

Learning Language “In Action”: Creating a Work Placement Program in Languages



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Abstract This chapter reports on the “Language in Action” project, a program implemented at Flinders University, which provides placement opportunities for language students in local community settings where the languages they study are spoken. This unique program, based on experiential learning, has recently been refocused in terms of its educational objectives. Our reflection has led to the rationalization of the core principles underpinning the program and to the design of a dedicated “Language in Action” website created to provide information for students, placement providers, and staff administering the program, as well as for any language educator interested in the idea of language placements. In this chapter, we outline the institutional context and rationale for the “Language in Action” program and present the educational principles underpinning it. We subsequently provide information about the program’s implementation, and discuss the benefits students report from their placement experiences. Finally, we present the main features of the program’s dedicated website.

Keywords Language placement · Flinders University · Social good · Deep approach pedagogy · Experiential learning · Intercultural citizenship

1 Introduction

This chapter reports on a community engagement program for language students offered at Flinders University. For a few years now, the “Language in Action” program, which is integrated into the Bachelor of Languages, has provided placement

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opportunities for students of French, Indonesian, Italian, Modern Greek, and Spanish¹ in a range of community settings such as aged-care agencies and cultural associations. The program has been very well received by the students and by the associations which have provided placements.

From an educational perspective, “Language in Action” provides experiential learning. In particular, it is inspired by the “deep approach to world language education” (Tochon 2014), an approach that places students in charge of their learning experience and promotes meaningful interactions with communities. Indeed, our program is designed to encourage students’ pursuit of positive social action in the community, by establishing connections with various migrant groups in a range of contexts, while improving their language and intercultural skills in settings where the target language is routinely spoken.

This chapter describes an educational model for language placements in community settings and presents the rationale for the “Language in Action” program in light of the core educational principles we have established and that have guided our approach. In particular, we will focus on the academic characteristics of the program, including the portfolio that students are expected to complete for assessment. We will discuss the program’s implementation, the benefits for students, and present a dedicated “Language in Action” website designed to facilitate and promote language placements.

2 Work-Integrated Learning

A core educational focus at Flinders University, Work-Integrated Learning (WIL), is deeply embedded in the University’s 2025 Agenda which states that

[t]he Flinders Experience will provide work-integrated learning opportunities and a thriving international mobility program that will enhance personal enterprise and intercultural skills development, enriching the educational experience (Flinders University 2016).

Recognizing the benefits of integrating practical applications as part of learning, Flinders University has considered Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) as a strategic priority by incorporating various forms of WIL into the curriculum across most disciplines and degrees. Referred to in the policy as “any structured and purposefully designed learning and assessment activity in a course curriculum that integrates theory with the practice of work” (Flinders University 2019, p. 1), WIL aims to provide students with opportunities to apply the knowledge (theory) and practice (skills) they acquire at university in a variety of professional contexts. This intersection of knowledge and practice is well documented in the research literature (see, for example, Patrick et al. 2008; Cooper et al. 2010).

The most common form of WIL is work placement, which is usually undertaken at more advanced levels of the curriculum. Placements are extremely valuable to

¹These languages are offered at Flinders University.

students as they are the most practical way to prepare them for the workforce. According to Gibson and Busby (2009), students gain new skills by gaining confidence and personal awareness, establish networks and develop an ethical understanding.

Engagement with industry partners and creating an impact through WIL is also supported by the University’s “Making a Difference” agenda. Students can apply their knowledge and expertise in areas that deliver practical workplace experience but also provide a benefit to their industry provider through delivering “social good” (Flinders University 2016), a notion that is essential in the context of the “Language in Action” program.

Flinders University’s push for WIL across degrees and the establishment of the Bachelor of Languages provided an excellent opportunity for the integration of placements into the language curriculum, from which they had been absent. However, it should be noted that although “Language in Action” qualifies as WIL for the purpose of the University, the language placement program’s primary objective is not necessarily to introduce students to professional participation. Indeed, the placements we offer are selected not so much for their work-experience benefits in the first instance, but rather for the linguistic and cultural exposure they offer, as well as for their potential humanistic and socializing opportunities. Consequently, as an educational practice, the “Language in Action” placement is located at the intersection of community learning, work experience, situated language learning, culturally and socially responsive education, and intercultural citizenship. WIL in general, and the concept of “language in action” in particular, are supported by Laurillard’s (2013) dynamic conception of the university curriculum which proposes a “conversational” model that operates at theoretical and experiential levels. The framework aims to promote the interplay between the conceptual and the practical, through which students engage in a process of action and reflection, and in which students are dynamically engaged in supporting community needs while meeting university requirements.

3 The Language in Action Program

The Bachelor of Languages at Flinders University² offers opportunities for in-country study in all the languages taught.³ However, given the typically high cost of overseas programs, relatively few language students are in a position to study abroad. Consequently, “Language in Action”, a third-year unit of study, was designed to offer an alternative to in-country programs. As a placement program, it aims to expose students to a variety of local community settings such as aged-care

²Although it should be noted that students enrolled in other degrees may have access to the topic under certain conditions.

³French, Indonesian, Italian, Modern Greek and Spanish.

facilities, cultural associations, social clubs, media outlets, businesses, public events, etc., where linguistic and intercultural engagements are possible. Students are required to spend a minimum of 35 hours on placement and submit a placement portfolio consisting of a reflective diary, a set of self-assessment and self-monitoring tasks, a research essay and an oral presentation to peers. Language placements are optional and interested students are subjected to a vetting process before they can qualify for one. Details about the program will be provided in the “Language in Action in practice” section below.

3.1 A Conception of Language Learning “In Action”

Our concept of “Language in Action” draws inspiration from Tochon’s (2014) “deep approach to world languages and cultures”. The “deep approach” is a holistic view of language learning that provides access to deep and meaningful content across disciplines while allowing a personalized and guided approach to learning. Tochon argues that meaningful language learning is essentially grounded in action and that students’ learning is shaped by interacting with their environment. The experiential learning of the “deep approach” engages students on emotional, physical and intellectual levels (Xiao 2015). According to Tochon (2014), an interactional and cross-disciplinary language “apprenticeship” leads to deeper language and cultural appreciation and promotes greater sensitivity to our social environment. This inquiry-based approach to learning prepares students for real-world interactions while still providing opportunities for higher-level critical thinking and deep analysis of language and cultural norms.

Furthermore, our placement pedagogy is informed by the notion of “intercultural citizenship”, as recently refined by Byram et al. (2017). “Intercultural citizenship” brings together language education (transnational dimension) and the community (civic dimension) with the view of developing in students a “cosmopolitan” perspective that goes beyond national borders (Porto et al. 2017). The concept of citizenship is essential to our conceptualization of “language in action”. It is compatible with Laurillard’s (2013) notion of community engagement and Tochon’s (2014) development of learners’ sensitivity to the environment and society, both of which cast students in the role of agents of change.

Our approach is also guided by Seligman’s research into positive psychology that promotes the importance of human relationships, a sense of connection with one’s community, compassion, and meaning in life (Seligman 2011). Weinstein and Ryan (2010, p. 240) suggest that “[w]hen individuals volitionally help, they experience greater autonomy, relatedness, and competence; need satisfactions that in turn appear to enhance the helper’s sense of well-being.” The “Language in Action” perspective is influenced by Rebecca Oxford’s recent model of wellbeing applied to language learning, which aims to promote agency, motivation and perseverance among language learners (Oxford 2016). Finally, our approach acknowledges the work of Cordella and Huang (2015), Cordella (2016) and of other language

educators in Australia who have recognized and explored the potential for collaboration between language students and the community (Rolin-Ianziti and Boucquey 1992; Visocnik Murray and Laura 2002; Kennedy and Miceli 2017).⁴

Broadly speaking, “Language in Action” contributes to students’ wellbeing by encouraging meaningful interactions through social, linguistic and cultural encounters with migrant groups. It capitalizes on the benefits of students’ volunteering and altruistic behaviour as a source of positive emotions from which meaningful and rewarding language experiences emerge. Importantly, it also aims to develop a sense of intercultural citizenship which broadens their world view.

The following eight statements, derived from the pedagogical perspectives we have outlined above, have served as guiding principles framing the “Language in Action” project.

1. **Language education is grounded in cross-disciplinarity, interculturality, social action and wellbeing.** It serves a higher purpose than just learning a language. In the case of “Language in Action”, students investigate topics grounded in social and intercultural settings. Besides language learning, the aim of the placement is “to do good” in the community and to influence society positively (Weinstein and Ryan 2010; Tochon 2014).
2. **Language education promotes intercultural citizenship.** It goes beyond the acquisition of “intercultural skills” developed within the confines of the classroom. The combination of language education and civic action in intercultural spaces supports broad multicultural perspectives, intercultural stances and worldviews, and includes active participation in the community through which students may initiate or support change (Byram et al. 2017).
3. **Knowledge is situated and co-constructed.** In the context of “Language in Action”, students are guided by their lecturers and their supervisors on placement. Students’ learning is situation-dependent and managed on a case-by-case basis. Students co-construct and share knowledge while gaining valuable field experience (Laurillard 2013), which they can in turn share with other students.
4. **Educational activities are negotiated.** Learning is individualized and sustained by personal interest and self-motivation (Tochon 2014). Students identify and propose their topic of investigation, which emerges during the placement, through observation and discussion in the field. This topic forms the basis of the “Language in Action” research assignment which is negotiated with the academic supervisor.
5. **Teaching is about empowering students** to explore, be active, and learn from opportunities. The teacher is a guide and mentor who provides the educational context, the learning tools and resources that will allow students to expand their knowledge and skills. The placements “benefit from the students’ intrinsic motivational impulse” (Tochon 2013, p. 57). Students are given the opportunity to set and achieve their own personal goals, whilst meeting the learning outcomes and acquiring the graduate qualities set by Flinders University.

⁴Refer to Bouvet et al. (2017) for details.

6. **Students demonstrate their capacity to interpret their placement environment by investigating it.** “Language in Action” students are required to: analyse a pertinent community-related issue by writing about it; present their findings to a student audience; interact with community members by speaking with them in the target language; and reflect on their experience in terms of linguistic and cultural development and personal growth through the portfolio.
7. **Language education offers opportunities for students to build resilience and perseverance** in their language use by placing them in environments that provide opportunities to engage in real-life activities in the target language. On placement, students encounter challenges that must be met using their own resources (Oxford 2016), as would be the case in in-country interactions.
8. **Language education must promote language sustainability.** Learning “in action” is essential to the development of durable, long-term knowledge, skills and habits that will persist long after formal language learning at university has ended. As argued by Tochon (2014), language learning is a life-long project. Real-world opportunities for interactions are more likely to sustain motivation for language learning into the future.

3.2 “*Language in Action*” in Practice

The constitution of the network of community partners required to accommodate “Language in Action” students’ placements was initially facilitated by Volunteering SA&NT, the leading volunteering organization in South Australia. Initially, we collaborated with the aged-care sector where students of Italian and Modern Greek participated in the daily activities of organizations such as the Associazione Nazionale Famiglie degli Emigrati (Italian) and the Greek Orthodox Community of South Australia Incorporated (Greek).⁵ These placements involved conversing with elderly migrants, taking them shopping or for walks, serving meals, playing games such as bingo or card games, cinema and art gallery visits, and even scrapbooking activities.

As our network of providers expanded, we began to offer placements to students of French, Indonesian, Italian, Modern Greek and Spanish, in a broader range of sectors. In addition to aged-care settings, students have been involved with cultural, community and media organizations, and ethnic schools, where they have helped organize and run educational activities, community events and festivals. For example, French students at the Alliance Française have assisted with French classes for children, while Spanish students have taken part in radio broadcasts. Indonesian students have worked with Indopeduli Adelaide, an association that assists Indonesians who come to Australia to undergo cranio-facial surgery. Enrolment in

⁵A list of partners may be found here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20191121084646/http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/language-in-action/for-placement-providers/partners.cfm>

“Language in Action” is approved by the topic coordinator. It is critical that students seek permission to enrol in the program well ahead of the start of the semester, as negotiations with providers, the drafting of the agreement and the pre-placement learning module can take several weeks. Students who express interest in “Language in Action” are interviewed by the program coordinator who assesses their language, communication and cultural skills, as well as their motivation and overall fitness for placement. They are also briefed on placement opportunities and on the assessment requirements.

While to date the placements have been largely problem free, students who undertake placements in health-related environments might find aspects of their experience confronting. Therefore, in addition to considering language skills, it is important to select students who have the maturity and life experience that will allow them to manage well in health-related contexts. Despite potential risks, we believe that interactions with the elderly in the context of aged-care and the rich experiences in language, culture and interpersonal connection that ensue, outweigh any concerns.

As the placements provide students with opportunities to practise their language skills through face-to-face interactions in their target language with native speakers, communication at a reasonably advanced level of proficiency is essential. To ensure that prospective students will be able to cope linguistically, we contact their language lecturers to obtain an evaluation of their skills, in addition to checking their academic transcripts. Once the program coordinator is satisfied that all the conditions of fitness for placement are met, the students are approved for enrolment.

The program does not require students to identify placement opportunities, as our current pool of placements is large enough to cater for the number of applicants. However, we make sure that from the outset, selected students are involved in the placement negotiations. As soon as a student is matched with a potential placement, we ask the student to make contact with the placement provider by phone or in person to discuss the placement conditions before the agreement is signed between the two parties. Placement providers are generally flexible in terms of scheduling the 35 hours. Time on placement can be stretched over a semester (three hours per week), half a semester (six hours per week), or be concentrated over a period of 1–2 weeks during the mid-semester breaks. Once both the placement provider and the student are satisfied, a formal agreement which sets out the responsibilities and obligations of the University, the placement provider, and the student, is made. Usually, the placement provider requires students to undergo an induction at the workplace. Students who are placed in aged-care or in schools are asked to produce a Department of Communities and Social Inclusion (DCSI) screening check or a Police Check before they begin.

3.3 Assessment

The assessment model for “Language in Action” is underpinned by the principles enunciated in the conceptual section of this article. It aims to evaluate the students’ languages skills, their intercultural competence, their personal development, their capacity to identify and research a topic relevant to the placement, and their capacity to reflect on the experience. Assessment aims to encourage personal interest and self-motivation and, as such, it must provide opportunities for students to carry out investigations across a diverse range of areas of personal and/or academic interest. It is important to note that the learning experience may vary substantially between placement environments and, as a consequence, the knowledge and skills developed may be different. Assessment is therefore negotiated in relation to the specificities of each placement. The students are made aware of this from the outset and are guided by their academic and placement supervisors in the development of their topic of investigation. Some recent examples of “Language in Action” research topics include reporting on the challenges faced by wheelchair users in Indonesia, profiling the communities of Spanish native speakers in South Australia, personal experiences of migration, traditions, culture and identity shifts, socio-cultural integration, intergenerational relationships and more.

The assessment for “Language in Action” is flexible enough to take into account the contexts of the placements and is developed relative to opportunities. It provides an occasion for the identification and analysis of a pertinent community-related topic, which is not only useful for the students’ own analytical and research skill development, but may also be beneficial to the placement provider. For example, an education student was placed with an ethnic school and conducted a survey among students and parents about the nature of a number of class activities. The survey was included in the student’s own assessment portfolio and provided feedback to the school which, in turn, contributed to subsequent class planning. By observing and engaging with the placement environment, by analysing and reporting their observations in an objective and critical way, students have the potential to make a contribution to their placement provider that extends beyond the time of their placement.

Finally, the “Language in Action” assessment provides an opportunity for reflection on the placement experience. It recognizes the challenges that placements may present to students and provides opportunities for them to showcase the strategies they used to overcome their difficulties. It therefore differs in nature and intention from the typical type of assessment students are subjected to in the language class. In placement situations, assignments are designed with the aim of collecting evidence of students’ learning and skills rather than simply judging students’ knowledge/skills (Burke 2010).

The “Language in Action” assessment consists of an end-of-placement portfolio comprised of four parts:

- A reflective diary that documents the student’s activities on placement, kept in the target language (*language development, reflection*);

- A completed set of three questionnaires designed to allow the student to assess their own language and intercultural progress (*language development, intercultural development, reflection*);
- An oral presentation to fellow students in the target language (*language development, reflection, sharing*);
- A research essay or an investigative report in English or in the target language (*analytical, critical, research skill development, independent learning*).

The inclusion of a diary and self-assessment questionnaires makes it a form of embedded assessment (William 2010). This underscores the aim of “Language in Action” to develop language learners’ self-awareness, self-reflection and empowerment.

3.4 Student Evaluation of the Program

Upon completion of their placements, students are invited to take part in interviews on a voluntary basis, in order to evaluate their experience of “Language in Action”. The interviews take place after their grades have been published to avoid the risk of possible perceived coercion. They take the form of a 30-minute conversation, based on a semi-structured questionnaire, during which the student is asked to provide information about their motivation for enrolling in the course, describe what they have done on placement, and outline the perceived benefits drawn from the placement in terms of linguistic, cultural and personal gains. The interviews are recorded and transcribed, then analysed qualitatively to identify common themes emerging from the data.⁶

Results from these interviews indicate that students are initially attracted to “Language in Action” because they consider it to be an excellent opportunity to practise their linguistic and cultural skills in the target language in a natural environment. They are also keen to engage with the community, either because they already have personal links with it or because they see the potential for making durable connections. Upon completion of their placements, most of the participants believe that their language proficiency has improved, especially in relation to their oral and aural skills. This is usually corroborated by the quality of their performance in their end-of-semester oral presentations. In addition to the linguistic and cultural benefits provided by the placements, some students state that their placement experience gave them a sense of engagement with, and belonging to, the community. In most cases, they have established personal connections which they strive to maintain after the placement. Some students state that completing “Language in Action” is much more than passing a unit of study. It is also about contributing to a community where the language they studied in a classroom is used. Developing awareness of one’s ability to contribute to a community group in this way can foster

⁶Ethics approval is sought prior to interviewing students.

self-confidence, a sense of purpose, and motivation that will help students enhance their foreign language proficiency in the long term through ongoing community engagement.

Finally, through their placements, students are able to adopt positive attitudes that help them deal with the challenges they meet. Learning language “in action” involves dynamic situations where the linguistic, the cultural and the social present themselves to the students in unscripted ways, forcing them to adopt problem-solving stances to overcome challenges.

3.5 Website

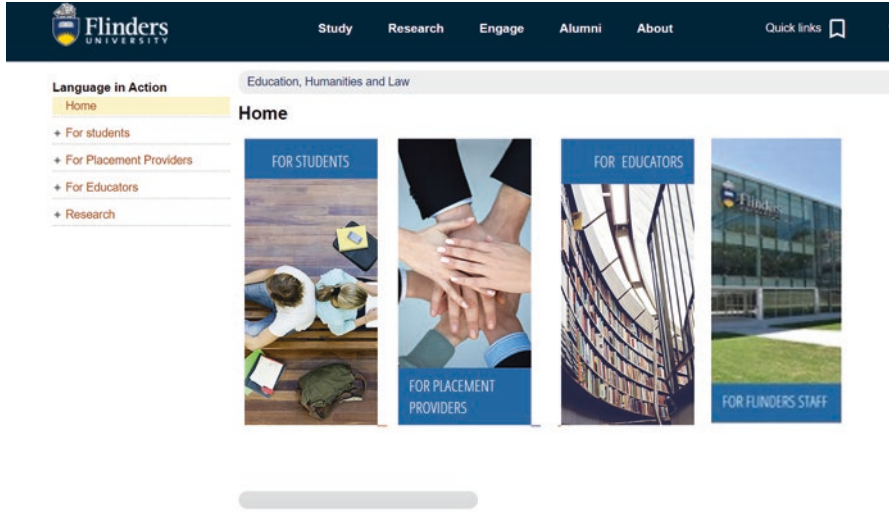
As part of the “Language in Action” program, we have developed a dedicated website which is described below.⁷ Our objective has been to offer a comprehensive information hub for students, placement providers and staff administering the placements. On a conceptual level, the website provides a platform for presenting the rationale, objectives, benefits and outcomes of language placement to students, educators and placement providers. The originality of the website resides in the fact that it allows students to see how unique and personalized their language learning journey can be, not only in terms selecting a placement, but also in terms of negotiating their assessment and in terms of their language/cultural development. It also provides the project’s educational rationale to educators interested in the “language in action” concept. On a practical level, the website provides a wealth of information targeted to students, placement providers, administrative staff and educators.

The starting point of a dedicated website was the need to publicize language placements to our students more effectively and provide them with the information they require to help them understand the program before enrolling in it. Moreover, we wanted to inform potential partners of the availability of language placements, as well as promote the benefits of placements for their organizations, and outline the procedural steps to follow for organizing and managing placements. Finally, in designing the website, our aim was to share our experience and publicize our “Language in Action” program beyond Flinders University to the wider educational community, as a possible model that could be adapted by educators interested in setting up their own language placement program in community contexts.

The website features a quadruple interface, each one catering for one group of stakeholders (students, placement providers, educators, and Flinders University staff) (Fig. 1). Although contents sometimes overlap across sections, each section displays specific information targeted at the relevant group.

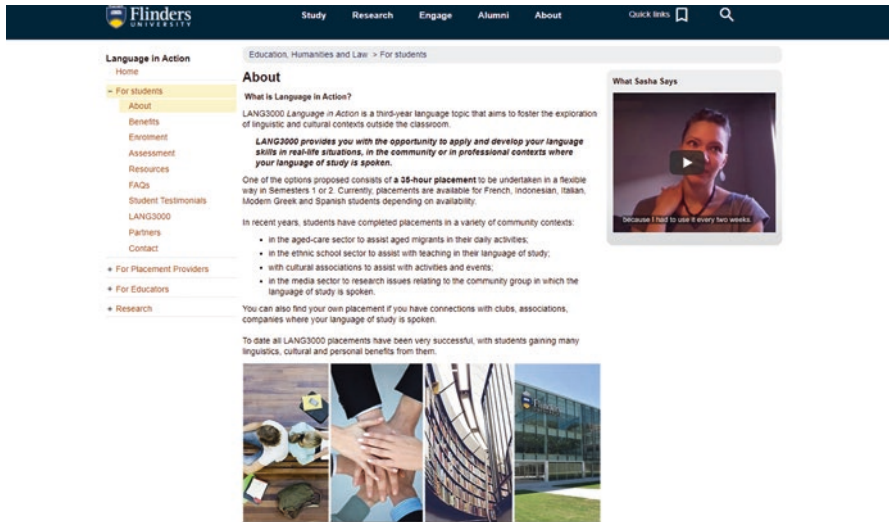
The **Student** section (Fig. 2) gives prominence to explaining the nature, timing and duration of the placements, as well as to providing tools for students to assess

⁷The “Language in Action” website is available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20191121084931/http://www.flinders.edu.au/ehl/language-in-action/language-in-action_home.cfm



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Fig. 1 Home page



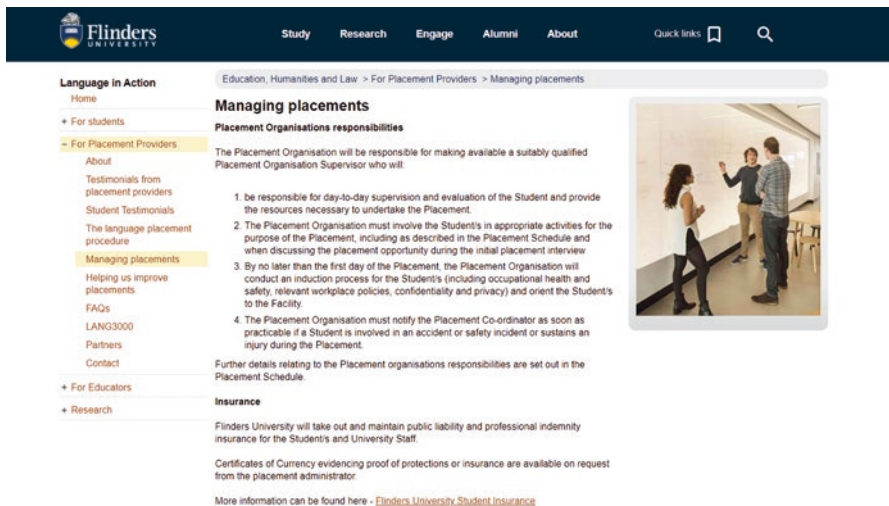
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Fig. 2 Main page of Student Section

their own suitability for a language placement. The selection, enrolment, and placement processes can be daunting for students. Therefore, the Student section of the website aims to streamline these processes and assist students in complying with all pre-placement requirements in a timely manner. This section features carefully scripted instructions combined with images, embedded online tools and videos of students recounting their placement experience. This section of the website offers a detailed explanation of the assessment components to clarify what is expected from students well before the start of placements, both academically and in terms of their commitment to their placement experience.

The **Placement Provider** section (Fig. 3) contains an adapted description of the placement process that is relevant for the host organizations. It includes details about how partners can benefit from participating in the project, and how to manage students. It also provides information about the provider’s responsibilities towards students and the university. This section features an expression of interest form and a number of links that provide direct contact with university staff, all of which aim to make early communication with relevant university staff as swift and simple as possible.

The **Educator** section (Fig. 4) features the pedagogical rationale and the principles underpinning the program. It details the stages of the placement process, lists our partner organizations and describes the assessment in light of the project’s pedagogical principles. It is also linked to a **Research** page which provides information about the “Language in Action” project and links to publications associated with it.



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Fig. 3 Page from Placement Provider section

The screenshot shows the Flinders University website. The main navigation bar includes 'Study', 'Research', 'Engage', 'Alumni', and 'About'. The page title is 'Pedagogical principles of the language placement'. The content is organized into sections: 'Pedagogical principles of the language placement', 'Language in Action guiding principles', and 'Documents'. The 'Pedagogical principles' section explains that the program is inspired by Tochon (2014) and focuses on social and intercultural connections. The 'Language in Action guiding principles' section lists four principles: 1. Language education is grounded in cross-disciplinary, interculturality, social action & being; 2. Language education promotes intercultural citizenship; 3. Knowledge is situated and co-constructed; 4. Educational activities are negotiated.

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Fig. 4 Page from Educator Section

The **Staff** section gives an overview of the program as well as the management tools required to administer the placements to ensure continuity of administrative knowledge in case of staff turnover. The staff section is linked to the Flinders University Policy and Procedures for WIL.

4 Conclusion

The “Language in Action” project seeks to capitalize on the opportunities for university students to be exposed to their target language in local communities. In this chapter, we have indicated that these opportunities are available across a range of sectors which offer health, educational or cultural services to migrant communities in the Adelaide region. We have negotiated partnerships with a number of community-based associations to implement a placement program which is pedagogically justified by current research on the benefits of learning language “in action”. We have adopted a set of educational principles focused on the values of experiential learning, which has allowed us to frame the “Language in Action” project and design a dedicated website that supports and promotes it.

Giving language students the opportunity to undertake placements at an advanced stage of their study is valuable from several perspectives. In addition to the linguistic and cultural gains expected from sustained exposure to the target language, placements allow students to take charge of their own learning. They also foster

resilience in dealing with unexpected linguistic and cultural challenges. Furthermore, they promote opportunities for altruistic experiences likely to have a positive impact on the environments in which they take place. The practical experience gained in “Language in Action” is likely to motivate students to pursue further studies in the language while sustaining their engagement with the community. The “Language in Action” placements thus support the notion of language “apprenticeship” put forward by Tochon’s (2014) “deep approach” pedagogy, as presented above. Such practical experience complements classroom-based learning and constitutes a natural outcome for it that is easily integrated into the language curriculum.

Our aim now is to develop the number and range of placements available to students through exploring opportunities for industry placements which we have not investigated so far. We hope that our framework for placements, supported by our dedicated website, will not only provide relevant information and support for all stakeholders involved in the program, but will also serve as a possible model to inspire other language educators to establish their own placement programs.

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