Chapter 32

Students as Producers of Digital Audio–Visual Clips in Preparation for a Study Abroad Period:
Collaboration for Independent Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

Students who avail of a period of study mobility abroad face many academic and day to day life challenges once in the host country. The language they learn in an academic setting only partly equips them to communicate with their peers in the foreign country. Colloquialisms are widely used among young adults. This chapter presents an independent language learning project that requires students who have chosen to study French, to collaborate with their peers and with visiting Erasmus students. Together, they produce digital audio-visual clips that familiarize students with the colloquialisms used by their native speaking peers. A key benefit of this project is that it encourages students to develop their own learning resource and engage with language learning in a self-directed manner. Casim and Yang's model of learning ownership underpins the discussion.

INTRODUCTION

In Europe, students who are enrolled in studies that lead to a recognised tertiary level qualification can benefit from a period of study mobility, between 3 and 12 months, with a partner higher education institution in the foreign country, under the Erasmus + programme. Students receive a grant to help towards their travelling and accommodation expenses. They are also exempted from paying fees for tuitions, registration, examinations and access to a range of facilities at the host institution. The aim of

Erasmus + is to encourage mobility of university students within the European higher education area. A study-mobility helps to shape students into European citizens by facilitating their access to Europe's diversity of cultures, languages, academic and social environments. A period of study spent abroad expands students' horizons, fosters their personal growth and enhances their employability. The number of students availing of mobility programmes such as Erasmus +, has grown considerably over the last decade. Study abroad periods are a unique opportunity for students to immerse themselves in a different culture, foreign language and new educational environment. In Irish universities, the study mobility is often a compulsory component of study programmes in which the learning of a foreign language is a key learning outcome. In this context, objectives for the academic year spent abroad tend to be articulated around language competency, cultural awareness and independent learning. In recent years, many language lecturers who are involved in preparing, monitoring and assessing language students who avail of a study mobility period, have noticed that the year abroad objectives are not always reached. Reasons are manifold. The easy accessibility of technology (e.g. Skype, Facebook) means students are often tempted to be in daily contact with their friends and relatives in their home country, hampering their full immersion in the host culture. Equally, the natural pull to socialise mainly with other international students often leads to English as the chosen language of communication at the expense of practising the language of the host country. Many Erasmus students find it difficult to make new friends with native speakers of the foreign language. In spite of their own best intentions prior to departure and a clear motivation to improve their linguistic competence, the pull to stay within one's own comfort zone once in the host country is largely due to a lack of confidence in speaking the foreign language with native speakers of that language. The same lack of confidence added to the inexperience of overcoming challenges associated with communicating across cultural boundaries further inhibits students' ability to immerse in the social environment of the host country. Finally, student's relative unpreparedness for independent learning means they are not always sufficiently resourceful to overcome the challenges encountered. Overall, poor integration into the host academic and social community is likely to result in the under achievement of learning outcomes for the study period abroad.

In Ireland, most programmes that include a period of study abroad provide some degree of preparation, whether it is in the form of inductions (e.g. information sessions) to the year abroad or through the language module syllabi. In general, lecturers endeavour to prepare students for some of the linguistic, cultural and administrative challenges they will encounter. However, raising students' awareness of the intercultural and linguistic challenges ahead of them can be difficult. For most, it is only once immersed in the host country that they realise the relevance of the cultural and linguistic syllabi covered prior to departure. Any valuable preparation is often short of exposing learners to the authentic native speakers and their culture.

In parallel to the challenges faced by our outgoing students, our visiting international students regularly experience difficulties in mixing with Irish students and in developing friendships with them beyond a superficial level. Many authors have shown that interactions with the host population foster our visiting students' experience and integration (Kashima & Loh, 2006; Campbell, 2012; Stone, 2000). It has also been reported that the level of contact is often very low between international students and the host student cohorts (see Campbell, 2012 for many references). In my own experience as a lecturer of French and as an Erasmus academic coordinator, I have found that both outgoing and incoming students are keen to meet each other and realise that they are an invaluable authentic resource for each other but many lack the social and linguistic skills or the confidence to do so.

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