displayed in various points on campus, both briefly detailing the initiative and advertising an information meeting at the end of the first week of the semester. During this session, students receive information on their potential involvement and how they can take part. The main aspects of the training are also highlighted, as well as the benefits of the programme for them (meeting Irish students, gaining self-confidence, being an ambassador of their native language and culture to name but a few). This initial meeting allows for the project coordinator to establish the number of volunteers interested, to collect their contact details and to ensure that a good linguistic diversity has been reached. The training starts the following week. Up to now, all the students showing an interest in the initiative have been accepted to take part in this training. However, they have to complete the first three sessions to be allocated a group. Any imbalance in the numbers of speakers of any of the languages is addressed in the scheduling of the groups. Several facilitators are allocated for one group if we have an over-

representation, and fewer groups are scheduled if we have an under-representation in a specific language.

Implementation of the activities

By the second week of their training, international students provide information about their availability and preferred mode of facilitation (discussion group or one-to-one session). This allows the coordinator to establish the schedule of activities for the four languages and the two modes of delivery (see Figure 1). This timetable is then widely advertised amongst language learners (posters, emails, social media announcements). Lecturers and tutors, who are very supportive of these activities, recommend them to their students. Activities start in week 4 of the semester.

In order to monitor attendance, the facilitators keep a log of participants every week. This allows the coordinator to ensure that all the groups are attended and to modify the timetable if need be.

Due to the nature of their stay at the university, the facilitators are continually changing (their maximum participation time is one academic year). Even though new facilitators need to be trained each semester, this iterative process brings a dynamic nature to the programme that allows it to evolve slightly every semester.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The study abroad experience is generally regarded as a key moment in a student's life as it is a journey of discovery as much on an academic level as on a personal level. The project presented in this article aims to integrate the international students into the academic sphere of indigenous students by transforming their status, from that of 'foreign visiting students' into active linguistic and cultural ambassadors within their host institution.

For this initiative to be successful, some elements are crucial: i) the programme has to be flexible to attract international students and adapt to their varied circumstances (in our case for example, two possible training paths for the facilitators); ii) collaboration with staff members from other units and departments within the institution (i.e., the International Office, language teachers) is paramount for information about the programme to be disseminated; iii) the training programme has to be carefully devised to suit the international students' needs and the institutional specificities; and iv) attention to the logistical aspects of the programme is essential to ensure the activities run smoothly (i.e., recruitment of the facilitators, training, scheduling and delivery of the sessions).

The innovative aspect of this initiative was acknowledged by the European Language Label award in 2015 for its contribution to promoting motivation and engagement in language education. As the project enters its fourth year, users and facilitators' feedback will continue to contribute to the ever evolving contents, scheduling and delivery modes of this initiative, which aims to reach as many students as possible.

Notes on the contributors

Catherine Jeanneau is the Coordinator of the Language Learning Hub at the University of Limerick. This unit aims at implementing a learner support strategy and providing language learning services outside of formal classroom time. Her research interests include second language acquisition, technology and language learning, particularly social media and online communication as well as learner autonomy.

Stéphanie O'Riordan is a member of the Centre for Applied Language Studies (CALS) at the University of Limerick. She has been trainer/lecturer and resource developer on the above project since its inception. Her research interests include second language acquisition, classroom discourse and applied corpus linguistics.

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