

Chapter 6

Towards a Culturally Reflective Practitioner: Pre-Service Student Teachers in Teaching Practicums Abroad

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ABSTRACT

Since 2007, it has been possible for student teachers based in Europe to complete a teaching practicum at a school abroad, supported by the European flagship mobility programme ERASMUS. The focus of this study was on 35 undergraduate preservice teachers who completed a three-month teaching practicum placement in the UK and Ireland. Data from reflective reports was content analysed and completed with focus group discussions six months after the students' stay abroad. On the basis of the reflective reports, a case study was additionally collated that focussed on their intercultural learning development. The findings indicate an interconnection of linguistic, intercultural, and professional development with professional development as the most prominent and the intercultural development as a rather neglected one. Suggestions on how to design a formal instruction element based on the principles of cultural (peer) mentoring and guided cultural reflection as part of the teaching practice experience are outlined.

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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 globalized 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 (TL) 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 TL (e.g., Sasaki, 2011).

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 with an outline of the measures taken for a guided cultural reflection of teaching practicums abroad, 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

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