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Delivering a Pilot Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP) at an Irish University: Teachers' perspectives

Abstract: This paper analyses the language educator's experience of delivering an Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) in an Irish University. It uses a focus group to explore the experiences of six International Language Tutors who delivered modules on a pilot IWLP between 2021 and 2024. The findings indicate that designing and delivering the programme was a predominantly rewarding experience for the tutors involved. Positive aspects included engagement levels among students who completed the programme, the freedom to design, deliver and assess modules in a flexible and innovative manner, and the supportive nature of the tutor team. Negative aspects relate to policy issues concerning student eligibility for the programme, operational issues such as (de-)registration, attendance and attrition rates, and misalignment between student and module proficiency levels. Recommendations relate to IWLP design and administration as well as to supports for IWLP language educators. They include the use of hybrid teaching as standard, the opening of IWLPs to all staff and students (using caps on numbers and waiting lists), clear communication to potential participants in relation to the relationship between IWLP language modules and main degrees reflected in simplified registration, deregistration and certification processes, the provision of training in hybrid design and delivery of language modules as well as of appropriate teaching infrastructure, and full integration of the IWLP teaching team into institutional support structures.

Keywords: language curriculum design; languages for all; language teaching; multilingualism in Higher Education; university language policy; university language teachers

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1 Introduction

This study has two main objectives: First, to gain insights into the language educator's experience of delivering an Institution-Wide Language Programme (IWLP) in an Irish university and, second, to derive learnings from this experience to inform the design of IWLPs and support those delivering them.

The paper briefly reviews the literature on the design of IWLPs. It then describes the context within which the IWLP, which is the focus of this study, was designed and delivered (see also Bruen and López 2024). A focus group with the programme team is presented and its outputs

analysed. Finally, recommendations are made on the basis of the findings for the design and administration of IWLPs and the support for those delivering them.

2 Principles of IWLP design

An IWLP consists of a suite of language modules usually taken by students in addition to their main degree, sometimes for extra credit, or as an elective/option as part of their main degree (Carson 2010a; Skrandies 2016). Some are housed within departments or schools of languages while others exist as separate units or Language Centres.

The modules on an IWLP are pitched at different levels of complexity often ranging from beginners to advanced, sometimes from A1 to C1/C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Cambridge University Press 2001). Many focus in a flexible and innovative manner on the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing in the target language as well as on the development of intercultural awareness/competence and transferable skills (Carson 2010b; Polisca and Wright 2019). The limited number of contact hours allocated to these modules sometimes results in a focus on developing language learner autonomy to support “essential complementary work outside of classroom hours” (Voss 2010: 146; Little 2020) and the enabling of a supportive Personal Learning Environment (PLE) for language learning within the institution (Bruen and Erdocia 2024).

IWLPs are delivered by teaching-focussed language educators whose positions are defined in a variety of ways (Earls et al. 2022). Designations include Teaching Fellow, College Teacher, Tutor, Language Assistant and International Language Tutor. Earls et al. (2022: 16-17) point out that teaching-focussed language educators generally have “precarious employment conditions in terms of pay levels, continuity and stability of employment, status within the system, [and] involvement in decision making surrounding language.” They may also lack structured opportunities for career progression.

There is limited research relating specifically to the experience of the language educator involved in the delivery of IWLPs (Polisca and Wright 2019). This may be related to the precarious nature of the employment conditions associated with such roles and/or to their teaching-focussed rather than research-focussed nature (Little 2020).

3 Study context and curriculum

At the time of writing, IWLPs are offered on a large scale in one Irish university and on a smaller scale in a second as part of an elective programme. A third Irish university has just piloted an IWLP, which is the subject of this study.

The IWLP sits within a languages department in Dublin City University and was piloted between 2021 and 2024¹. It offered students on selected degrees, which do not contain a language, the opportunity to study one, free of charge and for extra credit. The languages offered were Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Russian and Spanish. They were introduced onto the IWLP on a phased basis to facilitate the recruitment of the tutors, who were given the designation 'International Language Tutors'.

Nine proficiency levels corresponding to the CEFR levels were offered (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Near Here

Each module/level lasted one semester. The levels were selected to facilitate undergraduate students entering the university with a proficiency level in one of the languages on offer of A2.2² to reach B2 level by the time they graduated³. B2 on the CEFR is recognised as a threshold for independent language use (Council of Europe 2001).

The modules were available from the second semester of first year following orientation sessions, assessment of levels for those who requested it, and a registration process in the first semester. Modules were generally timetabled in two-hour blocks in the evenings between 6pm and 8pm in order to ensure that they did not clash with students' primary degree programme. All were delivered on campus while a small number also offered an online/hybrid option.

The IWLP modules took an action-oriented, task-based approach underpinned by the CEFR (Fischer 2020). The goal was to meet the needs of the student cohort via an eclectic, learner-centred, research informed curriculum that embraced innovative approaches to teaching and learning (Schaffner 2020). In line with best practice in the design of IWLP curricula (Nader 2019), the modules were designed to be highly interactive and engaging and to include a focus

¹ At the time of writing, it has not yet been determined whether the IWLP will continue beyond 2024.

² This level corresponds approximately to that of Irish school leavers who took a foreign language for the final school leaving examination, the Leaving Certificate

³ The majority of the degrees offered in the university concerned are three years (six semesters) in duration with many offering an optional additional academic year in a university outside of Ireland or a 12 month work placement.

on both the productive and the receptive skills as well as the development of inter/cultural awareness and language learner autonomy. A variety of forms of continuous assessment, including portfolio based assessment, were used in place of terminal examinations. The IWLP also benefitted from activities and some classes in the university's 'Linguaculture Space', an interactive space shared by domestic and international students. Informal, student-led activities take place in this 'café-like environment on a regular basis through languages other than English (Bruen and Erdocia, 2024).

In the first iteration of the IWLP, French and Spanish were offered, the former at beginner and intermediate level (Levels 1 and 5, Figure 1) while the latter was offered at intermediate level only, i.e. level 5. Thirty-three students enrolled on French level 5, 19 on Spanish 1 and 19 on Spanish 5 (71 students in total from a range of degrees across the university including engineering, science and the humanities). Both performance and attrition rates were high during this first iteration (average grade 70%, attrition rate 55%), a pattern which continued throughout the three years of the pilot programme. Retention rates increased significantly, however, as students progressed beyond their first module. The remaining 5 languages were gradually added to the programme until, in the final iteration of the pilot in the academic year 2023-24, the IWLP consisted of offerings in seven languages on which 200 students from 31 degrees across the university were enrolled (Figure 2).

Figure 2 Near Here

4 Methodology and methods

A qualitative methodology was appropriate for this study⁴ given its exploratory nature. The data generation, collection and analysis were conducted as follows:

4.1 Data generation and collection

A focus group was used to generate and collect the data. Focus groups have been defined as a group of "interacting individuals having some common interest or characteristics convened by a moderator, who uses the group and its interaction as a way to gain information about a specific or focused issue" (Hornsby 2022: 114). They are effective in evaluating and revising programmes of education (Panyanet al. 1997). Possible disadvantages of focus groups include

⁴ Formal permission for the study was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the institution concerned (Reference number: DCU-FHSS-2022-019A).

the fact that participants may “feed off each other’s ideas rather than express their own original thoughts” (Hornsby 2022: 114). However, this method can also generate original participant narrative (Hornsby 2022: 114). Therefore, a focus group was deemed to be appropriate for this study given its focus on the experiences of a team of 6 language educators who had been involved in co-delivering a pilot IWLP for varying periods of time between 2021 and 2024.

The second author of this paper was responsible for coordinating the team of language tutors. This insider perspective provided valuable insights into the context and aided the interpretation of the data (Atkins and Heron 2024). It also created a particular need for care around researcher positionality, and reflexivity, i.e. an appreciation of the potential influence of the researcher’s expectations and assumptions on the research process (Mortari 2015). In order to avoid bias, the focus group was moderated by the first author. Its purpose was explained in advance to the participants referring to a Plain Language Statement and Informed Consent form (Section 8). The moderator introduced the following topics and progressed the discussion in as neutral a manner as possible:

1. The tutors’ experience of delivering modules on the IWLP.
2. What they liked about the experience.
3. What they disliked about the experience.
4. How the IWLP and the experience of those involved in delivering it could be improved

The focus group took 48 minutes to complete and was recorded (audio only). Two participants took part virtually via an online platform and 4 in person⁵.

4.2 Data analysis

The focus group was transcribed verbatim by the first author who also conducted the initial stages of the analysis of the transcript using Thematic Content Analysis (TCA). TCA (Clarke and Braun 2013) facilitates the identification by the researcher of patterns and themes in qualitative data (Maguire and Delahunt 2017) and allows the researcher to interpret and make sense of data through the identification of these themes. The TCA process consisted of a number of steps: The first, familiarisation with the data, involved reading and rereading the focus group transcript. The second involved coding the transcript into smaller units of meaning (codes) relevant to the research objectives. These steps were completed by the first author who

⁵ One of the tutors was unable to participate in the focus group.

combined the codes, as part of the third phase of the data analysis, into broader themes. Both the codes and the themes are presented and analysed in the following section (Section 5) which was drafted by the first author and subsequently critiqued and refined by the second author.

5 Findings

Five broad themes emerged from analysis of the focus group data (Figure 3).

Figure 3 Near Here

The first theme concerns student engagement with the programme. This was highlighted as a positive aspect of the delivery of the programme in relation to the students who chose to complete it. The tutors reported that these students were highly motivated and engaged.

...my experience has been very very positive this year, I had great students. I had two classes to teach and in both classes I had great students...Everybody who remained in my class was really committed to learning the language... . Especially in the first level class everyone was really eager to learn'. (Tutor 4)

... and my students, they are so committed and I am really happy to work with them. (Tutor 5)

I didn't have a lot of students because [language] is not a high demand language but those who showed up showed up every week almost and they were taking it very seriously and they do their homework, they have good grades. (Tutor 2)

However, some tutors observed that the modules were not always taken seriously. This may be reflected in the high attrition rate, which several tutors attributed partially to the logistical and motivational issues associated with an evening timetable.

Students they want to learn [language] and sometimes their classes end at two o'clock or three and they have to wait four hours. It's so difficult. (Tutor 5)

The evening timetable proved difficult even for some of the students who successfully completed the modules. Some did not attend classes on campus and instead completed their study autonomously using the materials provided for them on the university's VLE by the tutors. In some cases, this had a negative impact on the class dynamic and the tutors' sense of fulfilment. In the words of one:

Sometimes I know a small group is always manageable but as a teacher sometimes you don't have [...] a success or a fulfilment like you fulfil your achievements in that way. If you've got quite a big class, you get more immediate feedback from a big class (Tutor 3)

Potential solutions proposed by the tutors were to increase the number of students on the language programme, which might allow for a day and an evening option for each language.

I think that it is very important to keep the evening classes. They are put in the evening so that they won't clash with student timetables during the day. But [...], if we opened the programme to more degrees I think that would open a door to offer some classes during the day. Maybe the two options and still keep the evening. It is connected to being an extracurricular activity. If it is not part of their working day, it makes sense - of course you have to be very committed if you want to do that - but you have to be very committed if you want to go to the gym after your day's work. Maybe if the programme is open that would allow us to offer two times and to absorb more students so even if there are a lot of dropouts you would have a nice number by the end of the semester. (Tutor 1)

A second solution was the systematic use of a hybrid mode of delivery with some students on campus and others joining the class virtually. One tutor reported using this approach successfully.

The second theme concerned the freedom afforded to the tutors to design modules as they saw fit within the CEFR framework. The tutors reported valuing the freedom to select materials and to design activities to meet their students' needs. This freedom was underpinned by the fact that the tutors also designed assessments and assessed their own students. The tutors commented that they:

[...] had freedom to create my activities and to teach the way I prefer so when you have more freedom I think that you get to explore more and figure out what's working and what's not. (Tutor 2)

[...] have [...] freedom and flexibility and the flexibility actually covers the teaching plan. We can teach whatever, not whatever we want, but we can adjust the teaching based on the students' feedback and the students' learning pace. And certainly the flexibility also refers to the continuous assessment. (Tutor 3)

In addition, the tutors enjoyed the opportunity to innovate via a range of modalities and "trendy pedagogies" (Tutor 6) such as telecollaboration, the use of a Virtual Reality room on campus and the integration of activities in the LCS. One stated:

I really appreciated the possibility to create everything from scratch, the planning of the activities, the programme, each week what will we do. I registered the students in the VR room for all of the modules and they really loved it and they thought it was a really good way to learn a language. We were able to do this because we were given the freedom to do this. So that was really good to be creative. It helps creativity when you want to teach a certain thing and you can pick ‘trendy’ things for a young audience that hopefully will work and it did work. (Tutor 6)

A second commented further that:

As some of our colleagues said, Languaculture Space has been a great physical space to meet people and do things together and also psychologically a great thing to have where we can just chill and talk in the language and about the culture they are interested in. I am really happy that we have that. (Tutor 4)

The use of project work was reported as valuable including when it facilitated the integration of students’ degree-specific knowledge into the language programme and allowed them to take on the role of the teacher or the one with the “power” (Tutor 6) who described such sessions as “...very informative for all of us including me”. Tutor 1 addressed the possibility that such flexibility could reduce coherence across the programme as a whole but ultimately favoured the degree of freedom afforded to the tutor team. The contribution of such a pedagogical approach to the creation of a sociable classroom atmosphere was emphasised in comments such as, “Everyone had a good time. They were coming for the sociable thing as well as learning a language.” (Tutor 6)

The language proficiency level of some students was discussed in relation to the CEFR proficiency levels available as part of the overall programme design (Figure 1). In particular, tutors observed that beginners' level was not available in all languages (French, German). As a result, some students joined intermediate level modules despite their language proficiency level not being appropriate. As noted, in Sections 2 and 3, IWLP modules have fewer contact hours than modules on more traditional language degrees as they run in parallel with a second degree. This also posed a challenge for some languages particularly those with different writing systems.

The third theme concerned the tutor team itself described by Tutor 6 as “the big multilanguage family”. The tutors praised the supportive nature of their team and the degree to which they learned from, inspired and helped one another both informally and during planned sessions for the sharing of good practice (Tutors 2 and 6). Two commented further:

[...] also we have quite a supportive team work here so we always support each other as long as we need it. I feel that’s also, I feel very welcome and I feel comfortable to stay in the team and I know

if I can't make something happen, I always have the backup so I really appreciate that as well. (Tutor 3)

For me it has been a positive experience working in a multinational and multicultural team because I really have learned from every member of the team in a different way. (Tutor 1)

The tutors praised the team coordinator describing them as “outstanding” and “beyond any expectations” (Tutor 1), and being always available to help and being open to new ideas and requests for supporting materials.

The fourth theme to emerge concerned the programme design at a macro level within the university. The pilot IWLP represented a first attempt at a flexible offering that diverged from the standard undergraduate or postgraduate degree and therefore posed challenges for university systems. A particular issue was related to the fact that this pilot IWLP was open to students on selected degrees only. Some tutors expressed frustration at having to turn away significant numbers of students. In the words of one:

I was really upset that students of other faculties could not join us. There were so many students of other faculties and they wrote me emails. Hello, can we join your class, and so on. And I was really upset when I was writing sorry, sorry, you're not a part of this programme. I'm very sorry.. (Tutor 6)

Combined with difficulties faced by eligible students registering and deregistering for modules, this issue contributed to a heavy administrative workload for the team. An unfounded fear that failure to do well or to complete a language module could negatively impact their main degree may also have deterred some students from continuing with the programme and/or from registering in the first place. In relation to deregistration, for example, one tutor commented during the focus group:

[...]And then at the end of the semester, not only they panic about this aspect that they are registered but also they receive the mark. They have 0. So what they see on their [VLE] is 0. And then you get another email in the summer. Why did I have a 0? I didn't enrol. I didn't come to class and we have to send more emails to some of them saying, 'Don't worry, it's an option. It won't affect your main degree.' It's more work for us and I feel bad for them as well because they didn't know. It is more administration for us. (Tutor 6)

The fifth and final theme concerned support within the university. A minority of the tutors had participated in the university orientation sessions for new staff owing primarily to timing issues. Those who had, found them beneficial despite describing the early days as somewhat overwhelming. Those who had engaged with the university's teaching support unit also found them to be supportive and perceived potential for greater engagement. Finally, the tutors

supported the view that more informal, social engagement with the staff teaching on the university's main language degrees would be welcome.

6 Recommendations

This study's findings indicate that the tutors' experience of delivering the IWLP was a predominantly positive one. This was primarily owing to high levels of student engagement, freedom to design curricula and assessments, the opportunity to innovate pedagogically, and the supportive nature of the team of tutors and programme coordinator. Negative aspects of the experience were attributed primarily to the restricted nature of the pilot, some small class sizes, sporadic attendance at evening classes, lack of beginners' options on some languages and a heavy administrative load.

Based on these findings, this paper concludes with several recommendations. These relate to the design of IWLPs, their administration, and support for those designing and delivering them as follows:

IWLP Design

IWLP modules should be delivered using a hybrid modality whereby participants have the option to participate in all sessions either in-person or virtually using teaching spaces designed for this purpose. Beginners' options should be provided wherever feasible and placement tests used systematically to prevent discrepancies between the proficiency levels of language learners and the CEFR levels of the modules.

IWLP Administration

Ideally, IWLPs should be open to all interested undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as staff in an institution with a system involving a cap on the numbers permitted to register and a waiting list to ensure sustainable class sizes despite the attrition that is a common feature of IWLPs. The principles underpinning the programme administration including the separation from a student's main degree (where this applies) should be clearly communicated from the outset and reflected in registration, deregistration and certification processes. It is recommended that only successfully completed language modules should be certified separately from degree transcripts thereby incentivising students to experiment with the language programme without fear of negative repercussions for their main degree and certification.

Support for IWLP Language Educators

Training in hybrid design and delivery of language modules should be provided to those designing and delivering the modules at an early stage in the curriculum design. Regular involvement of tutors with institutional orientation sessions, university teaching support units and Continuous Professional Development events should be facilitated and encouraged. Similarly, full formal and informal integration of tutors into the institutional language departments should be prioritised.

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8. Appendix

Plain Language Statement - Focus Group with International Language Tutors

Project

Designing and delivering a university 'Languages for All' programme: Successes, Challenges and Lessons Learned

This research project is designed to evaluate the DCU Language & Culture Programme. The research is being conducted by Professor Jennifer Bruen, a Lecturer in the School of Applied Language and Intercultural Studies in DCU, Jennifer.Bruen@dcu.ie; and Dr. Elena López, Elena.me.Lopez@dcu.ie.

Aim

The aim of the research is to gather information which will help us improve the design of the Language & Culture Programme as a whole and the individual modules it contains. It will also help to inform the design of similar programmes in other institutions.

Benefit

These improvements will enhance the delivery of this and similar programmes.

Participation

Your participation is voluntary. It involves participating in a 45 minute focus group about your experience of delivering modules on the DCU Language and Culture Programme.

Risk

There are no risks involved in participating in the focus group and you can withdraw from it at any time.

Findings

The findings of this research will be made available to you in an academic journal article/conference paper via DCU's digital repository, Doras.

Privacy and confidentiality

Your responses will only be accessed by the research team listed above and will be kept as anonymous as possible. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym (Tutor A, Tutor B, Tutor C....) prior to their participation and all data will be stored and referenced using this pseudonym. No participants will be identified by name at any time in any publications/communications about the study. The focus groups will be recorded (audio only) and the recordings stored in a secure password protected google drive folder. This will be deleted after five years. Confidentiality does have limits, however, and can only be protected within the limitations of the law (i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to a freedom of information claim, for example).

Questions:

If you have any questions about this research study or want to discuss it further with one of the principal investigators, you can contact Prof Jennifer Bruen [Jennifer.Bruen@dcu.ie]

If you have any concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, you can contact: The Secretary, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee; e-mail: hss-frec@dcu.ie.

Informed Consent Form - Focus Group with International Language Tutors

Designing and delivering a university 'Languages for All' programme: Successes, Challenges and Lessons Learned

Principal Investigator

Jennifer Bruen: Jennifer.Bruen@dcu.ie, SALIS;

Participant: Please complete the following (circle yes/no)

I have read the Plain Language Statement.	Yes/ No
I understand the information provided in the Plain Language Statement.	Yes/No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to discuss this study.	Yes/No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions.	Yes/No
I give permission for my pseudonymised data to be used for research purposes.	Yes/No
I give permission for anonymised quotes from my data to be used in conferences and academic publications.	Yes/No
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the focus group at any time.	Yes/No
I understand that I am not obligated to share information that I do not feel comfortable discussing and I can skip topics.	Yes/No
I am aware of the precautions that the researcher is taking to keep my data confidential (i.e., pseudonyms, password protection, etc.) as far as possible subject to legal limitations.	Yes/No
I understand why my data is being collected and retained.	Yes/No
I am aware of how the data will be retained.	Yes/No
I am aware that my data will be destroyed after 5 years.	Yes/No
I consent to being part of this research study.	Yes/No

Signature of participant _____

Name of participant (block capitals) _____

Signature of witness _____

Name of witness _____

Figures

Proficiency Level / Module number	CEFR Level
1 (absolute beginners)	A1.1
2	A1.2
3	A2.1
4	A2.2
5 (post-Leaving Certificate students)	B1.1
6	B1.2
7	B1+
8	B2.1
9	B2.1/B2.2

Figure 1: Proficiency levels

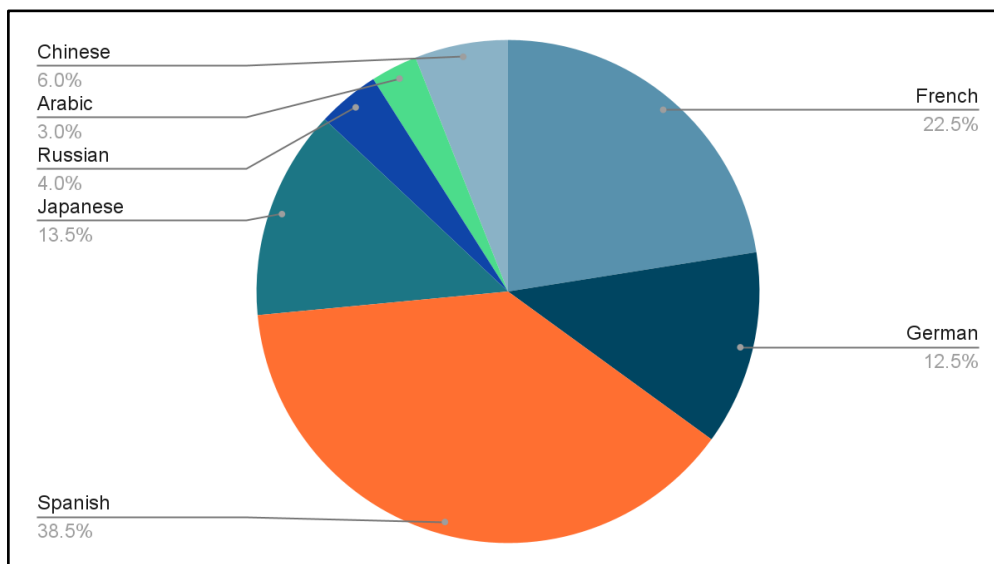


Figure 2: Enrollment Figures by Language in the Final Iteration of the Pilot IWLP

<p>Theme 1: Student Engagement</p> <p>Students who completed were committed/engaged/curious/motivated Some staff language learners very motivated, while often time poor Students less anxious about grades Some students don't value what doesn't count towards main degree or is free of charge Classes not always taken seriously Learners sometimes unprepared Some students couldn't attend live classes because of logistics/commitments and depended on LOOP Sporadic attendance especially impacting small classes Less feedback/fulfilment from very small groups High dropout rate Logistics of evening attendance Lack of class time flexibility Evening classes needed to avoid degree classes Hybrid, online and face to face classes used sometimes informally Including more degrees might allow day and evening option for all languages and reduce dropouts.</p>	<p>Theme 2 Pedagogy & Curriculum</p> <p>Freedom to design modules, curricula, continuous assessments and activities Freedom to select materials and innovate via 'trendy' pedagogy for a young audience (e.g. via telecollaboration, LCS activities, virtual reality, projects related to main degree, students as teachers) Freedom to try things out, see what works and what doesn't. Positive classroom atmosphere Friendly relationship between students Friendly relationship between students and tutor Sociable classes Fun classes Lack of coordination across languages sometimes despite CEFR framework Number of contact hours is insufficient for some languages, particularly those with different writing systems. Student proficiency levels sometimes too low for module Beginners option needed for all modules. Placement tests needed in all languages</p>
<p>Theme 3 Tutor Team [Members & Leadership]</p> <p>Feel comfortable, welcome and supported in teaching the programme Supportive, multinational/cultural teaching team, 'multi language family' Learned from other team members Fantastic team Team sharing sessions very positive Inspiring team & Team leader Supported to become more proactive Ideas supported in practice Outstanding Team coordinator Motivating, supportive Team Coordinator Supportive administration Induction by Team coordinator was useful</p>	<p>Theme 4 Programme Design & Systemic Issues</p> <p>Students on some degrees precluded from participating. 'Upsetting' to have to refuse them. Registration and deregistration processes can be challenging (have improved a bit) Allocation of 0 marks to students who fail to deregister for programme causes anxiety among students. High administrative workload for tutors</p>
<p>Theme 5 University Supports & Integration</p> <p>Overwhelming at start Formal university orientation programme (two of six completed) quite useful University orientation was good for learning about the VLE Limited engagement by most tutors with the university's teaching support unit. The university's teaching support unit was very helpful when approached Would appreciate more informal social engagement with languages department</p>	

Figure 3: Codes and themes derived from TCA