



Language Use at the United Nations: Interdisciplinary Project of the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages

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Abstract: The Scottish Baccalaureate may be an extraordinarily challenging award to complete but it also has numerous rewards. This article will provide an insight into my experience of the Interdisciplinary Project which is the distinguishing element of the Scottish Baccalaureate. My research for the project was focused on languages within the United Nations, investigating whether languages play an essential role in upholding the fundamental aims of the United Nations.

Keywords: Scottish Baccalaureate, United Nations, European Union, Interpreting, Translation

Introduction

The Scottish Baccalaureate is a qualification involving the study of two languages alongside the completion of an Interdisciplinary Project (IP). The latter, essentially the distinguishing feature of the Scottish Baccalaureate, essentially requires pupils to undertake an independent investigation on a topic of their choice. Many find this aspect particularly challenging, particularly in the early stages. However, for me this was the most interesting part of the overall award. I found that it allowed a lot of flexibility and freedom for creativity and innovation; it increased my independence as a learner and widened my range of skills. The report itself is too long to attach as an appendix. I have, therefore, created it as a blog¹. Below I give some details about my project journey.

Starting Out

Initially I aimed to research the use of languages within the marketing industry. However, in the end I felt that this area was of little real interest to me, partly because the subject matter was too broad to fully research within the timescale of the Baccalaureate. My contingency plan was a melange of numerous ideas and its fruition stemmed from my application to study International Relations at university. This was by far the defining moment of my project - one could say you take a leap of faith when you decide on your proposal and then have to outline the next six months of academic investigation. However, I can assure you that in many ways, this becomes one of the most exciting parts of the project: it is converted into something you continually think of (and the one thing that could quickly become the bane of your life if you haven't chosen

¹ Cf. <http://unitednationsandlanguages.blogspot.co.uk>

a subject you are truly passionate about). My project was directly focused on the United Nations, though my contingency was to focus on the European Union - the EU is far more accessible and I had already established links within the first month of my project; yet this was not my desired research area.

Moving On – and Getting Stuck

Progressing from my initial decisions, the project began to take shape. Initially my focus was on gaining contacts within the field I was researching: the natural partnership was with Heriot Watt University, which offers studies in Translation and Interpreting. Through Heriot Watt I was able to gain a vast amount of knowledge and hone my research questions. I focused on: who uses languages and how important are they in emergency situations, for instance the Haiti earthquake.

In order to fulfil the key criteria of the Baccalaureate I utilised my language skills through: creating questionnaires and conducting surveys, researching non-English internet websites and conducting interviews in my target languages (French and Spanish). As a whole experience, this encouraged me to employ languages in daily life which is a rather large task when you feel as if you are still in the infancy of language learning, relatively speaking. With hindsight, I can see that skill development is a huge part of the Baccalaureate and I feel that the IP truly underpins the key skills necessary for university life. Having now almost completed my first year of university and completed a module in Academic Skills, I feel qualified to say that the IP has been the key to me passing this module in particular. In other words, I believe that I have an enriched learning environment at university as a direct result of not having to develop the skills needed at university because I had some experience in the area of self-study through undertaking the IP. Research skills form the biggest part of the IP and a lack in these becomes evident in the final report; interpersonal skills are a necessity and as a confident, outgoing individual I found that the Baccalaureate has only furthered my skills in this field - comfort zones are, by all intents and purposes, extinct during the investigation. Thoughtful and careful planning is an absolute must, without it I dare say any project is likely to fail. It can therefore feel at some point that you are being taken to the very edge of the cliff before being nudged off - forcing you to find a parachute on the way down. The IP really does encourage students to work without the guidance of a teacher - you really do not have a safety parachute in the form of a teacher to do the work for you. And it is for this very reason that the Baccalaureate is an experience worth having before university because in the world of lectures and tutorials you are on an island with no one but yourself to help you.

The completion of my IP rested upon a contact at the United Nations and I was very much in the danger-zone until this materialised. The interview I conducted with this person (Christian Landrein, see below) led to the clarification of my research and the consolidation of my argument that languages play an essential role in maintaining the fluidity within the bureaucratic agency; something which can be transferred into many other International Organisations such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO), World

Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). I had a lot of research from secondary sources but nothing from the mouth of a senior interpreter at the United Nations until the very last hour. This was a massive risk – although one I was prepared to take. At the initial stage, I was asked if I was prepared to be wrong and in all honesty, no I was not. I was not prepared to be wrong, and with hindsight I feel this was one of my biggest weaknesses. You must be prepared to be wrong, and it certainly is not a sign of failure. In fact, being wrong could actually be encouraged in many ways. Although my hypothesis was correct - languages are key in the United Nations - yet had I been wrong my skills and personal development had come to such a degree that admitting my assumption had been wrong would not have amounted to an admission of failure, because I would simply have had an answer to my question that was different to the one I had expected. In academia, being wrong isn't necessarily bad - negating theories is a prime part of university.

Do languages play an essential role in upholding the fundamental aims of the United Nations?

The simple answer to such a complex question turned out to be 'yes'. Languages are, in the words of Christian Landrein, senior interpreter at the United Nations, '...the lifeblood of virtually all gatherings at the UN.' Translators render in excess of 200 documents daily, into six languages. Every state is entitled to its part in the functioning of the United Nations. Thus, it becomes a strict necessity that language is no barrier. The Security Council is, from a quasi-liberal/realist perspective, the hierarchical hegemonic power in global relations and hence language really ought not to be a barrier in international affairs. It duly becomes necessary that the Heads of International Law and Global Peace and Security are able to extend their authority and power throughout the global community effectively. Certainly following my research and through the continuation of my studies in global organisations such as: NATO, UN, EU and GATT etc. I am still convinced that languages diminish the barriers that are so frequent in international relations between states. Certainly, functioning of the United Nations rests upon an ability to communicate freely amongst one another. Of course, languages will never have the ability to remove the bureaucratic tape that tends to permeate large organisations, where it seems to take an uncanny amount of time to complete even the simplest of tasks such as sending a fax.

Translating and interpreting are essential to the UN for several reasons: they facilitate communication and democratise the UN process; an equilibrium between states is struck in this regard through the use of six official languages. All are able to communicate on a global forum, in a global manner where languages are not a barrier. Far more could be used, of course, however the system would become cumbersome yet any less than the six used and the system would not be accessible, according to Landrein. More than six would increase the decision-making time and hence, lead to critical-decision windows being lost.

In emergency situations languages become particularly to the fore as they allow for the equal contribution of all parties and allow all members of the UN to participate in worldly debates. For instance, languages (Arabic and French) were employed throughout the Iraq war, the Libyan civil war and during the Haiti earthquake - interpreters were essential in decreasing the communication deadlock and allowing organisations to carry on with their work. This highlights that interpreting and translation operate in all corners of the globe and allow for communicational deadlocks to be broken.

As a result of my research I have concluded that languages facilitate greater participation in general debating, allow better handling of emergency situations and I have come to believe that the translation and interpreting facilities within the UN are by far two of the biggest assets the UN has.

Perhaps the UN could be restructured to function without translators and interpreters. However, the member states would then have to agree on a common language, and this would be very difficult politically. Also, all those attending meetings would have to be proficient in the chosen language, which is easier said than done for some countries that have great difficulties finding suitably qualified experts for some meetings without adding a linguistic dimension to their difficulties. In my survey one respondent added the following comment:

[...] mid-level security meetings are often attended by national police representatives. How many police in China speak enough English to make their contribution? If the UN language was not English and was Spanish, how many police at Scotland Yard would be able to participate at these meetings in the future? If we had to pick a Spanish-speaking representative, would they be the best candidate in terms of qualifications and experience, or just linguistically?

As far as I'm concerned, this admirably highlights the purpose and position languages play in a modern society. Languages to me are magnificent things and through languages a lot can be achieved.

Concluding Remarks

I have since started a university course in International Relations with French and Spanish. I have found the knowledge gained as part of my research hugely beneficial. International Relations depend upon an ability to actively correspond on issues. But on another level, university life is entirely different from school life - there may be help when you look for it but there is no silver spoon and no hand-holding. So to close I would like to extend my encouragement to further candidates of the Scottish Baccalaureate in Languages: take risks, embrace the feeling that you have been thrown off a cliff and find your parachute!

Think critically. Be prepared to be wrong. Enjoy the experience whilst you can.