

Assessing the Work Placement Abroad

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Abstract:

This paper provides an account of the implementation of a Work Based Learning Abroad module designed to help university language learners to recognise and critically assess their personal and social development while working abroad as English Language Assistants. This project was launched in 2008 for BA Languages students within the School of Creative and Cultural Industries at the University of the West of Scotland. The author considers students' reflections collected over the past three years on the impact of the work placement abroad. Qualitative content analysis has been applied in order to find recurring themes, to gain insight into students' attitudes, behaviours, concerns, lifestyles and aspirations. Overall, the module was recognized as an efficient way to measure personal development as manifested by greater understanding and increased confidence in use of both foreign and mother tongue languages, improved cultural awareness, the development of some generic employability skills and a growing sense of self-belief amongst the participants.

Keywords: British Council, language assistants, personal development plan, linguistic skills, cultural awareness, work abroad, employability, self-confidence, self-awareness

Introduction

In 2008 a pilot project on a module called **Work Based Learning Abroad in a Foreign Language** was launched for BA Languages students within the School of Creative and Cultural Industries at the University of the West of Scotland (UWS). One aim of this module was to encourage students who had chosen to work abroad as a language assistant to develop a greater understanding of said foreign language and culture as well as to become more confident in their use of that language. Another aim was for the learner to recognise and be able to critically assess their development of essential generic employability skills and attributes within a real work situation. Forty-eight students who were placed as an English language assistant in a school abroad under contract with the British Council took part in this project.

This article aims to evaluate the students' end of year reflections, compared with their pre-departure skills audit and development plan, with regard to their experience in developing and using their language skills in a real work situation; to assess their ability to deal with unfamiliar environments and with people across boundaries; and to consider their development of generic employability skills and attributes within a real work situation.

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis has been applied in order to find recurring themes, to gain insight into students' attitudes, behaviours, concerns, lifestyles and aspirations. Collecting and analysing unstructured information, although time-consuming and daunting, allowed the author to extract meaning as to the impact of the year abroad. Students were encouraged to reflect on their learning through personal development planning using a bespoke model developed by the British Council. A pre-departure checklist, skills audit and personal development plan were established to measure development over the year spent abroad. A logbook in which thoughts and impressions were recorded was also used to provide evidence. A series of open-ended questionnaires for use at intervals throughout the year were included as an important process of encouraging reflection on the-year-abroad experience. Finally, an end-of-year summary report and an individual interview were analysed to demonstrate new or extended skills.

The learners' end-of-year reflections

Once students complete the full term of their work placement, they are invited to review their year abroad in the light of their original personal development plan and to reflect on the range of experiences they have encountered, paying particular attention to the enhanced skills they can present, and to any ways in which their personality and attitude to life has changed. Boud and Solomon (2001:39) argue that

students need to stand back and reflect on their learning in order to understand what it is that they have learned that goes beyond the specifics of the situation in which they find themselves. It is this aspect of learning that enables them to 'face new situations with equanimity'.

In the following section, we will look at the most significant and recurring testimonials that students presented via their end-of-year summary report, which were reinforced in their individual interview.

Improved language skills

Before I began teaching in my class I thought I knew all I would need to know. However I was very wrong. I learnt a lot about the English language. I didn't know the answers to a lot of my students' questions. Reading my grammar book, I learnt a lot about the language. (Natalie)

I was finding myself listening to conversations that passers-by were having in the street and sometimes laughing to myself if they said something funny. I realised I was understanding things a lot more [...] I was not as scared to speak out and sometimes even initiated conversations. (Amy)

Before I went away I had little or no confidence in my Spanish knowledge. I was not anticipating as much of an improvement in my Spanish speaking. I now feel as if I have the confidence to go to any Spanish speaking region on a visit or even to live and I will cope alone without as much help as I would have needed before [...] I am so grateful to

this experience for all the changes in myself, that otherwise may never have taken place. I feel more confident in myself and would not hesitate to do many things that before I would never even have considered, such as public speaking and meeting new people without being shy and embarrassed. (Emma)

Students' end-of-year reflections suggest that the expectation of improving their language skills has been met to a large extent. Indeed, it appears that students not only have strengthened their speaking and listening skills whilst working abroad, but also have gained enriched knowledge and understanding of how the foreign language as well as their mother tongue function. Another important point stated by students is that building up their language skills enabled them to address the issue of social isolation since they could penetrate and integrate better into another culture and they were in a better position to interact with the locals. We can then argue that improved language skills are very much linked with culture learning benefits and emotional benefits. Improvement of organisational and presentation skills using the foreign language was also often perceived as an undeniable reward.

It is worth noting that there are limitations of improvements in language: In the feedback comments during the individual interview quite a few students disclosed that reading, and in particular writing skills, had not improved during their placement abroad due to the fact that these skills were rarely being called upon. Also, students needed to use English within the school environment and some recognised that they did not make as much effort to use the target language outside the work placement as they had been advised prior to departure. Other participants did not improve their language skills as much as they should because a) they came back home too often for emotional reasons or b) engaged too often with other English-speaking students while travelling in the foreign country. In summary, factors affecting linguistic success according to our data would depend on students' personality, motivation and the degree of isolation from other English speakers. Coleman & Klapper (2005) suggest, with regard to residence abroad 'most research has focused on linguistic gains. Generalizability of findings is reduced by the variety of residence abroad contexts, and while linguistic progress is, on average, faster than under home university tuition, there is considerable individual variation'. The authors further note that: 'Progress is most notable in fluency (Freed 1995), oral-aural and sociolinguistic skills and in vocabulary, and less marked in reading, writing and grammar-although recent studies do show the importance of living in a target-language country for acquiring intuitive control of complex grammatical features.' (ibid: 127).

Cultural awareness

It is worth highlighting at this point that the discovery or the exposure to a new culture barely features in students' expectations prior to going abroad which might imply that most of our students have not had any cross-cultural experiences. However, at the end of their year abroad, the main quotes from students reveal that the process of having experienced a new culture and gradually having adjusted to it gave them a better understanding of their own culture. It actually made them proud of their home culture

and country, broadened their mind as well as expanded their global horizons and helped them to become more tolerant and appreciative global citizens. It needs to be said though, according to our data, that the process of making the transition from one culture to another has sometimes been quite disorientating and overwhelming hence this feeling of “culture shock”. Furnham (in Kim & Gudykunst 1988: 45) mentions that ‘the culture shock “hypothesis” or “concept” suggests that the experience of a new culture is a sudden, unpleasant feeling that may violate expectations of the new culture’. Students do experience ups and downs in different degrees of intensity and for different lengths of time. We cannot help at this point linking this “culture shock” and its effects to a feeling of homesickness which is often referred to as a main worry and expectation prior to departure. Strategies adopted to overcome this feeling of “culture shock” so often mentioned by authors vary greatly; some get involved by seeking out opportunities to keep busy, others join a sports club or participate in extra-curricular activities within their placement school. Confronting their feelings by talking to their mentor, attempting to blend with the locals or to make new friends, bringing something of home are other noteworthy and helpful steps taken.

My year abroad made me realise what it feels like to be a foreigner and I have a new respect for foreigners as it is a very hard thing to do. To try to adapt to new surroundings, meet people and learn the language. I've also realised that I'm proud to be Scottish and that I would love to explore different parts of Scotland, which I have not; this had never occurred to me before (Angela)

My knowledge of the Basque Country has increased greatly by talking to my students, talking to team-mates from my rugby team and watching TV. They are very proud of their own culture, food and language. They are always quick to remind you that they are not Spanish. I can see many similarities with my own country, being Scottish. I've noticed that young people here are more politically aware and active than at home. There are always students' strikes and protests. (Mark)

Adjusting to the French way of life wasn't easy. It was testing at times to not stand out as a foreigner, to be accepted by others and to blend into the crowd. I tried my best to live like a local by attending the local gym, visiting the weekly market to buy groceries and eating out in local cafés. [...] Whilst in France, every so often I was brought out of my comfort zone by the challenges which faced me. These challenges and unfamiliar surroundings helped me grow and realise what I can accomplish on my own which inevitably made me stronger as an individual. (Mhairi)

Indeed, the importance of ‘social support’ is not to be disregarded when it comes to a ‘better psychological adjustment’. According to Bochner’s functional model of friendship networks, ‘research has demonstrated that both host and co-nationals can provide assistance and contribute to the enhancement of psychological well-being.’ (Ward et al, 2001:150). Cultural awareness appears to be the most significant development that has taken place. Students benefit greatly by balancing out and adjusting to the foreign culture. They undoubtedly develop increasing independence and display a maturity beyond their expectations.

Valuable teaching experience

The theme of increased confidence emerges as one of the main gains from the work-related learning experience whilst abroad. Students face quite considerable problems when they start their placements; most had no prior teaching experience although they do a TESOL course (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) before leaving so they have an idea of what the teaching job entails. Students are also encouraged to attend induction courses either organized by the British Council or by the authorities abroad so that they are adequately prepared. However, it is mainly through developing problem-solving skills and drawing on personal resources that students manage to cope with new and sometimes challenging situations at work such as preparation of lessons, discipline problems when managing a class etc. Bailey et al contend that students on placements must have ‘the opportunity to define as well as solve problems; they can approach problems flexibly, using a variety of strategies and tactics depending on the situation’ (Bailey et al, 2004:167)

Also, students’ self-evaluation on their own teaching experiences leads us to the belief that the role and the effectiveness of an appointed mentor and the support given within the work placement is of the utmost importance and is instrumental to an effective teaching and learning experience; most students indicate that the appointed mentor had been useful in various areas such as helping them to understand how the school functions, assisting them with integration into the staffroom, advising on teaching methods and helping with teaching materials. Initial impressions of the job are positive in most cases. In the *Working Knowledge* (Bailey et al, 2004) repeated reference is made to the importance of ‘active participation of employers’ to ensure that ‘work-based learning is to be effective’.

The thought of teaching in a French school was very daunting at first however I overcame this initial fear after a few weeks of working with the children. I felt myself instantly mature as soon as I step in the classroom as there were new responsibilities and all eyes were on me. Preparing lessons, accurate time-keeping and overseeing classroom discipline all soon became part of my new role which helped me to flourish as an assistant... (Mhairi)

I also feel this has changed me in other ways. I was willing to stay in and read and learn. I would look up one point, which would lead to another, and then another. I would dedicate time, take notes and think about what my students wanted to learn, what the book said, and what they needed to know. My organizational skills have become much better [...]. This experience has helped my confidence in speaking in front of people and in managing to give adequate explanations! (Natalie)

In terms of classes, [...] I used a range of subjects, starting simple in order to judge the abilities of the classes, then introducing more complicated grammar exercises and games to make it seem more fun and less of a chore. I really feel that this sense of responsibility is one of the most important things about my year abroad. I had to manage classes, prepare lessons, give information clearly and confidently and supervise that the students were doing what they were supposed to and were actually learning something from it. This experience is vital for me as a person; to be in charge of and leading a group of people is a lifelong skill that can be transferred into almost any job that involves working with people or teaching (Steve)

Nevertheless, opinions are rather divided with regard to the beneficial impact of length of time spent observing. Also, the question of how far they have been consulted about their role as teaching assistants throughout the year has hardly been addressed which implies that employer's involvement is not always sustained. Evans (Boud & Solomon 2001:70) reminds us that 'the motivation and accomplishments of employees as learners' reflect 'the interest taken by their in-house supervisors. Lack of encouragement from line supervisors' emerge 'as the prime reason for some withdrawing from the scheme. Unsurprisingly, line supervisor support' is 'identified as a condition of success.'

Reviewing students' reflections, the work placement has also a strong influence on students' development in terms of becoming more self-reliant and more responsible as well as gaining more independence. Finally, it becomes apparent that the work experience provides the opportunity for some participants to think about their own future career goals.

The actual job of being a language assistant has helped me to be more responsible as it was important to be at work on time and dressed appropriately. At the beginning, I did not have much of a part in the classroom but as time passed, teachers gave me more responsibilities [...] which I enjoyed a lot because I felt as though the teachers had a lot of confidence in me working with the students... (Rachel)

It has also given me valuable teaching experience that will be useful in the future as I intend to have a career as a teacher. Furthermore, my PDP with a record of all my skills and qualities will be of great importance when I finish my course at university and begin looking for employment. (Jorge)

Although I didn't always enjoy working as an Assistant, I can now look back on good and bad experiences and see that each has taught me something and helped me look towards making a decision about my future career. (Alison)

Self-image and self-belief

Students' recurring comments below suggest that the self is subjected to considerable changes in the students during their placement abroad and that student growth is taking place. Students are able to recognise and to critically assess how they have developed an awareness of their self-belief. Let us look into some of the various steps that led to self-belief and/or a better self-image. One of the steps is that some students manage to re-examine and cast aside the limiting ideas they have about themselves by being flexible and willing to change. Some clearly took steps to improve their perceived weaknesses by converting them into strengths.

Characteristics such as shyness, confidence issues, bad presentation skills, inability to talk to a large group of people were not called upon when I was in France and it was something I had to get over. I was quite lazy before going to France, I wasn't independent or assertive, I lacked a willingness to learn, I was finding it difficult to accept constructive criticism and I had a problem with dedication-sticking things in the past. Also I had a big problem with homesickness, I wasn't self-motivated or organised. Now after having completed my year abroad, all of these characteristics have changed for the better as I developed new skills whilst being abroad. (Nikky)

One of my priorities was to improve my confidence in speaking to groups, especially giving presentations, which has improved dramatically after speaking in front of classes – sometimes including teachers – for so much time. There are few audiences who are more critical than schoolchildren so I feel I've really achieved something in overcoming my fear of public speaking... (Alison)

Others learn to deal with the inner negative voice by priming their mind with qualities and positive characteristics that determine their behaviour:

Overall I am very happy that I took the opportunity to go abroad for the year. I met some great people, who helped me to build confidence in myself. I saw some fantastic places while travelling. I think now I definitely have a much more relaxed and optimistic attitude towards life. Also I feel much more comfortable talking to people I don't know and I think working with the children in the school has helped me to overcome my shyness as well as there is no way I could ever get into teaching professionally if I had this hindering me. (Claire)

Others become their own motivational coach by convincing themselves that they can do it and that they must not give up. Self-belief comes from developing the vision that they can relax socially, overcome language barriers, speak and give presentations to groups of school children, have an independent life away from the family support network or whatever it is they need to believe they can do or be.

Today I can honestly say I am twice the person I was when I arrived in Paris in September. I had to overcome many personal setbacks and problems during my eight months in France but I am very proud of myself for being able to say I achieved what I set out to do. On a few occasions I was so close to giving up. However on each of these occasions I managed to always convince myself to give it another chance. If someone could have told me beforehand all the things I would overcome in these past 8 months, I would not have believed them. (Suzanne)

When I look back at my time in Malaga I have an overwhelming sense of achievement. As I previously mentioned there were ups and downs but without a doubt the highs more than made up for the lows. I feel I have grown so much as a person being able to put my mind to anything I want and achieve it no matter what. I have learnt I can adapt to any situation, overcoming language barriers and be able to make friends from different walks of life finding common ground whether it be a love of dance, learning a language or teaching. (Ashley)

Conclusions

Overall, a greater understanding and an increased confidence in use of both the foreign and the mother tongue languages in the work-related situation is in most cases perceived as a reward and has met, or exceeded, students' expectations prior to departure. Most students have widened their communication skills beyond just the English-speaking world. Moreover, students consider that their motivation and isolation from other English speakers play an important part in their improved language proficiency. However it must be kept in mind that mostly speaking and listening skills in the foreign language have improved rather than reading and writing skills.

In addition, students agreed that improved linguistic skills are closely connected to culture learning benefits, simultaneously addressing the issue of social isolation so much feared by students before departing. Cultural awareness, which is hardly mentioned by students before leaving, is a most noteworthy personal development by the end of the work placement abroad: Students clearly identify that the placement abroad equips them with a more global perspective and that it promotes greater confidence, independence and maturity. It needs to be said though that not all students seize the opportunities open to them as fully as they might to explore in depth the culture of the target country.

Prior to departure, students are patently unaware of their employability and even fail to mention it in their expectations; conversely, in their end-of-year summary report and individual interview, students are able to recognize and articulate the development of some generic employability skills within a real work situation as another significant development: Increased confidence, self-reliance and independence figure clearly among skills they recognize as having attained or improved via their work placement abroad. A few participants recognise at the start that improved communication skills and team working will make them more marketable in a global economy but not many indicate that having overseas professional work experience will make them more employable.

It is undeniable that this growing sense of inner confidence and self-awareness which students develop throughout the year supported them well when faced with obstacles and when dealing with pressures and problems.

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