

Chapter 22

Teaching Practicums Abroad: Increasing the Professionalization of Preservice Foreign Language Teachers

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ABSTRACT

European student teachers have the opportunity to complete a work placement at a partner school in a target language country. The focus of this study was on 35 undergraduate preservice teachers who completed a teaching practicum placement in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland between 2010-2014. Data from five years of reflective reports were content analysed and complemented with focus group discussions after the students' stay abroad. This chapter briefly outlines the structure of the teaching practicums, delineates data collection and analysis methods, and discusses the results in order to gauge the potential of such experiences for students' intercultural learning and overall professional development. Results indicated an interconnection of categories with the 'professionalization' of preservice teachers featuring most prominently.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, a period of study abroad has constituted an optional or mandatory component of university degrees, particularly foreign language-related ones. It is maintained that an international education is conducive to the aim of global citizenship and helps learners prepare for a globalised world (cf. Davies & Pike, 2009; Schattle, 2009; for more critical views Lewin, 2009; Wanner, 2009). Study abroad programs are also seen as enhancing international understanding and cross-cultural awareness, given their extended period of contact between the student and locals (Carlson & Widaman, 1988; Papatsiba, 2003). A rationale for study abroad lies in assumed or expected improvement to students' target language proficiency, particularly for foreign language students (e.g., Brecht, Davidson & Ginsberg, 1995; Meara, 1994). Studies focus on progress in specific skills areas (e.g., Towell, Hawkins & Bazergui, 1996) or on outcomes indirectly related to language proficiency such as the motivation to perform well in the target language (e.g., Sasaki, 2011) and for writing well.

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While the body of literature on study abroad has grown substantially in the last decade, little attention has been paid to periods of teaching practice abroad and their potential effect on different proficiency areas of preservice teachers. We know relatively little about the impact of teaching practicums (placement) abroad for (European) preservice foreign language teachers in terms of their language proficiency, their intercultural competence and/or their emerging professionalism. The purpose of this study was, therefore, to investigate expectations, perceptions and outcomes of 35 Germany-based preservice English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers who spent a teaching practice period of three months at primary and secondary schools in the United Kingdom (UK) and Ireland on the European-funded ERASMUS work experience program. After a literature review, the study design, data collection and analysis methods will be addressed before an outline of the findings. A section on didactic implications for preservice foreign language teacher training will follow, as well as a discussion of directions for future research in the field.

BACKGROUND

Collentine (2009, p. 218) defined study abroad as the ‘context [which] takes place in countries where the L2 enjoys an important sociological and functional status, entailing a combination of planned curriculum and host family’. While this definition of a study abroad context is rather limited to university undergraduate students pursuing a more or less rigorous degree program, I would like to argue for a broader definition of the term that encompasses different formats of instruction in the framework of a curriculum and also other forms of housing arrangements. A working definition for this chapter would be for study abroad to be part of a university degree program that enhances professionalisation and global citizenship through increased opportunities for intercultural and experiential learning, among others.

Study Abroad Research from a Second Language Acquisition Perspective

The research findings related to second language learning processes and the potential benefits of a period of study abroad in a target language country constitutes a major research area of study abroad programs for undergraduate foreign language students. From a Second Language Acquisition (SLA) perspective, Churchill and DuFon (2006, p. 26) pointed out that according to popular assumption, the mere study abroad experience automatically leads to SLA. The amount of research on study abroad, which has increased exponentially in the last two decades, has challenged this naïve assumption. The field of research, however, is rich and complex, with a large variety of programs in different educational systems and with different foreign languages as target languages, which account for many and varied results. However, there seem to be general tendencies of findings in study abroad, which I will try to outline.

The bulk of study abroad research in the field of SLA has tended to focus on the learner and particularly on the learners’ acquisition of linguistic skills during their study abroad period e.g., as early as the 1960s (Carroll, 1967). Most studies that are concerned with linguistic gains have focused on spoken skills and more specifically on ‘fluency’. For example, Segalowitz and Freed (2004) studied 40 US-based L1 (first language) speakers of English studying Spanish for one semester in a home study or study abroad context. The learners’ oral performance gains were investigated e.g., gains in oral fluency by using the Oral Proficiency Interview (POI) and by measuring temporal and hesitation phenomena. In comparison, the study abroad students displayed more and longer fluent runs than the home study students and

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